March 31st 2003, Monday

Prologue

"Yes mother, I know," muttered Xena under her breath.

Cyrene raised an eyebrow at her daughter momentarily. "Alright honey, as long as you remember that, then you can stay there for the next couple of days."

Xena smiled at that. "Thanks, mom."

"You're welcome, sweetie." Cyrene leaned forward on the Xena's bed; she placed a gentle kiss on her young daughter's cheek.

"Mom," grumbled the teenager.

Cyrene chuckled while pulling back. "Pretend with your mother for once."

Xena grinned and leaned over, she gave her mom a kiss on the cheek as well. "There," she stated.

"Thank you, sweetie." Cyrene stood up from the small bed. "Now you think you can go get your brothers for me?"

"Yes, mother."

"Good… have them come into the kitchen to help me cook."
Xena nodded her understanding and slid out of the bed. She quickly left her room in search of her brothers.

Cyrene listened to her young daughter's footfall down the stairs. After a heavy sigh, she left the small room and into the tavern. She went directly into the kitchen to begin dinner for herself and her children.

"Hey Toris!" yelled Xena, she came around the corner of the tavern to the backyard.

"What?" barked Toris. He lowered his wooden sword.

Then Xena's younger brother, Lyceus, peered around his big brother towards Xena. "Mom wants us huh?"

"Yup," confirmed Xena. "Your two's turn to make dinner with her," she taunted.

Toris huffed. "I don't get why we have to do a girl's job," he grumbled while walking towards the tavern.

As Toris neared Xena, she stuck her foot out once he was close enough.

Toris tripped and growled after he recovered. "Don't do that," he warned.

"Then don't talk about mother like that."

"I wasn't," stated the young man.

Xena put her hands on her hips. "She's only trying to help you."

"How's that?" Toris raised an eyebrow. "If I need food later in life that's what I get a wife for."

The young girl glared. "If you can find one that'll take your crap."

Toris shook his head and decided not to fight anymore. "Whatever." He brushed past her.

Lyceaus neared his big sister and whispered, "Why you always pick on him?"

The teenager huffed and crossed her arms against her chest. "He needs it, Ly." She started shaking her head. "He's always tough on us all."

"He's just going through that stage, mother says."
"Yeah well, he's not much older than me and you don't see me going through it." She then added, "Or you."

"Yeah I know," uttered the boy. He swung his wood sword in his hand a little then asked, "Mother want me too?"

"Yes." Xena shrugged. "I'm going to set the table… do the dishes."

Her baby brother smiled up to her.

Xena just returned the smile and said, "Come on." She rested her hand behind his back and led him into the tavern.

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Xena swayed back and forth in the wagon. She slowly opened her eyes and gazed about the area as a yawn escaped her. She quickly realized she was coming into town. Straightening up off the side of the wagon, she looked to her mother at the front of the wagon. "We're in Potidaea?"

Cyrene glanced back at her daughter briefly then focused back on where the horses were going. "Yes, honey we are. How did you sleep?"

"Pretty good," replied the teenager. She then started studying the village and all the people.

"We'll be at the market in a minute," promised the mother.

"I know," responded Xena. Her stomach turned in excitement again just like it had very early this morning. Her mother had awoken her before sunrise so she could prepare to travel to Potidaea and stay for three days.

Cyrene directed the horses to an open spot at the entrance of the marketplace. She pulled the reins to make them halt. She carefully then climbed out of the wagon.

Xena, on the other hand, had sprung up and jumped out of the wagon. "Mother?" she asked.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of everything this time." Cyrene smiled softly. "Go on."

The teenager came up to Cyrene and kissed her quickly on the cheek. "Thank you."

"Scoot," urged the mother.
Xena grinned then broke into a run across town.

Cyrene watched her child run off, it simply made her chuckle.

The teenager came up to the other side of town. She directly went to rather well-built house and went rushing up the steps. Rasp for air, she furiously knocked on the door. After about the fifth knock, somebody finally came to the door.

"Well hello, Xena."

"Hi, Hecuba. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Yourself?"

Xena tried catching her breath then replied, "I'm great." She took a deep breath again and asked, "Is… is Gabrielle home?"

"Yes, dear. Come inside… she's in her room." Gabrielle's mother opened the door more and stepped aside.

The teenager entered the small house. "Thank you."

"You are welcome," replied the mother. "Go ahead." She grinned then added, "I know you both have missed each other."

Xena smiled and repeated, "Thanks."

Hecuba laughed quietly. "Go ahead, dear."

The teenager nodded and hastily walked down the hallway of the house to Gabrielle's room. She took a shaky breath but then knocked on her friend's door.

"Yeah come in," called a girl.

Xena grinned to herself and entered her best friend's room. She didn't say anything as she noticed Gabrielle was sitting in the middle of her bed, head down, and writing.

The girl was biting on her lower lip as she sat there writing her story. "Hold on, sorry…"

"It's okay," replied Xena.

Gabrielle threw up her head at the familiar voice. "Xena!"
"Hi."

The little bard tossed her scroll off her lap with her quill; she bounded off the bed after her friend.

The next thing Xena knew was she couldn't breathe from the enormous hug she received.

"Oh gods, I've missed you so much, Xen."

The teenager tried laughing a little between the hugging. She then finally felt her friend's squeeze loosening up but she had yet to let go of her. "I've miss you too, Bri."

At hearing her nickname, Gabrielle gave one more tight squeeze then let go of her best friend. "You been okay?"

"I'm a lot better now," confessed Xena.

"Me too," agreed the little bard. "How long can you stay?"

A huge grin broke out across the teenager's face. "Mother said three days. She'll be back then to pick me up."

Gabrielle's face just lit up at the good news. She again engulfed her friend in a gigantic hug.

Xena was so happy that she took hold of Gabrielle and spun each other in a circle.

The younger girl laughed when her feet touched the floor again. "I love your mom."

"Yeah me too," teased the teenager. She then released the smaller girl and asked, "What were you writing about?"

"Oh." Gabrielle brightened up at the mention of her latest story. "I'm writing a new story."

"What about?" inquired the teenager. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

The little bard jumped onto the bed, landing on her stomach next to her friend. "It's kinda silly actually."

Xena felt a grin pull at her lips. "Tell me."
"Well…." The girl considered for a moment.

"Please," begged the teenager.

"Okay." Gabrielle chuckled then started explaining her new story idea. "Well it's a bit about us."

"Oh?" Xena raised an eyebrow at this.

"Sorta," explained Gabrielle, "but when we're older and like we're partners."

The teenager laughed softly. "And we're not now?"

"Oh I know but what I mean is… we're well….

"Yes?" urged Xena, she read the title aloud, "The Warrior Princess?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle grinned and snatched the scroll from the larger hands. "You're a warrior right?"

"Uh huh."

"And so am I but not as good as you since I'm never as good at things as you are."

"Gabrielle, you're a much better bard than I ever could be."

The little bard shrugged. "But I could see where you'd be some great warrior."

"Go on," teased the teenager.

"Okay so you're a warrior and I'm your partner. So together, you and I travel through Greece…" she stopped but quickly said, "the entire known-world even. And like we meet all these new people and we help people."

Xena chuckled at her friend's idea.

"I'm serious!" roared the girl. "You think its funny." She put her scroll aside while her friend was laughing. "Xena!"

The teenager was shaking her head as she laughed. "I'm sorry."

"It's not funny!" Gabrielle playfully growled and rapidly sat up. She knew her friend wasn't going to stop laughing, so she threw herself into Xena.
"Aaaah!" yelped Xena, she fell off the bed but not without taking Gabrielle with her. She made sure though to land on her back and with her friend directly on top. She felt the wind get knocked out of her and she started coughing.

"You okay?" asked a worried little bard. She lifted herself up off her best friend Xena just nodded but took a deep breath. "I'm okay," she whispered. She then gradually wrapped her arms around her friend's waist and forced her to lie back down.

Gabrielle sighed and rested her head on the large chest under her. "You really think its funny?"

The teenager smiled to herself. "No, I like the idea." With her right hand, she began rubbing the other girl's back. "I just don't see us as warriors… and traveling all over the known-world."

"But wouldn't it be fun though?" whispered the tiny bard.

The older girl thought about the question then finally replied, "Yeah it would be. Just you and I…"

"Right the wrongs," teased Gabrielle.

"Bri, you know how dangerous that would be?"

The smaller girl shrugged and closed her eyes. "You'd protect us."

Xena felt a smile shaped her features. "I'd try my best, yes."

Gabrielle lifted her head and lowered her chin onto Xena's chest. "And I know your best is like… better than anybody else."

"I don't know about that," countered the teenager.

"Sure it is, Xen." The little bard now lifted her arms up and folded over top of Xena's chest. She lowered her chin onto her arms now. "I mean, you're clever, talented, really smart… you'd make an amazing warrior."

"Glad you think that." Yet Xena shrugged. "But I don't think I'm going to be a warrior or anything like that." She grinned. "As nice of a fantasy as that might be."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Never say never." For emphasis, she freed one hand and poked the nose in front of her.
The teenager grinned back. "I think though you'd make a wonderful bard later on." She studied her friend as a question came to her mind. "Still thinking about going to the Academy for bards?"

"I really want to," admitted the tiny bard. "But I think I have awhile before that happens."

"Well…" Xena considered a few things. "You probably could go when you're eighteen if not sixteen."

"I've heard they let some sixteen year olds in just because they're so good."

A huge grin developed on the teenager's lips. "I bet if you tried, you could get in when you're sixteen."

"I would… gee that means in four years."

"Less even. Your thirteenth birthday is this coming spring," reminded the older girl.

"Oh gods, yeah in like a few months." Gabrielle laughed in surprise. "Wow… I'll be a teenager." She then suddenly shot a smirk at her friend. "A teenager like you… must mean I'm getting ooooold."

Xena groaned and rolled her eyes at the comment. "At least I have more rights as a seventeen-year-old than you,' she taunted.

Gabrielle huffed. "True." She then turned her head to one side.

"You okay?" asked Xena in a quiet voice.

"Yeah… just thinking."

"About?" urged the teenager.

"What's going to happen with you while I'm at the academy… if I go."

"You'll go," promised Xena. "And I'm sure I'll keep myself busy."

"Hold on… what am I going to do after I graduate from the academy?" Gabrielle quickly lifted her head. "Am I suppose to do anything in particular?"

Xena shrugged then said, "I know most bards travel and tell stories for several years. A way to… earn a reputation so to speak."
Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows in thought. "But if I do that, means I'll have to leave you more."

"Don't worry… I'll be fine."

"You're probably right…"

Xena frowned at her friend's agreement.

"You'll probably find some cute guy by then," started Gabrielle, "get married… have kids." She smiled sadly at her friend.

"Maybe," agreed the teenager. "Maybe not."

"You ever thinking about where you'll be in the future?"

"Mmmm." Xena pressed her lips together. "Sometimes but I don't worry too much about it." She focused her eyes back on her best friend. "How about you?"

"Sometimes I do."

"You'll be a famous bard, I know that," stated the teenager.

"I hope so," whispered the little bard.

"I know so." Xena reassured Gabrielle with a warm smile.

Gabrielle smiled back and just laid there studying her best friend.

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Gabrielle rolled onto her side and studied her best friend.

Xena smiled at her.

The little bard mirrored the smile back but her eyes were more serious.

"What you think about?" whispered the teenager.

Gabrielle shrugged then replied, "Just about when you leave in two days."

"Don't think about it," urged Xena. She reached over and carefully plucked a piece of straw out of the long blond hair.
The little bard's green eyes followed the slender fingers as they pulled the straw from her hair. She then watched the straw being held in the air then placed back on the straw pile. "I know it's just… I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too," confessed the older girl. "But I'm happy I'm here."

The tiny bard brightened up at that. "Me too." She then rolled onto her back and studied the roof of the small barn. She always loved spending a night or two up in the loft of the barn with Xena, it was a tradition between the friends. She sighed at the thought of her friend leaving and it caused her to wonder when she'd see Xena again. She then asked, "You think I can come to Amphipolis soon?"

"Probably," answered Xena. "Mother would like to see you again."

Gabrielle giggled at the mention of Cyrene.

"I think she would adopt you if she could," teased the teenager.

"I think so too," agreed Gabrielle. "But I'm not sure how your brothers would take that."

Xena huffed. "Toris wouldn't be too fond of it."

"Ly would though."

"Yeah he would." The teenager furrowed her eyebrows. "He really likes you too."

Gabrielle turned her head at what Xena mentioned. "Does he?"

"Uh huh." Xena licked her lips. "He's always asking about you or just talking about you."

The small bard grinned. "He likes me huh?" She paused but then added, "He reminds me a lot of you… but a male version."

The older girl laughed in response, afterwards she said, "Yeah he does." Suddenly a devilish smirk formed on her lips. "He'd make a good boyfriend for later huh?"

Gabrielle grumbled at that, she turned her head away and folded her arms against her chest. "I like Ly but… nothing much else." She closed her eyes and muttered, "Not ready for a boyfriend."

"Yeah I know," uttered Xena, "still too young."
"Xen?"

"Mmmmm?"

"Why don't you have one?" Gabrielle could hear her friend stop breathing briefly. She realized she wasn't getting any response so she urged Xena on. "Seriously." She rolled her head to the left and stared at the teenager. "I mean... you are seventeen."

Xena chewed faintly on her lower lip then finally replied, "Just can't find anybody right for me."

"No cute boys in Amphipolis?" teased the little bard.

The older girl grumbled at the question and stated, "We have a lot of rude, not to mention ugly, boys in the town."

A couple of giggles came from Gabrielle.

"Besides," continued Xena, "I just don't date anybody."

"Figures," retorted the tiny bard.

Xena mock glared at her best friend for the comment. "You know what?"

"What?"

"You are a bratt, Bri."

Gabrielle stuck her tongue out for a response.

"You little... bratt!" roared the teenager. She sat up but with a handful of hay. She tossed it on top of her friend.

"Aaaaah!" screamed the tiny bard. She sat up sputtering and thrashing away at the straw covering her face. She finally got most of it off her body but a few pieces still in her hair and in her mouth. "Oh gross," she whimpered. She reached up and slowly extracted a piece of long straw from out of her mouth.

Xena laughed hard at the scene.

Gabrielle threw the straw over the loft's edge and then glared at Xena. "That's it," she growled. She sprung up onto her feet but was soon leaping towards her best friends.

"Oh Hades!" yelped the teenager. She soon found herself on her back with a very
furious little bard on top of her. She began laughing at the red faced Gabrielle.

"It's not funny!"

Xena then suddenly stopped laughing and had a very devilish grin. Without warning, she rolled to their bodies to the right in all of the hay.

Gabrielle growled when she looked up into twinkling blue eyes. She quickly forced her friend to roll to the left.

The teenager only made them roll again.

They kept rolling to the left but then suddenly Gabrielle felt a shock rip through her body as she went off the loft's edge.

"Xena!" screamed the little bard. Her entire body directly rolled off the ledge but she just grabbed onto the edge before she went over. "Xena!"

Xena furiously tore the straw away from her face and grabbed a hold of her best friend's wrists. "Grab onto my arms, Gabrielle. And don't look down."

The tiny bard gripped her friend with all her strength. She then peered down below and saw how far the drop was and the pitchfork on the ground sparkled at her. "Oh gods!" She began squirming and struggling.

"Gabrielle, relax please. You'll be okay."

The tiny bard took a deep breath; she closed her eyes and tried ignoring her racing heart.

Xena was finally able to get her feet under herself and began pulling back. She slowly lifted her smaller friend back up onto the loft. Once she had Gabrielle over the edge, she scooted back a ways from the ledge and pulled her best friend into her arms. "You okay?" she whispered.

Gabrielle whimpered quietly then tucked her head into Xena's chest. She then started shaking uncontrollably.

Xena felt her heart drop as she hid her friend in her arms and legs. She lowered her head on top of Gabrielle's then she was able to hear the little bard quietly crying. She sighed and tightened her grip around Gabrielle more. She sensed her anger growing inside of herself for failing to protect her best friend.

The tiny bard lifted her head slightly so she could wipe away the tears on her cheeks.
She then raised her head more and then rested it on Xena's right shoulder.

"You okay?" whispered the teenager.

Gabrielle nodded faintly.

"I'm sorry," uttered Xena in a shaky voice.

The smaller girl closed her eyes and nuzzled her face into Xena's warm neck. "It wasn't your fault," she muffled out.

"Yes it was... I shouldn't have rolled us that far."

"You didn't know," stated the tiny bard.

"It doesn't matter, should have been more careful."

Gabrielle lifted her head off Xena's shoulder. She peered up into navy eyes. "It wasn't your fault, Xen. I mean, you could say it was my fault for jumping into you."

"Mine for throwing straw at you," reminded the teenager.

The little bard shook her head. "Wasn't anybody's fault... it was an accident." She watched Xena's eyes turn away from hers. "Xena?" she whispered to draw back Xena's focus.

The older girl looked back to her friend.

"Not your fault, okay?"

Xena didn't say anything but then gradually nodded. Yet she was still angry with herself and promised herself and Gabrielle that she would protect Gabrielle better from here out. "Tired?"

"Yeah I am," admitted the tiny bard. "Are you?"

"Yeah," uttered the older girl. She glanced to her left then leaned that way to grasp their blanket for the night. Slowly, she lowered herself back, pulling Gabrielle with her.

Gabrielle snuggled into her best friend's side and closed her eyes. She then felt a warm wool blanket cover her and Xena. She smiled some to herself as she cuddled in closer.

Xena smiled too and finally rested her eyes. After a big sigh, she tried relaxing and
The following day, the friends decided to visit the market and mingle about after they received Hecuba's permission. Together, they went through the different stands, stalls, and small shops.

"Ooooh, Xen, look," cooed the little bard. She pointed out the necklace at the jewelry stand.

The teenager moved closer beside her friend and studied the silver necklace. "That's very nice," she whispered.

Gabrielle smiled up to Xena then glanced back down at the necklace. "I wish I had the money to buy it." She then frowned after saying that.

The taller girl raised her right hand and rubbed her best friend's back. "I know." She continued studying the silver necklace that had a quill for a pendant. "Come on." She made a mental note of the price tag on the necklace right before she led her friend away.

The smaller girl wove her way through the people back to the middle of the market place. "I'm getting hungry."

Xena grinned at her friend's declaration. She noticed it was noon according to the sun's position and decided she too was rather hungry. "Wanna go to the Greasy Spoon?"

"Yeah sure." The small bard made a beeline for their favorite restaurant. "I'm so hungry."

The teenager grinned while following behind her friend. "I'm pretty hungry too."

"Not as hungry as me," joked Gabrielle.

"Nobody is as ever hungry as you, bard," taunted the older girl.

For a response, Gabrielle stuck her tongue out then hurried off to the steps of the restaurant.

Xena giggled at her friend and rushed after her, as not to lose track of her.

Once the pair was inside, they decided to eat up at the bar together. It was not long
before they were served today's lunch, a regular meal that they both thoroughly enjoyed. While they ate together, they talked about this or that, mainly family.

"Oh, you know what I just remembered," cut in the tiny bard.

"Mmmm?" asked the teenager between a mouth full of lamb.

"I need to grab more scrolls." Gabrielle pointed a long bread roll at her friend. "I almost forgot."

Xena swallowed her bite of lamb from her gyro and then grinned. "We can't forget them."

"Definitely not," agreed the very serious bard.

The teenager laughed quietly to herself as she took the second to last bit from her gyro. "Know what I wouldn't mind?"

"What's that?" Gabrielle swirled her last piece of bread through some leftover sauce from the beef and lamb.

"I want a couple of daggers," whispered Xena. She tried being quiet about it since she didn't want any funny looks from various people around them.

Gabrielle's ivy eyes widened in surprise. "Really?" she squealed.

"Ssssh," urged the older girl.

The tiny bard laughed softly and leaned forward, closer to her best friend. "Really?"

"Yeah, really," answered the teenager. "Not sure why though."

"You think it's safe?" uttered the tiny bard. "I mean, my dad says it isn't safe for girls to handle sharp things like that."

Xena rolled her eyes. "Gaaaabrielleeeeee," she drew out.

"What?" huffed the tiny bard.

"I like your dad a lot and all but come on," pushed Xena, "What is so different between girls and boys anyway?"

The bard shrugged. "Their bodies… guys are much stronger."
"Yeah right." Xena grabbed her last piece of her gyro. She wagged the meat in front of her friend's face as she spoke. "Just the other day, I was wrestling with both Lyceus and Toris. I whipped both their butts." She popped the meat into her mouth.

"Really?" squeaked the tiny bard. "But... but you're like a tougher girl than most of us."

"What's that suppose to mean?" Xena arched a brown eyebrow at her friend.

"Ummmm... well..." Gabrielle grinned sheepishly. "What I mean, Xen is that... well you've grown up with two brothers. I have a sister so like...."

"I act like a boy?" probed the older girl.

"No, no," squeaked the tiny bard. She held her hands up briefly but lowered them when she spoke again. "It's just you know how to be tougher because you had to grow up with two brothers. Lila and I, well... we are use to each other and we play with dolls instead of sticks."

Xena considered her friend's words as she chewed on the remains of the beef in her mouth. "I guess you're right, Bri." She sighed, swallowed the small meat, and then added, "Guess I need to act a little girlier."

Gabrielle huffed at that and rolled her eyes. "Gods... I hope not." She finally straightened back up in her seat. "I like the way you are."

"Thanks." The teenager offered a warm smile and got one back in return. "Come on, let's go."

Gabrielle suddenly grinned. She hopped off the tall stool and waited for Xena.

Xena paid the bartender for the two meals then stepped off the stool as well. With Gabrielle, she headed out of the tavern.

"You think you can get the daggers?" whispered the small girl.

"Yeah, I think so." Xena watched her best friend jump down each step. She just grinned, bent her knees, and jumped over all three steps to land neatly on the dirt road.

"Show off," growled the bard yet she grinned.

Xena winked and teased, "Thanks." She then went a little more serious. "Okay, here's the plan. You go get your scrolls okay? While you're doing that I'm going to get the daggers. Alright?"
"Why can't I go with you?" whined the little bard.

"Because then I'll look younger than I really am, no offense."

Gabrielle's shoulders dropped. "Really?"

"Unfortunately yeah."

"I can wait outside," urged Gabrielle.

Xena just shook her head. "I'll come back to the scroll stand for you."

The tiny bard frowned some but finally asked, "Promise?"

"Promise," replied the teenager.

"Okay."

Together, they went to the scroll stand and once they were there, Xena offered her friend some money for the scrolls. As always, the tiny bard refused the dinars and told her to hurry up while at the weapons store.

Xena promised to be back in a few minutes and for Gabrielle to take her time at the scroll stand. She then turned around and started walking off into the market area again. Once she knew she was out of Gabrielle's vision, she broke off running. She had to carefully maneuver her way through all the people as she ran.

"Where's that stall?" growled the teenager to herself. She then found what she had been hunting. Coming right up to the owner of the stall, she asked, "How much is that necklace?"

The owner turned around, he looked the young girl up and down. "Its thirty dinars." He smiled warmly at her and picked it up then carefully handing it to her. "Are you interested in it?"

"Well… yes and no," replied the teenager. "I'd like to buy it but not for me."

"Oh, a gift then?" The jeweler smiled even more. "Whom for?"

"My best friend… she loves to write."

"Oh I see." The jeweler folded his arms against his chest as he thought about this. "And how much were you expecting to pay for this charm?"
Xena peered up with sky eyes. "I wasn't sure." She lowered the necklace back down carefully. "Anything really since it's for my friend."

The man nodded at this. "And when do you plan to give it to her?"

"Well…." The teenager seriously considered this question then answered, "Her birthday is soon."

"Perfect. And how much money do you have with you?"

Xena took a deep breath as she thought about how much her mother gave her for her allowance and how much lunch was today. "Thirty-two dinars."

"And do you live here in town?"

"No, just in Amphipolis."

"Really? I'm originally from there. Who is your mother?"

"Cyrene," answered the teenager.

The jeweler's eyes widened at this information. "Then you must be her only daughter, Xena?"

Xena brightened up at this. "Yes actually. You know my mother?"

The jeweler nodded at this and answered, "I was close with your mother for many years until I moved here. My name is Potestas."

"Nice to meet you." The girl held out her hand.

Potestas grinned and shook Xena's arm firmly. "Now then," he continued while releasing her arm. "You have thirty-two dinars, her birthday is in a couple of months, and you want that necklace?"

"Yes, sir," agreed Xena.

"Now will you be in town again soon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well then, how about you give me seven dinars now. I'll hold this necklace for you. Then when you want it for her birthday, bring me another seven dinars and we'll be
even. How does that sound?"

Xena's eyes widened. "Fourteen dinars all together?"

"Yes, for Cyrene's daughter anything."

Xena chuckled at that. "I'll take it." She unhooked her pouch and fished around for seven dinars.

Potestas took the necklace and carefully slipped it away in a special pouch for later. He then took the money from the young girl. "I'll see you soon then, Xena."

"Thank you, Potestas."

"You're quite welcome, dear. Tell your mother I said hello."

"I will." Xena smiled and started walking off but called, "Bye!"

"Bye!" The jeweler waved but then went back to his business.

The teenager took off sprinting for the weapon's shop and now there was a bounce in her run. She made it there in no time and went right inside, out of breath. Once inside of the small store, she studied the various weapons in the store. She raised an eyebrow though at the long, heavy built sword that hung high up on the far wall. She admired it for several minutes.

"Like the sword huh?" questioned the weapons master in the store. He'd reappeared out of the back of the shop and had watched the girl studying the sword.

"Its beautiful," answered Xena.

"It is," agreed the weapons master. He turned around and reached up to carefully lift the sword off the display. He then gently lowered it onto the glass casing.

The teenager neared and leaned against the casing as she looked down at the sword. "May I touch it?"

"Of course, be careful though."

Xena nodded then gingerly ran her right hand down the blade of the sword. She studied the blue gem at the top of the hilt. "What's it made of?"

"Well," started the weapons master, "It's made of steel."
"Doesn't look it." Xena peered up in question at the man then back down at the sword.

"No, it's been coated in bronze for looks."

"Why not gold?"

"Gold is too weak for a sword." The weapons master folded his arm. "Gold is good for fashion but not a well made sword. The bronze is much sturdier and ages well."

Xena nodded her understanding but then asked, "What's the gem?"

"It's a sapphire," replied the man. "It took a black smith a very long to produce this sword."

"Why is that?"

The weapons master folded his arms again. "Steel has to be heated at a very high temperature. As soon as it's touched by water it begins to cool and then its harder to shape the steel. So the black smith went through many trials and errors to come out with just this one sword."

"It sure is amazing though."

"I agree."

Xena lifted her blue eyes back up. "May I hold it?"

"Well…." The weapons master pressed his lip together. "It's rather heavy."

"I can handle it," promised the teenager.

The weapons master saw the confident look and nodded his head. "Go ahead."

Xena grinned suddenly. She wrapped one hand around the hilt and began lifting it off the case. She soon realized she needed her second hand, her left hand too curling around the hilt. She heft the sword up with all of her strength, she stared at it for several minutes, memorized by its beauty and strength.

"Amazing sword, isn't it?"

Xena could only nod her answer. She then felt her muscles straining from the weight some but before she lowered it, she asked, "How much is it anyway?"

"Oh gods, it's not for sale," replied the weapons master. "I doubt I could part with that
sword."

The teenager chuckled at the weapons master's words. She lowered it slowly back onto the glass case. "I can understand why."

The man picked it up without trouble and lifted it back into its home high above. "Now then, what can I help you with?"

Xena finally tore her eyes away from the sword. "I was interested in some daggers, possibly."

"Hmmm." The weapons master gave a curious look. "How old are you?"

The teenager sighed. "Seventeen, sir."

"I'm afraid I have a store policy that I may not sell to anybody that's under eighteen."

Xena grumbled quietly to herself but then stated, "My eighteenth is this coming winter."

The weapons master considered the girl for a minute but then said, "I think I can let this one slide." He walked off to his right to another case. "All my daggers are here."

The teenager brightened up and quickly hurried to that side of the shop. She knelt down and looked over the weapons in the display case. "That's a dagger?" She pointed against the glass.

The shop owner peered through and chuckled deeply. "That would be a breast dagger."

Xena dropped her head back and grinned. "Really?"

The man nodded while chuckling some more.

"Interesting," muttered Xena; she continued studying the daggers over. "How about those two?"

"These ones?" The weapons master pointed from his side of the glass. "Nice choice." He slid open the glass door, reached in, and picked up the two matching daggers that both had separate sheaths. He placed them on the top of the display unit.

Xena stood back up and examined the two daggers. "I like these."

"They're very lovely." The man picked up one of them. "They're rather light but still
hold enough weight to make them fly." He then unsheathed it and held out the dagger in the palm of his head. "And I enjoy the design engraved on them."

Xena smiled as she ran two fingertips over the integrated design of intertwining ivy leaves. "How much are they?"

The weapons master considered while he placed the one back down on the case. "For you, twenty dinars."

"Honestly?" Xena peeked up between her brown bangs.

"I like you, so yes," answered the shopkeeper.

Xena smiled at that.

The weapons master grinned and took that as a yes. He placed the one dagger back into the sheath. He then went across the shop back to the front. He checked to make sure they were locked into their sheaths then placed them into a woven satchel to carry them in for now.

The teenager, on the other hand, pulled out twenty dinars and handed them over. In return, she received the satchel. "Thank you."

"You're welcome and please be careful with them."

"Yes, I know." Xena smiled warmly then quietly left the store. Once outside, she grabbed a hold of the daggers while they were in the bag, she took off sprinting for the scroll stand.

Gabrielle looked up when she saw Xena reappeared at her side. "Get them?"

"Yup," answered the teenager.

"Seriously?" The tiny bard grinned.

"Seriously," simply replied the older girl. "I'll show them to you when we're in your room."

"Alright."

"Got what you needed?"
"Yeah, sure did." Gabrielle held open her bag of scrolls.

Xena nodded and then asked, "Ready to go home?"

"Actually yeah, been a long day."

The older girl chuckled. "Come on." She twisted and turned her way through the crowd until they were out of the market. "Maybe we can get a nap in before dinner."

Gabrielle sighed happily at that idea. "Sounds good to me."

Xena laughed at her friend. "Me too."

~*~*~*~

The little bard snuggled closer into her friend's side. "You really have to go home tomorrow?"


"Not its okay… just I'll miss you."

"Yeah me too." The teenager placed her hands under her head as she stared up at the ceiling. "At least we live close by."

"Yeah true," agreed the tiny bard. "When you think we'll see each other again?"

"Hopefully soon." Xena grinned. "Mother wants you to come over. She enjoys having you over just as much as me."

Gabrielle chuckled at that. She rolled onto her right side so that she snuggled up against her friend. She threw her left arm across her friend's stomach. "I'd like to come over."

"Ask your parents, okay?"

"I will," promised the smaller girl. She was quiet momentarily but then suddenly asked, "You going to show those daggers to me?"

Xena had a devilish grin. "Yeah sure." She sat up then rolled out of the bed. She grabbed the bag off her friend's small desk. She sat down on the bed again and crossed her legs.

Gabrielle sat up as well and crossed her own legs.
The older girl removed the two daggers from their bag and handed them to Gabrielle.

The tiny bard pulled one out of its sheath and looked it over. "I really like it."

"Me too," agreed Xena.

"Wait… what are you going to do with them?" asked a confused bard.

Xena shrugged and answered, "What most people do with them."

"And that is?" pressed on the younger girl.

"Learn how to throw them mainly."

"Oooh." Gabrielle's head bobbed a little and she sheathed the dagger. "Happy you have them?"

"Oh yeah."

The smaller girl laughed quietly and handed them back carefully. "Me too. I know you wanted them."

"Uh huh," agreed the teenager.

"Can you teach me how to use them once you learn?"

Xena brightened up at the request and asked, "Are you sure?"

"I think so… yeah." Gabrielle smiled. "I think I would."

"Alright, I will," promised the teenager. She wrapped the daggers back up in the bag and placed them on the floor. "Let's get some sleep."

"Yeah, I agree." Gabrielle grabbed her friend by the shoulders and together they rolled into place in the bed.

~*~*~*~

"How was your visit, dear?"

Xena lifted her head up but yawned before she replied to her mother.

Cyrene waited while she continued directing the horses down the dirt path towards
Amphipolis.

"It was nice, mother."

Cyrene smiled.

Xena returned the warm smile.

"Gabrielle's parents said you both had a nice time together."

"We did," agreed the daughter.

"They also asked if Gabrielle may visit soon."

"Did they?" Xena grinned at the news. She lifted herself up in the wagon some and hopped into the seat beside her mother. "What'd you say?"

"I told them anytime she wants to come over she can."

"Thanks, mom."

"Welcome, sweetie." Cyrene briefly patted her daughter's back then concentrated on the horses again. "Gabrielle's birthday will be soon."

"Yeah I know."

Cyrene raised a dark eyebrow at her daughter. "What's that grin about, dear?"

The teenager laughed softly because she knew her mother knew her too well. "Gabrielle and I were in the market and I happened to meet an old friend of yours."

"Oh really? Who was that?"

"Potestas."

"Oh gods… I haven't seen him in ages. I didn't realize he was living in Potidaea now."

"Well I met him."

"And?" urged her mother.

Xena wiggled around a little in her seat to get more comfortable. "Well," she started, "he had this necklace with a quill pendant on it. I asked how much it was and we began talking. He told me he knew you and me, when I was a baby though I think. So
he offered me the necklace for fourteen dinars."

"Do you have it now?"

"Not yet, I paid half of it now. Then when I go back for Gabrielle's birthday, I pay the other half."

"That was very nice of him. Did you thank him?"

"Of course, mother." Xena smiled. "He was very nice."

"He is a nice man." Xena's mother gave a light jerk of the reins to slow the horses back down. "And I am sure Gabrielle will love the gift."

"Oh I know she will."

The mother arched an eyebrow at her overly confident daughter. "Oh?"

"Uh huh. Gabrielle saw it earlier and just loved it."

"I see." Cyrene began to chuckle. "You are always the clever one."

Xena just grinned at her mother's words.

"We should be home fairly soon."

"Yeah I know." The teenager sighed. "How are the Toris and Lyceaus?"

"They are fine. Ly missed you though."

A few chuckles escaped the teenager. "He always does."

"He adores you," reminded the mother. "Toris on the other hand...."

"Toris just needs to readjust his attitude," grumbled the girl.

"Honey, I think sometimes he thinks a lot about your father." She rested her left hand on her daughter's knee. "It's hard on him, I believe."

"He's gone though," stated the teenager. "What's there to think about?" She crossed her arms against her chest, a displeased look on her face.

Cyrene squeezed her daughter's knee briefly then returned it to the reins. "Toris misses your father."
"What father?" reminded Xena. "You're all we have, mother."

"I know, honey. I realize you do not miss him but Toris misses having a father." She shook her head. "He is angry he has no father figure to look up to like all the other boys in the town do."

"Ly isn't like that though," countered Xena.

"No he's not and he is not Toris either."

The teenager groused to herself. "I still don't understand him sometimes."

"I know, sweetie just… don't give him such a hard time. He loves us all and may not show it but he's just going through a stage."

"Yeah I know," whispered Xena. She brushed back a few strands of deep brown hair. "You think about father at all?" She peered up.

Cyrene pressed her lips together but then responded. "Not really, honey…. You three are the most important things in my life."

Xena smiled happily. She leaned over and lowered her head onto her mother's shoulder.

Cyrene revealed her own smile, and she placed a gentle kiss to her daughter's temple. She then returned her attention to the road.

~*~*~*~

Xena narrowed her eyes, pulled back her right hand as the dagger shimmered from her fingertips, and she suddenly threw it roughly.

The dagger glided through the air and struck the centre of the black circle on the tree.

"Bullseye," declared Xena proudly. She faced her best friend with her hands on her hips.

Gabrielle laughed and her head bobbed. She looked at the practice tree with the dagger sticking out at the centre point. "How long did that take you?"

The teenager grinned as she walked over to the tree to retrieve her dagger. "I started the day I got home with them."
"I can't believe that." She studied the other dagger in her hand that she held onto for Xena. "Only a month?"

"Uh huh." Xena took the sheath from her friend and put the dagger into it.

"That's amazing." Gabrielle handed over the other dagger. "I wonder if I could learn that quickly."

"Maybe." The teenager shifted one foot forward and leaned back against the other. "I can show you. Then once you get the hang of it, you just have to practice."

"Well, I don't have a dagger," reminded the bard.

"True, but you can burrow one of mine," offered Xena.

Gabrielle gazed down at the two daggers in her friend's hand. "Um… I'm not sure."

"I don't mind." While she waited for a reply, Xena tucked her daggers under her shirt and in between her pants.

"I know just… kinda nervous about actually handling one now that I think about it."

Xena chuckled and said, "It's a lot of fun."

"Really?"

"Uh huh."

Suddenly a devilish grin appeared on the tiny bard's features. "Show me when you come over for my birthday."

"Alright, it's a date."

Gabrielle laughed quietly. She then asked, "You think your mom has dinner ready?"

"Yeah probably. Come on." Xena took her best friend's hand and led her through the forest. They entered Amphipolis again and headed for the opposite side of town where the tavern was located.

As they made their way home, Gabrielle started noticing a few boys following behind them.

"Xen, those boys-"
"I know," whispered back the teenager. "They always follow me."

"What for?"

The older girl shrugged. "Maybe because I'm the only good lookin' girl in town."

A couple of giggles left the bard. "You're probably right." She then asked quietly, "They ever done or said anything?"

"No, not really. I think they're scared of me."

"Why?"

Xena's dark blue eyes twinkled at the little bard. "You don't want to know."

The tiny bard snickered in response.

Once back at the tavern, the pair went inside and went into the kitchen.

"Mother, you need any help?"

Cyrene glanced over her shoulder at the two girls and replied back to Xena. "Yes, dear. I need one of you to peel these carrots for me and can the other get the boys for me?"

"Where are they?" piped up Gabrielle. "I'll go get them."

"They're back over in the woods on the other side of the tavern. Thank you, Gabrielle."

The tiny bard smiled then headed out of the kitchen.

Xena, however, helped by peeling the carrots as her mother requested.

The tiny bard went outside and went around the corner of the tavern. Soon as she did, the same four boys that had been following her and Xena earlier greeted her.

"Well who are you?" inquired one boy.

Gabrielle looked around herself and saw all of them circling her. "I'm Xena's friend."

"Okay, Xena's friend… do you have a name?" teased the boy.

The young girl glared at the older boy. "It's Gabrielle."
"Well, we can tell you're not from around here, are you?"

"Not really, no."

"Didn't think so." The boy folded his arms against his chest. "I'm Dan and you see, your friend isn't exactly well liked around here."

"Why is that?" urged the small bard. She felt her heart beginning to race.

"Because she thinks she's the hottest girl around and toughest." He cracked his knuckles. "She's such a princess. And we've been meaning to get her back for a few things." He had vicious grin now. "That's where you'll play in, Gabrielle."

"No thanks," stated the little bard.

"Mother, I'll be right back."

"What's wrong, sweetie?"

Xena put the carrot and knife down. "I'm just worried about something. I'll be back in a flash to help more."

"Okay, dear." Cyrene watched her child hurry out of the kitchen.

Xena stopped on the porch of the tavern and cocked her head to one side. She heard Gabrielle's voice and a boy's voice. She narrowed her eyes and raced to the right of the porch. She gazed over and saw the four boys surrounding her best friends. "Hades," she growled. She grabbed the rail of the porch; she sprung over the rail and landed on the ground. "Get away from her!" she yelled.

The four boys all stopped from closing in on the tiny bard.

Dan saw Xena heading for them and he ordered, "Get Xena!"

The three boys turned to the teenager and came after her. They started attacking her.

Dan though came at Gabrielle and picked her up off the ground.

"Xena!" hollered the tiny bard. She tried struggling against the older boy but found herself lifted off the ground and carried away.
Xena growled as she threw one of the boys off herself. She started fighting back.

The one boy she'd thrown aside got back up and came up behind her. He was a little bigger than Xena so he was able to grab a hold of her from behind.

Then the other two teenage boys started punching at her in various parts of her body.

Xena closed her eyes as she took a blow to her stomach then another at her face. She felt a few tears welding up behind her eyelids but she thought about her best friend. Suddenly her anger grew furiously and she lashed out. She grabbed the boy behind herself and hurled him over herself.

"Look out!" screamed the two boys in the front. They both were slammed by the bigger boy and fell to the ground.

"Stop struggling," snarled Dan. He threw Gabrielle onto the ground and glared down at her. "You're just a pain."

"I don't play hostage well in these games," retorted the tiny bard. She returned her own glare and sprung up at the tall boy.

Dan growled as he tried to grab her hands that were clawing at his chest. He managed to get a hold of her wrists but only after she clawed his right cheek. He was so frustrated though that he threw her and the back of Gabrielle's head hit a large rock.

Gabrielle moaned and closed her eyes; her body went limp.

"Stupid girl." Dan picked up Gabrielle in his arms and continued into the woods.

"Dinner should be soon," announced Toris, he lowered his wood sword.

"Yeah I know," agreed the young brother, he lowered his sword as well. He then gazed, confusingly, past Toris.

"What's wrong?" Toris turned around.

"Isn't that Dan?"

"It is and…." Toris furrowed his eyebrows as he studied Dan from a distance. "He's got some girl in his arms."
"Its Gabrielle," uttered Lyceaus in fear.

"Come on, let's get him," ordered Toris. He went racing after the boy and his brother following behind. "Dan!" called out Toris.

Dan stopped and located the owner of the voice. "Hades," he growled. He then suddenly heard Xena angrily scream his name. "Oh double Hades. How'd she get past them?"

Toris neared the boy and held up his wood sword. "Put Gabrielle down."

Lyceaus held up his sword too and said, "I think you better, Dan. Xena will kick your ass."

Toris grinned at what his brother said, and he had to just chuckle. "You know she will, Dan… soon as she gets here."

Dan felt his heart pounding and sweat coating his body now. He started shaking his head.

"Dan!" growled an angry Xena. She stepped in front of her two brothers and whispered lowly, "Giver her to me or I'll…"

Dan didn't want to know what she planned to do. He just stared at feral blue eyes and a face written in anger. He cautiously handed the tiny bard to the girl.

Xena held her best friend in her arms tightly. She then felt something wet and warm touch her left elbow, she quickly realized Gabrielle's head was bleeding. Her breathing deepened. "Toris," she whispered quietly.

"Yes?"

"Please take her to mother. Her head has been hurt… somehow," she whispered between her teeth.

Toris carefully moved closer to his sister.

Xena turned and handed Gabrielle off to her brother. "Go with him, Ly."

"But-"

"Now!" yelled Xena hotly.
Both brothers stared at their sister, they'd never seen her this anger before in their lives. They both stepped back then rushed off and praying that Dan would live to see another day.

Xena turned her feral eyes back onto Dan.

Dan's eyes widened at the vicious look appearing on Xena's face. "It was an accident."

"I doubt that," she growled.

Dan kept shaking his head as he stepped back while Xena stepped forward. His back hit the tree directly behind him. "Xena-

"Shut up," growled the girl. She grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. "You bastard." She felt her anger rage on and it caused her adrenaline to pump through her body. Now she was able to lift him up slightly off the ground, she then threw him onto the ground behind herself.

Dan stared up at Xena. Slowly he saw Xena extracted a dagger from under her shirt. "Oh gods," he whimpered and began crawling backwards on his hands.

Xena revealed a primal grin. She knelt down beside the boy and brought the dagger under his throat. She saw all the fear in his eyes. She didn't say anything nor did anything as she enjoyed all this fear he held for her. "Now then…." She lowered her face closer to his. "I'm going to tell you this once and you better not ever forget it."

"Okay," whispered the boy.

Xena pressed the point of the dagger in more to emphasize her power. "If you ever, ever touch Gabrielle or anybody else in my family again, I will make your insides your outsides." She brought her face right into the other teenager's. "Keep your boys away from us as well." She paused as a very nasty grin crossed her lips. "Have I made myself clear, Dan?"

The boy faintly nodded.

"Good," whispered Xena. She pulled back her dagger and slipped it back under her shirt. She started to stand up but stopped part of the way up. "Oh and another thing."

Dan's eyes widened when he saw the fist slam into his face. His head hit the ground, and he cried out.

"That's for Gabrielle." Xena stood up and walked off; in the background she could hear the boy crying about his broken nose. She shrugged it off and repeatedly
clenched and unclenched her right hand. Her hand ached some from the hard blow she gave the boy but she really didn't care. She also finally decided to wipe away the bit of blood smeared under the bottom of her lip.

"Mom, is she okay?" whispered Lyceaus.

Cyrene sighed and brushed Gabrielle's blond locks away from her forehead. "What was your sister doing when you two left?"

"I don't know, mother," whispered Lyceaus.

"Probably kicking the crap out of Dan," replied Toris. He entered Xena's room with a bowl of water. "She was pissed, mom."

Cyrene peered up at her son. She then stood up. "Take care of Gabrielle. I'm going to get your sister."

"Mom, she'll be fine."

"I know that but I'm more concerned for this boy Dan."

Toris chuckled.

"Its not funny, Toris." Cyrene stood in the doorway and ordered, "Keep watch of Gabrielle. Check the back of her head."

"Yes, mother." Toris watched his mom hurry out the room. He then glanced at his younger brother then back at Gabrielle. He lifted her head and with his free hand, he carefully dabbed the wet towel to clean off the blood.

"You think she'll be okay, Toris?"

"She'll be fine," promised Toris.

Cyrene came around the side of the tavern, soon as she did she caught sight of her daughter coming out of the woods. "Xena?"

Xena didn't say anything but approached her mother.

"By the gods," whispered Cyrene. She carefully touched her daughter's right cheek,
examining the various cuts and bruises on her daughter's face. "What happened, honey?"

"These four boys ganged up on Gabrielle," uttered the teenager. "I kinda got angry."

"Yes, I can tell. What happened to Dan?"

Xena shrugged but didn't make any eye contact.

Cyrene turned her daughter's face towards her own. "Xena, where is he?"

"He's in the forest still."

"Alright... go inside and clean yourself up."

"Is Gabrielle okay?"

Cyrene sighed and removed her hand. "I think so. Let her rest, hopefully she'll come out of it soon."

Xena nodded and just brushed past her mother. She went into the tavern and upstairs.

The mother listened to her daughter go inside; she then headed into the woods in the evening sunset. After about three minutes of searching, she found the boy sitting up against a tree with bloody hands, nose, and scratched cheek. "Dan?"

The boy looked up with a tear stained face. "Who are you?"

Cyrene went a little closer but didn't move in too close. "I'm Xena's mother, Cyrene. Are you okay?"

Dan licked his lips and lowered his eyes to his bloody hands. "I just need to get home," he whispered.

Cyrene took four more steps closer and knelt down. "Can I help you get home?"

Dan looked up into trusting hazel eyes. He slowly nodded.

Cyrene helped the young boy up and walked him out of the forest. "Where is your home?"

"I live by the butchers."

"Okay, let's get you home then." Cyrene sighed and directed the boy towards the other
side of town. "How is your nose?"

"I think it's broken."

"May I ask what happened between you all?"

Dan sighed deeply and explained to Cyrene what had happened. "Me and three of my friends tried to get Gabrielle so we could tease your daughter. We didn't want to hurt anybody." He paused while chewing on his lip a little as he continued his story. "And well, Xena came out and saw what was happening. She got all angry and started hitting and punching at us all. I ran off to get away but she hunted me down." He shrugged then added, "She threatened me to stay away from Gabrielle from now on."

Cyrene narrowed her eyes yet nodded her understanding. "Well next time, I think its best you do not try to tease Xena. She has a rather bad temper."

"I can see that," agreed Dan. He saw his house coming into view so he stopped and said, "Thank you for walking me home."

"You'll be okay?"

"Yes, thank you again." Dan smiled warmly then continued the rest of the walk to his house.

Cyrene watched for a moment but then turned and went back to her own home.

Xena dried off her face and lifted her head, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. She mentally counted the scars on her face from the fight, there were three of them. She could also see a slight blackness developing under her right eye. "Great," she muttered.

After washing her face off, she went into her bedroom. Her two brothers looked to her immediately when she came into the room.

"Sssssso, is Dan still alive?" asked Toris tauntingly.

"Yeah," replied Xena simply. She went to her dresser first and kept her back to her brothers. She quietly and carefully slipped out her two daggers, she placed them into her shirt drawer, tucking them underneath a few shirts. Turning around, she came to the other side of her bed. She knelt down besides the bed and studied her best friend.

"What happened to Dan?" quipped Lyceaus.
"Nothing, Ly," replied Xena.

"Centaur shit," countered Toris.

"That's centaur crap, young man," corrected Cyrene. She stood in the doorway with her arms against her chest. "Go down stairs, boys. I'll have dinner ready in a few minutes."

Toris stood up from the chair besides the bed. He grabbed Lyceaus's arm and tugged him out of the room.

After they were gone, Cyrene sat down.

"Is she okay, mother?"

"I think so, honey."

Xena nodded, licked her lips, and lowered her chin down onto the bedside. She just stared at her friend sleeping peacefully on the bed.

"Dan told me you attacked them."

The teenager lifted her head up at hearing that. "I did not, mother. They attacked Gabrielle and I jumped in to stop them."

"Dan had a bloody face and a broken nose, honey."

"Mother!" roared Xena; she sprung up to her feet. "What you think this is huh?" She pointed to her face. "Or how about Gabrielle huh? You think she just hit her own head?" She huffed and turned around, she walked over to the window and stared at the town.

Cyrene sighed. She looked at Gabrielle for several moments but she stood up from her chair. She crossed the room to her daughter's side. "Honey, please try to control that temper of yours."

"Mom, they were going to hurt Gabrielle," whispered Xena, "You know how I feel about her."

Cyrene took a deep breath, she brought her left arm around her daughter's tense shoulders. She slowly lowered her head onto her child's shoulder. "I know, sweetie. I know she's your sister. Just please be more careful next time and try to control your temper better. Please?"
Xena's shoulders loosened up, and she dropped her head against her mother's. "I will try."

"Thank you," uttered Cyrene. "Why don't you stay up here for dinner. Keep an eye on Gabrielle. Okay?"

"Thanks, mom."

"No problem, sweetie." The mother lifted her head back up and quietly left the room.

Xena moved away from the window and sat down in the chair beside the bed. After about ten minutes, her mother had brought her dinner. She tried her best to eat most of it but it was hard since her stomach was still doing flips from being upset about this afternoon. But after she ate most of it, she returned her plate to her mother then went back upstairs. She blew out a couple of candles in the room so that she could sleep.

The teenager then crawled into bed after she'd put her night shift on herself. Once she was comfortable in her bed, she cautiously pulled Gabrielle into her arms. She placed a gentle kiss to Gabrielle's temple and held her tightly.

"Xen?" muttered the tiny bard in her sleep.

"I'm here, Bri," whispered the older girl.

Gabrielle moaned and thrashed onto her left side, her back to Xena.

The older girl sighed and placed a gentle kiss to the back of her friend's head, right where the scab was growing. When her lips gently pressed against the scabbed skin, she felt her anger boil up again inside of herself. She tried to control it but it was so hard.

The bard whined, "Xena?"

"Come here," whispered the teenager. She helped her friend turn around then tucked her back into her arms.

"Xen?"

"Hmmm?"

"You stop Dan?" Gabrielle nuzzled her friend's neck and whispered, "He tried hurting me."
"I know… he won't bother you ever again."

The tiny bard tried pushing more into her friend's arms. "I have a bad headache." She lifted her head up some and opened her fuzzy green eyes.

Xena sighed but smiled sadly at Gabrielle. "Close your eyes again. I'll try to help it, okay?"

"Okay, thank you."

"You're welcome. Just go back to sleep." She shifted her left hand under Gabrielle's head to her right temple. Xena's other free hand, she placed her index and middle finger against Gabrielle's left temple. She then slowly massaged her friend's temples.

"Mmmmm," whispered the tiny bard. She gradually felt her headache calming, and she drifted back to sleep.

Xena, however, laid awake for a few candlemarks. Her mind repeatedly replayed the events of this afternoon. She continually heard Gabrielle screaming out for her. Her anger fueled through her body and the energy kept her awake for most of the night and caused for restless sleep.

~*~*~*~

Winter had passed by and spring had begun in full glory, two months had passed by since the incident with the boys and Xena. The pair of friends had grown from that experience. Xena learned exactly the potential of her own anger as well as her physical strength. She'd grown to see the various possibilities to handling such a fight like that ever again.

Gabrielle, herself, also saw the anger her friend could hold but never experienced her best friend's own temperament first hand. She also felt a need to protect herself after that experience so that nobody could attack her like that ever again. So as promised, Xena taught her best friend how to use the daggers.

Xena had promised her best friend, soon as she mastered the daggers, that she would let her have one of them. Tomorrow was the day that Xena would pit against her best friend to see just how much she'd learned over the couple of months. But today, they were enjoying an incredibly special day, Gabrielle's birthday.

"Godsss." Gabrielle laughed as she stared up at her ceiling her in bedroom. "I can't believe I'm a teenager now."

Xena laughed quietly to herself. "Wait till you turn eighteen." She turned her head to
the right on the pillow and smiled at her friend.

The new teenager brightly grinned and teased, "You'll be eighteen this winter."

The older teenager groaned. "I know."

"I can't wait!" Gabrielle sat up in her bed and decided to sit on Xena's waist. "I'm going to have the biggest birthday for you."

"Thanks but no thanks."

"Awe come on, Xen." Gabrielle grinned. "It'd be so much fun."

"Hades no," growled the older teenager.

The smaller teenager rolled her eyes. "You are no fun."

"Oh really?"

"Well maybe some," teased the little bard.

Xena chuckled at that.

Gabrielle then decided to lie back down but not on her bed but instead on top of Xena.

The older teenager smiled at her friend.

"So, you think I act my age?"

Xena shrugged and replied, "No."

"How old I act then?"

A gigantic grin broke out in Xena's expression. "A three year old."

"Xena!" Gabrielle swatted her friend's side. "I'm the birthday girl, you can't tease me today."

Xena's blue eyes rolled. "Oh yeah, that's right."

"Seriously, how old do I act?"

The older teenager went more serious as she slipped her hands under her head. "I think you act a lot older than thirteen."
"Like how old?" urged the tiny bard.

"Mmmmm." Xena considered for many seconds. "My own age."

"Really?"

"Uh huh." The older girl smiled softly and added, "I don't hang out with any thirteen year old."

Gabrielle folded her arms over her friend's breasts and rested her chin on top of her hands. "Thanks."

"Welcome," whispered Xena.

The pair studied each other quietly without any noise except their own breathing.

Gabrielle sighed contently and lowered her head down onto Xena's breasts with her arms sliding away. She then gradually closed her eyes.

Xena grinned at her friend. She slipped one hand free from under her pillow. She rubbed her friend's back lightly.

"Gabrielle!" suddenly screamed out Lila.

"Oh gods," groaned the little bard. "Now here comes the three year old," whimpered the bard.

"Gabby! its time!" Lila came banging on the door. "I'm coming in!"

"Lila, wait!"

But Lila didn't wait and started opening the door.

Gabrielle's heart skipped a beat, and she never knew she could move so quickly as she flew off Xena's body.

Xena's only reaction was to hysterically laugh.

Lila came into the room to see a huffing and puffing sister standing up and a laughing Xena. "What's going on?"

The teenaged bard glared at her sister. "You barging in, that's what!"
"What?" squealed the sister. "I said I was coming in."

"You could have waited!" growled Gabrielle. "You are toast, Lila!"

Xena finally stopped laughing and saw how serious her friend was being. "Better run, Lila."

The eleven-year-old glanced between a grinning Xena and an angry sister. "Toodles!" she jumped out of the room and slammed the door. "By the way," she yelled between the door, "Mom says dinner is ready."

"We'll be in there in a minute," promised Xena.

Gabrielle listened to her sister's footfall going into the living room. She sighed and looked across the room to her best friend. "That was close."

"I've never seen you move so fast… other than for food," taunted the older teenager.

"Thanks," deadpanned Gabrielle.

Xena and the little bard both knew if they'd been caught lying in each other's arms how much trouble they would be in for it. Not only were they in each other's arms but they both were females. They each knew the other's family's outlook on such things. Neither one of them spoke to the other about it but quietly accepted it between each other.

Xena hopped out of the bed and came up to her best friend. She squeezed Gabrielle's shoulders to help relax her.

Gabrielle sighed in relief and just hugged Xena.

The older girl hugged the tiny bard back. "Come on. Let's get some cake."

"Always after the sweets," teased the little bard.

"Got that right." Xena turned her friend around and pushed her towards the door.

"Okay okay, I got the drift." Gabrielle opened the door and went to the kitchen. She sat down at the head of the table with Xena to her right, Lila and her mother on her left then her father was at the other head of the table. Anytime it was somebody's birthday, they were allowed to sit at the head of the table for that night.

"Okay, birthday girl start dinner," teased Lila.
Gabrielle glanced at her mother for approval.

"Go on, honey," urged Gabrielle's mother.

The young bard smiled and started dinner by taking a few pieces of chicken from the plate. She then handed it off to the guest, Xena. After that, she moved onto the asparagus then passed it to Xena as well. She continued this with each platter her mother had prepared. Once everybody had what they wanted on their plate, Gabrielle started the dinner.

After the dinner, Hecuba and Lila cleared the table together and prepared the cake.

"The best part," teased Xena to her friend.

Gabrielle chuckled.

"I'll agree," stated Gabrielle's father.

Xena even chuckled in response.

Hecuba blew out several candles in the kitchen to darken everything some.

Lila then came down the hallway with a large square cake on a plate that had thirteen lit candles in it. "Happy birthday to you…." 

Everybody joined in singing with Lila.

Gabrielle eyes widened as she realized it was a huge cake of nutbread with strawberries on the top. Once the cake was down in front of her, she blew them all out in one go.

"Make a wish?" asked the older teenager.

"Oh yeah." Gabrielle winked at her friend.

"Go ahead and start cutting up the nutbread, honey." Hecuba stood up from her chair and relit the candles in the room. She then pulled out five small serving plates and put them in front of her eldest daughter.

Gabrielle gingerly placed a slice of the nutbread onto a plate and handed it to Xena. She then cut another piece and plopped it onto a plate with a few strawberries. "Pass that to father."

Xena took the plate and handed it to Herodotus.
The young bard continued slicing pieces of the nutbread until everybody had a slice. Then everybody started eating their nutbread in happy silence.

After dinner, Xena and Gabrielle went to Gabrielle's parents to ask if they could leave the house.

"Honey, where are you two going?" probed Gabrielle's mother. "To the barn?"

"Hecuba, let them be… they're old enough."

"I know, Herodotus but I'd just like to know where they'll be."

"Just out to the field behind the house," answered Gabrielle. "Please?"

Hecuba put the dirty plate down in the counter. "If you promise to sleep in the house tonight and not in the barn. Okay?"

"Yes, mom. We promise."

Xena nodded her agreement.

"Okay go on." Hecuba watched the two girls rush out of the house. She shook her head and turned back to the dirty dishes. "Those two are always into something."

Gabrielle's father chuckled and replied, "They're kids… what can you expect?"

Hecuba chuckled at that.

Xena and Gabrielle slowly strolled around to the back of the house. They then entered into the remains of what was a wheat field that soon would be growing barely. Together, they searched out a perfect spot to lay and study the stars together. Once they were settled into comfortable positions on the ground, they started studying the stars.

"I love doing this with you."

Xena felt a grin tug at her lips. "Me too."

"A little cool though."

"Come here," offered Xena. She pulled her friend in closer.

Gabrielle snuggled up to the older girl's side and started to warm back up. "Thank you
for coming for my birthday."

"I wouldn't miss it," promised Xena.

"Yeah I know… just always means a lot to me."

"I know it does." Xena turned her head and gave a warm smile.

Gabrielle returned the happy smile then looked back at the stars. After many minutes of silence, she whispered, "Xen?"

"Yeah, Bri?"

"Can I asked you something?"

"Yeah sure. Shoot."

Gabrielle rolled onto her side and brought her right arm over Xena's breasts. "I know we never talked about this before but….."

Xena raised a dark brown eyebrow in question. "What is it?"

"Well… why you let me, you know….."

"No, why do I let you what?" persisted the older teenager.

"Like… touch you or snuggle with you… things like that."

"Well why do you?" countered Xena.

Gabrielle pressed her lips together at the question and simply responded, "Because I love you."

"Same for me," agreed Xena.

Gabrielle just blinked then lowered her head onto the side of her friend's chest. "It's just that I consider you my sister and all and I don't do this stuff with Lila. Well I have when she's upset or I'm really upset."

"Yeah I know." Xena squeezed her friend's shoulder.

The little bard lifted her head to peer into warm blue eyes. "Remember when I asked you about if you'll ever find the right guy?"
"Yeah a couple of months ago. Why?"

Gabrielle chewed on the inside of her lips a little yet asked, "You think you will?"

"Maybe." Xena shrugged. "Not really worried about it though. Why are you so worried?"

"I'm not sure." Gabrielle rested her head back down. She shifted her right hand back over and pressed her fingertips against Xena's throat. She trailed her fingertips up to her friend's jaw line.

"Gabrielle," whispered Xena, she'd closed her eyes. "What's on your mind huh?"

"You," uttered the young bard quietly.

"What about me?" Xena felt her heartbeat go a little faster when Gabrielle's fingertips came over her high cheekbones.

The young teenager raised her head back up again and watched blue eyes open up to her again. "Just… what it'd be like to kiss you," she whispered softly. Her fingertips grazed across her best friend's soft lips.

Xena felt a burst of heat flash through her body. She carefully brought her right hand up to Gabrielle's left cheek. "Then find out." She drew her friend's head down with her hand.

Gabrielle closed her eyes when her lips touched Xena's smooth lips. At first, she wasn't really sure what to do since it was her first kiss but her imagination helped her along.

Xena felt Gabrielle's warm tongue against her lips so she opened her mouth cautiously. She moaned when her tongue pressed into Gabrielle's own.

The little bard whimpered and pressed her body against Xena's more.

Xena pulled back some because she felt a little out of control. "Calm down, Gabrielle," she muttered between the kiss.

The younger girl backed off, giving a huge sigh but tried to calm down.

"Come here." Xena pulled her friend in closer and tried to get her to relax. She, herself, was trying to catch her breath again. Once a few minutes passed by, she asked quietly, "So what'd you think?"
"Gods," whimpered the bard, she snuggled her head into her friend's neck more. "I couldn't write it if I tried."

"Good then?" teased the older teenager.

"Uh huh."

Xena grinned. "Not bad for our first times huh?"

"Yyyyyeah… hate to see what we're like after a few practice runs and a longer kiss." She then felt Xena's chest shaking from a few quiet laughs. She grinned.

Xena felt the grin shape from Gabrielle's lips. "So care to explain that one?"

Gabrielle brushed back her hair when she lifted her head back up. "Xena, honestly I don't want you to date anybody. Well… I do, just only one person."

"Who is that?" inquired the teenager.

Gabrielle placed the palm of her right hand against her friend's closest cheek. "Me." She searched loving blue eyes as she spoke more. "I'm sorry but I'm really selfish like that."

Xena felt an incredible smile pull across her face. "Me too."

"Seriously? You'd date me?" Gabrielle shook her head in confusion. "But wait, I'm your friend, sister… a girl… younger. Xena-"

"Gabrielle, hold on." Xena waited for her friend to settle down. "I've always loved you as my friend and a younger sister. Just over time as we've changed and developed, I've grown more love for you." She brushed back a few loose strands of blond hair behind Gabrielle's ear. "As I said earlier, you don't act younger than me. And far as two girls goes…." Xena shrugged. "Well, I've heard of two women being together."

"Yeah? Really?" asked a curious little bard.

"Uh huh." But Xena chuckled. "I have no idea but I hear its true."

"Wwwwweird."

"I wouldn't call it that."

"Yeah I know." Gabrielle lowered her chin onto her friend's chest. "Not that I know how a girl and guy… you know do it. Well I mean I do, but I don't know the finer
"Well," started Xena, "what happens."

"Xena! Please… I don't need a class in male, female sex." Gabrielle groaned and rolled off her friend.

Xena snickered quietly but rolled to her right, on top of her friend. "Okay then. How about this?"

"How about what?" questioned the small bard.

"How would you like to… be my girlfriend?" whispered Xena lovingly.

Gabrielle rested there under her friend's body as she seriously considered the offer. She thought about everything from her family to Xena's then to her future and how she felt about Xena. After the consideration, she quietly replied, "I would love it." She then watched has a very happy smiled developed on her new girlfriend's face.

"Thank you."

Gabrielle smiled sheepishly. "Thank you too."

"For?"

"For asking and…." She trailed off but her face began to go bright red.

"What, Gabrielle?" Xena's devilish look reappeared at seeing the blush.

"And for well, making my birthday wish come true."

Xena smiled and lowered her head closer to her girlfriend's. "I hope I do it every year." She placed a light kiss to Gabrielle's lips.

The bard giggled and suddenly wrapped her arms and legs around Xena's body.

The older teenager groaned and suddenly rolled onto her back, taking Gabrielle with her.

Gabrielle positioned herself comfortably on her friend's body. "I do have one question."

"What's that?"
"Um well…." The small bard began blush yet again.

"Oh let me guess, when are we going to have sex?"

Gabrielle laughed and swatted her friend's side. "Its called making love."

"We've always made love, Gabrielle," taunted Xena.

"You know what I mean."

Xena wiped away her teasing grin and finally answered, "When we think you're ready."

"Why me?"

"Because you're only thirteen," reminded the seventeen-year-old. She lifted her right hand poked the small nose in front of her.

"True… I haven't even started my cycle."

"Be happy," stated Xena. "It's a… pain."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Yeah, you get so biii-"

"Gabrielle," warned the teenager.

"I was just teasing."

Xena shook her head but grinned nonetheless. "But seriously, I think its best we wait till you're older."

"Like how old?"

"Like when you're my age."

"Eighteen?" roared Gabrielle, she lifted herself up some.

The teenager sighed and pulled her little bard back down. "At least sixteen, okay?"

"Why?"

"Because you're young, Gabrielle."

The bard huffed. "You just said I act your age."
"You do but I didn't say your body is my age."

The young bard groused and finally rested her head onto Xena's chest. "I know but its just… I'll be sixteen and you'll be… twenty-one by then. Gods."

"It doesn't matter, from there out we'll have the rest of our lives to do sex."

"True."

Xena rubbed her girlfriend's back. "Worry about it later huh? We have plenty of time to decide. Alright?"

"Okay." Gabrielle slowly closed her eyes.

The older teenager glanced at her peaceful friend, she felt a content sigh leave herself. She then decided it was the right time to give her friend the gift she'd been dying to give to her. Carefully, she slipped her right hand into her pant's pocket and pulled out a black velvet bag.

"Xena?"

"Mmmm?"

"What you doing?" Gabrielle opened her eyes, lifted her head, and settled her chin onto Xena's chest.

"Do me a favour, sit up."

Gabrielle raised a light brown eyebrow at her girlfriend.

"Come on," urged the older girl.

"Ooookay." Gabrielle grinned but nonetheless sat up. "And?"

"And close your eyes."

The little bard arched her eyebrow momentarily but did as her friend asked.

Xena opened the black bag then ordered, "Lean forward for me."

Gabrielle shook her head but a grin was forming on her lips. She leaned forward with her eyes still closed. "Anything else?"
"Just stay like that for a second." Xena unhooked the two ends of the necklace. "One more favour."

The young bard giggled and asked, "What's that? You're running short on them."

"Ooooh I think you'll give me… nutbread points for this one. Pull your hair up and hold it."

"Rrrrright." Gabrielle reached behind and grabbed her hair. She clumped it all into one hand and lifted it up, holding it up.

Xena reached up, holding the sparkling silver necklace between her hands. She carefully brought the two ends around her girlfriend's neck and watched the quill pendant settle into place. Finally, she clipped to two ends back together with the lobster like clasp. "There. Can lower your hair and take a look."

Gabrielle slowly dropped her hair back down then opened her misty green eyes. "Oh Xen," she whispered once she'd held up the charm in the palm of her hand to study it.

"I hope you still want it."

The little bard shifted her eyes to her friend and a happy smile formed. "Why?"

"Because its your birthday and because I love you," replied Xena.

Gabrielle examined the silver quill again and then gingerly lowered it against her chest again. She lowered herself back down onto her girlfriend's body. She hugged Xena with all of her strength for about a minute straight.

Xena hugged her little bard back just as strong.

"Thank you so much," whispered Gabrielle. She finally raised her head back up and placed a gentle kiss on Xena's lips.

"You're very much welcome."

The younger girl chuckled and said, "I wondered what happened to it. I've been eyeing this necklace for months."

"I know you have… thought you should finally have it."

"Thank you." Gabrielle squeezed her girlfriend again.

Xena responded with a kiss to the top of her bard's head.
"And yup, you got nutbread points with me," teased Gabrielle.

The older teenager started laughing happily. "Sweet!"

Gabrielle joined in the laughing.

~*~*~*~

"Mom, Xena and I are going to go into the forest to play. Is that okay?"

Hecuba looked away from her garden and up to her daughter and Xena. "That's fine, dear. Just be careful, please?"

"Yes, mother." Gabrielle then asked, "Do you need help with the garden?"

"No, honey… I'm pretty much finished." The mother wiped the dirt off her hands. "But after lunch, you might need to help your father in the barn or with the field."

"Okay." Gabrielle then considered her sister so asked, "Where's Lila?"

"Oh she's out helping your father at the market today."

"That's what I thought."

Hecuba turned back to her garden. "Be back for lunch, ladies."

"We will, mom." Gabrielle hurried her best friend off towards town.

Xena walked beside her girlfriend as they went part way into town. They then headed off on a trail that led into the neighboring forest. Once she felt like she was far enough from sight, she reached over.

Gabrielle felt a large warm hand take hers. She quickly looked at Xena.

Xena smiled warmly and squeezed the smaller hand.

The tiny bard blushed but squeezed her girlfriend's hand back.

They soon found a nice open yet secluded spot away from the town.

"Which tree?" inquired Gabrielle.

Xena turned in a full circle as she picked out the official contest tree. "That one." She
pointed to the medium size oak tree. She removed the two daggers from under her shirt and handed one to Gabrielle. "Okay, how about a little warm up first?"

Gabrielle extracted the dagger from the sheath and nodded. "Okay." She bent forward and placed the sheath onto the top of a large rock. She took Xena's sheath as well and put it next to the other one. "You go first."

Xena chuckled and said, "Okay." She took a large side step away from Gabrielle to gain more space. She then flipped the dagger and caught it by the end of the blade. With a huge grin, she pulled back her arm and threw it.

Xena's dagger sailed towards the tree and dug into the bark directly under a branch.

"Your turn."

Gabrielle groaned but then announced, "I'm so gonna miss the tree." She sighed but held the dagger by the tip; she then pulled back her right arm and threw it.

Gabrielle's dagger clipped the targeted tree and wedged into a branch in the tree behind the targeted one. "See!" yelled Gabrielle.

Xena shook her head as she grinned from ear to ear. She walked over to the target tree and extracted her dagger. She then retrieved Gabrielle's as well. She handed her friend the dagger back. "Okay, next time focus your eyes just solely on that tree, okay? Forget about everything else around you."

"Okay." Gabrielle focused herself on the target tree. For a second she chewed on her lower lip but then pulled her right hand back then threw her arm forward with the dagger releasing from her fingertips.

Gabrielle's yelled happily and did a quick happy dance. "I got it that time."

Xena laughed and handed her dagger to her friend. "Good for two in a row?"

"I can do this," promised the little bard. She held Xena's dagger by the end blade, pulled her arm back, and focused on the target tree again. She took a deep breath, held it, and chucked the dagger with all her strength.

The dagger soared and cut into the tree slightly to the left of the first dagger.

"Nice one," praised Xena. She went to the tree and extracted the daggers again. "Okay, let's test you a little more."

"Um… how?"
"You'll see." Xena handed over the two daggers. "Now go ahead."

Gabrielle licked her lips, focused on the tree again, and pulled her right arm back. She was about to throw it but stopped herself when she noticed Xena's face rather close to her own. "Xen, stop that," growled the bard.

"What's wrong?" whispered Xena. "Can't focus?"

"Xena," growled the tiny bard. "I'm trying to. You're distrac…." She stopped, turned her head to Xena, and glared. "You are so mean."

The older teenager snickered evilly. "And what? You think you won't have any distractions when somebody is fighting you?" Xena corked a dark brown eyebrow. "Not like the world is going to stop for you, be quiet, and let you throw the dagger," she whispered.

Gabrielle grumped with a few expressions but tried hard to ignore her girlfriend being so close to her. "You can do this, Gabrielle," she coached to herself. She started to throw her hand forward.

"Yes you can, Gabrielle," uttered Xena in a sensual voice.

The little bard faltered and her throw went to low. Her dagger embedded itself into the ground at the base of the tree. "Xena!" she roared.

The older girl stepped backwards a few times laughing so hard.

"That is not funny!" yelled the tiny bard. "I almost had it then you had to say my name… like that!" she growled.

Xena was hunched forward still laughing at her friend. "That was classic, Bri." She then saw her friend getting angry but focusing on the tree again with her right hand pulled back with the other dagger. She quickly moved closer again and right when Gabrielle was about to toss the dagger, she pressed her warm lips against Gabrielle's cheek.

"Xena!" yelled the tiny bard. She felt her anger boil up. She pulled her arm back as far as she could, she then hurled the dagger at the tree. Gabrielle's dagger drove its way deep into the tree's centre.

Xena pulled her face away from Gabrielle's and looked at the dagger. "Oooh finally used the anger huh?" She grinned and sashayed up to the target tree.
Gabrielle was shaking her head while grinding her teeth. "You are just pure evil."

"Thanks," responded the older teenager. She ripped the one dagger out of the tree and then picked up the other from out of the ground. She handed them back yet again to her friend. "One more practice run."

The little bard sighed and took them. "Don't do that anymore though, promise?"

"Okay… okay." Xena held up her hands and took a few steps behind her friend. "I'll watch from behind here." She put her hands behind her back but a devilish grin still masked her features. "Go on."

Gabrielle cleared her throat and readied one dagger in her right hand. She took a calming breath and pulled her right arm back. She licked her lips then prepared to throw the dagger.

"Gabrielle!" suddenly screamed Xena.

"Oh gods what!" yelled the tiny bard, she spun around while she was in the motion of throwing her dagger.

The dagger escaped Gabrielle's hand and went barreling towards Xena.

"Xena, look out!"

The older teenager dropped to the ground right as the dagger came at her head. "Hades," she muttered when she heard the dagger strike the tree behind her.

"Xena!" growled the tiny bard. "I could have hurt you. Don't do that!"

Xena lifted her head out of the grass and just grinned at her girlfriend. "You are funny."

"No I'm not… especially when I have sharp objects in my hand." Gabrielle knelt down in front of her friend. "You okay?"

"Yeah fine." The grinning teenager stood back up with Gabrielle's help. "Okay I promise not to do anything this time."

Gabrielle chuckled and moved back to her spot after she knew her friend was okay. She focused on the target tree and threw the dagger with perfect aim. This time she nailed the tree in the direct centre. "How was that?"

Xena smiled happily. "Perfect." She turned around and pulled the one dagger out of
the tree. When she came to Gabrielle's spot, she saw her friend had pulled the other one from the target tree. "Now then, time for the contest." She neared the target tree and held the dagger up at the tree. "First our target area on the tree." She slammed the dagger into the tree and forcefully cut out a small circle in the bark.

Gabrielle looked at the small circle and squeaked, "I have to get it in there?"

"Yup." The older girl wiggled her eyebrows in a teasing manner. "You get it in the middle of that circle, you get your dagger."

The young bard groaned. "This will be funny."

"Come on, have some confidence," urged the eldest teenager. She pushed her friend away from the tree then made her stop. "Wait here. We have to have a line we stand behind to throw from." Xena picked up a long branch, lined up with the target, and then took four gigantic steps backwards. She dropped the branch at the front of her shoes. "From here."

"Forget that!" Gabrielle threw her hands up and stomped off after she saw exactly how far the throwing line was from the tree.

Xena laughed and raced after her friend. "Come on, you can do it. Just try."

Gabrielle spun around and pointed the dagger at her girlfriend's nose, which was half a foot away. "I can't."

"Yes you can, Bri," promised Xena. "I have faith."

"I don't!" Gabrielle laughed and lowered the dagger. "No way."

"Okay…." The older girl shrugged, turned around, and walked to the throwing line. "I understand… you're too weak and scared."

"What'd you say?" asked a small but now angry bard.

Xena whirled around on the balls of her feet. "You're scared… I know you can't handle something as simple as this." She bit back her lower lip to hold her grin down.

"I'm scared huh?" She marched right up to Xena with her dagger back up. "I'm too weak huh?"

Xena's blue eyes narrowed down to the tip of the dagger that was near her nose again. "Yeah, that's what I said."
"Fine, you're on." Gabrielle whipped the dagger down to her side and moved over to the throwing line.

Xena rolled her eyes while her back was to Gabrielle. She wiped away her huge grin and shifted to Gabrielle's side. "Okay, the best of three is the winner."

"Alright." The small bard raised up her dagger.

"You sure you want to go first?" Sparkling green eyes looked her up and down.

"Well the winner always goes first, duh."

Xena laughed and said, "Be my guest." She took one step back, and she placed her hands behind her back with her dagger.

"Lila?"

"Yes, mom?"

Hecuba turned around from the counter, she lowered her cutting knife to the counter. "Can you go get your sister and Xena for lunch?"

"Where are they?"

"In the forest, I'm sure not too far off."

"Probably down the path a ways."

Hecuba nodded her agreement. "Go on and hurry."

"Yes, mother." Lila put the last plate on the table then rushed out of the house to find her sister and friend. She quickly found the path that led into the forest. She quickly walked down it, searching.

"Okay we're both one and one," stated Xena. "This is the last round and-"

"I know, I know," cut off the teenaged bard. "If I win I get the dagger if I lose you keep it."

"Uh huh." Xena chewed on her lower lip. "Want to go first?"
Gabrielle thought about it then shook her head. "You go."

The older girl chuckled and took the position in front of the throwing line. She took a deep breath, pulled her arm back with the dagger, and started to aim at the circle.

A huge grin creased the bard's lips as she decided to play Xena's game. She took a few small steps closer to her girlfriend.

Xena glanced at her friend from the corner of her eye. "Gaaabrielleee," she warned.

The small bard leaned her head closer. "What's good for one goose is good for the other one," she whispered.

Xena groaned and whispered, "Pay backs."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle licked her lips and whispered, "Go on, oh expert one."

"Bratt," grumbled the older girl. She tried to ignore her girlfriend as she refocused on the target. With a deep breath, she tensed her arm up and started to bring it forward.

Gabrielle moved her head in a little closer.

Xena faltered in her throw when she felt warm lips lightly brush her neck. "Gods! Gabrielle!" she roared when the dagger hit the right inside of the circle.

Lila turned her head to the right when she heard her sister's name being yelled out by Xena. She came to a sudden stop and saw Gabrielle and Xena's heads above the large bush. She furrowed her eyebrows at what they were doing. So instead of making herself known, she sneaked up behind the brush, knelt a little, and listened carefully.

The tiny bard snickered at her friend's attempt to get the dead centre. "Well in real life, the world isn't going to stop for you, Xena be quiet and let you throw." She pushed her friend aside and took her spot in front of the throwing line.

"Alright then," declared Xena, "If that's how you want to do it." She narrowed her eyes and stood beside the other girl.

Lila quietly moved some of the thin branches out of the way so that she could see through the bush better. She now had a clear view of her sister and Xena. She watched as Gabrielle held up a shiny dagger and Lila's brown eyes instantly widened.

"Go ahead," urged Xena.
Gabrielle chewed on the side of her mouth because she knew her girlfriend would try to distract her again. She studied at where her girlfriend's dagger hung, embedded into the tree. After a brief second, she concentrated on the middle of the circle and tried to keep her mind focused on just that spot.

Xena stood beside Gabrielle but slightly behind her. She lifted her left hand that was directly behind Gabrielle.

The little bard felt the faint breeze behind her back and it caused her to tense up. She knew her friend was about to do something to break her concentration. But instead of letting Xena best her, she used her emotion she used last time, her anger. So she pulled back her arm a little more, gritted her teeth, and began to swing forward.

Xena felt a grin spread across her lips as she ran her fingertips up Gabrielle's back until she came to her neck.

Gabrielle was almost caught off guard by the warm sensations but remained focused on the target. She released the dagger from her fingertips and it sailed for the circle.

The older teenager watched in waiting tension.

Lila herself had even held her own breath to see if her sister did it or not.

Then suddenly Gabrielle jumped up and down, screaming and hollering in happiness. "I beat you, I beat you!"

Xena stood there, laughing, shaking her head, and admiring Gabrielle's dagger in the direct centre of the circle.

Lila even giggled quietly to herself at seeing her sister's happy victory.

"Okay, okay," started Xena. She came over to her happy dancing bard and grabbed her by the shoulders. "I'll surrender my second dagger to you."

"Yes!" yelled the bard. She did another jump and then hugged her best friend.

"Gods… all this over a dagger," whispered Xena in the middle of the hug.

Gabrielle chuckled and pulled back a little. "But I won and its your dagger."

Xena smiled warmly at her girlfriend. She reached up to push back some of Gabrielle's blond hair. "You did well."

"Thank you… and thank you for the help."
"You're welcome," uttered the older girl.

Lila furrowed her eyebrows as she realized the two friends were having a rather long hug.

Gabrielle smiled warmly and reached behind Xena's head, she pulled Xena's head down.

Xena locked their lips together in a gentle kiss.

Lila gasped and fell backwards onto the ground.

Gabrielle tore away from the kiss. "What was that?" she uttered.

Xena narrowed her eyes and quickly released her friend. "Somebody is here," she uttered then quickly went to grab her daggers from the tree.

"Who is there?" called Gabrielle.

"Um… its just me, Gabby," called Lila from behind the bush.

"Lila?" growled the older sister. She stomped over to the side of the bush and looked down at her sister sitting in the grass. "Lila," she growled even deeper. "What are you doing here?"

"Mother asked me to get you and Xena… so I did."

"You sure did," agreed the older teenager, as she came up beside Gabrielle. Xena was carefully slipping the daggers back into their sheaths and placing them under her shirt again.

The tiny bard narrowed her eyes and knelt down closer to her sister. "Lila, what did you see and hear?"

"Um… nothing, sister." Lila then started to suddenly blush.

Gabrielle's shoulders slumped and a groan escaped her. "Great… great, I know just what you saw." She closed her eyes as she tried to think.

"I swear I saw nothing," squeaked out the younger sister.

Gabrielle opened her forest eyes and leaned closer to her sister. "I swear if you tell mother and father, or anybody else for that matter. I will-"
"Gabrielle," whispered Xena quietly. Her right hand rested between Gabrielle's two shoulder blades but she wasn't looking down at her friend.

The younger teenager looked up at her friend and saw the confusion on Xena's face. "What's wrong?"

"Do you smell that?" uttered Xena quietly.

"Smell what?"

"It smells like fire," answered Xena.

"Yeah I smell it too," agreed Lila.

"Sssssh," ordered the oldest girl.

Gabrielle had a confused look as she waited for her girlfriend to explain what was wrong. "Xena?" she whispered in fear, she grasped the strong arm nearest to her. "What is it?"

"I think something is happening in the village." Xena finally looked down at the two girls. "Come on."

Gabrielle helped her sister up onto her feet and the three girls raced back to the town. Once they were close to the edge of the forest, Xena stopped them.

"Hold on." Xena saw a warrior on horseback race past.

"The village is under attack," gasped Lila.

Gabrielle's eyes widened at the realization, and she saw the building just ahead ablaze. "Oh gods, no. Mother and father." She started to move past her girlfriend but Xena grabbed her wrist.

"Gabrielle, no if we go in there we could get killed."

"But mother and father," whispered Gabrielle in fear.

"I know…." Xena hastily thought about what to do.

Lila suddenly gasped when she saw a raider in the distance come up to a man and stab him in the stomach.
"Sssssh, Lila." Gabrielle grabbed her little sister's hand.

"What about mother and father?" asked the scared girl.

Gabrielle didn't have an answer as she looked up to her girlfriend.

"I'm not sure," whispered Xena in worry.

"We can't leave them," almost yelled Lila.

"Lila, hush. If we go out there we'll be killed easily," reminded the older sister.

"But mom and dad," urged Lila. She shook her head furiously. "They'll be killed if we don't help them." Without warning, she jerked her hand free and broke off running into the village.

"Lila, no!" screamed Gabrielle, she chased after her sister.

"Hades," growled Xena, and she also went chasing after the pair. She quickly caught up to her girlfriend and called, "Gabrielle, get out of here, okay?"

"Xena… I have… to get Lila," she rasped between her running.

"I can catch her, I'm much faster. Just get away before a raider gets you." Xena grasped her best friend's shoulder for a brief moment. "Go into the forest…" she rasped, "and go around the village to your house. Please?"

Gabrielle faintly nodded because she trusted that Xena could catch Lila. She slowed down and quickly raced back into the forest right as a raider flew past on a horse, just missing her.

Xena sighed in relief and looked ahead to see the small Lila not too far off. She pushed herself to speed up. But what she never saw was the raider on horseback turning around and urging his horse into the woods right on Gabrielle's trail.

The little bard jumped over large branches and fallen trees, she rushed herself around the forest towards her home. She slowed down a little to try and catch her breath some, she felt as if her heart would burst from her chest. Yet she'd never felt so much excitement fueling through her body that made her run so fast. Now she understood what Xena must have felt that afternoon with the boys.

But as she leapt onto a huge rock, she heard a whining of a horse not far behind. "Oh gods no please no," she rasped and jumped off the rock to keep running.
The raider removed his sword from his side and started swiping the branches out of his way. It made his horse speed up and easier to work his way through the forest. "Where is that girl?" he growled. Looking ahead for a moment, he caught sight of a small figure with blond hair running. "There she is. Come on, boy." He urged his dark horse forward and faster after the tiny bard.

Xena saw Lila nearing the side of a large building but then suddenly at the other end of the building a raider reappeared. "Oh no."

Lila screamed and stopped running when she saw him. She felt her knees weaken and her body weaken at the sight of him.

"Lila!" screamed the teenager. She reached between her shirt and grabbed one of her daggers. She held tightly to the dagger hilt as she felt her leg muscles strain to go faster.

The raider grinned happily and waved his bloody sword at the small girl. "Come here, sweetie. I won't hurt you." He neared Lila slowly.

Lila took one step back but that was all as she was possessed by pure fear.

"Lila, duck down!" screamed Xena at the top of her lungs.

Lila didn't hear the teenager and just stood there petrified by the raider.

The raider closed in even more and prepared to grab the small girl.

Xena gritted her teeth together then positioned her hands in front of herself. She took five huge strides then launched herself at the raider with her dagger out.

The raider looked up when he heard Xena's screaming but it was too late. He went onto his back and so much pain tore through the back of his head. Then he felt a warm blade pressed into his gut and he looked down when Xena got off of him. All he could see was deep red blood oozing through the wound over his black leather armour. He raised his eyes up and saw the blood dripping of the girl's small dagger. "Hades," he growled but he violently coughed up bloody.

Xena backed up as the blood from the dagger seeped down the blade and onto her hand. "Oh gods," she whispered. She hastily smeared the blood off her blade and hand onto her shirt. She tried to shake her fear away as she spun around. She sheathed her dagger again, and picked Lila up. "Let's go get your parents."
Lila clung onto Xena with all of her remaining strength, her face buried into Xena's warm neck.

The teenager continued running across town, slower now because of Lila's weight, but she still ran quickly.

Gabrielle took a quick glance behind and saw the raider was catching up to her. She looked back ahead and saw a huge tree had fallen over and caught onto another tree. She ducked down just in time before hitting her head on it. She knew that would slow the raider down for a bit but not long enough.

Instead of slowing down, she kept her pace up. She knew her field behind her house would appear soon. After about another half of a minute of running, she saw the end of the forest and the start of the field. She felt a bit of relief at this yet she feared the raider would follow her home. So she stopped next to a huge tree and saw a large opening in the base of it. Quickly she crawled into the hole and hid inside the hollow trunk of the tree.

The raider growled as he backed his horse up a few paces. He then spurred his horse in the side. "Go, boy!"

The horse galloped and jumped over the large fallen tree with easy. He landed on the soft moss and trotted through the forest in the direction his master told him.

Gabrielle held her breath when she heard the horse's hoof beats nearing. She then realized her feet were slightly sticking out of the hole. With quick thinking, she jumped up and hooked her feet into two small notches and held herself up with her hands. Again, she held her breath when the raider came even closer.

The horse snorted when his master pulled him to a halt.

"Where'd she go?" he hissed. He turned ever which way in his saddle, looking for the girl. "She was just here, I swear," he muttered under his breath. "Damn it." He slammed his fist into the saddle horn. Giving a hard jerk on the right rein sent his horse to the right onto a cold trail.

Gabrielle opened her eyes slowly as she listened to the raider go back into the forest. She then started to breathe normal again, and she lowered herself silently back onto the ground in the trunk. She waited about another minute then carefully crawled back out of the large hole. She kept low while peeking around a nearby tree. She saw the raider far off in the woods.
The little bard turned quietly and started for the open fields. She came to the edge of the forest and hopped over a huge log but when she landed, she landed on a stick.

The raider threw his head around when he heard the branch snap. He wrenched his horse back around and spurred him in the direction of the noise.

Gabrielle cursed herself and quickly sprinted into the field, she spotted her house slightly off to the right but straight ahead nonetheless. In a quick second, she looked back to see the raider working his way through the woods. "Oh Hades," she cursed to herself again. Yet she continued to her house but then her heart dropped when she saw her barn on fire. "Oh gods, please no," she whispered.

Xena ducked behind a building right before a raider ran past. She took several deep breaths while pressing her back against the cool house's siding. While her head dropped against the house, she closed her eyes and just felt the beads of sweat roll down ever part of her body. After lifting her head back up, she actually studied the attack on the village.

Off to her left she watched a large building on fire starting to topple over and crash. Then as she was turning her head to the right, she quickly saw a horsemen riding past with a man's body dragging behind his horse.

Xena closed her eyes after seeing the hacked body scuff past. She then finally opened her eyes after she turned her head to the right. Now she saw a warrior coming out of an open door of a house, he was rushing to pull his pants back up. After the raider moved out of the doorway, she saw glossy white eyes on the floor of the house staring back at her.

She quickly turned her head away after seeing the dead woman on the floor in the house. "Oh gods," she rasped and felt her stomach lift up into her throat. She clamped her jaw down, closed her eyes, and tried to hold her stomach down and remove the images from her head. Slowly her stomach relaxed, and she was able to breathe regularly again.

After a deep breath, she opened her eyes and knew they would have to move again before a raider caught them. But for the first time, she could now hear Lila's muffled crying. 'It'll be okay, Lila,' promised Xena. Now she realized her neck was wet from all the crying the small girl had been doing.

Lila peered up with red and brown eyes. "They're going to kill them, I know it."

"Sssh," hushed the teenager. "We'll all be okay." She pulled the girl's head back into
her neck. She held tighter onto the girl while looking ahead again. She took one last huge breath of smoky air then took off on a run for the house; it wasn't much further. As she went around the house, she found a dead woman at the front of the house. "Oh gods," she whispered and jumped over the bloody body. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw a raider at the neighboring house gutting a man and another setting the house ablaze. She shook her head and continued to run for Gabrielle's house.

Once she made it past the town's burning tavern, she saw Gabrielle's house in clear sight. Her eyes widened when she realized the door to Gabrielle's house was fully open. She then saw her girlfriend now running between the burning barn and the house. "Gabrielle!" she screamed.

The tiny bard saw her best friend but her heartbeat was racing with the horse's hoof beats, which were catching up to her. "Xena, hide! A horseman is coming!"

Xena felt fear strike her when the raider from earlier materialized behind her friend. "No," she rasped.

Gabrielle then suddenly tripped on the well bucket that her family used. She rolled onto her back as the raider neared her. Gabrielle frantically tried to stand but her ankle was sprain from the fall.

The raider yelled and twirled his sword. "Got you now, kid!"

Gabrielle screamed in fear but a dark shadow fell over her.

"Stay away from my child!" yelled Gabrielle's father.

The raider's eyes went wide when the farmer with the pitchfork stepped in the way. He tried to stop his horse quickly but couldn't soon enough. His horse slammed into the points of the pitchfork.

The horse reared up, crying in pain and fell over with the raider underneath.

Xena came right up beside Gabrielle and grabbed her with her free hand. "Gabrielle, get up."

Gabrielle shook her head and struggled to get up onto her feet but was able to with some of Xena's help.

Herodotus yanked his pitchfork free and turned around. "Xena, I need you to give Lila to me. Then I need you to go get my two horses near the barn. They're tied up on the post. Go now!"
Xena nodded and lowered Lila to the ground. She hurried off in search of the horses.

Herodotus picked up her youngest daughter. "Gabrielle, follow me." He hurried into the house with Gabrielle behind him.

Xena, however, went around the burning barn but soon as she was at the front of the barn, a dead raider surprised her. She stopped about five feet away from the body and just stared at it on the ground. She could tell Herodotus had killed him since there were several pitchfork puncture wounds in his neck, arm, and head. Xena though could not move not even around the body as she feared he might come to life and attack her. Suddenly though a horse whined and it brought her out of her trance.

The teenager made a point of walking far around the dead raider but kept watch of him. Once she was beside the horses, she started hastily untangling them. After one rein was free, she wiped the sweat off her forehead and then yanked the other rein free.

Xena then led the dark mare and the workhorse around the raider and quickly went past the burning barn to the front of the house.

"Herodotus!" called out a man at the opening of the house.

Herodotus came out of the house with his two daughters and wife. "Potestas, get the Hades out of here!"

"I will soon as I know your family and Xena are out of here."

Gabrielle's father nodded and came down the steps, approaching Xena. "Xena, get on the horse with Potestas."

Xena nodded and turned to Potestas, whom sat high up on a young golden mare. He held his hand out to her and she took it.

Herodotus helped his wife up onto the dark mare and then Gabrielle. He then handed Lila up to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle tucked Lila into her arms while her mother slipped one arm around her waist.

Herodotus quickly mounted the workhorse. "Let's get out of here." He directed his horse around the house and led the group into the open field. Once they were in the field, he spurred his horse into a gallop and all around them was open fields for a long distance.

Yet soon as the group was galloping in the field did five raiders on horseback catch
onto them. They came racing past the house and burning barn to play chase.

"Herodotus, they're following us!" called Potestas.

Herodotus saw the five raiders coming after them. "Alright," he called, "You all stay together, I'm going to try and lead them away from you all."

"Father, no!" called Gabrielle. "They'll get you! Philip is too old to go any faster."

"I know and I'll slow everybody down." Herodotus pulled on the workhorse's right rein and started to split from the group.

"No, dad!" cried out Gabrielle.

Hecuba held her daughter into the saddle tightly. "There's nothing we can do, Gabrielle."

The small bard began to cry for the first time today as she watched her father growing more distant.

Two raiders quickly broke away from the group and persuade Herodotus.

When Gabrielle saw the two raiders catching up to her father at a rapid pace she buried her head into Lila's own head.

Xena felt so much anger as she wiped the tears away from her cheeks furiously. "We have to do something, Potestas."

"We can save ourselves, Xena." Potestas urged his young mare to go faster. "Hecuba, force your horse."

Hecuba nodded solemnly and spurred her horse more.

Potestas took a quick look back and realized the three raiders were catching up. He knew there was no way Hecuba's older horse could get away from them. The raiders' horses were trained for speed and this type of game. He tried to think of something to do to save at least the children.

Gabrielle lifted her head from Lila's and looked back at the raiders. She squealed when she saw one of them directly behind her horse. "Mother!"

Hecuba took a quick look and saw the raider was behind her. "Oh gods," she fearfully whispered.
The raider forced his horse to go faster and brought the horse along the right side of Hecuba's horse. He grinned at the mother and her two children. He unsheathed his sword and waved it at them. He then urged his horse even more and brought his horse ahead of Hecuba's.

Suddenly Hecuba was surrounded. One raider was ahead, one to her right, and one wedged between her and Potestas.

"Gabrielle!" yelled Xena.

Gabrielle was flooded by all of her fears. She looked over to Xena and that only started stinging tears.

The raider that was between the two horses extracted his sword and swiped at Hecuba. It forced Hecuba to move away from Potestas and Xena.

"Xena, please!" screamed the small bard. "Oh gods help us!" She held out her hand as she grew further away from Xena.

Xena, without thinking, tried to get out of the saddle to go after Gabrielle.

"No, Xena!" The jeweler forced the teenager back into the saddle and held her down.

"No, no Gabrielle! We have to help her," screamed the girl, tears rolling down from her cheeks.

"We can't do anything for them, Xena." He then saw the raider that had been between them break away and come back after them. "Hades," he growled. He kicked his mare hard and ordered, "Go girl, use everything you have."

The mare whined and took deep breathes as she pushed herself harder than she ever had done in her young life.

Xena continued to look off to her right where she saw Gabrielle and the two raiders. She then saw Hecuba's horse come to a stop and the two raiders circling the horse.

"Xena!"

Xena felt her heart fall when she heard Gabrielle's piercing and fearful scream. She held onto the saddle horn and tightly clenched, as all she could do was watch the raiders force the three women off the horse. Her heart was pounding and her body screaming to jump off the horse. She watched one raider chase after them on foot while the other remained on horseback. And all she could do was watch from so far away.
Gabrielle screamed for her life as she tried carrying Lila away but she felt so weak. She soon fell from the pain in her sprained ankle. She pulled Lila into her arms and hid her then balled herself up around Lila.

The little bard could feel her sister shaking, so much that her own body shook with hers. Gabrielle tried to think about anything but what was happening to her. Yet Lila's crying and whimpering only reminded her exactly what was about to happen to them both.

Xena had lost sight of her girlfriend. She felt so much anger as much as fear and she couldn't take anymore. Suddenly, she pushed off the horse and slammed hard into the field.

"Xena!" yelled Potestas then he pulled his mare into a sudden stop.

The raider saw Xena on the ground and that she was amazingly getting up.

Xena limped up onto her feet; she saw the raider coming for her now. She gritted her teeth and forced her legs to move and to even run. She went towards the direction she'd last heard Gabrielle cry out.

Potestas released the reins and grabbed a hold of his mare's mane. He leaned to the right of his saddle and lowered his right hand downward.

The teenager kept trying to run but started to slow down as she ran out of energy and her eyes were blurring over. She could barely run now from the immense pain in her leg. She then fell to the ground on her hands and knees.

"Xena, get up!" yelled Potestas. He peered up slightly to see the raider so close to the teenager. "Go, girl. Come on!"

Xena strained to get herself up. She looked between Potestas and the raider, both closing in at the same rate. She then limped towards Potestas hoping to help Potestas gain an edge.

The jeweler clenched his teeth, opened his right hand wide, and called out, "Grab my hand!"

The teenager held her hand out and felt her hand clasp with the man's.

Potestas squeezed hard and lifted him and Xena up. He hauled the tall girl into the saddle with surprising strength and had just enough seconds to force his mare around.
The raider cursed as he just missed the girl but continued his chase for the two, he wasn't very far behind.

The mare galloped as much as she could to help her riders get away from their hunter.

Xena could barely breathe from everything. She held onto the horse's mane with the last of her strength in hopes not to fall off.

Just ahead, the jeweler saw the beginning of the forest and he knew the northeastern road to Amphipolis was not far beyond that. The only thing he feared now was getting his mare through the forest. He knew she was not too good with forests and sometimes could get spooked. He just prayed today would not be one of those days.

The group finally entered the forest and it instantly slowed them down. Yet Potestas urged the horse through the thick woods.

The raider came into the forest and pushed his horse into the woods after them. He drew out his sword and started hacking away at the various branches; this seemed to help him catch up to his prey.

The jeweler realized the raider was closing in as he looked behind but soon as he turned around he was slammed in the head by a large tree branch. He was knocked off his horse.

The mare bucked up and whined when she lost her master.

This had caused Xena too lose her grip, and she fell off. "Potestas?" she called.

Potestas held his head in his bloody hands but stood up. He knew the raider was near but he quickly picked Xena up from the ground and hauled her over to his mare. "Get on her, now," he ordered.

Xena pulled herself up into the saddle and grabbed onto the reins.

"Get out of here, Xena. The road to Amphipolis is just ahead. Go!" he yelled.

"What about you?" she asked quickly, she caught sight of the raider just fifteen paces away.

"Just go!" Potestas forced his horse around while saying, "Get her home, girl. Don't stop for anything, Argo."

The horse whined and galloped off when she received a slap to her rump, a signal she knew all too well. Gallop and do not stop until you cannot gallop anymore.
Potestas whirled around when he heard the raider's horse directly behind him.

The raider grinned down at him and decided he was tired of the chase. He'd let the girl go and thought it'd be much more fun to turn this man inside out.

Xena though held tightly onto the mare's reins but also grabbed a clump of the horse's mane.

Argo jumped over a few small logs and then went up a small hill onto a dirt road. She came to the top, stopped for a second and looked left then right.

The teenager did nothing but bury her head into the horse's mane. Her tears started again.

Argo whined and went to her left, instinct telling her that where she was original born was this way. She continued down the small dirt road at her fastest gallop.

Xena throughout the ride towards Amphipolis just clung onto the golden mare. She couldn't remember anything about the ride except the smell and comforting warmth of the young mare. All she thought about was Gabrielle, and all she heard were Gabrielle's terrified screams. Images of Gabrielle holding her hand out and screaming for her flashed repeatedly in her mind. The repeated images grew so strong in Xena's mind that at one point, she'd thrown her head back and screamed at the top of her lungs.

Xena never felt so much hope just sink out of her since she'd failed Gabrielle again. And she'd never felt so useless in her life more than she had at that instant in time of watching Gabrielle taken away from her.

During that ride back to Amphipolis, so many things consumed Xena and ate away pieces of her into a darkness she never imagined could exist in this world. And from the start of that horse ride to the end of it, Xena felt her strongest emotion devour her and she embraced it with her heart and soul. She was then controlled by one of the most feared emotions any person ever encountered, pure and raw anger.

Section One

Part 1: Gabrielle's Second Year

The young girl stepped out of the back of the jail wagon. She made sure to keep her head low as she ducked down. Once she was out, she quickly turned around and helped her mother down.

"Thank you," whispered Hecuba.
Gabrielle didn't say anything but did give a sad smile to her mother. She then waited for her little sister and hefted her out of the wagon onto the ground.

"Let's go, girls," ordered the man.

"Yes, my lord." Gabrielle followed the man through a small crowd of people. Far ahead, she could see a fence and on the other side was a huge crowd of people throwing their hands up here and there to place bids. She sighed then glanced down at her feet but looked back up as they neared the side of a stage.

"Wait here."

The three girls squeezed in together as they watched their lord talk to another man that stood attention at the steps of the stage.

Gabrielle stared up at the stage where a young man stood in the centre. He was shackled at the wrists and was somewhat bruised yet he seemed in good health. Her eyes then wondered over to the crowd of people. One man had thrown his hand up and the auctioneer on the stage called out twenty dinars.

"Do you think we'll be sold together?" whispered Lila; she glanced between her sister and mother.

"Maybe," replied Gabrielle.

Lila suddenly had a fearful expression.

Hecuba gave a disapproving look to her eldest daughter. She switched her attention to Lila. "Don't worry, honey. I'm sure we'll stay together," she promised.

Gabrielle sighed knowing that was most unlikely. Even she heard plenty of times of families being torn apart by slavery. She moved her eyes away from the auctioneer and to her little sister. She studied Lila, whom was too busy watching the auction to notice Gabrielle looking at her. Gabrielle mentally counted all of the bruises on her sister's exposed body. She sighed deeply; there were thirteen, thirteen dark bruises. She also saw the remaining scar across her sister's back from the few whip marks.

Gabrielle shivered at the reminder of the whip beatings at the start of the slavery training. She slowly looked up from Lila and looked at her mother's back. She noted her mother's attention was mainly on the auction. Her mother, like her and Lila, wore rather revealing clothes and all three of them had lost a large amount of weight.

As her forest eyes travelled up her mother's body, she stopped and just stared at the tattoo on her mother's right hip. It was a small yet distinct 'S' in black that simply stood for slave. She knew if they ever saw freedom one day, they would still wear this mark that would forever outcast them from society. The slave tattoo would be her constant reminder of the future ahead of her. And as she stared at her mother's slave tattoo, she instinctively grazed her
fingertips across her own exposed tattoo.

"Gabrielle," hissed her slaver. He grabbed her by her forearm and jerked her closer.

The young bard suddenly fell out of her daze and looked to her master. "I'm sorry, my lord."

The slaver growled and lightly slapped her across the cheek. "Pay attention, girl." He then tugged her towards the steps. "You're up first."

Lila's eyes widened and she grasped her mother's hand tightly. "Mother?"

"Hush," warned Hecuba.

Gabrielle gave one last look to her mother and sister then climbed the steps.

The auctioneer rushed over and grabbed Gabrielle's wrist. "Who's your master, girl?" he whispered as he led her to the front and centre of the stage.

"Hecht."

"How long have you been a slave and how old are you?" The auctioneer stood there at the front of the stage with her.

"About thirteen months and I'm fourteen."

The auctioneer nodded and suddenly whirled around to the crowd with a huge smile on his lips. "My friends, I have here a young one." He held his hand out to Gabrielle. "She has been trained by no other than the infamous Hecht." He walked behind Gabrielle and came to her other side. "Let's begin the bidding at… thirty dinars."

"Thirty here!" called one man.

"Ah thank you, sir." The auctioneer walked away from the girl and went to the other side of the stage. "How about over here. Any of you gentlemen willing to give thirty five for her?" He directed to Gabrielle again. "She's been fully trained by Hecht himself."

"Thirty five!" bid an older man.

"Oh yes, Cornelio! Yes, sir!" The auctioneer gave a happy smile to the older man then focused back on the bidders. "Can any of you give me forty for this girl? Even the great Cornelio selects her."

"Forty over here!" yelled a young man from the back.

"Excellent, young man!" hollered the auctioneer. "Wise to bid on her… especially for those late nights!"

Several of the men in the crowd all laughed together.
"What's that mean, mother?" uttered Lila.

"Nothing, honey," quietly replied Hecuba. She felt a great sense of dread fill her similar to the one on the day Potidaea was attacked.

"You two need to be quiet," suddenly growled their master. His angry eyes especially rested on Lila since she always began the talking.

Lila lowered her eyes.

"Okay anybody want to give me sixty?" pressured the auctioneer. "Come on, you young men. You can't pass up such a beautiful slave as this one." He grinned while adding, "She is almost in her prime years."

Several men in the crowd started laughing deeply at this.

"Sixty here!" yelled out a man that mainly looked like a warrior.

"Excellent!" called the auctioneer. He then crossed to the other side of the stage. "Anybody want to do sixty five?" He got no response. "How about sixty two? Come on!"

"A hundred dinars!" called out the same young man from the back.

The auctioneer gaped at the young man but quickly recovered. "One hundred dinars then!" He held his hands out to the slave and said, "Going once! Going twice!" He spun on his heels and now pointed at the young man. "Sold to the young man!" He then went to Gabrielle's side and grabbed her by the arm. He quickly pushed her down the steps.

Gabrielle almost tripped on her own sandals as she was rushed down the steps. As soon as she was on the ground, Lila was pushed up the steps. She quickly caught Lila's scared eyes and it made her heart drop.

Lila was dragged to the front of the centre stage and put on display for the crowd.

The auctioneer bent down and asked Lila the same questions she'd asked Gabrielle.

As the auctioneer started the bidding on Lila, the young man was paying for Gabrielle.

"Does she listen well?" asked the young man to Hecht.

Hecht nodded while folding his arms. "Yeah… and if you need to reinforce anything a few good whippings does the trick."

The young man nodded but was grinning. "I'll remember that." He untied a bag of dinars from his side and handed it to the slaver. "That's a hundred there."

"Thank you," replied Hecht. "Enjoy." He gave a huge grin.
The young man quietly laughed then faced Gabrielle. "Follow me, girl."

Gabrielle's eyes flickered to her mother, and she took a step closer to her mother instead of her new master.

Hecht quickly stepped between the mother and daughter. He grabbed Gabrielle by her hair. "Listen to him, girl." He jerked her head down.

Hecuba closed her eyes and bit her lip.

Hecht threw the slave towards the young man. "A real good whipping," he reminded.

Gabrielle stumbled and fell down on her knees into the dirt. Her watery green eyes lifted up to her mother.

Hecuba did nothing, as she knew if she did it could cost Gabrielle dearly.

The young man raised an eyebrow as he stared down at his new slave. "Alright, girl. We'll do this the hard way." He reached behind and untied a collar with a leash. "Stand," he roughly ordered.

The small bard stood up and felt the cool leather slip around her neck then tightened into place.

"Let's go." The new master jerked the leash and led her away.

The young slave looked back to her mother.

Hecuba kept her eyes locked with Gabrielle.

Gabrielle then lost sight of her mother from the people moving around. She then looked across to her sister still on the stage. She heard somebody bid fifty-one dinars for Lila then she was sold. She frantically looked through the crowd to find out who bought her sister but she could not find them.

Once Lila was off the stage, Hecuba was on it now up for sale.

The young bard sighed and didn't look up to her mother. She instead switched her focus to her little sister being paid for by her new master. He was a middle-aged man, who once paid for her took her away from the auction area. After about twenty seconds, Gabrielle lost track of her sister, and she knew that was the last time she'd ever see Lila.

"Let's hear twenty for her!" yelled the auctioneer. He had no real response for her.

Gabrielle's new master glanced at her then back up to Hecuba. "Is she a good cook?" he whispered.
The small bard felt her stomach drop yet she knew it was a chance to keep her mother at least. "She's wonderful."

The young man narrowed his eyes and suddenly held up his hand. "I'll give thirty for her!"

The auctioneer gleefully smiled at the man for bidding again. "Yes, sir!" He then turned his focus to the other bidders. "Will anybody give me thirty-two?" After about fifteen seconds of silence and started to call out, "Going once, going twice…. Sold! Thank you, sir."

The young man nodded and tugged at Gabrielle's leash. "Let's get your mother."

The small girl followed behind the man. Every step she took, her hope seemed to float away with her sister's absence. Ever since the day after the raid of Potidaea, she'd grown angrier and angrier at this life she was given. Although when she looked up and her eyes met with her mother's, she felt some scrap of happiness return.

Within a candlemark, Gabrielle and her mother were sitting in a wagon again but not a barred one like Hecht's. This time it was an open one, which meant they could stretch out a little better. That in its self was a relief for them both.

Their master was in the front sitting on the passenger's side. Another young man, presumably a slave, was actually guiding the horses.

Gabrielle, however, couldn't keep her eyes off the young man that was possibly a slave. She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd seen him a few times before yet she couldn't place him.

"Once we've returned, I want you to show them to their quarters," ordered the master.

The driver nodded and asked, "In the slave house, my lord?"

"Yessss, Perdicus." The master raised an eyebrow in warning.

"Sorry, my lord." Perdicus returned his attention to the horses.

The master half turned in his seat and looked to his two new slaves. "Get plenty of rest this evening, girls. Tomorrow you both will be busy."

"Yes, my lord," answered back Hecuba.

Gabrielle didn't give an acknowledgement to her master, which only angered him. "Girl, did you hear me?" hissed the master. He reached out and dug his nails into her arm.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth but now looked to him. "Yes of course, my lord."

"That's better." The master gave a toothy grin then turned back into his seat.
After about a two more candlemarks of riding, the group arrived at the gates of a dirt road that ended at the front of a large stone house. As they passed through the gates, Gabrielle took note of the olive trees lining the road to the house. She then scanned the surrounding grounds of the house and knew it was in fact a combination of wine and olive groves.

Hecuba was first out of the wagon then the bard slid out next. Once everybody was off, except Perdicus, he ordered the horses to go to the stables behind the house.

"Wait here," commanded the master, "He will return for you two." Without another word, he walked towards the large home and went up a few steps and into the house.

Hecuba waited until he was out of earshot and quietly asked, "Are you okay, honey?"

"I'm fine," brushed off Gabrielle. She didn't look at her mother while she folded her arms against her chest.

Hecuba only felt her shoulders slump more now. Today was a day that second the raiding day; she'd now lost her youngest child.

Gabrielle suddenly realized Perdicus had returned from the stables.

"Follow me." Perdicus guided them through the grounds and went to a small house that was offset from the master's house. "The slaves stay in here." He went up five steps and pushed open the door for them.

Hecuba went in first then her daughter followed.

Perdicus stood in the doorway while saying, "Its small but… it becomes home after awhile."

Gabrielle quickly realized the house was about half the size of her home. It had four beds or rather two bunk beds then a small lounge area further back.

"By the way, I'm Perdicus."

Hecuba turned around and finally smiled. "I'm Hecuba." She lifted her right hand and rested it on Gabrielle's shoulder. "This is my daughter, Gabrielle."

Perdicus returned the smile and said, "Well… welcome to Michulus's home."

"Thank you." Hecuba sadly smiled at the young man and stepped into the house more.

Gabrielle followed in and sat down on a bottom bed to the right.

"What we do for dinner?"

Perdicus considered Hecuba's question then finally answered, "I doubt we'll eat tonight." He went into the tiny living room area and picked up a chair. He brought it into the living
quarters and sat down. "We'll probably eat tomorrow morning."

"What are our jobs?" finally spoke up Gabrielle.

Perdicus sighed as he rested back into his chair. "I think you'll be helping me some and helping to clean. Your mother will probably be the cook and helping the misses."

"Is Michulus strict?"

Perdicus shrugged. "He likes his slaves sticking to the rules. As soon as they're broken then we'll be punished rather harshly."

"Are there any other slaves on the grounds?"

"Actually there are two others." The young man slightly turned in his chair and pointed off to his right. "Over there is a smaller slave house and they live there." He turned back to the two women. "They're both dark skinned ones too."

"From Egypt?"

"I think so. They and I mainly take care of the groves and whatever maintenance needs to be done."

Hecuba nodded a few times as she considered their new circumstances. "Michulus is well known for his winery?"

"Yeah actually." Perdicus sighed and then added, "He's also rather political too. His entire family is into politics." He paused while thinking about something for a second but then leaned forward in his seat. "To tell the truth, have you two heard the latest rumours about the war against Rome?"

"Not really, no," confessed Hecuba.

"Well there's been a lot of talk about the states gathering together to strike against Rome. A lot of people fear that Rome will soon gain too much strength and start to conqueror… starting with Greece."

"Gods really?" whispered Hecuba in surprise. "I've heard a lot of talk that Rome was growing more powerful but not that powerful."

"Yes, well… they're power is increasing. So a lot of people in Greece are demanding the states to unite and attack Rome before we're attacked."

"What's this have to do with Michulus?" urged a frustrated bard.

"Michulus is one of the wealthy people pushing for the war against Rome." He finally sat back into his chair again. "Only problem is, a lot of the common people think this war will only ruin Greece."
"They'd rather join Rome," simply stated Gabrielle.

"Yes they would. A lot of the technology Rome possesses we could benefit from learning."

"But at the same time the wealthy don't want the Greek economy to be slaves of Rome." Gabrielle huffed and shook her head. "Well we conquered Rome during Alexander the Great's days sssso what comes around goes around."

"True," agreed Perdicus. "Personally, I think Greece could benefit from it, even the economy."

The small bard shrugged and muttered, "Greeks and dictators don't mix."

Perdicus sighed and decided a change of topic was in order. "So… where do you two originally come from?"

"We're from Potidaea. It's a town on the peninsula of-"

"Wait Potidaea?" Perdicus brightened up at the mention of the town. "Small town right? With the small fishery on the eastern side?"

"That's the one," agreed Hecuba.

"By the gods." Perdicus laughed and whispered, "It's a small known-world after all."

"Why?" inquired Gabrielle. She knew she recognized him and now she had to figure it was from her own hometown.

"I'm from Potidaea."

Hecuba's eyes immediately widened. "Where in town did you live?"

"I was on the western side… away from the market." He quietly laughed in surprised. "Where did you two live?"

"We had that small farm on the eastern side."

"The one that was set away from the town, right?"

"That's the one," replied Hecuba.

"Now I remember," cut in the small bard. "I've seen you in the market a few times… selling grains."

Perdicus nodded a few times. "My family had a very small farm. We'd just moved there." He lowered his eyes but continued speaking. "My folks were killed in a raid." He looked back up. "The town was raided…" He fell short on his words. "You both must have been there?"
His eyebrows knitted together.

"Yes," answered Gabrielle, "that's how we ended up being slaves."

"Same thing happened with me... but it was kind of after the raid." Perdicus gave out a long and deep sigh. "I wondered what's happened with the town...?"

"Knowing Potidæa... they probably recovered." Hecuba shook her head after about a minute of thinking. "The one reason why my husband and I settled there was because Potidæa was known for not having raids."

"We moved there in hopes our farm would do well." Perdicus just stared at the floor. "Especially with the small harbour growing there."

The silence fell between the group as they all recalled that day in Potidæa that changed their lives dramatically.

Gabrielle suddenly pulled herself out of her thoughts and took a quick glance outside. It was now dark time, and she decided she was tired from today. Looking to her mother, she said, "I'm going to bed, I think."

"Alright, honey." Hecuba smiled at her daughter, leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "Top or bottom bed?"

"Top." Gabrielle forced a warm smile and patted her mother's leg. "Goodnight, mom." She hopped off the bed and climbed up the side ladder into the bed above.

"Well...." Perdicus stood up and returned the chair into the living room area. "I think I'll check to see if Michulus needs anything else." He approached the door and pulled it open. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Hecuba watched him leave and decided to curl up in bed as well.

The small bard however lay on her back in the bed and stared up at the ceiling. She quickly glanced over at the few candles lit and hanging from the wall across the room but returned her attention to the ceiling. She lay there, thinking about where her little sister was now. She could still recall the scared expression Lila had as she stood on that stage on display.

Gabrielle had never realized just how little she could do until over a year ago. After they'd been taken by the two raiders in the field, they were kept in the army's camp for several weeks. She shivered at the memories of just how dirty and disgusting those raiders were around them. Once the raiders had transported them into southern Greece, they were then sold to Hecht.

At first, she was confused as to why the raiders could sell them for money but then when Hecht explained her new life to her, she understood. She could still recall his words on the first day she'd become a slave.
"I have purchased you." Hecht had locked his eyes with Gabrielle's. "Do you know what the means, girl? That means you are my rightful property. I own you, posses you, and control you. I may do with you as I please." He had paused and lowered his face closer to Gabrielle's. "I can be nice to you if I want or I can beat you until your dead. I can feed you and clothe you or starve you and rip every pieces of clothing off your back. You have to listen to every word and call me your master, girl. You have no rights and no voice in any of this. Do you know what you are, girl?" He had lifted up a leather collar with a leash. "You...." He then slipped the collar around her neck. "are...." Now he buckled it and held up the leash. "a slave...." Suddenly he had jerked the leash with all his strength bringing Gabrielle's face right into his own. "forever."

The young bard shook her memory away and quickly turned to her right side, facing the wall now. She felt a chill ripple up and down her spine but as she tried to think about something else, she noticed a new sound. She went very still and concentrated on the muffled sound. Within a few seconds, she realized it was her mother crying below her.

The small bard climbed out of her bed quietly and curled into the bed with her mother. Hecuba kept her back to her daughter but once she realized Gabrielle as in the bed, she turned around.

Gabrielle didn't say anything nor did her mother, they simply held each other. After about a minute or so, Gabrielle also started crying. She too felt so much weight on her shoulders and an intense anger growing deep in her. In so many ways she was scared about what her future held and just how long her future would run. And even to this day, she still wondered what ever happened to her father. Now she would be constantly wondering where Lila was or if she was even still alive.

And what about Xena? Every night, she was plagued by thoughts about her best friend. She knew nothing of what happened to Xena. Her imagination played with her making her believe Xena was enslaved too. Or worse yet, she had continuous images of her girlfriend being hunted down and slaughtered by the raiders.

Either way, she'd felt her hope slow slip through her fingers as she learned the exact hardships of slavery. Every thought about freedom was squeezed out of her with each lashing she received from Hecht.

All she could do now was keep her head tucked under her mother's chin as she cried the last few months away. Eventually though she found sleep through all her tears that night.

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"Hey," whispered Perdicus. He reached out and nudged Gabrielle's back with his right hand. "Hey, wake up."

Gabrielle slowly opened her eyes and quickly turned over. "What's going on?" She then realized her mother was gone. "Where's my mom?"
"It's the late morning. Your mother finished making breakfast for everybody. You need to get up and start your chores."

The small slave nodded her head and dragged herself out of bed.

"Come on, we'll make a fast break for the kitchen." Perdicus hurried out of the slave's house and escorted her to the kitchen. He opened the back door to the kitchen and waited for Gabrielle to go in first.

Soon as she was inside, her mother greeted her.

"Morning, honey." Hecuba quickly rushed her daughter to a small two-person table that was next to a pair of windows. "Sit down and eat." She went to the counter and picked up a large plate of food.

Gabrielle slightly smiled at the sight of her mother's cooking; it'd be a long time since she'd had any of it. Without a second thought, she dove right into it.

"How are things going?" asked Perdicus.

Hecuba gave a faint nod. "Not bad. I think everybody is fed."

"Have you met the misses?"

"I did actually. She's very nice."

Perdicus smiled at that. "Yes she is."

Hecuba chuckled but added, "I think I'm suppose to help her some after this."

The young man nodded. He then realized that Gabrielle was already finished her breakfast. "She can eat fast and a lot," he joked.

Gabrielle half glared at the boy.

Hecuba chuckled some and picked up the clean plate. "Yes, she's always been a good eater."

"Mother," warned Gabrielle. She lifted a warning eyebrow at her mother.

Hecuba just huffed at that then went to clean the plate and fork. She glanced at Perdicus while she was cleaning the dishes. "What will Gabrielle be doing today?"

Perdicus sighed in response. "I'm not sure. I need to ask Michulus honestly. Actually I'll do that now." He crossed the kitchen and went out of the door that went into the main house. He decided that he'd go to Michulus's office first. Once he was there, he tapped on the closed double doors.

"Come in."
Perdicus creaked open one door and slipped into the office. "Sir, what would you like Gabrielle to do today?"

Michulus peered up from the scroll on his desk. He folded his hands in his lap and rested back into his seat. He remained quiet while he considered the question. "She needs a little… meat on those bones." He pressed his lips together but suddenly focused on Perdicus again. "Have her muck the stalls. Show her what is expected."

"Yes, my lord." Perdicus bowed his head and started to step back.

"Also, Perdicus."

The young slave stopped and lifted his head in question.

"Tell her to come to my office afterwards." Michulus sat back up in his chair. "I'd like to see the work she's done."

"Yes of course, sir." Perdicus stepped out of the office.

Michulus remained motionless as he listened to Perdicus's footfall fade away down the hallway. He then went back to his work.

Perdicus entered the kitchen again and told Gabrielle her duty for now. Once they were outside, he headed for the stables.

"Are the stalls dirty?" inquired Gabrielle.

"Yeah, they're pretty bad actually. We haven't had the time to clean them." Perdicus sighed and patted the girl's back. "Sorry for your luck."

The small bard grunted at his words. "Yeah," she muttered.

"Sorry," honestly apologized the young man. "I didn't mean it like-"

"Its alright," brushed off the small girl.

Perdicus took a brief look at the girl then saw the stables coming into view. He went inside first and took Gabrielle down to the very end. "Alright, you use these tools to haul everything out of the stalls. Once you get it into the middle aisle you brush it out of the stable." He stopped for a moment then continued. "Now, there should be a wheel barrel not far and you can put it all in there. The stuff goes over to a huge pile over that way." He pointed off to his right. "The manure is good for the olive trees and grapes, it gets reused."

The bard nodded and reached up to pull off the pitchfork from the wall. She stared at it for several moments, many memories returning to her from just staring at it.

"Hey." Perdicus now rested his right hand on her shoulder. "I know how you feel."
Gabrielle felt her shoulder droop a little at the boy's effort to reach out to her. "I'm sorry for being a little... tough." She shook her head and then rested it against the pitchfork. "This isn't easy."

"I know... sometimes I can't understand why this happened to me." Perdicus closed his eyes for several seconds but gazed down at the bard again. "It's not a bad dream like I always wish it was."

"Yeah," sadly whispered Gabrielle.

"Well..." The boy trailed off but squeezed Gabrielle's shoulder before releasing her. "I'm always here for a talk."

Gabrielle felt a tiny smile tug at her lips. "Thanks."

Perdicus gave a wink then left the stables but called out, "Happy cleaning."

The small girl sighed; she dropped her head against the pitchfork again, and stared at the messy stalls. "Well... better get started." She hefted the pitchfork into both hands and stepped into one stall.

Three candlemarks passed by and Gabrielle finally found herself shoving the mix of straw and manure out of the stables into the warm day. Once it was all outside, she started hunting around for the wheelbarrow that Perdicus had mentioned. She went around the side of the stables and saw Perdicus coming towards her.

"Hey," greeted the bard.

"How's it going?" asked Perdicus.

Gabrielle shrugged then answered, "Almost finished."

"Good to hear." The young man formed a warm smile.

Gabrielle couldn't help but mirror it back.

"Oh afterwards, Michulus wants you to go to his office. When you go into the kitchen, go through that door and go to the other end of the haul. He's down there."

"For what though?"

Perdicus just shrugged.

The small girl shrugged as well but finally noticed the wheelbarrow off to her left next to the stable.

"Go on," offered the young man.
Gabrielle chuckled and went to the wheelbarrow.

Perdicus watched for a moment but went back across the grounds to continue his work.

The young bard took about half of a candlemark to load up the wheelbarrow and carted it all to the manure pile. She made several trips back and forth but eventually won the smelly battle. She then took the tools back into the stable and put them back into their homes.

Gabrielle then decided to head to Michulus's office so she made her way to the kitchen first. When she went inside, she didn't find her mother so she shrugged it off. Although she did decide she felt pretty icky from cleaning those stalls so she took a minute to wash up. Once she dried herself off with a towel, she continued onto Michulus's office.

Michulus looked up when he heard Gabrielle enter. "Did you knock?"

Gabrielle stopped halfway through the doorway. "No, my lord."

Michulus narrowed his eyes at the girl. "Then step out and do so," he slightly growled.

The slave hesitated but stepped out and closed the door. After a shaky breath, she rapped on the door then waited.

"You can come in now," ordered the master.

The teenager sighed and pushed the door back open and went inside this time.

"Now then, how are the stalls?" inquired the lord.

"Better, sir."

Michulus glanced at Gabrielle then looked back at his scroll. "I will inspect them later then."

Gabrielle didn't say anything, she just stood there in silence and waiting for some kind of order.

The master finally pulled away from his scroll after about three minutes. He lifted his attention to his slave. "Now, I'd like for you to stay in the house for the rest of the day. Help clean around the house… the misses could use the help." He stood up from his chair and came around to the front of the desk. "You'll mainly be in the house… taking care of it." He folded his arms against his chest and leaned against the desk. "The misses is expecting a child soon so she cannot do much."

"Yes, sir," finally spoke up the bard.

"For now on, each day you can report to her. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord," answered the slave. "Anything else?"
Suddenly a huge grin creased the master's lips. "Actually yes." He pushed off the desk and neared the small girl. "I also wanted to mention what your other position is here."

Gabrielle swallowed the lump she now felt in her throat. "What is that, sir?"

Michulus reached up and placed his two fingertips under her chin and tilted her head back. He stared deep into wintry forest eyes. "You'll be my mistress… in training," he whispered.

The small bard felt every piece of her body prepared to run but she remained locked in her spot.

Michulus lowered his head a little more and pressed his lips against her forehead. "Go to the misses now."

Gabrielle reached behind and scrambled for the doorknob. She easily found it and hastily turned around.

Michulus stood there watching the heavy breathing slave race out of his office. He stood there in front of the open door and studied the young girl. Once she was gone, he grasped the door's handle and pulled it closed.

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The summer season seemed to push on without many other incidents. Gabrielle and her mother had now been Michulus's slave for two months. The labour wasn't overly intensive except for certain times when they were called to go outside in the summer heat and help in the winery area. Overall, they seemed to prefer their new chains compared to the ones that Hecht had given them.

While the summer progressed so did Gabrielle and Perdicus's relationship. Gabrielle had missed having a figure in her life that was strong, somebody to look up to and respect. Originally, she always looked up to Xena and idolized her talents but she'd lost her best friend. Perdicus was only a year older than Gabrielle but he knew his way around a little better than the bard. It was easy then for Gabrielle to admire him yet her growing attachment to him sometimes even scared her.

"So how was your day?" Perdicus picked up a dirty rag from next to the sink and started drying his now clean hands off.

Gabrielle carried the hot loaf of bread from the stone oven to the counter next to Perdicus. "Yeah it went well." She slipped the wood tray onto the counter before her hands dropped it from the heat.

"Where's your mother?"

"I think still helping the misses." Gabrielle shrugged and reached past the young man to grab a serrated knife, which was hanging on the wall.
Perdicus nodded a few times then stood there watching the small girl carefully slice the warm bread. He finally placed the dirty rag back up on the counter.

"How were the groves?"

Perdicus shrugged and wondered over to the small table. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

The small bard gave him a curious look for not answering her question.

The young boy chuckled. He finally answered, "It wasn't too bad."

"Yeah… there was a cool breeze today."

"Thank the gods for that." Perdicus sighed dramatically and fell back into his chair then spread his legs out.

Gabrielle studied him for a moment after she finished cutting the bread but then looked over to the main kitchen door.

Hecuba entered the kitchen and saw the pair. She then noted Gabrielle had made the bread for tonight's dinner. "Honey, that's my job."

The young teenager shrugged and stated, "I can help."

The mother shook her head, neared her, and then pushed her off. "Go sit with Perdicus."

Gabrielle shook her head despite her grin. She decided to go ahead and sit down for the first time today. A large sigh left her soon as she relaxed into the chair. "How was the misses today?"

"Maria was good," replied Hecuba. "You didn't see her?"

The bard shook her head. "I had a lot of cleaning and laundry to do. How about you?"

"I was helping the misses with her preparations for the baby."

Perdicus huffed at that. "She's been preparing for three months now. How long does it take?"

"A long time," replied mother and daughter in unison.

The young man laughed at them and shook his head. "If you say so."

Gabrielle suddenly stood up and announced she was going to check on her laundry.

"I'll come with you," offered Perdicus.

The young bard felt a warm smile tug at her lips. "Come on."
Together the pair left the kitchen and went down the main hall then made a left about halfway down the hall. They entered into a small room considered the laundry room. Inside were a few large wood tubs for cleaning the clothes along with a few buckets to retrieve water. Then there was also a fairly big fireplace used for heating the water. At the opposite side of the room was a split door and Gabrielle currently had the upper part of the door wide open. Outside could be seen two laundry lines and both were full with clothes flapping in the breeze.

"Wait here," spoke Gabrielle. She went to the door and there in front of it, she picked up a woven basket for the laundry. She pushed opened the door with her freehand and went to the second clothes line.

Perdicus stood there watching her but then moved to the now closed half door. He folded his arms on top of the door and leaned against the door. He remained there silently studying the young girl.

After the little bard had all of the dry laundry, she made her way back to the laundry room. When she'd turned around and found Perdicus just watching her, she couldn't help but grin.

"What?" asked the young boy once she was close enough.

Gabrielle shyly laughed and replied, "Nothing."

Perdicus revealed a silly grin but stood up and opened the door for his friend.

The teenager stepped around Perdicus and went directly to the folding table. She slid the basket onto the counter then moved down the counter a little. She took one piece of material at a time and folded it.

"Can I help?" offered Perdicus.

Gabrielle flashed a quick smile but returned to her folding. "Thank you but I'm okay."

Perdicus shrugged and stated, "Suit yourself." He took a few small steps back then leaned back against the cool wall.

"So…." Gabrielle placed the folded tunic off to the side then picked up another article out of the basket.

"So?" urged Perdicus.

"So have you ever thought about your future?"

"You mean as far as staying a slave?"

"Yeah." The small bard hesitated in though but continued folding. "Do you think you'll stay as one or not?"
Perdicus's eyebrows knitted together as he really considered the question. "Sometimes, yeah."

"Other times no?"

"Yeah, sometimes no." The young man sighed as his features loosened up again. "I can't help but hope that one day I'll be free again."

The young girl shook her head as an amusing smile came across her features.

"What?"

"Just because you have hope doesn't mean you'll be free again." Gabrielle sighed then faintly shook her head. "It's just human nature to always hope."

"That's true," agreed Perdicus. "But hey, I figure if you ever stop having hope… then you are truly enslaved."

Gabrielle stopped halfway through folding the shirt and turned her head to Perdicus. "You know… that's really true."

"It is because having some hope is the start of your freedom." Perdicus pushed off the wall and neared his friend. "Don't you still have hope you'll see freedom again?"

"I use to." The bard folded the last tunic then put it into the pile of neatly folded clothes. "But not so much now."

"Why not?"

Gabrielle felt a long sigh come and go as she placed the clean clothes into the basket. "Just because of so many things that have happened overtime."

"From the raid?"

"The raid, losing family, being enslaved… losing my best friend."

Perdicus felt a lot of compassion rise up inside himself for Gabrielle. He then furrowed his eyebrows as he thought about what she just said to him. "Best friend?" he muttered.

"Yeah," whispered Gabrielle.

"Wait… I remember one time seeing you in the market with this taller, older girl."

The bard looked away from Perdicus and grabbed the basket. "That would have been her." She jerked the heavy basket off the table.

"What was her name?"
Gabrielle licked her lips and took a moment to reply but finally replied, "I don't want to talk about her, honestly."

"I'm sorry," whispered Perdicus. "I didn't mean to start…." He trailed off, lost for words.

"It's okay," offered the young girl. "It's all over now." She neared the door that went to the main hall.

"I know but I know it still hurts." Perdicus came over to her as a sad smile took over. "I'm always here to help if I can."

"Yeah I know you are." Gabrielle gave her own smile but warmer.

The young man searched the cool forest eyes and then lowered his head a little.

The small bard felt her heart skip a beat and the basket become a little heavier than earlier.

Perdicus paused but lowered his head the rest of the way and pressed his lips into Gabrielle's.

Gabrielle stiffened up when his touched hers and she tried to step back but the door wouldn't let her. After a few seconds, she started to relax and faintly returned the kiss back to him.

Perdicus pulled back from the soft kiss, still smiling.

The young girl sheepishly smiled, quickly turned around, and left the room.

Perdicus's smile went into a silly grin as he quickly followed after her.

Gabrielle tried relaxing but felt her body slightly shaking. She came to the main steps that went up to the bedrooms and she stopped. "I'm going upstairs to put this stuff away."

"Alright… I'll head back to the kitchen." Perdicus gave a faint wave then continued to the kitchen.

Gabrielle stood there, momentarily but slowly climbed the steps. She went directly to the master bedroom and peered into the room. "Hello?" she called.

"Come in, Gabrielle," answered the misses of the house. She was sitting in a rocking chair, facing an open window and slowly knitting something. "How has your day been?"

The slave girl quietly walked in and went to the misses's dresser. "It's been rather busy, misses." She lowered the basket onto the floor and slid open the bottom drawer.

"Gabrielle, you know you can call me Maria." The expecting mother lowered her knitting onto her lap and peered across to the young girl."

"Yes ma'am I know but the master prefers I do not." Gabrielle didn't turn her head to the misses as she continued carefully placing the clean clothes away.
"Gabrielle," whispered Maria's warm voice, "Gabrielle?"

The young bard stopped what she as doing and turned her head to the misses. "Yes ma'am?"

"Do you see Michulus in here?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then it is okay to call me Maria." The woman returned her attention to the open window and continued rocking. "What is your mother cooking tonight?"

"I'm not sure, honestly." The teenager went back to slipping the clothes into the various drawers. "Are you and the lord eating together tonight?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Maria. "He is too busy with some guests."

The bard licked her lips and picked up the basket with a few clothes still in it. "May I ask who the guests are?" She crossed to the other side of the room, past Maria, and went to the dresser near the washroom.

"Some gentlemen from the state government."

"Oh," muttered the bard. She opened a few drawers of Michulus's and put away his tunics. After she was finished, she went over to Maria's side. "Is there anything you need?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle faintly nodded and started for the door with the basket in her right hand.

"Oh, Gabrielle?"

"Yes ma'am?" The bard stopped in the doorway and turned back.

"A little company would be nice."

The slave girl sadly smiled and placed the basket next to the door but out of the way.

"Pull that chair up, dear." Maria pointed to the chair that was next to the window.

The teenager walked over, picked it up, and placed it beside the misses.

After the small girl was settled in, Maria started rocking again. "Your mother told me you like to write…?"

Gabrielle just shrugged.

"You do not?" urged Maria.
The small bard let out a long sigh but replied, "I use to, yes."

The misses didn't respond and just rocked her chair while staring at the window. There was a few minutes of silence but she whispered, "Because of slavery?"

"Yes," quietly replied the bard.

Maria pressed her lips together for a moment as she thought about the girl. "I can say I've been very lucky with my way of life."

The teenager remained silent after Maria's words.

"I can't imagine anything less." She paused while glancing at Gabrielle then softly adding, "It has to be life shattering."

"It is," quietly agreed the bard.

Maria chewed on the inside of her lower lip. She suddenly reached over and patted the girl's hand. "Maybe it'll get easier soon, Gabrielle."

The teenager inwardly grunted at the remark.

The misses pulled her hand back. "Michulus is not the kindest of people… it can always catch up."

"It's a lot better here than with my previous owner."

Maria sadly sighed and whispered, "Do not hold your breath on that."

Gabrielle looked at her in question and worry.

The misses returned her attention to the window and whispered, "Go help your mother, dear."

"Yes ma'am." Gabrielle slowly stood up and returned the chair. She went to the doorway and picked up the basket. After she'd put the basket back into the laundry room, she made her way to the kitchen for dinner.

~*~*~*~

"Gentlemen, there is nothing to worry about," reassured Michulus. He sat up in his chair, keeping his eyes locked with the three other men in the office. "The states can be… influenced to join again."

"Michulus, with all due respect, the states have not joined in many years," reminded one man, he was to Michulus's far right. His name was Nautic, a very well known political man in the state government.
"Yes I know but they have done it before." Michulus lifted his arms and rested them both on his desk.

"I doubt you'll get much luck from some of the southern states," cut in Solus.

Then the man in the middle, Salarius, added, "The Spartans will certainly agree."

"Personally, I think all of the states will agree eventually." Michulus studied the three men. "We must make them agree."

"Michulus, as much as I respect you and your ideas, I do not think this will be agreed upon." Nautic shook his head. "The people will never go for it. Even your father, Cornelio, could not do it and we all know how much influence he has among the governments."

"Not to mention Cornelio is against the idea," spoke up Salarius.

"Then what should we do, gentlemen?" urged Michulus. He narrowed his eyes and grasped the edge of the desk with his hands. "Let ourselves be conquered by Romans, whom only like to duplicate everything of ours. For gods' sakes, they take our technology, our economy, our warfare, and now they want to take our lands, women, and children." He paused and then quietly added, "We'll be Roman lap dogs. No better than these slaves." He held his hand out to Perdicus over in the corner, whom was filling a water pitcher up with more water.

Perdicus felt his skin crawl at his master's words but he kept his back to him. He pretended as if they were not even in the room.

Michulus lowered his hand back to the desk. "So are you three men or are you mice? Squeak up if you are." He had a smug grin on his expression.

The three men exchanged looks then slowly looked back at Michulus, they all started to nod together.

Gabrielle kissed her mother on the cheek. "Goodnight, mom."

"Goodnight, dear." Hecuba smiled up at her daughter then rolled over onto her right side in her bed. She now faced the wall and closed her eyes.

The bard inwardly sighed, turned around, and went just outside of the slave house. Soon as she came out, she found Perdicus still sitting on the bottom step. After quietly closing the door, she sat down on the last step beside her friend. "How are you doing?"

Perdicus shrugged.

"What's wrong?" quietly asked the girl.

The young man sighed and briefly glanced at his friend then back at the moonlit olive grove
across the grounds. "I was in Michulus's meeting for a moment to fill up the water pitcher."

"And?"

"And… Michulus was talking about the rumoured war against Rome."

"What were they saying?"

Perdicus shook his head then looked down at his feet. "Michulus was trying to convince these men to fight Rome. He was saying Greece would be Rome's lap dog… as bad as a slave. He then pointed at me for an example."

Gabrielle felt a deep sigh release from inside herself. "I'm sorry," she whispered. She brought her right arm across the back of Perdicus's shoulders and slightly hugged him.

"I guess I understand why you think sometimes you'll never be free." The young man felt his shoulders slump down. "Sometimes I'd rather just die than live this life."

The bard chewed on her lower lip as she thought of something to say to comfort her friend. "Just keep hoping, Perdicus," she whispered, "there's always hope. You'll be free again."

Perdicus finally turned his head to Gabrielle and revealed a sad smile. "Thank you."

"Just have some faith." Gabrielle forced a warm smile.

Perdicus now looked to his right, away from Gabrielle, and stared at Michulus's office window. He saw Michulus standing directly beside the window, facing the three men. "I'm not sure if I'm for or against this war."

"I'm always against war," stated Gabrielle. "It serves no purpose."

"Sometimes it can," countered Perdicus.

"People dying senselessly… that is never the answer."

Perdicus returned his attention to his friend. "That's true."

Gabrielle softly smiled and reached over, taking his larger warm hand.

The young man felt a smile crease his lips. He leaned towards his friend and slowly pressed his lips against Gabrielle's.

The bard's body was already hot from the summer heat but it was intensified when Perdicus started kissing her.

As they young teenagers were kissing, Michulus happened to look out of his office window. He narrowed his eyes when he saw his two slaves kissing on the steps of the slave house.
"Michulus?" asked Nautic.

Michulus quickly turned his head back to the group of men. "I'm sorry. As I was saying...."

Perdicus gradually pulled back from the long and soft kiss. "Having you here has made it easier, Gabrielle."

The bard faintly smiled and took a deep breath. "I know, Perdicus." She squeezed Perdicus's hand and asked, "Tired?"

"Yeah, actually." Perdicus stood up and helped his friend up onto her feet. "Let's get some rest." He opened the door and led Gabrielle in by their locked hands.

Within a few minutes, the pair was in each of their beds and trying to sleep. For once, sleep didn't seem to take as long as it use to for them.

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The next morning, Gabrielle found herself back in the house cleaning the library room. It was a room that Michulus would retreat to when he'd had long days. Occasionally it was Gabrielle's duty to clean it up and reshelve whatever books he'd taken out. Once everything was neater, she would then scrub the wood floor on her hands and knees starting in one corner until she reached the doors on the opposite side of the room.

As soon as the bard started to come close to the two huge double doors of the library, she heard her mother call down to her. She stopped and looked behind herself to her mother. "Yes, mom?"

Hecuba came closer to the library but remained down the hall a little ways. "Michulus wants you in his office."

Gabrielle nodded. "Thanks, mom."

"Welcome, dear." Hecuba went back down the hallway and into the main hallway. She quietly went upstairs to the misses's room.

The teenager continued scrubbing the floor until she reached the entrance. She finally stood up on her feet in the doorway with her bucket of dirty water in her right hand. "Looks better," she muttered. Turning around, she went first to the laundry room to pour out the dirty water outside. After that, she headed for Michulus's office since he asked for her. She could only imagine what it was about today.

Michulus peered up when he saw her come into the office. He looked back down at his half written scroll and continued with his sentence.

Gabrielle didn't move nor did she look at him, she just simply stared at the wood floor.

The slave master lifted his quill and reached up a little more, placing the quill back into the
ink jar. He then slowly stood up from his chair and came around the desk then sat on the corner. He remained there silent and waiting for the girl to look at him.

The teenager had her two hands intertwined together in front of herself. Suddenly, she felt her own grip growing stronger and her palms sweating. She slightly licked her own lips and forced herself to look up into her master's direction. "I'm sorry, sir if I took too long."

"No, that was fine." Michulus right hand was resting on the desk; he drummed his fingers on it briefly. Slowly his eyes travelled over to the window across the room and he stared out at the olive grove. "I finally decided upon something last night, Gabrielle."

The small bard felt her stomach twist.

Michulus's dark eyes drifted back to the slave. "I've been meaning to teach you the rules of a mistress lately. Unfortunately, I've been rather busy with business." He now lifted himself off the desk and neared the girl. "But of lately I've been… inspired to start the lessons of a mistress to you." He stood directly in front of Gabrielle, staring down at her. "The first rule you must remember, Gabrielle, as a mistress you are solely mine… nobody else's. Is that clear?"

The slaver girl didn't say anything and after about a few seconds she faintly nodded her head.

"Gooooood." Michulus slyly smiled as he lifted his right hand and cupped her chin. "Don't forget that, Gabrielle." He lowered his head closer to hers. "Otherwise, it could cost you dearly," he whispered, "or maybe… somebody else. Understood?"

"Yes… master," uttered the tiny bard.

"Glad to hear it." Michulus finished the distance and started what seemed like a soft kiss but quickly turned rougher than anything.

Gabrielle felt the urge to back off but knew the risks if she did such a thing.

Michulus finally pulled away once he sensed the small girl was urging for breath. He straightened up while grinning at his mistress. He lightly patted her cheek with his right hand then returned to his chair behind the desk. "Finish your work, girl."

Gabrielle stood there, stiffened in fear but pushed herself to the door. She fumbled a little for the door handle yet quickly made it out. Once she closed the door, she stood there and tried to take in what happened and what he'd said to her. Her dark forest eyes closed as they started to sting, she suddenly opened them and went running down the hallway, not sure where she was going. She then went into the laundry room, closing the door behind herself, and frantically looked around the room.

The small bard's body was shaking from the violation she felt from Michulus. She felt a need to hide from the world and she went to the folding table and crawled underneath it. She pressed her back against the cool stone wall, pulled her legs up, and dug her head between her legs. Her tears started to roll down her cheeks quicker than earlier.
"I feel rather thirsty," announced Maria.

Hecuba lowered her knitting into her lap, as did Maria. "I'll get something to drink."

"No, no its okay, Hecuba." Maria lowered her knitting off to her right side and slowly stood up.

"Misses, I don't want you to-"

"Hecuba, its okay," promised the expecting mother.

Hecuba stared at the other woman's large stomach, looked up to her, and asked, "Are you sure, Maria?"

"I'm positive." Maria softly smiled. "I'll bring you something too."

"Thank you."

Maria gradually left the room and climbed down the large flight of stairs to the main hallway. She started for the kitchen at the right end of the hallway but stopped after about three steps. She stood there, silently. She tilted her head to one side and brushed back her curly black hair. After turning her head to the left, she instead turned around and went to the laundry room door. Behind the door, she could make out the muffles of crying.

She held out her hand, prepared to grasp the door handle but she felt hesitant. She felt a slight struggle inside herself yet after a few seconds, her fingers curled around the handle and she slid open the door some. She slightly poked herself inside and at first could not find the source of the crying until she looked down under the folding table. "Oh gods, Gabrielle," she uttered.

Maria slipped into the room, closed the door behind herself, and bent down in front of the small bard. "What's wrong, child?"

Gabrielle finally realized Maria was in the room, and she lifted her head up. "I'm sorry, misses. I didn't mean to-"

"Gabrielle," cut off Maria, "it's okay. I'm not mad." She reached out and carefully grasped one of the girl's knees. "What happened, sweetie?"

The bard shook her head and her eyes drifted away from Maria.

The woman deeply sighed. "Please Gabrielle, what's happened?"

"Nothing for you to worry about, misses. I promise."
"Yes it is," stated the misses. She squeezed Gabrielle's knee a little. "And please, it's Maria." She waited for the girl to say something but could tell she wasn't about to reveal anything. She pressed her lips together, squeezed the bard's leg one last time, and then crawled under the table to sit beside her. "Well… I will not leave until you've told me what has happened."

"But misses… Maria, you're pregnant and shouldn't-

The misses held up her hand to stop her. "Then that's not my fault since you won't tell me what's happened."

Gabrielle lowered her eyes and turned her head away. "Honestly, Maria… its nothing to be worried about."

Maria reached across with her right hand and turned Gabrielle's head back to her own. "Gabrielle, listen to me… I was the oldest child in my family and I had five siblings under me. A couple of them were your age and liked to ignore a lot of things like you do. But I know how to handle kids like you so you mind as well stop and just tell me." She removed the serious expression from her face and slightly grinned.

Gabrielle faintly chuckled but felt her shoulders slump again. "Its not that I don't want to talk about it… well I don't but… you shouldn't have to hear it, Maria."

"Gabrielle, have you ever had an older sister?" whispered Maria.

"Well… not a blood sister no but….

"Somebody like that?"

Gabrielle faintly nodded.

"Well then, did you and your older sister feel comfortable enough to talk about anything, no matter what?"

The small bard licked her lips as she sensed her heart dropping and old memories coming back. "Yes."

"Then please look at me like an older sister too, Gabrielle." Maria gently smiled at the young girl and finally lowered her hand back to her lap. "It is okay… even if it's about Michulus. I know more about him than people realize, trust me."

"Well… I'm not sure about this one, Maria."

"Gabrielle, let me guess…." Maria stared up at the bottom of the folding table while saying, "you're his mistress and he just let you know now, right?" She turned her attention back to the bard.

Gabrielle just stared at her in amazement. "But… how'd you…."

"But misses… Maria, you're pregnant and shouldn't-"
"Gabrielle, it's not that hard to figure out. I know Michulus very well." Maria shrugged, reached up, and brushed some of her hair back. "I knew from day one you weren't bought just to clean… not as young and beautiful as you are. I know what Michulus is about, sweetie."

The slave shook her head and stared at the cracked stone floor. "Can I ask you something, Maria?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Why did somebody like you… somebody nice as you marry somebody like him?"

Maria took a deep breath then gradually released it. "To reform."

"Reform?"

The misses faintly nodded and explained. "Michulus father is a very nice man and well respected. My own family is as well and both Michulus's family and my own have been close for years. My father, before he died, betrothed me to Michulus because he and Michulus's father had hopes to make a good man out of Michulus."

"They thought he'd be a bad person?"

"Pretty much," answered Maria. "They both had hopes that I could help him. And I have… in some ways and in other ways I cannot." She sighed and shook her head. "There is only one thing that can truly change a person for better."

"What is that?" quietly asked the small bard.

Maria gave a sad smiled to the girl then whispered, "Love."

Gabrielle didn't say anything back and just stared across the room.

"Gabrielle," uttered the misses, "I'll try my best to keep him away from you… but there is only so much even I can do."

"I know, Maria."

"I'm sorry." Maria grasped the girl's knee. "Just have faith… things will work themselves out, I promise."

"I hope so," muttered the bard under her breath.

"They will," promised the woman. "Keep your hope about it."

Gabrielle just barely nodded then wiped away the remaining tearstains. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Maria was about the slide out from under the table but stopped. "It might be safer, sweetie if you go first."
The small bard chuckled and crawled out from underneath. She then helped Maria from under the table and asked, "Where were you going?"

"To the kitchen for water for myself and your mother." Maria went to the slightly open door and asked, "Would you like to join us?"

The slave considered for a moment. "What are you doing?" She had a very curious look.

"Knitting." Maria suddenly heard a huge groan from the girl, which made her laugh at the girl. "Gabrielle, you can tell me a story," she offered.

The small bard brightened up at that idea. "Alright then." She quietly left the laundry room with the misses and tried to push away today's events with Michulus as if they didn't happen.

After she'd helped Maria get a few cups of water from the kitchen, she went upstairs to master bedroom. She pulled up a chair next to her mother and Maria then asked what kind of story they wanted to hear. Both women asked for a mythology story and Gabrielle tried to think about some of the ones that she knew about. She soon recalled one of her most favourites about a tribe of women called Amazons and how the first Amazon was born. She relaxed in her chair and started her tale about the first Amazon.

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Gabrielle sighed deeply while staring at the ceiling not far above her. Below she could hear her mother's faint sounds of snoring. She rolled to her left and lowered her eyes down to Perdicus's bed. He too was asleep but his back was to the wall so she was able to study his features.

Perdicus took a deep breath and tried to go to sleep. He really couldn't because his body was a fair bit sore from today's work. After a heavy sigh, he opened his eyes and gazed across at Hecuba. Then he gazed up and found Gabrielle staring down at him. He softly smiled.

Gabrielle returned the smile but hers was sad.

"Not tired?" whispered Perdicus across the room.

"No," quietly replied the bard. "How about you?"

"Not really." Perdicus lowered his eyes to the wood floor. Briefly, he studied a few cracks in the wood then lifted his gaze back up to the girl. "Wanna go out for a walk?"

"You think it's safe?"

"Sure." Perdicus climbed out of his bed and waited for Gabrielle to come down.

The pair quietly left the slave house and went into the warm summer's eve. At first, they aimlessly walked around in the olive groves but then they seemed to head back for the
master's house. They silently went around to the back of house where there was a small gate that slipped between the house into a courtyard.

Perdicus carefully and quietly opened the gate and let Gabrielle in first. He followed and made sure to be cautious about closing the metal gate again.

Gabrielle went to the centre of the courtyard and settled down on a white marble bench.

Perdicus scooted onto the bench next to his friend. He dropped his head back and stared at the three-quarter moon directly ahead.

The small bard sighed deeply and rested back into the bench. "Beautiful isn't it?" she uttered.

The young man faintly nodded. He didn't say anything for a few minutes but broke the silence with a random question. "Ever thought about having children, Gabrielle?"

The small girl blinked at her friend, wondering where that question derived from him. "I'm not sure, honestly."

Perdicus sighed then folded his hands in his lap.

"Why you ask?"

"Just curious," simply replied the young man.

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows but returned her attention to the moon.

Michulus gradually opened his eyes as he shifted out of his dreamscape. He narrowed his eyes when he heard a few faint whispers outside his bedroom window. He briefly glanced at Maria on the other side of the bed but turned his head back to the window. Slowly, he stood up out of bed and neared his window but just on one side of it. He poked his head outside and scanned for the owners of the voices.

"Yeah I have," quietly answered Perdicus. "I think I'd like two children."

Gabrielle nodded at his answer and considered it for a few minutes. "So why did you ask, honestly?"

The young man shrugged but looked at his friend. "Gabrielle, do you like me seriously?"

The bard felt her stomach drop now, and she swallowed her nervousness down. "Uh… yeah, Perdicus I do," she confessed but she knew in certain ways it was a lie to herself as much as to Perdicus.
Perdicus slightly turned on the bench and faced his body towards Gabrielle. "Gabrielle." He reached over and held her hands in his own. "To be honest, I could marry you and settle down."

The small bard caught her breath in her chest, her entire breathing locking up in fear.

"I'm serious," whispered the young man, "I could start a family with you." He was about to say something else but fell short.

"What is it?" urged Gabrielle.

Perdicus squeezed the smaller ones in his hand. "We can't start a family or anything like that because… we're slaves." He paused and bit the bottom of his lips a few times. "What I guess I'm trying to ask is… will you try to escape from here with me? Then we can start a life together?"

The small bard stared at her friend and tried to take in everything he just said to her. "Perdicus," she uttered, "we can't escape from here."

"Yes we can, I know a way."

Gabrielle shook her head then said, "Even if we do, Perdicus… we'll be outcasts from society." She directed to the brand on her hip. "This cannot be removed, Perdicus."

"It doesn't matter, Gabrielle. We don't need society to start a life together."

"And what about my mother?"

Perdicus stared at her trying to come up with an answer. "She'll be okay here, Gabrielle. Maria will take care of her."

Suddenly, Gabrielle's green eyes went into a deep swirling green. "I will not leave her here, Perdicus," she quietly growled.

"Gabrielle-"

"No," hissed the small bard. She jumped up to her feet and freeing her hands. "I won't leave my mom here, Perdicus." She turned her back to him and quickly left the courtyard.

Perdicus sat there stunned as he watched his friend disappear around the house. He closed his eyes.

"And how would you escape, Perdicus?"

The young man hastily turned his head to the deep, angry voice behind him. "Michulus, sir." He jumped up from the bench.

Michulus neared the slave. "Answer my question, Perdicus."
Perdicus took a step back; he also noticed Michulus had a sword in his right hand. "I wasn't going to escape, sir."

Michulus's eyes slowly narrowed while his patience thinned. He lifted his sword, the tip pointing towards Perdicus. "We will see," he growled.

Gabrielle sat down on a step of the slave house and dropped her head into her hands. "Gods," she muttered. She roughly ran her fingers through her hair then looked up to the moon. "Xena," she whispered, "where are you?" Her face went back into her hands and again today her tears returned. "I need you… with me… so bad," she whimpered. She kept her head in her hands, crying until she could control the pain again.

Yet slowly the door to the slave house crept open and Hecuba quietly stepped out. She went down a couple of steps and sat down beside her daughter. She didn't say a word because she already knew what her daughter was crying about since the first day. She reached over and just pulled her daughter into her arms, holding her tight and occasionally kissing the top of her head.

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The following day, Gabrielle had realized Perdicus never returned from last night. She's been worried that he'd possibly runaway on his own but she'd found him later that day. After finally seeing him, she soon became even more worried as he had several scabs and bruises on his body and a black eye. And there was one instant that she went to place her hand on his back but he quickly flinched when she did so.

Gabrielle had tried to find out what happened to him but Perdicus would not talk about it. She easily figured it had to do with Michulus. She also noticed he never spoke anything about last night, and she decided not to bring it up with him.

After that incident with Perdicus, things settled back down for her for a little while. Chores around the grounds and in the house continued as normal during the remainder of the summer. Michulus continued to see his three friends from the political party and best as Gabrielle could tell a bit of trouble was starting. On one occasion, several townspeople from the neighbouring village arrived at Michulus's gates demanding to speak with him. Michulus however ignored their demands to speak with him.

Then the end of the summer neared and with the change of season came a change in Michulus's treatment of Gabrielle. The bard realized Michulus began to look her over more often than not. And then as the leaves slowly started to turn on the trees, Michulus began touching Gabrielle on various spots of her body. During the times she had to clean the office with him in it, he would brush past her with a touch to her arm, back, or even chest. Each and every time, Gabrielle felt her shoulders become heavier and heavier.

On one early fall day, when the wind had started to finally pick up, several townspeople from
the village returned again to Michulus's grounds at the gates. Perdicus was the one to meet them again at the gates, telling them Michulus refused to speak with them.

Gabrielle stood in the window in the hallway and watched Perdicus speak with them. She dropped her head against the broomstick and continued to watch them. She really could not make out what the leader of the group was saying but he was definitely not happy. Then one man pushed up through the group of townspeople and in his right hand was a pitchfork. "Oh gods," whispered the bard.

"What's wrong?" asked Hecuba, she stood on the bottom step of the stairs.

"Come here, mom," called Gabrielle, she pointed out of the window.

Hecuba stood next to her daughter and saw the large group of townspeople at the gate confronting Perdicus. "What's going on?"

"I think they want to talk to Michulus and they're not to happy about something."

"Oh my," whispered Hecuba. She caught sight now of several people with a few torches. "Honey, hurry up stairs and get Maria."

"Why?"

The mother turned to Gabrielle. "Just go, now please."

The teenager was hesitant but nodded and raced upstairs to get the misses.

Maria looked up when she saw the slave come into the room without announcing herself. "What is it, Gabrielle?" She'd seen the slight panic in Gabrielle's eyes.

"There are some townspeople at the gates and they're very angry."

"How do you know?" Maria started to stand up but very slowly due to her pregnancy.

"They have pitchforks, swords, and torches," answered the bard.

"Oh gods." Maria reached out with her hand. "Help me."

The bard switched the broom into her left hand and took Maria's hand with her right. "Come on."

They hurried out of the room and tried to rush down the steps but Maria could only go so fast. "What's happening, Hecuba?" called Maria halfway down the steps.

Hecuba peered up at Maria and Gabrielle then back to the window. "They're trying to break the gates open. Perdicus is trying to hold them along with those to black slaves."

"They won't be able to," whispered Maria in fear. So finally made it to the ground floor and
went to the window to see what was happening too.

"I better tell Michulus," stated Gabrielle.

Maria grabbed Gabrielle's arm and squeezed it hard. "No, he can take care of himself, Gabrielle."

"But Maria-"

"I know but we can't." The misses looked back out the window and saw the gates about to breach. "We have to worry about ourselves right now."

Hecuba nodded her agreement.

"Where can we go?" whispered Gabrielle. "What about Perdicus?"

"He can take care of himself, honey," replied Hecuba.

Gabrielle felt her heart drop but she knew there was nothing she could do.

"Come on." Maria started for the kitchen.

"Where we going?" asked Gabrielle.

"To the stables… it's the safest spot," whispered Maria.

The group made it to the kitchen and went outside. As soon as they came outside though, the gates burst open and the three slaves were trampled.

"Hurry," urged Maria. She grabbed Gabrielle's wrist and forced her to run with her.

Hecuba glanced behind and saw the townspeople waving their various weapons and yelling out for Michulus.

Maria was the first into the stables with Gabrielle and Hecuba behind her. "We have to hide."

"Where?" hastily asked Hecuba.

"Let's go in here," replied Gabrielle. She directed to the stall with her broom.

"There's a horse in there," stated her mother.

"Perfect." Maria went up to the stall and opened the door. "They won't look inside the stall with the horses. Come on."

Hecuba and Gabrielle squeezed in and sat down on the floor beside each other.

Maria closed the gate and looked at the stall from her side and saw two handles on either
side. She looked behind the horse and saw a mucking broom. She quickly went around the horse and ripped the broom off the hanging peg. She went back to the stall door and slid the broom between the two handles to lock the door. After a heavy sigh, she sat down on the ground beside the other two, her back against the stall door.

All three women kept quiet as they listened to the yells of the townspeople.

"What you think is happening?" whispered the bard.

Maria shook her head then dropped it against the stall door. "Fighting."

"Why's this happening?" questioned Hecuba.

"It has to do with the war against Rome," replied Maria, she slowly closed her eyes. "Nobody wants this war but the people who would benefit from it. Michulus is one of them."

"Michulus won't give in to them though," stated Gabrielle.

"Exactly… that's why these people are here. To make sure he stops one way or another."

"Oh gods," uttered Hecuba, her eyes were wide with fear. "But they wouldn't attack you, Maria?"

Maria turned her head to the mother. "I can't be sure and I can't risk it either."

"Wait," whispered the small bard, "I hear something."

Maria lifted her head up and carefully listened. "Somebody is outside the stable," she whispered. After she said that, somebody stepped into the stable but they were dragging their feet.

Gabrielle pressed her back against the wall and kept her eyes closed.

"Gods," moaned a man, and then he fell to the ground.

Gabrielle's eyes flew open. "Perdicus." She jumped up.

"Gabrielle, no," warned Hecuba, she grabbed her daughter's arm trying to pull her back down.

"Mother, we can't leave him to die." Gabrielle jerked her arm free, and she grabbed the stall door and jumped over it with the broom still in her hand.

Hecuba started to stand up but Maria reached over and held her down. "Don't, Hecuba. She'll be fine."

Gabrielle bent down beside Perdicus. "Perdicus?" She grasped his shoulder with her free hand. "Perdicus?"
The young man faintly lifted his head and peered up with fuzzy eyes. "Gabrielle?"

"Hey its okay." The young girl sadly smiled.

"I'm not so sure." He was lying on his stomach so he directed down to his lower body.

Gabrielle glanced down and for the first time saw the small pool of blood. "Oh gods, no. What happened?"

Perdicus closed his eyes again and whispered, "One of those people attacked me."

"That would have been me," growled a man at the doorway of the stable.

The girl peered up at the man with the sword. She gritted her teeth. "Why'd you do this?" she hotly yelled.

"Because slaves of Michulus shouldn't even live," hissed the man. He stepped into the stable. "That includes you, girl." He pointed the tip of his sword at her.

Gabrielle felt her anger boiling up just as fast as her fears. She slowly rose up with the broom in her hands and slightly held out. "I'm not a slave."

"You could have fooled me." He directed to the brand on her hip.

The bard shook her head as she felt a few tears build up in her eyes. "I'm nobody's slave and you had no right to hurt this man," she yelled.

"Shut up, girl." The man took a few closer steps and raised his sword.

Gabrielle took a step back but when she saw the sword coming down at her, she raised the broom up.

The man stood there stunned that his sword had been stopped. He quickly pulled it back and growled at the bard.

The small girl jumped away from him and went down to the next stall.

The man shifted and now stood next to the first stall.

"Stay back," yelled Gabrielle.

The man laughed and took a swipe at the girl.

Gabrielle jumped out of the way but took steps forward and swung her broom at him.

The man yelped when it connected with his arm. He twirled his sword and slashed at Gabrielle.
The bard screamed when the blade sliced at her leg.

Suddenly the horse in the stall cried out and started pounding his hoofs down and turning every which way in the stall.

Hecuba and Maria now could do nothing to help Gabrielle in fear they'd get trampled by the horse. They had to move out of the way of the horse, starting to scoot away from the stall door.

The man suddenly reached out and grabbed the stunned bard and swung her around.

Gabrielle tripped over Perdicus and rolled onto the ground then hit her head on the opposite wall. She slumped against the wall with the broom in her lap.

The man laughed and twirled his sword, raised his hands with the blade pointing down at the slave.

The horse loudly whined, completely turned in the stall so that he faced the wall.

"Stupid slave," growled the man. He took a deep breath and started to bring his sword down.

The horse whined, threw his head up, and then bucked with his hind legs.

The man stopped when he saw the stall door suddenly coming at him. He screamed when the door slammed into him, sending him flying into the stable's doorway.

Gabrielle shook her head when she saw the horse coming out of his stall and coming at the man.

The man turned onto his back after getting the door off but he soon regretted it when he found a horse's face in his own.

The horse snorted in the man's face and stared into his eyes.

The man just felt a fear shiver up and down his back from the angry horse's look. He started to stand up but then saw the horse's teeth reappear.

The horse pushed his head forward and clamped his teeth down just in front of the man's nose.

The man screamed, dropped his sword, jumped up and ran out of the stable.

The horse stood there for a second then huffed. He turned his head around and saw that young man was now next to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle shook away her astonishment and looked to Perdicus.
"Are you okay?" whispered the boy.

"Yeah… I am."

Hecuba and Maria came out of the stall and knelt by the bard.

Maria was closes to Perdicus and said, "Let me look."

Perdicus nodded, closed his eyes, and painful turned around and rested against the wall next to Gabrielle.

The misses looked over Perdicus's wound and shook her head.

"I know," whispered the young man. "It's okay."

"You're going to be okay, right?" asked the bard to Perdicus.

Perdicus swallowed and instead of answering, said, "Look, remember I told you about how we can escape out of here?"

"Yeah?" whispered the small girl.

"If you go to the far southern end of the grounds, to the wood fencing, you'll find apart of the fencing loose. You can get through."

"What about you?" urged the bard.

"I can't make-"

"Don't say it," warned Gabrielle.

"Gabrielle," cut in Maria, "he's lost too much blood."

The small girl closed her eyes.

Perdicus grabbed his friend's closest arm. "Gabrielle, you have to get out of here."

"We can't leave you here," hotly stated the bard.

"Gabrielle, please go before its too late." Perdicus squeezed her arm tightly. "Just look at it this way, I'll be free too."

The bard closed her eyes and tried to hold back her tears.

Hecuba grasped her daughter while whispering, "Come on."

The small bard dropped her broom and stood up.
"Let's go," ordered Maria, she was partially out of the stable. She waited for a second and then started off when the two other women followed.

Gabrielle looked back at Perdicus as she hurried out of the stable.

Perdicus faintly nodded and closed his eyes, dropped his head back but after a few seconds his head slumped to one side.

The young girl knew exactly what happened and she felt her tears finally break free. She took a quick look at the horse that still stood in the doorway of the stable.

The horse cocked his head to one side then suddenly broke of cantering to the group.

Hecuba glanced back to see the horse catching up to them. "He's following us," she called to Maria.

"Well he's not going to fit through the fence, it won't matter." Maria saw the fencing in sight and noticed how two boards slightly protruded from the rest. She figured that had to be the right spot.

Once the group came to the two boards, they started pulling on them to try and pull them off.

"Hades," growled Maria. She let go and tried peeking between the boards. "Oh gods… they've been renailed."

The horse shook his head at the now scared looks on the humans' faces. He took a few steps closer, lowered his head, and pushed against Gabrielle's side.

The small bard looked at the horse and asked, "What, boy?"

The horse gave a harder push.

"I think he wants us out of the way," suggested Maria. She stepped back along with the slaves.

The horse came closer to the fence; he turned around, and reared up his back legs.

The two boards went rocketing into the air.

The horse huffed stepped to his left twice, whined, and threw up his hind legs again.

The two new boards cracked from the hard blow.

The horse huffed more in anger than anything but reared up his hoofs again and sent those two boards flying too.

"I like this horse," stated Maria in happiness.
"He's coming with us." Gabrielle took a step closer and patted his neck.

The horse huffed and leaned into the patting.

"Come on, ladies." Maria stepped through the large opening and waved her hand.

The two women and the horse walked through but Gabrielle stopped and looked back at the stable. She realized now it was on fire.

Hecuba sighed and came behind her daughter. "He's right, honey… he is free now."

Gabrielle grasped the fence beside her and shook her head. "I just feel terrible about it."

"Its okay, Gabrielle… its okay."

The small bard turned around and started walking towards the woods that wasn't far ahead. "Where are we going?" she quietly asked then wiped away her tears.

Maria sighed but replied, "To Michulus's father… Cornelio."

"You think that's safe?" asked Hecuba in worry.

"Very… he's with the people not the governments." Maria took a deep breath as she felt all the excitement from today catching up to her.

"Are you okay?" asked the worried girl.

"Yeah… just…." Maria stopped walking and slightly bent forward.

Gabrielle glanced at the horse then back to Maria. "You should ride the horse, Maria."

"I'll be fine," rasped the misses.

Hecuba now cut into the conversation. "Gabrielle is right, Maria. You're pregnant and need to take it easy."

The horse came up closer to the group and stood next to Maria.

The expecting mother lifted her head to the horse.

The horse snorted a little but then he slowly and carefully lowered himself down onto the ground.

Maria softly laughed at the horse and took his offer. She grasped his mane and carefully climbed onto his back.

The horse stood back up and continued the journey for the woods.
Gabrielle glanced at her mother then back to the horse. "I wonder what breed he is?"

Hecuba laughed for the first time today and brought her arm around her daughter's shoulder. "I don't know, honey."

"Me either." The small teenager started walking again with her mother. "I wonder what this means?" she whispered just for her mother to hear.

"I'm not sure."

"You think we'll be free?" whispered the bard.

Hecuba looked away from her daughter and felt a sense of defeat come inside her. "I don't think we can ever truly be free," she uttered.

Gabrielle's head slumped at her own mother's words. "Because of the brand."

The mother sadly nodded her head.

"Mom?"

Hecuba looked at her daughter in question.

"I miss Lila," whispered the small girl.

The mother closed her eyes while she turned her head away. "I miss Lila too, honey." She opened her eyes again but squeezed her daughter's shoulders in reassurance.

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Part 2: Xena's Second Year

Xena knelt down in front of her bed and carefully slid the item under her bed.

"Xena, sweetie?" called her mother.

The girl looked up when she saw her mother poke her head into the room.

"Hi," she greeted to her mom.

Cyrene smiled at her daughter. "What you doing, sweetie?"

The teenager looked under her bed, her hands still grasping the sheath, and the hilt of the sword gleamed up at her. "Just cleaning up some, mother." She lifted her head back up to her mother.

Cyrene chuckled at the answer. "Okay… come down stairs when you're finished. Dinner is almost ready."
"I'll be there in a minute," responded the girl.

The mother nodded and quietly left her daughter's room.

Xena sadly sighed and stood up again. She pulled the bed sheet back down to hanging over the bed. She then went down stairs to join her family in dinner. Everybody was talkative except for Xena; she'd always been quiet these days. It'd gotten to the point where Cyrene became terribly nervous about her daughter. Xena was quiet, she constantly had nightmares, and now she was hiding things from her own mother. Cyrene felt as if something was building up inside of her daughter and was preparing to take her child from her. Ever since that day in Potidaea, her daughter had never been the same.

"I'm going to go check on Argo," announced Xena after she finished her meal.

"Always worried about that stupid horse," jabbed Toris.

The teenager glared at her older brother and stated, "Like you are with your girlfriend."

"Hey," growled the young man. "At least that's a healthy relationship," he chided.

"Whatever." Xena pushed her seat out and stormed out of the tavern to the small stable she'd built herself for Argo.

Cyrene slowly turned her head to Toris. "I've told you before, would you please lighten up on your sister."

"Mother, all she does is ride that stupid horse… almost every damn day. Who the Hades knows where she goes and what she does."

"Toris, just leave her be."

"Yeah Toris, ever since Gabrielle died she hasn't been the same," reminded Lyceus.

Toris sighed and rested back into his chair.

"Please give her a break, Toris." Cyrene leaned forward in her chair. "I think she needs her family more than the hard times."

"Yeah I know," whispered the young man.

Xena ran her hand up and down her horse's nose.

Argo whined but continued to eat her feed she'd just received.

"How is it?"
The horse snorted.

"Same old, same old huh?"

Argo looked up at her master and snorted again. She lowered her head and continued munching on the feed.

"Yeah I know." The teenager reached behind and pulled out an apple. "That's why I brought this."

The mare immediately looked up and saw the apple. She whined in happiness.

"Eat the feed first," ordered the young woman.

Argo whined, stared at the apple, stared at the feed, then back at the apple.

"Go on," ordered Xena again.

The mare sighed and went back to the feed.

Xena lowered the apple onto the stall door's top. She then rested her left arm into the top as well. "I still keep having those dreams, you know."

Argo looked up in question.

"The ones about… her."

Argo sighed, waited for a second, and then went to finishing off the feed.

"Everybody keeps telling me she's dead… I just can't believe it, girl." Xena realized her horse had finished the feed off and that meant it was time for the dessert. She reached behind and extracted one of her old daggers. She gracefully twirled the dagger in her right hand the plunged it into the apple. "I can't see her giving up like that." She wrenched the dagger through the apple, starting to slice it.

Argo carefully watched the apple being cut up while listening to her master's words.

"Maybe I'm just fooling myself… she probably is dead."

Argo whined at that and stomped her feet.

"You think she's still alive too huh?"

The mare threw her head up and down and stomped a hoof again.

Xena sadly smiled and handed over a slice of apple. Right when Argo was about to take it, she pulled the apple away. "Or you just agreeing because you want this apple?"
Argo huffed and whined then shook her head.

The teenager chuckled at that and held the apple slice back out. "That's what I thought."

Argo brought her lips around the slice and pulled it free from her master's fingers.

Xena finished cutting the next slice and held it out. "I have to find out, girl."

The mare stopped halfway from taking the slice and peered into her master's eyes.

"Argo, I have to know what's happened to her."

The horse sighed but took the slice and started munching on it.

"But I can't go back there even though I know that's the best place to probably start the search."

Argo shook her head and dramatically sighed.

"Yeah I know… bad memories huh?" Xena held out her next apple slice. "I've been training for several months with that sword. Plus everything else I've been doing and with you."

The mare stretched her neck out and nuded her master's hand.

"What?"

The mare shook her head.

"What? About the training?"

Argo bobbed her head a few times.

"I'm ready."

Argo whined in laughter plus shook her head.

Xena frowned at her mare. "You're not getting anymore of this apple then." She twirled the dagger and slipped it away. "Actually it looks pretty good." She brought the remaining half of the apple up to her lips but she suddenly laughed at her mare's pouty look. "Alright… alright." She held out the apple half for her horse. "So you really think I need more training?"

The horse was chewing on her bite of apple as she considered the question. She finally shook her head.

"Well… only so much I can do without training against an opponent." Xena sighed and held out the last morsel of apple. "The rest I'll just learn on the way."
Argo took the last bite and quietly chomped down on it.

"I'm just not sure how I'll tell mother," she whispered. "I mean, I'm going on nineteen, I can do what I want by now," she stated.

The mare laughed quietly.

"I'm serious," warned the teenager.

Argo huffed but settled down nonetheless.

Xena gave a deep sigh. "I'll talk to her tomorrow." She glanced outside. "With spring coming, the weather will be better… better for travelling." She felt her shoulders slump as she turned back to her mare. "You know, it's been almost a year since everything happened." She paused and quietly whispered, "It'll be her fourteenth birthday soon."

Argo stretched her neck out again and nudged the side of her master's face.

Xena turned her head back to her mare. "Sorry." She patted her horse's nose and said, "Get some rest, girl." She turned around and quietly left the stable. She tugged her cloak against her body then continued to the tavern. Once she was back in her bedroom, she started settling into bed for the night.

But before she went to sleep, she'd pulled out two scrolls from under her bed. She unrolled them and just sat there, staring at them. On them were maps of Greece with every small town to large city along with the roads between them. Almost every night, Xena would pull out the maps and review them, memorizing them until they were locked in her head. It'd been one of Xena's many projects to prepare for the search.

After she finished with them, she slipped them back under her bed then leaned over to the nightstand. She lit the two candles since sunset was near. Reaching back under her bed, but on the other side, she removed another scroll. This scroll contained a long list of herbs used as medicines. Once of Xena's worries was getting hurt and never being able to care for herself. Fortunately with this scroll, she was able to memorize all the herbs that were used in various treatments, what they looked like, and where to find them. And what made it even more interesting was the fact here and there were notes that certain herbs could kill a person or hurt them if used in a certain way.

By the time she'd finished rereading the scroll, she rolled it up and tucked it back away in its hiding spot. She finally decided she was tired, blew out the candles, and crawled under her covers to fall asleep soon.

Again for the seventh night straight, she had dreams about Gabrielle. This dream was a very different one compared to most of her others it was a pure dream and less of a nightmare. Gabrielle came back to her in her dreams, begging her to find her and save her. And for whatever reason, Xena saw Gabrielle in chains just like the other few times she'd had this same dream. She couldn't quite figure out what the chains meant yet she had her ideas of what they meant and it clued her in where to start her hunt.
The next morning, Xena had gotten up a little late in the morning but went down stairs right after getting changed. She first went to find her mother and found her in the tavern preparing for the official reopening day of the tavern later this week.

"Mother?"

Cyrene turned around and lowered the cutting knife onto the counter. She wiped her hands on her apron then finally asked, "Yes?"

"Can I talk with you for a minute or two?"

"Sure, sweetie." Cyrene went outside into the main portion of the tavern. She sat down at a table but next to her daughter.

Xena settled into the chair.

"What's going on, Xena?"

The teenager sighed deeply then replied, "I think… I'm going to leave."

Cyrene stared at her daughter while considering her words. "Leave?"

"Yes, I want to find… Gabrielle."

The mother chewed on her lower lip as she considered her daughter's words. She reached out and held her child's hands. "Sweetie… Gabrielle is gone. You have to let her go."

"No!" yelled Xena. She jumped up from her chair and moved behind it. "She's not gone, mother." She grasped the chair with all of her strength. "She's alive… I know it."

"How can you be so sure, dear?" Cyrene felt her heart starting to pound.

"I just know she is, mother." Xena stared at her mother then added, "I'm going to find her."

"Sweetie, how are you going to find her huh?" Cyrene clasped her hands in her lap and added, "It's dangerous out there… you can't do it alone."

"Nobody would come with me anyway, mother. I'll be fine."

"Xena," warned Cyrene, "there are crazy… sick people out there." She stood up now. "If one of those people gets a hold of you… gods only know what could happen to you."

"I'll be fine, mother."

"How do you expect to protect yourself from them, huh?" yelled Cyrene.

Xena straightened up. "I've learned how to use a sword."
The mother stood there in complete shock. "You what?" she hotly whispered.

"I've learned how to use a sword, mother."

"Xena, I don't care if you had an army behind you. It's not safe."

"Mother, I can take care of myself and old enough to go out on my own. Why do I need your permission?"

Cyrene came around her chair, closer to Xena. "Because I'm your mother."

The teenager sighed and took a few steps away then turned back around. "Mother, I have to find her."

"Xena, she is gone."

"They never found a body!" yelled the teenager.

Cyrene shook her head and folded her arms against her chest. "For all you could know, Xena her body could be some where else. You can't possibly track her down."

"Yes I can," stated the young woman. She turned around now and started walking up stairs.

Cyrene quickly followed after her, calling, "Xena, don't do this."

Xena went into her bedroom and went to her dresser. She pulled out her second dagger and held onto it in her hand. "Mother, please just let me do this."

"So you can end up dead too?" yelled Cyrene.

"I won't," argued the teenager. She grabbed her leather bag from her dresser and threw her dagger with sheath into it. Also in her bag she had a small bag of dinars, heavy blanket, some food, and another change of clothes. "I can take care of myself."

"Xena, think… you're just a child."

"What's going on?"

Both Cyrene and Xena turned their heads to Lyceus in the doorway.

"Nothing to do with you, Ly. Go on," ordered the sister.

"No, what's the yelling about?" urged the sixteen-year-old.

"You heard your sister, go on, Lyceus."

The young man sighed and turned around. "Alright." He went back into his room but quickly
put his ear against the wall that adjoined Xena's room.

Cyrene turned her head back to her daughter after she heard Lyceus's door close. "Xena, please stay home."

"Mother, I can't." Xena knelt down beside her bed and reached under it.

The mother furrowed her eyebrows as she wondered what was under her child's bed.

The teenager stood back up with a sword's hilt sticking out of a sheath.

"Xena, no."

"Mother, please." She came up to her mother. "I have to find her… I have to know if she's still alive or not." She shook her head and whispered, "I can't take anymore of these dreams."

"And what happens if you find the answer you don't want, Xena?" Cyrene felt her heart sinking now and tears building up.

"At this point… any answer will help." The teenager lowered her head.

"Xena… please stay here," quietly urged her mother. "I can't lose you."

"You won't, I promise." Xena lifted her head back up. "I'll be back."

Cyrene lowered her arms and closed in the distance. She pulled her child into her arms and hugged her.

Xena sighed and could only snuggle in closer since both her hands were full of items.

Cyrene kissed her daughter's head, pulled back a little but didn't let her go. "You come back here when you find what you're looking for. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, mother."

The mother stepped aside and watched her daughter walk past.

Xena stopped in the doorway and turned her head back. "I love you, mom."

"I love you too, sweetie… go on before I change my mind."

The teenager faintly nodded then quietly left the room. She hurried down stairs and swung her pack onto her back. While rushing out to the stable, she fumbled to tie her sword onto her side.

Cyrene took a couple of steps backwards, sat down on her daughter's bed, and hung her head down. "Oh gods," she whimpered and tears began to fall.
Lyceus shoved the last item, a shirt, into his satchel then jumped to his door. He quietly opened his door and stuck his head out checking the hallway for anybody. He saw nobody so he silently crept out and went downstairs, making sure not to touch the steps that always squeaked. Once he was outside, he went bolting for the small stable where he knew his sister would be right now. When he got inside of the stable, he found Xena in the stall just finished tacking Argo up.

"Lyceus, what are you doing?"

"I'm coming with you," he replied, "I'm packed and ready to go." He held up his leather satchel briefly then swung it onto his back.

"I don't think so." Xena pushed open the stall door, tugged on Argo's reins, and walked her out of the stable.

"Xena, I'm going with you," stated the young man.

"No, Ly," growled the sister. "You're staying here with Toris and mother."

"Why can't I go?" Lyceus took two large steps to catch up with his sister.

Xena stopped and faced her smaller brother. "Because mother needs you… and because I said so."

"Toris will be here," he argued. "And how come it's okay for you to go? What? Mother doesn't need you?"

The teenager shook her head. "This is something I have to do… alone."

"Why can't I come?" protested the young man. "Gabrielle was my friend too."

"Lyceus," warned Xena. "I don't have time for this."

"Xena, she was my friend too." The brother took a step closer and grasped his sister's arm. "Please? Can I come with you? You'll need the extra help." He paused. "Please? I want to help find her too."

"Lyc-"

"I'm just going to follow you anyway," reminded the young man.

Xena sighed and looked away from her brother as she thought about what he said to her. "Alright." She turned her attention back to Lyceus only to see his expression happy and excited. "One condition."

"What's that?"

"If things start to get dangerous, I'm taking you back home. Okay? Agreed?"
Lyceus slowly nodded his head. "Okay."

"Alright… let's go." Xena continued walking to the small gates of Amphipolis with her brother beside her.

"Where we going first?"

"I'm not sure just yet," replied the teenager. She took one last look at her mother's tavern, home, and then turned her head back never to look back again.

Lyceus glanced over at his sister then looked back down the dirt road. "Do you know where we're going?" he quietly asked.

Xena felt a tiny grin tug at her lips but she coolly answered, "Yeah."

"How you know?" The sixteen-year-old had a very curious look.

The taller sister chuckled and simply replied, "I memorized all of the roads, towns, and cities in Greece, Ly."

"No you didn't," protested the young man. "That's horse manure."

"Ly, I've been planning for this day for a year now," reminded Xena.

"Gods… really?"

Xena briefly looked at her brother, sadly nodded, then looked back down the road.

"What… what else have you learned or done to… prepare?"

The older sister felt her grin return. "I've learned how to use a sword and daggers, trained Argo…." She trailed off and just shrugged.

"Memorized the roads too," reminded the young man. "Wait… you know how to use a sword?"

"Yessss."

"Cool." Lyceus had a huge grin now. "But I'm sure you're not an expert."

"No," agreed the young woman. "But I think I can hold my own pretty well."

The brother sighed, shook his head then whispered, "I hope you don't have to."

"Yeah I know." Xena lifted her left hand and ruffled her brother's hair.
Lyceus swatted his sister's hand away and fixed his hair while asking, "You think we'll find Gabrielle?"

"Yes."

The young man pressed his lips together. He looked down and kicked at a stone then lifted his head back up. "Where we going first?"

"We're going to a small but important town," replied Xena.

"What's so important about it?"

The teenager sighed but she answered, "It's a centre for warlords."

"What you mean? A lot of warlords and warriors collect there together?"

Xena faintly nodded. "Pretty much."

"Why are we going there?" Lyceus's eyebrows were pushed together but he ended up answering his own question. "We're looking for the people that attacked Potidaea huh?"

"Exactly." Xena reached up with her right hand, which held the reins, and patted Argo's neck. "I think if we find the person in charge of that attack, we might be able to find out what happened to Gabrielle."

Lyceus rubbed the back of his neck with his right hand and dropped it back to his side. "How are we going to do that? I mean… we can't just stroll up to the leader and ask him." He slightly chuckled at his own words.

"No… we can't," agreed the young woman.

"Then…?" He peered up at Xena in question.

All Xena did was grin evilly then returned her eyes to the road. After a few seconds, she did say, "First though, we need to get some money."

"How in Hades are we going to do that?"

The young woman shrugged but she then suddenly stopped and fully faced her brother. "One thing though."

Lyceus cocked his head to one side.

Xena now pointed her index finger at her brother. "You're going to have to learn how to use a sword."

"Swwweet."
The teenager shook her head as her hand went back down. "But Lyceus, I'll teach you so you can protect yourself… not fight. Okay?"

"Um… okay."

Xena accepted that and continued the journey down the dirt road.

Lyceus had no idea what town they were headed for but he did know they were travelling west. He was still surprised by what his sister had been doing for the past year to ready herself. He never realized just how much Gabrielle meant to Xena until today. He could also figure it out for himself that Gabrielle must have meant more than a friend to his sister. His only hope though was to help his sister find Gabrielle so that Xena would finally be at peace. Xena had lost herself after Potidaea and he missed his sister more than anything.

And has the pair travelled westward, Xena took the time to sort out her plans. First, she knew she needed more money but she was unsure where'd they find that just yet. Second, they needed to make it to the town of Delia and find out about the leader of those raiders. But before she could do that, she would have to teach her brother how to protect himself with a sword. Her only concern at this point was her brother's own safety. She could only imagine what her mother was thinking and feeling now that her daughter and youngest son were gone. After realizing that, her head hung down, and she stared at the various leaves, stones, and grass that passed by them.

Xena tried to push her thoughts away and for once she stopped them by concentrating on the noises surrounding her. She could make out some trees shaking in the light breeze, a few birds chirping, and some animal tromping just off to the left in the woods. She then noted her mare's hooves tapping on the road along with her and Lyceus's boots scuffing on the road in unison to her sword tapping against her side. Then her focus went deeper to the sound of Argo's breathing, then her own, and Lyceus's as all of the other sounds in the world faded out. She gradually lifted her head now as her ears started to filter in a new sound she hadn't heard earlier. The new sound suddenly made her come to a dead stop.

"What's wrong?" asked Lyceus.

"Ssssh," urged Xena. Her sky eyes slowly deepened into a rich sea blue. "You hear that?" she uttered.

"What?" whispered the young man.

The teenager tilted her head to one side then gradually turned it to her left. "Somebody is coming… towards us."

"I don't hear anything." Lyceus shook his head and curiously asked, "Even if there is… why so worried?"

"Because…." Xena trailed off as she concentrated on the new noise and realized there was a second one that bothered her more than anything. "I think they're… armed."
"Armed?" muttered Lyceus.

Xena suddenly looked at her brother and held out Argo's reins. "Take her reins, okay?"

Lyceus took them but hastily asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't think this'll be... good." The young woman took a few steps in front of her brother. She could now make out the noises even better. "Two," she whispered, "both men." She shook her head, took a few more steps, and pulled her light weight cloak closed so that it hid her sword. She turned her head back to her brother. "Just stay there, okay? No matter what happens."

"Um okay." Lyceus wasn't sure what was about to happen but he was worried either way.

When Xena turned her head back, two men started to materialize ahead of them. She reached up, brushing her dark brown bangs out of the way but placed her hands now at her sides.

The two men were talking away but one of them had caught sight of the two teenagers ahead in the road. He slapped his friend in the side to get his attention.

Xena curiously took notice of what they were wearing and carrying. One man had a sword at his side and the other was carrying a mace in his hand. They had satchels on and didn't have much in the way of armour yet looked rough.

The two men approached the teenagers once close enough, they stopped and studied them, especially Xena.

"What are you kids doing out here alone?" asked the man with the sword.

"Out for a stroll," sarcastically replied Xena.

The swordsman glared at the girl and took a step closer to her. "I hate smartasses."

"So do I," taunted Xena, she flashed a sly grin.

The guy with the mace started to lift it up and tap the mace gently in his free hand.

"Look kids," started the swordsman, "here's how it works. We're bandits and we smash your faces in before we take what we want." He ran his tongue along the front of his teeth. "And I mean aaanything." His eyes ran up and down the length of Xena's body.

Xena felt a faint shiver ripple down her back. "First of all, we're not kids." Slowly her eyes started to form into slits while her anger grew. "And second, you can't take what's not yours."

"To Hades we won't," growled the swordsman. He tore out his sword and started after Xena.
Xena jumped aside which only pushed open her cloak. She reached in with her left hand and extracted her sword. "Back off," she warned.

The swordsman laughed and threw a grin to his buddy. "Not only a kid with a sword but a girl at that."

Xena felt her anger turn into rage as her lip curled. She suddenly lunged forward and brought her sword down on the bandit.

The swordsman brought his sword up just in time to stop hers. He then realized just how strong she was as she pressed her weight down against him. With the gritting of his teeth, he pushed up with his legs and threw her off.

Xena took a step back yet held her spot. She gave a good spin of her sword and lunged at the bandit again.

The bandit with the mace shook his head with a small laugh as he watched in amusement. He took a good step back and watched as the pair started to circle in their spot. He grinned to himself as he pulled his mace back, preparing to take a whack at Xena.

"Xena!" yelled Lyceus, and he was about to stop the bandit but found it too late.

Xena had already put her sword behind her head and caught the mace on her blade. She gave a hard jerk and freed the mace from the bandit's hands then threw it over her head into the woods.

The bandit stood there shocked by what happened.

Xena took a daring slash at the swordsman however he jumped away in time. This though gave Xena time to turn slightly and slam a kick into the other bandit.

The bandit went flying onto his back.

Lyceus took the opening, letting go of Argo's reins, and lunging at the bandit on the ground. He quickly brought his fist into the bandit's face and knocked him unconscious.

Xena was still parrying off her attacker. She brought her blade out to stop the bandit's then quickly attacked with a slice and missed.

The swordsman however suddenly dropped down and took a swipe at her legs.

Xena hadn't expected it and tried jumping back yet stumbled and fell onto her back. Her sword fell out of her hands and landed just beside her. She looked up at the bandit standing above her.

Lyceus saw what was about to happen, he could do nothing from how far away he was from Xena.
Xena felt her heart stop when she saw the sword coming down on her. She quickly acted and brought her hands up, palm to palm, in hopes to stop the blade somehow.

The bandit saw his sword come to a stop, and he lost his grin. He just stared at his blade stuck between this girl's two hands.

Xena stared at the sword between her palms with the tip of the blade just touching her nose. She now felt the air fill her lungs again; she tried to regain her senses as she curled her fingers around the blade and jerked it free. She threw the sword far aside, grabbed her own, and jumped back up onto her feet. She grinned as the tip of her blade pressed into the bandit's throat. "Kids huh?"

The bandit swallowed, he was captured by Xena's stormy blue eyes.

Xena finally realized just how hard she was breathing along with the amount of excitement that fuelled her body. She debated about what to do now. She fisted up her left hand, lowered her sword, and disappeared into a blur as she punched the bandit in the face.

The bandit stumbled backwards and had no time to recover. He was hit over the head with the butt of Xena's hilt.

Xena stood there, breathing hard, and glaring at the bandit lying in the dirt.

"Xena?" whispered Lyceus.

The teenager didn't hear her brother; she remained still.

Lyceus didn't know what to do at first. He took two careful steps closer to his sister then gently grasped her arm. "Sis?"

The young woman shook her head then finally lowered her sword. "Sorry," she whispered.

"You okay?"

"Uh... yeah." Xena brushed the question aside; she quickly went to her mare. She had some rope tied to the side of her saddle so she untied the rope from the saddle and went to the swordsman first. She grabbed one of the bandit's wrists and dragged him to a tree close to the road. "Bring the other guy over here too," she called.

Lyceus had a confused look however went grabbed the other bandit and tugged him to a tree a bit close to the swordsman. "What now?"

Xena had removed one of her daggers. She was busy cutting the rope into two separate ropes. Once she had it cut, she tossed one to her brother. "Tie him up to the tree... real tight." She slipped her dagger away then went onto the other side of the tree. She hastily took the bandit's arms and wrapped them around the tree. She then lashed them down against the tree, making sure her knot was strong and tight.
Lyceus had done the same then went back onto the edge of the road. He curiously looked at his sister, wondering what they were going to do now with the bandits.

The teenager stepped back and stood next to her brother. "Well… first." She whirled around and paced over to the sword the bandit left on the ground. She picked it up but held the hilt out towards her brother. "You need a sword."

The sixteen-year-old stared at his sister, his eyes were wide. "Xena-"

"Take it," coldly ordered Xena.

Lyceus felt a sigh come out although he did as his sister told him. He carefully brought his right hand around the hilt of the sword then felt the entire weight of the sword. As he held it up in front of himself, he studied the sharp blade.

Xena grinned to herself then stepped past her brother. She knelt down in front of the swordsman and removed his sheath. "Here." She tossed the sheath at her brother.

Lyceus barely caught it but slipped the sword away and worked on tying it against his side.

The young woman returned her focus on the bandit. She now noted the small bag on the right side of his hip, a huge grin spread across her lips. She bit down on her lower lip as she worked the small pouch free. Once she had it in her hands, she gave it a good shake and received several jingles in response.

"Wow… how much is in there?"

Xena smirked at her brother. "Plenty. Check the other guy."

Lyceus nodded. He knelt down in front of the other bandit and also found a small pouch attached to his side. After he took it off, he opened the top and peered into it.

"How much?" asked Xena.

"I'd say at least twenty dinars."

"Perfect." Xena had a huge grin as she went to her mare. "Here."

Lyceus approached his sister and handed over the money.

The young woman combined the two pouches into one then swung her pack off. She bent down onto the ground and opened up her satchel. She dropped the dinars into her satchel, closed it back up, and stood up while putting the pack on again. "Let's get out of here."

"I second that." Lyceus waited for his sister to get Argo. Once Xena was next to him, he started travelling with her again. "What about those bandits though?"

Xena threw back a quick glance at them then settled her eyes back on her brother. "Don't
worry about them."

The brother shrugged. He kept himself a little busy adjusting his light cloak around the sword. He tried to do what his sister was doing by hiding the sword inside of his cloak.

"We'll stop in a few candlemarks." Xena took a long and deep breath then added, "I'll teach you the sword a little."

"Alright," agreed the excited young man.

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"Xena, let me try," offered Lyceus.

The teenager threw a menacing look at her brother. "I can do it, Ly."

The young man held up his hands in defence then walked away. "Okay."

Xena sighed and went back to trying to start the fire in the pit. She'd done it several times before at home in the woods but she'd never really practice enough times. After a deep breath, she started rubbing the wood against each other just under the dry leaves.

Lyceus curiously watched his sister and decided it was best to stay out of her way. He took a quick look at Argo and she was busy eating grass for dinner. "Um, sis?"

Xena lost her concentration at the mention of her name and she whipped her head around. "What, Ly?" she hotly asked.

Lyceus wasn't looking at his sister when he asked, "Can I untack Argo?"

"No," growled Xena. "I'll take care of her." She turned her head back to the fire pit.

"Well... is there anything I can do?"

"Lyceus" hotly whispered Xena. She closed her hollow blue eyes. "Just be... quiet for a few minutes. Okay?"

The brother gulped down his lump in his throat and just stood there, quietly.

The young woman counted to ten then tried to start the fire again. This time, she didn't just scrape the wood together fast but with more force.

Lyceus dropped his head to one side when he saw sparks flying then land on the dry leaves. "You got it."

Xena sighed and pushed the lit leaves deeper into the pit where the twigs and sticks were located. She watched as everything began to burn. Once she decided the fire was strong enough, she grabbed two larger branches off to her right and put it into the growing fire.
"What's next?"

The sister stood up finally and turned to Lyceus. "After I untack Argo, we'll practice with the swords."

"What about dinner?" For emphasis, Lyceus rubbed his stomach.

Xena felt a faint grin tug at her lips as she went over to Argo. "I only brought some of mother's bread, dried fruit, and some spices."

"That's all we're having then?"

The young woman tugged off Argo's saddle and placed it on the ground. "No, we're going to have to catch something."

Lyceus shook his head and laughed. "Xena, how are we going to do that?"

"Come on, Ly it's not that hard." Xena removed Argo's face piece and placed it beside the saddle. "There you go, girl," she whispered and patted Argo's side. "Let's get dinner first then," she decided aloud.

Lyceus second that and decided to follow his sister into the woods. "What are we… catching and how?"

Xena came to a stop in front of a berry patch. "First we need the bait." She hastily plucked about a dozen berries. "Next a good hiding and trap spot." She stood still but was carefully studying the surrounding area. Her expression brightened up when she found the perfect spot. She rushed over to it, slightly jumping over small hurdles of branches and bushes.

Lyceus came to a quick stop when his sister did the same. He watched as Xena placed the handful of berries in an open patch of moss.

"Come on," whispered Xena. She grabbed his brother's cloak and tugged him with her.

The pair went behind some bushes and ducked down into them.

Xena silently withdrew her two daggers. She held the one in her right hand by the tip.

Lyceus carefully studied his sister and noticed how she was not taking her eyes off the pile of berries. He slowly shifted his eyes to the red berries and started to notice these little quails began to emerge out of the forest.

The teenager pulled her arm back and waited until a quail came to a stop at the pile of berries. She abruptly threw her dagger at the quail.

The small bird had fallen to its side with the dagger sticking out of its side. Soon as it did that, all of the other quail disappeared into the woods.
"Hurry, grab the quail," urged Xena.

Lyceus sprung out of the bushes and picked up the dead quail. He placed the quail onto the ground, drew out the bloody dagger but carefully wiped it off with a few leaves. He handed it back to his sister. "Nice shot."

Xena grinned and replied, "Thanks." She already had her second dagger readied in her right hand and placed the first one into her left hand. "You want two or one?" she whispered.

"Two."

The teenager chuckled at her brother then went serious as she focused on the quails that re-emerged out of the woods. Again, she waited until a quail came to the bait then struck with her dagger. She repeated this until she had four dead quails. "Is that good?"

"Oh yeah," answered Lyceus. "Thanks."

"No problem." Xena faintly smiled while she was putting her daggers away. She stood up with a quail in either hand.

The brother grabbed the other two and they returned to the camp.

Xena took a moment to put more wood into the fire then place the quail next to the fire for later. She also had taken Lyceus's birds and placed them beside the other two. Both she and Lyceus took off their packs and stuck them next to the Argo's tack. "Feel like practicing?"

Lyceus nodded his head.

"Alright." The sister decided to do the practicing in the camp but off to one side since the clearing was rather large. She unsheathed her sword as she neared her brother. "You'll enjoy this," she lightly taunted.

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Lyceus flopped down on the ground beside the fire. He simply closed his eyes and knew he'd fall asleep any minute.

Xena chuckled at her brother's exhaustion. She unbuckled her sword and placed it down on the ground, next to where she'd sleep. She slowly walked over to where her satchel was on the ground. She knelt down in front of it and pulled out a blanket to keep her warm. She then checked Lyceus's bag too and sighed happily when she saw his blanket in there too. She carried them both over to where Lyceus was and opened up her brother's first. With a good toss, she let it fall over her brother.

The young man slightly cracked open his eyes and gave a faint smile to his sister.

"Go to sleep," ordered Xena.
Lyceus chuckled and closed his eyes again.

Xena dropped her own blanket onto the ground and decided to check on the fire. After it was well stoked for the evening, she went back to her brother's side and lay down on the ground beside him. To her right though was her sword in its sheath. She grabbed her blanket and shook it open then covered her entire body.

"The ground is a little hard," whispered Lyceus.

"I know… tomorrow we'll get some bedrolls."

"Good idea," agreed the brother.

Xena let a small grin appear but she replied, "Go to sleep, Ly."

"Yes, commander," teased the young man.

The teenager shook her head and just rolled onto her side, trying to go to sleep. She let her eyes drift shut but her thoughts were nowhere near sleep. She considered the various supplies they would get tomorrow in the town. She also tried to estimate about how much money they had now between her own and the two bandit's dinars.

Then her muses wandered to how she'd find out information about the various warlords in the area. She tried to figure out what to do after she knew what warlord attacked Potidaea a year ago. She was just worried that the warlord might not be active or dead for that matter.

After a very long sigh, Xena tried to push her thoughts away and relax. She gradually felt her concentration slipping as she fell asleep. Within twenty minutes, she'd returned to her dreamscape.

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"So… what's the name of this town?" whispered Lyceus. He didn't like the looks of the town to start. It was a small yet very gloomy almost a dark town.

"It's Delia," quietly replied Xena. "We need to be careful too."

"Why's that?"

Xena lightly tugged on Argo's reins.

Argo understood the signal and shifted closer to her master so she could better protect her.

"Because this is a large hang out for warlords and warriors."

Lyceus pressed his lips together while a surprised look came over his features. "Good reason."
"Yeah, I thought so too." Xena slowed down a little when they came into the town. She quickly scanned the town for a tavern or some kind of bar. "This way," she ordered.

The brother tore his eyes away from a group of armed men off to his left. He moved closer to his sister and followed after her. He then realized everybody in the town seemed to turn in their direction ever since they came into the town. "They're all staring at us," he mentioned.

"Yeah… that's because we're teenagers."

The young man huffed but tugged his cloak closer to his body. "I already like this place, sis."

Xena held back her chuckle. She saw the tavern ahead come into view and she saw a small stable. "Let's go in there first."

Lyceus nodded, making his way first into the stable with his sister.

The teenager directed her horse into a stall but left her tacked up. "We won't stay here too long."

"Sounds good to me." Lyceus left the stable next to his sister.

The siblings entered the tavern and went directly to the bar. They both pulled up a stool and waited for the bartender.

The bartender, after five minutes, finally approached the teenagers and suddenly had a funny look. "What in Hades are kids doing here?"

Xena's expression went right into a nasty glare. "We're here looking for some information." She'd already pulled off her satchel and had it open in her lap, just out of everybody's sight.

"Nothing a couple of kids could need." The bartender turned away yet he stopped midway when he heard a few dinars hit the bar. He turned back to the two teenagers. "You must really want some information then."

"Yeah, we do," Xena had a dinar in her right hand and she was tapping it on the bar. "Think you can help out?"

The bartender looked around himself then looked back at the two. His right hand came up and plucked the two dinars off the bar. "What you want?"

"I take it a lot of warlords and whatnot come through here huh?"

"Yeah of course," bluntly responded the man. "Why?"

Xena tapped the dinar again to keep his attention. "Well… you must know of that raider about a year ago on the town of Potidaea?"
The bartender was taking a deep breath as he jogged his memory. "Oh yeah… I did hear about that one. We actually had several of those raiders in here a few days afterwards bragging about the raid." He then lifted an eyebrow.

"Really huh?" Xena's sly grin suddenly slipped into place. "You know who the leader was by chance?"

The bartender held out his right hand. "It'll cost a little more, girl."

The teenager sighed but pulled out two more dinars and gave that to him along with the one she already had in her right hand. "Who was it?"

"His name is Bracis."

"Is? So he's still around?"

The bartender turned his attention to Lyceus for the first time. "Yeah, he is actually. He mainly runs the eastern portion of Greece… that's his turf."

"Turf?" questioned Lyceus.

"Yeah, these warlords each have their little… sector. None of them crossover unless they have intentions to expand."

Xena thought about that and filed it away for later. "You said there were a few raiders in here?"

The bartender went back to Xena. "Yes, a few of them. It wasn't long after the raid."

"They say anything about prisoners?"

The bartender sighed, licked his lips and scanned the room before finally replying, "Yeah actually. They were bragging they'd caught several women and planned to sell them into slavery."

"That was it?" inquired Lyceus.

"That's all I can remember." The bartender glanced between the two teenagers. "A lot of these warriors come and go in here… telling far fetched stories about this or that. They all get jumbled in my head after awhile."

"Its okay," stated Xena. "Thanks for the help." She started to slip off the stool.

"Wait."

The two teenagers paused and looked back up in question.

"You two should be careful… these people are real, they don't play with sticks."
Xena and Lyceus exchanged looks but Xena said, "We're no ordinary kids." She sealed up her pack, swung it around, and reassured the man by poking out the hilt of her sword.

The bartender saw it but shook his head. "Be careful… this is no place for a couple of teens."

"No worries," stated Xena. She signalled, with her head, to the door.

The brother quickly made his way out with Xena behind him.

Xena tried to ignore the few whistles she got from the men in the tavern. She simply clenched her fists and kept going.

Once they were outside again, Lyceus asked, "Where to now?"

"There should be a small market just down this way," Xena mentioned. "We need to pick up some stuff."

"Bedrolls for one."

Xena grinned at her brother before leading the way to the market. After they came into the market, they went directly to a stand that carried a lot of various travelling supplies. At that stand, Xena and her brother bought two bedrolls, dried foods, and two water skins. After they paid for the items, Xena asked for where the nearest leather shop would be from that stand.

The siblings then went to the leather stand that the man had told them about in the market. The leather stand was a lot larger than the supply stand.

"What we need here?" quietly asked Lyceus.

"Saddlebags." Xena was already picking through some of the leather products and found the pile of saddlebags on the main table. She began wedding through them by size and price.

"How about this one?" Lyceus held up a tan and medium size saddlebag.

The teenager grabbed it from her brother and faintly grinned. "Perfect, Ly." She went to the merchant and bargained a little with him, getting him to take five dinars off. After she paid the man, she said, "I think we got what we need. Let's head back to Argo."

Lyceus second the idea. He helped carry some of the supplies. Within a few minutes, they arrived back at the small stable to find Argo inside waiting.

Xena gave her brother her water skin and the bag of dried goods. She then slipped into the stall with the saddlebags and began attaching it to the saddle. Once she had it in place, she took the dried goods and put them away in the saddlebags. "Give me the bedrolls."

The brother tried his best to hand them over without dropping everything.
Xena grabbed them and put them into the other saddlebag side. "Hold onto the skins," she mentioned. She swung off her pack and took out her blanket. She shoved it into the saddlebag as well. "Give me your blanket, Ly."

Lyceus lowered the two water skins onto the ground and opened his pack. He pulled out his blanket and gave it to his sister.

Xena placed it into the saddlebag as well. After that, she cleaned out a few more items in her pack, putting them into different parts of the saddlebags. She then threw her pack on again but held the pouch of dinars in her hands.

Lyceus then backed out of the stable when his sister came out of the stall with her mare.

"Here, take Argo and give me the skins."

"Where you going?" asked the brother after he gave Xena the skins.

"To fill them. Wait here." Xena didn't look back and went up to the tavern.

Lyceus furrowed his eyebrows and turned to Argo. "She treats you like this too?"

Argo huffed and nodded her head.

"Yeah but you're a horse."

Argo threw up her head and whined at the young man.

"Yeah… I think she loves you more than me," he joked lightly.

Argo also snickered and lowered her head back down.

Xena went directly to the bar with the two skins.

"Back again, huh?" asked the bartender. He came down to Xena and asked, "What you want now?"

"Can you fill these?" The teenager held up the two water skins.

The bartender sighed but reached over and took them from her. "I'll be back." He went into the kitchen for about a minute then returned with full water skins.

"I owe you for it?"

The bartender shook his head. He was about to leave but paused and said, "By the way. I heard that warlord you're looking for is due west of here. About a candlemark or two."

Xena nodded. "Thanks."
"Uh huh." The bartender strolled off to help the rest of his customers.

The young woman sucked in her breath as she made her way to the door of the tavern. She tried not to make any eye contact with the various men in the room.

Lyceus looked up when he heard somebody come out of the tavern. He smiled at his sister. "Got 'em filled huh?"

"Yup." Xena came next to her mare and lashed down the water skins onto the saddlebags. She then put away her money and asked, "You ready?"

"Yeah, can't wait to get out of this town."

Xena took the reins, turned her mare around, and headed for the gates of the town.

"Where we going to find this warlord?"

"West of here." The teenager grinned at her brother. "We'll probably meet up with them by this evening."

"Then what?" asked the worried boy.

Xena shrugged. "Spur of the moment."

"Oh great," grumbled Lyceus.

The teenager patted her brother on the back. "You were the one that wanted to come."

"Don't remind me," chided Lyceus.

Xena chuckled quietly to herself but a faint smile creased her lips.

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Section One

Part 1: Gabrielle's Second Year-Continued

"Can we take a break?" suddenly cut in Lyceus's voice.

"Need a break huh?" taunted the older sister.

"Xena," groused the young man. "I haven't been preparing for this for the past year like you."

Xena lifted an eyebrow at him. She suddenly made a sharp right turn into the open grass. "How did you know I've been… training?"
"Sis, come on." Lyceus shook his head. "We all knew you were doing something. Almost everyday you were off with Argo and wouldn't show up until sunset."

The teenager sighed as she stared at the ground passing under her feet. "Ly, I had two choices."

"What you mean?"

Xena lifted her head back up; with her free hand she brushed back her dark brown bangs. "I could have sat around in my room and cried about Gabrielle. Or I could have done something about it." She paused then simply stated, "I decided to do something about it."

"Yeah I know, sis." Lyceus released a long sigh. He folded his arms against his chest. "I'm just worried."

Xena finally came to a stop deciding this was a good area to rest. "Worried about?" She turned to Argo and decided to take off her face piece so she could eat some of the surrounding grass.

"Just… if this is a good idea," confessed the young man. Lyceus found a good size rock and sat down on it. "I mean, maybe mother is right, you know. There are a lot of dangers out here."

The young woman had her back to her brother as she hung up Argo's face piece onto a low branch. "Look Ly…." She slowly faced her brother. "You can go back home."

"That's not what I meant, Xena." Lyceus ran his fingers through his blond hair. "I'm just saying, you think you're really ready for this?"

Xena approached her brother and bent down in front of him. "Look Lyceus, I've been training for an entire year… that was more than I wanted to do." She lightly placed her right hand on her brother's knee. "You don't understand how much I need to find out what's happened to Gabrielle."

"What happens if she's dead?" whispered the brother.

"Then I can finally let her go." Xena searched her brother's dark green eyes. "If she's not, then I need to find her."

"Why?" uttered Lyceus. "Why is she… this important?"

Xena remained motionless as she considered the question. She really hadn't answered that question to herself yet either. "I'm not sure really," she confessed.

"There must be a reason."

Xena lowered her eyes and tried to think more about it. Slowly her crystal blue eyes lifted back up. "Ly, I don't know if this'll make sense but I just can't live without her." She felt her old emotions for Gabrielle started to push through inside of her. "She means so much to me, Ly. Just trust me on that."
"I know," whispered the brother. He leaned forward and suddenly hugged his sister.

Xena was a little surprised but wrapped her arms around her brother. She hadn't been hugged by somebody in over a year. After her brother let go, she quietly asked, "You thirsty?"

"Yeah, actually."

The sister had a faint grin as she stood up and went to the munching Argo. She untied one water skin and threw it over to her brother. "After you're finished, I want to teach you some more with the sword."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah definitely." Xena waited until her brother was finished drinking. She then took the skin and put it back. Afterwards, she and Lyceus did more teaching sessions with the sword for about half of a candlemark. Then the pair continued their journey to find the warlord Bracis.

"Xena, it is getting late," mentioned Lyceus.

"Yeah I know." Xena sighed as she took a quick look at the western sun. It would be setting within a candlemark if not sooner and she knew they needed to make camp soon. "Alright… let's get off the road and find a spot."

Lyceus second the idea and went off the road into the woods. "Hey, there's a cave over there." He stopped and pointed to it.

Xena grinned when she saw it. "That'll do." She went directly to it and once partially inside, she noted some people had been here.

"Looks like somebody else was here," mentioned Lyceus. He poked his boot at the ashes in a small fire pit.

"Yeah, they sure were." Xena lifted up a sharpening stone. "Looks like some kind of army or-"

"Warlords," finished Lyceus. He held up a worn out dagger. "A little shabby."

"Keep it," suggested Xena. She turned to her horse and put the reins over her head. "You think you can set up camp yourself?"

"I think so, why?"

The teenager shifted to the mare's saddlebags. "I think I'm going to scout around."

"You think this was from the warlord Bracis?" Lyceus held out his arms when his sister plopped the saddlebags into him.

"I think so," agreed Xena. She went over to the fire pit and bent down beside it. She
scooped up a handful of the ashes and lowered her nose to it. Her nose crinkled up at the scent. "Yeah, not too long ago either." She threw the ashes back in and wiped her hands clean. "Take care of camp. I'll be back with dinner. Fair?"

"Sure." Lyceus stood there, watching his sister mount Argo. "Be careful."

Xena grinned as she settled into the saddle. "I will."

Lyceus watched his sister turn Argo around then canter off. He lowered his head and stared at the saddlebags in his arms and the worn dagger sticking out. "Great," he muttered.

Xena rode Argo hard to the western direction. She knew of a small town not too far and she had a sneaky suspicion. She kept Argo at a hard ride for about twenty minutes then slowed Argo down to a trot when she realized she was coming to a hilltop. She pulled Argo to a halt when she just made out faint signs of smoke ahead.

"Okay, girl. Stay here and wait." Xena dismounted her mare and patted her on the neck. "I'll be back." She quietly approached the hilltop and once she figured she was close, she lay down on the ground and crawled the rest of the distance. As she neared the edge of the ridge, she started to see tents materializing far below in a valley. Once she was on the edge, she laid there and stared at a fairly medium size camp below. "Bingo," she whispered.

Down below in the camp, Xena counted at least twenty-five tents. She figured there had to be at least two raiders per tent. She then saw one tent was larger than the rest, it had to be Bracis's tent. She took a good deep breath at that point and all she smelled was fire, burning. She furrowed her eyebrows because it was a rather strong scent considering it was only coming from a few campfires below. That was when she looked across the valley to the opposite ridge and saw smoke coming up from that side. "Gods," she whispered.

The teenager immediately looked back down at the camp. She now watched the raiders and saw them each polishing their swords or sharpening them then others were wiping down their armour. "They just attacked that town," she whispered. Then in the centre of the camp was a tent that had two raiders in the front, on guard. "Must have hostages," she muttered.

She was about to crawl backwards but faltered when she saw Bracis come out of his tent. She settled back into her spot and carefully watched him. She realized he was a big man, rather large and he seemed rather muscular too. Although he had this look about him that made him seemed less intelligent. Her eyes then travelled back over to Bracis's tent and she saw a small flag flying from the top of his tent.

Suddenly Xena was pulled back to an old memory. She'd already seen that flag flying. It was back in Potidaea, in the town centre.

Xena stared at the yellow and black flag, flapping on the pole in the centre of Potidaea. She pulled Lila closer to her body. She couldn't help but wonder whose flag
that was waving but she turned her head away. Right at the same time a raider stepped out of somebody's home, where a woman laid on the floor, dead.

Xena shook her head and push the memory away. Her eyes unlocked from the yellow and black flag and she decided it was getting late. She crawled backwards then stood up and went to her mare. "Hey, girl."

Argo whined her welcome and nudged her master.

The teenager smiled a little then mounted Argo. "We need to find dinner before it gets any later."

"Yes!" gloated Lyceus. He proudly smiled at the fire he'd just started. "That only took less than a candlemark."

"Three-quarters of a candlemark to be exact," cut in a deep voice.

Lyceus look into the woods at hearing the voice but he saw nobody. He then heard a horse whine. "Xena?" He then saw his sister emerge out of the darkening woods with two rabbits in her hands and her mare tagging behind. "Gods… you scared me, sis."

Xena sensed a slight grin tug at her lips. "Thanks."

The brother shook his head. "You must have found something." He stared at the rabbits in her hands. "Other than rabbits if it took you this long to come back."

"Yeah, I did," confessed the teen. She went to the fire and placed the rabbits beside the fire. "Let me untack Argo and I'll skin those rabbits."

"Not a problem." Lyceus sat down on a log that was positioned next to the fire pit. "What'd you find?"

"Found the warlord and his men."

"Yeah?" The brother brightened up at the news. "What else?"

Xena shrugged as she pulled off Argo's saddle. "Looks to be about fifty men roughly."

"Wow." Lyceus fiddled with the dagger in his hands. "Anything else?"

"They have a few hostages."

The brother looked over to his sister, who was just outside of the cave. "They must have done a raid not too long ago."

"Yeah… there's a town by the name of Athium. Its pretty small but they attacked it."

"Gods," whispered Lyceus. He sighed sadly and stared down at the dagger. "So what are we going to do now that we found them?"
Xena hung up Argo's face piece onto a tree branch. The saddle was rested against the tree's trunk. "I think we're going to join them."

"What?" Lyceus threw up his head, and he had the most confused look. "You're serious?"

Xena patted Argo's side, she ducked into the cave. "Yes, I'm serious." She bent over and picked up the two rabbits by the ears. "Why?"

"Well…." The brother wasn't sure what to say but he asked, "What purpose will that serve us?"

"We need to get close to them, Ly if we want to find out any information." Xena started heading out of the cave but added, "Only way to do that is join them." She disappeared into the woods.

"This just keeps getting better," he muttered. "Couldn't you have thought of a better plan?" he yelled to his sister.

"I'd like to hear yours," called back Xena from somewhere in the woods.

Lyceus huffed and shook his head. After about three minutes, his sister came back in with the skinned rabbits and a long, thick branch skewered through them.

"Here put this over the fire."

The young man took the branch with the rabbits and placed it over the fire, holding it in place. "We're really going to join them?"

"Yeah," replied Xena. "Going to try at least."

"I hope this works," whispered Lyceus.

"Me too," agreed the sister quietly.

After dinner the siblings relaxed in their own spots. Xena had found that sharpening stone again and pulled out her sword. She tried to figure out how to sharpen her sword with the stone. After several test trials, she figured out how it worked.

"Hey, sis… you think this is a good dagger?" He held it up.

Xena sighed and looked up from her sword. "Let me see it."

Lyceus sat up from the log and went over to his sister. He handed it over.

Xena looked over the dagger. She grabbed her sword and the whet stone. She put them down on the ground next to the large rock she was sitting on top. "Go to the saddlebags and in that small side pocket, pull out that rag."

Lyceus went over to the saddlebags and found the side pocket. He pulled out the
rough cloth and wondered what it would do. He gave it to his sister.

Xena pressed her lips together as she rubbed the dagger's blade through the cloth a few times. She pulled the cloth away then held up the dagger. The blade reflected the firelight back. "Shiny again," she whispered.

Lyceus grinned at the dagger.

The teenager then carefully ran her thumb against the side of the blade and noted it was pretty dull. She picked up her new sharpening stone and started running it down the blade.

Lyceus carefully watched his sister sharpening the dagger. "What about a sheath?"

Xena shook her head. She flipped the dagger over in her lap and sharpened that side as well. "You'll have to be careful with it, Ly. We can get you one the next time we're in a town."

"Alright."

The young woman pulled the whet stone away and held it out to her brother. "Good as new."

The brother smiled and took his dagger back. "Thanks." He also took the cloth back.

Xena nodded then picked up her sword.

Lyceus put away the cloth then sat back down on the log by the fire. He somewhat opened his cloak as he tried to decide where to put it for now.

Xena studied him briefly but returned to sharpening her sword. The stone was a perfect size to fit the palm of her hand. She stroked the stone down the blade, brought her hand back up, and ran the stone back down. She continued this pattern until it became a natural rhythm for her. As she became use to it, she started to go a little faster and she seemed to fall into the rhythm. She felt a long sigh leave her as she began to relax from this simply rhythm and from the sound of the stone running down the metal.

The brother glanced over to Xena and saw she was lost into what she was doing. He sadly smiled at that then looked at his dagger again. He turned his torso some and looked down at his side. He carefully slipped the dagger between his side and his belt. He decided it should stay put and not cause any problems. He sighed and studied his sister again for just a moment. He stood up now and said, "I think I'm going to get some rest."

Xena almost didn't hear him but she stopped her sharpening and peered up at him. "Alright, Ly. Sleep well."

Lyceus licked his lips and nodded. He went over to the two bedrolls and blankets he had laid out earlier. He unhooked his sword and pulled out the dagger. He placed both of them beside his bedroll then he crawled underneath the blanket.
The teenager looked back at her sword and continued sharpening it for another candlemark or so. After she'd felt some kind of relief from sharpening the sword, she stopped. She put the stone away in her saddlebag for later then she too went to sleep.

~*~*~*~

"Okay, how's this work again?" Lyceus stared down at the camp far below in the valley.

Xena sighed and turned her head to her brother. She repeated the plan. "We're going down there and asking to join the... army, raiders, group."

"The whatever," concluded Lyceus.

"Yeah, the whatever down there," Xena placed her attention on the raiders below. "I have a feeling they might say no."

"You think?" teased Lyceus. "Wonder why."

The teenager swatted her younger brother. "Look, in either case, I think we're going to have to challenge them. Let me do it."

"Challenge them? You mean fight them."

"Exactly," agreed Xena. "Let me do it, okay?"

Lyceus raised an eyebrow.

"Ly, I know the sword better than you so it only makes sense."

The young man sighed and shook his head. "Alright." He turned his head away. "What if we do join them? What happens then?"

"Then we try to get some of those raiders to trust us. Once they do, we'll start asking around about what happened at Potidaea. See if we can get some more information about what happened to Gabrielle."

"Okay. But..." He took a deep breath and continued his question. "But what if Bracis decides to attack a town? What are we going to do then? I mean... I can't slaughter people," he whispered.

"I know, Ly. We're just going to have to fake it somehow."

"Oh great," grumbled the brother. "This is going to be really tough, isn't it?"

"Yeah," honestly confessed Xena. "You sure you want to do this? I can do it alone, Ly."

"No, no." Lyceus chewed on his lower lip. "Don't want you going alone. I can do this."
"Alright." Xena brought her left hand onto her brother's back. "Just follow my lead, okay?"

The brother lightly moved his head in agreement. "Let's go."

Xena had a big grin as she crawled backwards. She stood up right when her brother did the same. She went to her horse and took the reins. "This way."

The siblings went around the ridge to the opposite side where there was a small trail that took them down to the camp. As they started down the trail, they noticed several raiders were stopping what they were doing and turning towards them.

"This will be fun," muttered Lyceus.

"I know," retorted Xena.

Once they made it to the bottom they came to a quick halt.

"Who the Hades are you two?" growled one raider. He extracted his sword.

Three other raiders around him also pulled out their swords.

Xena slowly arched an eyebrow at the man. "I'm here to talk to Bracis."

The raider narrowed his eyes at the two teenagers. "Go home, kids."

Xena licked her lips and glanced at her brother.

Lyceus just shrugged and grinned.

Xena had an evil grin as she looked back at the raider. "We want to talk to Bracis."

She folded her arms against her chest and in the process, she pulled her cloak open to reveal her sword.

The raiders saw the sword and took her a little more seriously now.

"What for?" finally asked one raider.

The teenager looked over at him. "We want to join up," she simply replied.

The group of raiders started to laugh together.

Xena released her mare's reins. She felt her patience thinning out. She unsheathed her sword and quickly stepped up to the closest raider. She pressed the point of her blade into his throat. "I was serious."

The raider stared into dark blue eyes. He tried not to flinch as he signalled for one of his buddies to get the leader.

Xena gave a nice grin as she backed off.
The raider rubbed his neck and stepped back as well when Bracis arrived.

Bracis approached the two teenagers and folded his arms against his chest. "Sorry, we're not accepting kids in my army."

Xena chuckled at his words and held up her sword then let the blade fall back against her shoulder. "Great… because we're not kids," she harshly stated.

Bracis narrowed his eyes at the girl. "Go home or we'll be happy to add you to our hostage pile," he growled.

"What you afraid of?" whispered Xena, a grin in her features. "That a 'kid' will beat you?"

Bracis stared at the two teens and he looked over his shoulder. "Prostig, you think you can handle this girl?"

The raider named Prostig, came up beside the warlord and looked Xena up and down. "Sure."

"Alright." Bracis looked at Xena again. "If you can hit Prostig a hundred times before he hits you three times, then I'll consider you two joining."

"Deal." Xena signalled for her brother to take Argo's reins that were just dangling in midair. She then followed Prostig and Bracis into an open area.

Lyceus remained on the sidelines with Argo beside him.

Xena went into the centre of the circle and pushed her cloak out of the way. She gave her sword a good spin and waited for Prostig to near her.

Prostig unsheathed his sword from his side and grinned at the teen. Then for the first time, he realized Xena was as tall as he was and he knew he was one the tallest raiders in the group. He shook the thought away, not letting it bother him.

"Ready?" taunted Xena.

Prostig's upper lip twitched and he lunged at Xena.

The teenager jumped back. She felt her pulse picking up and her heartbeat was starting to ring in her ears.

"Come on, girl," coaxed the raider.

Xena spun her sword then suddenly jumped and took a slash at the raider.

Prostig held up his sword in time and stared at the girl in shock.

"Ninety-nine more to go," she teased.

Prostig readied his sword.
Lyceus felt a grin trying to spread across his lips but he tried hiding it. He watched his sister beat down on her opponent, getting one strike after the other on him.

Prostig felt his anger rising up. He suddenly threw off a kick.

Xena was caught off guard; she took the blow to her face and went stumbling backwards. Her vision blurred over and all she could see now was a blob coming towards her. She blinked her eyes but it didn't help and the blob was coming closer. She squinted her eyes.

"Come on, Xena," whispered Lyceus, "he's right in front of you."

Xena calculated how many steps he'd take before he would strike. She gave him two more steps until he was close enough to her. She saw the blob move two more times. She immediately dropped down with her sword out and she took a swipe. She watched the blob jump away which gave her a few seconds to blink again.

She quickly wiped at her eyes as she stood back. She focused on her opponent and he came back into human form.

Prostig saw Xena grinning now and he knew she was about to do something. He had only two more strikes left while she had sixty-three to go.

The teenager started circling her opponent.

The raider spun his sword; he remained in his spot but was turning to keep Xena in sight. He waited for her to strike, knowing she had some kind of plan.

Xena suddenly stopped and just remained motionless.

Prostig raised an eyebrow at the girl and waited for something, anything.

Xena bent her knees, spun her sword, and gave a sly grin.

The raider couldn't wait anymore, he suddenly launched at Xena.

The teenager laughed devilishly and jumped to her side as the raider breezed past her. Right after he went past, she quickly attacked him from behind. She managed to get a swipe at his mid-back when her sword connected with his armour.

Prostig growled and spun around but before he could attack, he found himself on defence as Xena overpowered him.

Xena struck her sword against his about ten times but she pulled away.

Prostig became confused when she suddenly pulled back. For one instant, he took his eyes off Xena to see the crowd's emotions. And in that moment, he lost sight of Xena.

The teenager had moved so quickly and managed to hurl a fist into his face.
Prostig went stumbling backwards with one hand over his face. "Fuck," he growled.

Xena didn't wait; she kicked him in the stomach.

Prostig hunched over and he almost lost his grip on his sword.

Xena took the advantage and brought the butt end of her sword to his head.

Prostig slammed into the ground but took a third blow to his side. He recovered himself by rolling away then getting up onto his knees. He had his back to Xena but knew she'd strike, so he put his sword behind his back just in time. He knew she was down to forty-eight more strikes and he had yet to get a second one.

Xena backed off and tried to catch her breath for a moment. She then decided to play with the raider more. "You're doing pretty good," she taunted.

The raider gritted his teeth. He suddenly reached behind his back with his free hand.

Xena's eyes widened, as she knew what he was going after. She waited for one instant when she saw the dagger coming around from his back.

Prostig threw the dagger with all of his strength.

Xena dropped down to the ground, her face in the dirt and her hands in front of her. "Hades," she muttered. She saw the raider's feet coming at her at a fast speed. She hastily reacted and rolled away then jumped up to her feet just in time to see his sword buried in the dust. "Missed." She watched as the raider approached her, his eyes full of anger.

Prostig took a quick swipe but missed.

Xena suddenly lunged and struck his armour. She then came at him again and again.

The raider parried all of her strikes away. He tried backing away so he could rethink an attack but Xena pressed on him.

Xena grinned as she heard her sword ping against her opponent's. "Forty-three…." Xena's sword connected again, "Forty-two, forty-one, forty…." She continued to count aloud her strikes and she could see how frustrated the raider was getting with her. "Thirty-four."

"Gods damn you, girl." The raider became so frustrated that he suddenly took a jump back and that gave him enough space to kick at her.

The teenager saw it coming and was able to lean back as the boot breezed just past her nose. "Close… but not close enough." She suddenly dove at him.

Prostig held up his sword to stop her. He thought she was going to back off but he realized she was pressing her weight against his own. He grinned at that. "You are not as strong as me, girl."
"Let's see about that." Xena flash a nasty grin and then pressed all of her weight into him and pushed with her legs.

Prostig gritted his teeth and growled at how strong she was in comparison.

Xena saw how into the tug of war he was and she decided to take it to her advantage. She hadn't exactly ever used her left hand to do a solid punch but it was never too late to try. She released her left hand from her hilt, fisted it up, and quickly brought it into the raider's face.

Prostig lost his vision as his head was punched away.

The young woman suddenly lifted her right leg and kneed the raider between his legs. She could hear the entire crowd of men suck in their breaths.

Prostig had fallen onto his knees with his hands cupping between his legs.

Xena grinned and lifted her sword.

The raider knew she was going to bring it down on him. So he forced himself to face her and he lifted his sword up to meet hers.

"Thirty," stated Xena.

The man simply groaned at her.

The teenager inwardly chuckled at his reaction. She brought her sword around and connected her blade against his again.

Prostig could only deflect her attacks as he tried to recover from the knee blow.

Xena now struck against his blade hard and held it down as she bent her head down. "Sixteen to go," she whispered.

The raider just glared back at her.

The teen scraped her blade against his then walked backwards a few steps.

Prostig forced himself to stand back up.

The two opponents stood there, facing each other and measured each other up.

Lyceus whispered, "Think she'll win?"

Argo lifted her head and whined.

"I think so too." Lyceus grinned then looked back at his sister.

Xena licked her lips and waited for her opponent to attack first. She then decided to toy with him a little more, knowing she could finish this. She twirled her sword once but now held the hilt so that the blade was pointing down. She plunged her sword into
the ground. "Come on, I'll give it easy to you."

Lyceus's mouth dropped. "Is she crazy?"

Bracis even grunted at that and muttered, "Stupid, girl."

Prostig grinned despite he was a bit weary. He shook his head while saying, "You do want to die."

"Nah." Xena grinned, she bent her knees.

The raider growled and lunged at her, bringing his sword at her head.

Xena leaned to her right as the sword breezed past. She then saw him swipe again at her head so she ducked as it breezed overhead. Then the raider's sword stabbed at her stomach and she bent forward while sucking her stomach in as the blade flew just under her chest. She then saw he was about to strike at her feet so she rolled away and landed back on her feet but kneeling down.

The raider laughed deeply as he stepped between her and her sword. "Shouldn't have left it behind."

The teenager felt a bit of panic but she held her confidence by giving him a grin back. "Come on, big boy." She stood up to her full height.

Prostig puffed out his chest and took a step closer. Before he could take a swipe at her, she'd already kicked at him. He watched as his sword went reeling out of his hand. He hissed from the pain in his hand.

Xena watched his sword land further away than hers and she looked back at him. "Fifteen."

They both knew they each needed their swords to finish this contest.

Prostig was the first to move, he raced after his sword.

Xena jerked her sword out of the ground first and came at the raider.

Prostig grabbed his own just in time and turned around to face Xena. He suddenly found himself slammed by repeated attacks by Xena.

"Ten, nine, eight… seven." Xena continued her assault, one blow after the other without letting up her strength and force.

Prostig growled when he heard the count down. He heard her yell two then she suddenly stopped.

Xena stepped back and grinned. "Two left, big boy. What you say?"

The raider didn't say anything; he just lost all patience and charged Xena.
The teenager hadn't quite expected it as she stopped his sword from hitting her neck. She felt herself locked down by his strength.

"One left," growled Prostig.

Xena felt her arm strength giving up. She hastily thought about what to do. She let go and rolled off to her right.

Prostig went two steps forward, almost losing his balance.

Xena had spun around behind him and did a fast kick to his back.

Prostig lost his footing and landed on his stomach, his grip on his sword gone.

Xena positioned the tip of her blade to where his heart was located. "I have one left," she whispered. "I'm sure you can guess where it'd go."

The raider groaned and dropped his face into the dirt.

Xena's grin twitched at the corner of her lip, she gently tapped her blade against his armour and walked off. "One hundred," she called out to Bracis.

All of the raiders in the circle began whispering amongst each other.

Bracis took a few steps into the ring and waited for Xena to come closer.

The teenager came up to the warlord. She gestured for her brother to join her.

Lyceus came over with Argo in tow.

"So?" Xena sheathed her sword, her hands rested on her hips.

Bracis briefly watched Prostig getting up onto his feet. "You've proven yourself." He regarded the strong yet young female for a moment then said, "Alright, you two can join." His eyes flickered between the two siblings then rested on Xena again. "I hope you make out the week." He turned around and walked off.

Lyceus laughed in surprise and he almost grabbed his sister for a hug. "You did it," he whispered in awe.

Xena winked at her brother. She then tensed up when she sensed somebody coming up behind. A warm hand grasped her shoulder tightly.

"Nice job, kid," whispered Prostig. He squeezed her shoulder even tighter. "Let me know if you want anybody to practice on."

Xena lifted her head a little and replied, "Yeah sure, thanks for the match."

Prostig grinned then walked off without another word.

"So what now?" asked Lyceus.
"Now, I set you two up," replied a raider. He'd come up along side of Xena. "I'm Tracker."

"Tracker?" repeated Lyceus.

"Let me guess," teased Xena, "you do the scouting."

"How'd you know?" Tracker nodded to his right. "Follow me. Show you where you can settle down your horse."

Xena nodded and took the reins from her brother.

Tracker led the way into the main portion of the camp. "So how you know each other?"

"Oh we're-"

"Partners," finished Xena. She gave a smile to her brother but her expression held more warning than anything.

"Huh." Tracker reached behind his head with both of his hands and tugged his ponytail tighter. "Interesting." He thought for a moment then asked, "What are your names?"

"I'm Xena and this is Lyceus."

Tracker nodded a few times and said, "Over here is where we're keeping our horses." He directed at the group of horses that were contained in a fenced in area.

"You normally come here?"

Tracker nodded as he opened the gate. "This is one of our main camp outs."

Xena directed her mare into the fenced in area. She didn't take long to untack her horse. She'd given her brother her saddlebags and she took care of the rest.

"I'll show you both to your tent." Tracker continued into the camp again. "You're lucky, we had two of our men get killed yesterday in the raid. So you both get their tent."

"Oh wonderful," chided Lyceus.

Tracker ignored the comment. He focused on the young woman. "So, where'd you learn to fight?"

Xena shrugged. "Taught myself."

Tracker held back his surprised expression. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Xena cocked her head to one side. "It comes to me naturally."
"I won't argue that," agreed the raider. "And why did you two want to join anyway?"

"Fun and money," replied Lyceus.

Xena chuckled and slapped her brother's back hard. "Home got boring, right Lyceus?"

"Yup, sure did, Xena." Lyceus coughed a little and patted his chest.

"Where are you both from?"

"We're from Amphipolis," spoke up Lyceus.

Tracker grinned and said, "That's great. We could use inside help with raiding Amphipolis."

"Hey, that's not a problem. We know that town inside and out," mentioned Lyceus proudly.

"Perfect," stated Tracker.

Xena groaned inwardly.

"Well, here's your tent." Tracker grabbed the flap and held it open for them. "Enjoy."

"Thanks, Tracker." Xena let her brother in first. Then after the raider left, she stepped in too and threw her saddle at Lyceus. "We know it inside and out?" she growled.

"What?" yelped Lyceus. He found his right foot pounding when the saddle landed on his foot.

"Lyceus," growled Xena lowly, "that's our home town. You want it attacked?"

"Um… no."

Xena shook her head. "Then shut up about it." She picked up her saddle from the ground and carried it over to one of the bedrolls on the ground. She placed it at the foot of the bedroll then placed the face tack on top of it.

"Sorry," whispered Lyceus. "What was I suppose to say?"

"That you were from Athens or something," muttered Xena hotly.

The brother's shoulders drooped down. He held out the saddlebags to his sister.

Xena took them and put them next to Argo's tack. "It's okay." She stood up. "Let's just hope he forgets you said anything."

"Me too," agreed Lyceus.

"Why don't you sit down and relax a little?"
The young man considered the idea as he sat down in the bedroll. "Can we spar later?"

"Yeah sure," promised Xena. "I just need to catch my breath."

"Yeah I know." Lyceus saw his sister was taking out her whet stone. "You were amazing, sis."

Xena shrugged as she sat down on her bedroll. "I was okay."

"You were amazing," repeated Lyceus.

The teenager peered across to her brother but looked at the whet stone in her hand while she sat down on her bedroll. "Thanks but... I have a lot to learn."

"Not as much as me," joked Lyceus. He flopped back into his bed.

Xena chuckled some as she unsheathed her sword then began sharpening her sword again.

Lyceus closed his eyes and tried to relax while listening to Xena's stone run down her blade.

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Later that afternoon, Lyceus and Xena had sparred together just outside of the camp. They sparred for about a candlemark and half until sunset. They then returned to the camp to experience their first meal, it wasn't as bad as they thought.

The next day, Bracis announced to pack up camp and that they were headed east to another old campsite. The small army of raiders managed to pack up things by the late morning and started their journey due east. They were never able to make it to the campsite but they stopped about midway and camped out. The following day they travelled the rest of the distance yet they weren't head just east but a little north as well. The raiders finally rolled into an older camp of theirs by late afternoon.

Then at dinner that night, Bracis told everybody by tomorrow in the late morning to be prepared to attack a town. All of the raiders cheered and hollered for tomorrow's raid.

Lyceus furrowed his eyebrows while whispered, "What town is around here?"

Xena stared down at her food then quietly answered, "Cirra."

"Is it big?"

The teenager shrugged and replied, "It's about the size of Potidaea but not quite that wealthy."

Lyceus shook his head and asked, "How you know this stuff?"

Xena faintly chuckled. "I did my homework, Ly."
"So, are you two ready for an attack tomorrow?"

Xena looked up to see Prostig. "Yeah sure."

Prostig sat down at the bench with the two teenagers. "Have either of you ever killed before?"

Lyceus felt his stomach turn at just the thought.

"Can't say either of us have," replied Xena.

Prostig had a half grin. "It'll change everything for you."

"How's that?" pressed on Xena.

The raider took a deep breath before answering. "After some many times, you start to lose any regard for life."

"I can imagine," muttered Xena. She pushed her plate of food away, not feeling so hungry now. "You've been here long?"

"Yes," Prostig was about to say more but he saw two other raiders sitting down with them.

"Hey Tracker," greeted Xena.

Tracker nodded and held out a hand to the other raider. "This is my buddy, Latho." He held his hand out to Xena first. "That's Xena and that's Lyceus."

"Hey," greeted Latho.

Xena nodded and so did Lyceus.

"What were you talking about?" asked Tracker.

"About how long I've been here," replied Prostig.

Tracker chuckled and stated, "He came with the horses."

Lyceus grunted at that.

"How about you and Latho?"

"I've been here for about five years," stated Latho.

"A year myself."

Xena nodded at the raiders' answers. "Raids always go well?"

"For the most part, yeah." Prostig considered for a second. "Not too many flops, you
know."

"The other day was one of the first times in awhile somebody has been killed," mentioned Latho.

"How many were killed?" asked Lyceus.

"Just two." Tracker grinned. "Their tent you have now."

"We remember." Xena grinned back and folded her arms against her chest. She leaned back and felt the post of the tent come in contact with her back. "Ever get that many problems during the raids?" she probed.

"Not normally." Latho slowly let a smirk work into his expression. "Plenty of screams and money."

"I do recall this one raid like a year ago," mentioned Prostig.

"You talkin' about that town on the peninsula?"

Prostig looked down at Latho. "Yeah, that one. What's its name?"

"Potidaea," answered Tracker. "I was even there for that one."

Lyceus felt his body tense up at the mention of Potidaea. He noted Xena remained as relaxed as possible.

"What happened in that town?" probed Xena.

"Nothing too out of the ordinary," started Latho. "I tell you though, I can still remember that one damn family or group. Whoever the Hades they were."

"Oh, you're not going to fucking whine about them again, are you?" Tracker groaned and shook his head.

"Tracker, I've never had a chase like that before." Latho had a deep laugh for a moment. "It was a lot of fun."

Prostig grinned down at Latho. "You're just pissed you never got that girl."

"Yeah, I am." Latho sighed and looked back at the two teenagers. "Me and few of the boys were chasing this farming family. They'd managed to get onto three horses. Slowly the family broke down into three groups. I happened to have one group by myself." Latho paused as he tried to recall what happened. "I went after this guy and a kid. They were fucking fast on this horse they had but I managed to get the guy."

Xena felt her heart race as her own memories filter back. She stared at Latho and so many memories came back. She now realized Latho was the raider that had chased after her and Potestas.

"Didn't that girl get away too?" urged Prostig.
“Yeah, she did,” grumbled Latho. “It was a good chase though. I enjoyed it… enjoyed gutting out that old man more.” He laughed a little.

Tracker shook his head. “Still can’t believe you didn’t get that kid.”

“Oh shut up, Tracker.” Latho glared at him. “I’d like to have seen you do better.”

“Hades I wouldn’t have even bothered.” Tracker looked away while stating. “I don’t kill kids.” He looked at the two teenagers across from the table. “No offence.”

“None taken.” Xena sat up.

“Women and children….” Tracker shook his head. “I don’t touch.”

“I second that,” agreed Prostig.

Latho stared at the other two raiders. “A bunch of fucking wimps. A woman can pick up a sword just like any other man. And the kids… they grow up too.”

“Latho, that doesn’t make it right.”

Latho grunted at Tracker’s words. “You’re just a bunch of pussies.”

“No, just got a few more morals than you, Latho.” Prostig slowly raised an eyebrow at him in challenge.

“Fuck you, Pro.” Latho stood up and stormed off.

“He always like that?” inquired Xena.

“Who? Latho?” Tracker let out a small laugh. “Yeah, he’s a fuckin’ dick sometimes but that’s just him.”

“Why don’t you two kill women or children?” finally spoke up Lyceus.

Tracker looked at Prostig in question then returned his attention to the teenagers. “I don’t believe in killing pointlessly. If somebody is fighting me, sure I might kill them in self defence. I won’t kill somebody because I want to or I enjoy it because I really don’t.”

Prostig moved his head in agreement. “That’s what Latho does, he enjoys his work. I’m in it for the money.”

“I’m here mainly to learn,” stated Tracker.

“Learn what?”

Tracker gave a small grin to Xena. “How to fight…and track or scout.”

“Then you’ll leave?” urged Lyceus.
"If I find something better, yeah."

Xena found that curious. She tried to relax as she leaned back against the pole again. "Do a lot of the men kill for fun?"

"Its fifty-fifty," answered Prostig.

"Think about it like this, Xena," started Tracker, "if you constantly kill the people in the towns you raid. Then you'll never have anybody to raid. That goes the same for burning them down or destroying them. If you destroy the town and kill all the people, then you won't have a town later to raid again. Economically, it's stupid."

"That's true," agreed Lyceus.

"But you do capture some of the people?"

"Sometimes yes, Xena," replied Prostig.

"Like with that town Potidaea," cut in Tracker, "we rounded up…." He started mentally counting. "Ten people, Pro?"

"Yeah, I think it was around there."

"It was something like ten women," concluded Tracker.

"Just women or kids too?" urged Xena.

"Sometimes kids," answered Prostig. "I think that time we had two girls."

"Yeah we did," agreed Tracker. "I remember that one kid, she was scared to death."

"Mmmm." Prostig chuckled at the memory. "I had to guard them that one day. This girl must have thought I was a giant."

"Well you are tall," mentioned Lyceus.

Prostig chuckled at the young man's words. "She thought so too. She clung to her older sister every time I checked on them."

Xena tried hard to hold back her grin as she stored away what information they were telling her.

"Anyway," cut in Tracker, "we normally sell the women we capture to slavers."

"Always slavers?"

Tracker shook his head. "I think just one. Bracis is friends with one, right Pro?"

Prostig nodded. "Yeah that guy Hecht. He's a well known slaver. He's well known for training them more than anything." He considered his memory for a second then
muttered, "I think those women from Potidaea were sold to him too."

"Who cares?" grumbled Tracker. "That was a year ago. I'm sure those women are well into the slavery system by now." He chuckled and shook his head.

"Bracis get a lot for selling them?" questioned Lyceus.

"Yeah normally." Tracker furrowed his eyebrows. "I think it's like fifteen dinars, flat rate." He shrugged his shoulders. "Bring in ten and get a hundred and fifteen dinars. It works."

"Sounds like it," agreed Xena. "You think tomorrow's attack will be easy?"

"Cirra?" Prostig laughed. "Cirra is always easy pickings." Slowly a large grin crept along his expression. "I'm sure you'll decide then if you really want to stick around, kids."

Xena grunted at that and sat up. "Yeah sure, Pro. You're just worried I'll beat you again."

Prostig lifted an eyebrow slowly. "I'd love to see it, kid."

Tracker started laughing quietly as he listened to them.

"Yeah, yeah," brushed off Xena. She stood up and looked down at her brother. "Ready to turn in?"

For an answer, Lyceus stood up.

"Xena?"

The teenager looked at Prostig in question.

"You didn't do too badly that day, kid."

"You didn't do so bad either, Pro." Xena winked then pushed her brother to leave the tent.

Prostig watched them leave then he shifted his attention to Tracker. "I don't understand why a couple of kids join up with us."

"Neither do I," muttered Tracker. He scratched at the side of his face. "Better keep an eye on them though."

"Why you say that?"

Tracker huffed and said, "With all these brutes? Pro, we both know these raiders around here."

"Tracker, you worry too much."
"Think about it, Pro. What would a couple of kids be doing here huh?" Tracker licked his lips and shook his head some. "Nor does it make sense how or even why that girl has learned a sword like she has. It just doesn't add up."

"Mmmmm." Prostig chewed on the inside of his mouth.

"And I don't know what it is either… but I swear I recognize her from somewhere," muttered Tracker. He turned his head back to Prostig. "Do you?"

"Nope, can't say I do."

Tracker sighed and reached back to tighten his ponytail. "Anyway, Pro… I think we need to look after them."

Prostig grunted. "I don't baby sit."

"Shit, neither do I but I like these kids… for whatever Hades of a reason." He gave a drawn out sigh before standing up. "I think I'm getting out of here."

"Have fun with Latho in the tent," he taunted.

"Pro, don't fuckin' remind me or you can sleep with him for now on."

"Nope." Prostig held up his head. "All yours." He dropped his hands onto the table. Tracker smacked his friend's back and said, "Thanks." He quietly left the food tent. Prostig rested in his seat for a moment but slowly stood up and left for his tent.

"They had Gabrielle and Lila," stated Lyceus when he sat down in his bedroll.

"Sure sounds that way," agreed Xena. She unhooked her sword and rested it next to her bedroll.

"So all we need to do is find Hecht."

The young woman nodded her head. She took off her cloak; she then tossed it on top of Argo's tack. "We need to do that next before we can leave. I don't plan on trying to hunt down one man without knowing his location."

"Wait, Xena." Lyceus put his own sword by his bed and put the dagger there as well. "What happens once we find out where he is?"

"Then we go after him next."

"Oh great, great." The brother flopped into his bedroll. "He'll probably have some kind of army in his backyard or something that we'll have to fight off."

Xena grinned at her brother's words. She walked over to the tiny table that had a few
candles; she blew them out and waited until her eyes adjusted. She found her bedroll and crawled into it. "We'll see, Ly. Alright?"

"Yeah sure." Lyceus was about to go to sleep but realized something. "What about tomorrow?"

"We'll fake it, Ly."

"How in Hades you do that?"

The sister grumbled as she rolled onto her side. "You don't kill and just sack the families for money. Just stay with me tomorrow and we'll get through it."

"Alright," agreed the young man. He went quiet and decided to go to sleep as well.

Xena finally closed her eyes but it took her a candlemark to fall asleep. She couldn't help but think about her best friend. She knew she was on the right trail yet she felt so far from finding Gabrielle. She just tried to keep her wits about herself and planned to find her friend no matter what it took.

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"Ready, kid?" asked Prostig. He was standing next to Xena's mare.

Xena peered down at the tall man. "Yeah."

"Where's your partner?" asked the curious raider.

The teenager turned in her saddle some and saw her brother. "He's comin" She settled back into her saddle then asked, "Where's Tracker?"

"I imagine him and Latho are coming."

Xena huffed. "I can't believe it takes this long for this army to attack a village."

Prostig grunted at the girl's words. "I'm use to it after so many years."

The teenager shook her head as she realized about half of the raiders were ready while the other half were still messing around in the camp. "I would have my men all here at once and quickly."

The raider found that peculiar and he peered up at her again. "And how would you do that, kid?"

Xena licked her lips then simply said, "I'd kill 'em if they took this long."

Prostig was about to laugh but realized she was very serious. "You are tough, kid."

"Got to be."

The raider folded his arms over his chest. "Sometimes, yes." He grasped his right
wrist and adjusted his gauntlet. "It all depends on the leader."

"True," agreed Xena. She now heard her brother approaching from behind. "Nice of you to join," she teased.

Lyceus sighed while shaking his head. "I couldn't get my sword in the right spot."

Xena lifted up an eyebrow.

The brother's expression went into defence. "What? It was really bothering me."

The young woman gave a half grin then looked away. She now saw Bracis was coming and several raiders were following behind him. Some of the raiders were on horseback while others simply remained on foot.

Bracis started calling for everybody to follow out of camp to raid Cirra.

Prostig saw out of the corner of his eye Latho and Tracker running to catch up with the raiding party. "You two better hurry," he called.

"We're comin', damn it," yelled Latho.

Xena tapped Argo in the sides and took up the rear of the raiding party. To her right was Lyceus then on her left were Prostig, Tracker and Latho. For some reason, she felt a little in control because she knew three out of four of these men respected her. She enjoyed that sensation and it made a satisfying grin spread across her face.

"How was your night, Xena?" inquired Tracker.

"Restless," replied the young woman.

Tracker laughed softly at that and asked in a taunting voice, "Too excited about today?"

"Actually, yeah," responded the teenager.

Lyceus peered up at his sister in surprise.

Tracker nodded a few times. "Hey, I get excited about some of these raids myself."

"I love a good raid," stated Latho. "But a battle is much better."

"How is that?" questioned Xena. She remained calm while swaying in her saddle rhythmically to Argo's walking.

Latho peered up at the girl, his eyes were wild. "A lot more of a challenge to fight another warrior."

"I would think that's too much of a challenge for you, Latho."

"Oh shut the fuck up, Pro." Latho bared his teeth at the large man.
Prostig just brushed him off.

"I hope we don't have to travel far to this village," complained Tracker.

"It's not too far." Prostig reached to his side and extracted his sword. "About another five minutes over there." He spun his sword at his side. "But all up hill."

Tracker grumbled at that as he noticed they were already travelling up a hillside. "Damn it, I might join you on that horse, Xena."

"I don't think so, Tracker." Xena revealed a grin at the small man. "My horse only holds one."

"Nice mare at that," mentioned Tracker.

Latho huffed as he studied the horse. "She's quite a golden colour… almost distinctive."

Xena licked her lips after he said that, it made her stomach turn in worry. "She's a good horse."

Latho was still examining the horse as if he was trying to find an answer to a question.

"Latho?"

Latho lost his focus when Xena said his name. "Yeah?" He looked up at her.

"Do you have any particular skill?"

A huge grin appeared on the raider's face. "I use to be very good at stealing. I was a thief before I was a raider."

"Just got caught too many times huh?" Prostig could sense Latho's anger rising at what he said.

Latho ignored the other man despite his words. "I just decided one day I could admit that I liked to steal. Figured I could be of more use in some type of army."

"Got yah," stated Xena.

"Here we go." Tracker pointed to the town just ahead after they'd climbed the hill. "Get yourselves ready." He reached to his side, unsheathing his sword.

Latho did the same.

Xena pulled out hers and gave it a good spin. She then glanced down at Lyceus.

The brother knew he had to pull out his. After a deep breath, he removed his sword and tried to mentally prepare himself for this.
Bracis called for the raiding party to stop. He had orders for the party to split. Half would take the western side while the other covered the eastern portion. He also ordered for it to be a fast raid, take as much valuables, and supplies as you could carry. As far as hostages went, he wanted three to four women. After that, he commanded for the raiders to attack the town.

Xena held her hand down to her brother. "Come on."

Lyceus took her hand and hauled up into the saddle behind his sister.

"Thought it was a one person horse?" teased Tracker.

"I make special exceptions once in awhile."

Tracker grunted at her answer but was grinning.

"Yaaa!" called Xena. She'd spurred her mare in the sides.

Argo broke out into a gallop, heading into Cirra behind several other raiders on horseback.

"What's the plan?"

Xena held the reins in her left hand while her sword was in her left. "Just raid forget about the idea of prisoners or killing or burning. Alright?"

"Got it."

The sister directed Argo into the town. She could already see the townspeople were running in fear and screaming. A lot of the women were chasing after their children to hide in their homes. The men were more or less trying to prepare for the raid. They'd been sacked one too many times not to know what would happen.

Xena headed for the western side of town. Half of the horsemen went east while the other west. Once they were into the western portion, she stopped her mare and said, "Hop off, Ly."

The brother took a shaky breath but dismounted the tall horse.

"Look out, Ly!"

Lyceus had already seen the farmer coming at him. He met the man with his sword.

"Die you damn raiders!" yelled the farmer. He pulled his pitchfork away and took a stab at Lyceus.

Lyceus had stumbled back and he thought he'd bump into Argo but Xena wasn't there anymore. He then saw Xena was behind the farmer.

"Get the Hades out of here," growled Xena.
The farmer spun around at hearing the voice behind him. He then suddenly saw the huge horse jump up and direct her hoofs at him. He screamed, dropped his pitchfork, and raced off.

Argo's hoofs slammed into the ground.

"Thanks, sis."

Xena grinned and patted Argo's neck.

"Hey, kids. How are things over here?"

The teens saw Prostig joining them at a jog.

Xena shook her head and said, "Most of these people are in their houses."

"Yeah I noticed that too."

The young woman carefully dismounted her horse. "No point in staying on her." She smacked Argo's rump. "Stay close, girl."

Argo whined and galloped off to the edge of town to stay out of harm's way.

Prostig raised an eyebrow at the girl. "You must really have her trained."

Xena grinned and spun her sword. "She'll be here in an instant if I whistle for her."

"I'd love to see that," Prostig laughed and said, "Come on, stay with me, kids." He started for the closest house, which was straight ahead. He climbed the three steps and suddenly kicked at the door.

The door cracked from the hard blow.

"Good door," praised Prostig. He gritted his teeth, took a step back, and then ran towards it. He rammed his right shoulder into the door and the door flung open. He stepped inside.

Xena and Lyceus followed into the house.

"Grab what you think is important," reminded Prostig. "Looks like nobody is here."

Xena looked around in the first room, which was a lounge room. She saw nothing important so continued down a small hallway that had three doors. She went to the furthest door on the left.

Lyceus on the other hand went to the door on the right.

Prostig took the nearest room.

Both teens suddenly heard a woman screaming. There were sounds of struggling in the room that Prostig had entered.
Xena knew what was happening, she tried to ignore it. She realized now she was in a kid's room. She narrowed her eyes as she went over to the bed; the sheets were messy. She touched the bed and felt it was still slightly warm. Scanning the room, she saw a small closet on the opposite side. She started to close in on it but stopped when she heard her brother come into the room.

"Find anything?" asked Lyceus.

"No nothing."

The brother hung in the doorway and studied the room. "Looks like a girl's room." He noted the wooden horses on the dresser with a doll in between them. He sighed and looked to his sister. "Prostig found a woman in that other room. He's trying to subdue her."

Xena chuckled at that. "Doesn't sound like he's having much luck either."

"Not really," agreed Lyceus.

The young woman half turned to her brother. "Why don't you see about helping him, Ly?"

Lyceus stared at Xena, trying to understand if she was serious or not. "Um… okay," he finally said. He disappeared out of the room.

Xena turned her head to the closet; she licked her lips and spun her sword. Slowly she walked up to the door and her left hand curled around the door knob. She remained motionless as she could just make out heavy breathing behind the door. She jerked the door open yet didn't point her sword out. Scared brown eyes stared at her.

"Don't hurt me," whispered the girl.

The teenager lowered her sword more to her side. "I don't plan to." She took one step closer.

The girl pushed back more into her hanging clothes, trying to hide from the raider.

"What do they call you, girl?"

"It's… Calli," whispered the girl.

Xena could see the fear in the child's eyes. She tried to think of something to calm her down. She bent her knees, which made her about the girl's height. "How old are you, Calli?" She'd already guess her to be around Gabrielle's age or maybe younger.

"Twelve," whispered the girl.

"Alright, Calli," uttered Xena, "do me a favour, okay?"

The girl didn't make any acknowledgement.
Xena sighed before she said, "Stay in here until somebody gets you or until sunset, okay?"

The girl just faintly nodded. She opened her mouth to say something but stopped.

"What's wrong?" whispered Xena.

"I… I… heard my mom scream," whimpered the child.

"Don't worry, she'll be fine," promised Xena.

"Wha-what about my dad?"

The teenager raised an eyebrow at that. "Where is he?"

"I'm… I'm not sure. He told me to hide and… he left."

Xena knew immediately the father had run off to do something to help protect his family. "He'll be fine too, okay?"

The girl nodded again.

Xena was about to say something else, her mouth half opened.

"Xena?" yelled Lyceus.

The teenager groaned and turned her head. "Yeah, Ly?"

"We need your help, hurry up out here!"

"Yeah, I'm coming!" Xena returned her attention to the girl. "Stay here, got it?"

The girl nodded as she pulled a pant leg that was dangling in front of her into her face.

Xena stood up and pushed the door shut. She quickly raced out of the room and went down the hall. "What the Hades is wrong?"

"Prostig needs help with that woman," spoke up Lyceus. "He wanted your help."

"Great," complained Xena. "He's outside?"

"Yeah," answered Lyceus. "I'll come with you."

The two siblings rushed out of the open door.

Prostig had dragged the woman down the steps and was trying to gain control of her.

The woman, however, was furiously struggling against Prostig.

"Xena, I need your help." Prostig growled as he tightened his grip on the woman
again. "On my right side I got some rope, get it and tie her up for me."

Xena nodded and sheathed her sword.

"Don't you dare," screamed the woman. She jumped, pushing off Prostig and tried kicking at Xena when she was close enough.

"Watch her," warned Prostig. "She's a tough one."

Xena laughed. "I'd say so."

Prostig decided to make it easier so he turned instead and brought his side around to Xena.

The teenager neared him and untied the ropes from his side.

"There should be a few short ropes."

"Got it." Xena took two short ropes and tied the rest back onto his side.

"No!" screamed the woman, she tried breaking Prostig's grip but he was much stronger.

Prostig clenched his teeth and managed to growl, "Woman, stop struggling or we'll do this the hard way."

Xena then decided to make this faster; she reached behind her back between her cloak and pulled out one of her daggers. She quickly moved and pressed the tip into the woman's neck.

The woman felt the cold point press into her neck, she instantly stopped thrashing around.

"Good idea," whispered Xena.

Prostig decided it was safe now so he slowly turned back towards Xena. This then gave him the chance to slip his right arm from around her waist to around her neck. "If you fight me anymore, I just won't bother anymore and kill you instead."

The woman closed her eyes at his words.

Xena felt her heart drop. She had a job to do though; she bent down and started tying the woman's ankles. Although as she did it, she made sure to put rope between her legs so that she could walk but not run. Afterwards, she stood up and started tying her hands together.

"Mommy?" called a small girl's voice.

Lyceus spun around and saw the small girl standing on the top of the steps.

"Calli, get out of here!" cried out the mother.
"Where the Hades did she come from?" yelled Prostig.

"Hades," hotly whispered Xena. "Damn kid." She jerked the woman's bindings tightly and tried to rush the final knot.

"Calli, go hide!" called a man's voice.

Lyceus had already seen the man coming around the house from the opposite side.

"Let her go!" yelled the man. He had a sword in his right hand and he was headed for Xena.

"Xena!" warned Lyceus. He bolted for the man, his sword out. He made it just in time, his sword clanging against the man's.

Xena let out a huge sigh of relief when her brother covered her back. She tried to rush the knot even more but started to fumble the knot. "Shit," she growled while listening to the fighting in the background.

Lyceus backed up a few steps without watching his footing; he stepped back onto a rather large stone that rolled under his foot. He went flying backwards, landing on his back.

"Die you damn raider," growled the man.

Xena knew what was happening; she'd just finished the knot and had already spun around, unsheathing her sword again. She moved so fast that she had no time to think, only react. She took two large steps then thrust her sword.

The man had his sword over his head and never brought it down. Instead, he lost his grip and it fell from his hands off to the side. He lowered his hands, his fingers curling around Xena's sharp blade. His eyes finally locked with scared blue ones.

Xena stood there, that was all she could do as she watched the blood trickle out of the corner of the man's mouth.

"No," suddenly cried out the wife in pain. "Oh gods no."

Lyceus sat up after he realized he was okay. He now saw why he was okay.

The man took two steps backwards.

Xena's blade slide out from inside of his stomach and his blood dripped off the blade.

The man shook his head in fear; he didn't want to believe what just happened. He could barely feel his heartbeat yet his entire body felt on fire.

So much panic rose up inside of Xena as she frantically thought what to do but she didn't know what to do. She remained frozen in her position.
The father looked up to his daughter; he walked over to the steps, slightly hunched over and his bloody hands over his stomach. He couldn't make it up the steps though, and he fell onto the bottom step and lay back against them.

"Daddy?" whispered Calli, she'd gone down the steps to meet him. "Daddy?" She looked up and stared across to Xena.

Xena lifted her eyes to the girl, she could feel the girl's pain. It was the same kind of pain she'd felt the day she'd lost Gabrielle. Suddenly her breathing became ragged and her entire world spun, almost to the point everything became dizzy.

"Xena?"

The teenager closed her eyes when she heard Prostig's voice.

"Snap out of it, Xena." Prostig could tell the girl wasn't grasping what had just happened. "Come on, kid… let's go."

Xena shook her head. She took one last look at the child on the steps with her dying father. She forced herself to turn away then go to Prostig.

Lyceus urged himself to stand up finally. He glanced down at Xena's sword, small droplets of blood still ran down it. He swallowed and quickly followed the group.

"Let's get this woman to Bracis," suggested Prostig. He was now able to get the woman to quickly walk. She'd become almost sedate because of the event that just happened.

Within a minute, the group had returned to the gates where Bracis was waiting with a few men.

"Got one huh, Pro?"

"Yeah, she's a good one, sir." Prostig pushed the woman to the five guards.

Those five raiders pulled the woman in closer.

"Oh got one, Pro?" Tracker and Latho joined up two the bunch. "Latho got a young woman himself."

Latho was pushing the fighting woman towards the five raiders. She must have been about Lyceus's age.

Latho gave the girl to one of the raider's. He then turned around, facing Prostig, Xena and Lyceus. "Hey, Xena." He grinned at Xena and neared her. "Welcome to the club." He punched her shoulder the pointed at her sword blade. "And now there's no leavin' the club." He laughed loudly and walked off back into the town.

Xena lifted the sword, she'd forgotten about the blood, not wanting to believe it. She quickly brought her cloak around and wiped the blood off on the outside of her cloak.
Prostig looked over at Tracker. "Want to join? That woman took more time than I wanted."

"Yeah, I hear you. I'm low on dinars," joked Tracker.

"You joining us, Xena and Lyceus?" asked Prostig.

Xena shook her head then replied, "Yeah, yeah." She quickly followed after the two raiders.

The raid continued into the early afternoon. Xena's group mainly ransacked a few homes without any other incidents. Fortunately the three homes had already been abandoned but they managed to find jewellery tucked away or people's savings of dinars. Between Lyceus and Xena, the pair had added fifty dinars to their stash but they never took any jewellery, leaving it to Prostig and Tracker.

After the raid was over, the party left the town and travelled back to camp. Xena had whistled for Argo to come back and she had within a few seconds. The entire ride back, Xena tried to push away what happened today. She didn't know what bothered her more, the fact she'd killed somebody or the how she'd reacted. She tried to shake it off as an accident yet she could have had perfect control of the situation but she hadn't, she'd reacted wrong.

When they arrived back into camp, the raiders all cleaned up and decided today's raid was worth celebrating. The hostages they'd taken were all placed into a guard tent where they were shackled and tied down to the ground by ropes and ring nails. Then at the front of the tent, two guards were posted.

Xena had taken Argo to where the horses were being kept. The horses were harnessed around the neck by a soft rope then the other end of the rope was tied to another rope, which had both ends hooked to two trees. Lyceus was going to help his sister but she'd told him to go to the tent. He didn't want to argue with her, so he'd quietly left her.

The young woman had all of her mare's tack in her arms, she started for her tent. She studied almost each and every one she passed. Most of them were sitting outside of their tent, their armour off, and using a wet cloth to wipe dried blood off their armour. Occasionally, she would glance at a raider's damp cloth and notice just how red it was with blood. She finally made it back to her tent and ducked into it.

Lyceus was sitting on the ground with his sword and dagger sitting in front of him.

Xena could feel her brother's green eyes following her every step.

The brother sighed after her sister had put Argo's tack down. He wasn't quite sure what to say to his sister at this point.

The young woman reached up and started untying her cloak. She made a mental note to wash it later, probably before dinner. "How you feel?" she quietly asked.

The brother huffed at that as a frown developed. "I should be asking you that," he
muttered.

"Why?"

"Because of what happened" he replied. He dropped his head and stared at the two blades in front of himself.

Xena pulled her cloak off and dropped it onto the ground beside the horse tack. "Its okay, Ly."

"Xena, how can you say that?" Lyceus shook his head; he still wasn't looking at his sister. "I froze and it... it costed your... innocence."

The sister sighed after what he said. She came over to him and sat down beside him but still facing him. "Ly, it was either that or you. I'd much rather make that sacrifice then sacrifice your life."

"I know but... that doesn't make it right, Xena."

"No it doesn't... I messed up."

Lyceus quickly turned his head to Xena. "That's not what I meant."

"I know... but it's what I meant." Xena shook her head. "I wasn't thinking and for that mistake, it got that man killed."

"Xena, you did what you thought was right."

The sister held up her hand then lowered it. "I didn't think about it, Ly. I reacted... that was my mistake."

"Then what in Hades were you suppose to do huh?"

"I should have acted."

Lyceus shook his head in disbelief. "Xena... you were trying to save me. Why in Hades are you so tough on yourself for it?"

"Because I killed somebody today, Lyceus." The sister closed her eyes then gradually opened them again. "My next mistake could mean you getting hurt... or even killed. I'm not gonna let that happen."

Lyceus lowered his eyes as he stared again at his two weapons. "Do you really think this is still a good idea, sis?"

"I think we're getting close, Ly." Xena reached forward and started playing with her boot's laces. "I have a feeling those hostages will be taken to Hecht. If they're taken by the raiders, maybe we can somehow slip into the group."

"Then we'll know where Hecht is huh?"
"Yes, and get a feel for what his home is like." Xena wrapped the lace around her finger as she continued to talk. "Hopefully it won't be a problem."

"You think he might even still have Gabrielle?"

"That's what I'm hoping."

"Wonder how long it takes to train a slave?" whispered Lyceus.

Xena shook her head as she thought about it too. "I have no idea." She unwrapped her finger then reached over to her brother. "Going to be okay?"

"Yeah… you?" whispered Lyceus.

"I'm a survivor." Xena gave a small yet light smile.

Lyceus tried to return the smile but it was hard.

The sister patted her brother's leg and stood back up. "I'm going to clean my… cloak."

"Need help?"

"No, I'll be fine, thanks. Try and take it easy. I'm sure around sunset they'll start the celebration."

Lyceus rolled his eyes. "Great."

With that, Xena left the tent after swiping her cloak off the floor. She knew of a small lake near by that everybody used. She avoided a lot of the raiders since their tent was on the edge of camp so she made it to the small lake in no time. Once she was on the water's edge, she bent down and pushed her cloak into the water.

It only took her a few minutes to clean it. Although that was only because Xena furiously rubbed at the bloodstain with the palm of her hand or her nails. She was able to get it all out and it left no permanent stain. Once she decided it was clean enough, she stood up and rung the cloak out getting most of the water out. She then returned to the tent only to find her brother conked out so she kept quiet. She was able to hang the cloak by its hood onto a nail that stuck out of the centre pole in the tent.

For a few seconds, Xena stood there regarding her brother. If anything, she was happy he was still here in her life. She'd been convinced today she might have lost him and almost did lose him. After Gabrielle, she didn't plan to lose anybody else as important in her life. But right now, Xena felt a sense of energy still inside of herself and she needed a way to get rid of it. With that in mind, she quietly left the tent and went in search of Prostig.

Fortunately it didn't take too long for her to find him. He was sitting outside of his tent, sitting in a wood chair, seeming to admire the coming sunset. He'd looked up when he saw Xena coming towards him.

"Hey, kid," he greeted.
Xena gave a nod in return. "Feel like sparring?"

"Sparring huh?" Prostig studied the young woman for a moment then asked, "The raid didn't wear you out?"

"No, actually… feel kind of… hyper but not quite like that," tried to explain Xena. The raider considered that as he stood up. "We'll do a little before the celebration starts. Come on, kid." He led the way to where there was an open area for them. "So you have lots of energy left huh?"

"Mmmm."

"Feel like you have no control over it?"

Xena thought about it before answering. "Yeah… feel like it controls me actually."

Prostig felt a long sigh leave him. "Sounds almost like bloodlust but…." The young woman looked up when he didn't finish his words. "But what?"

"But you're too young for something like that… plus you didn't really fight a battle."

The teenager shrugged and lifted her right hand to rest on her sword hilt. "I don't know much about bloodlust."

Prostig came into the open area and stopped. He faced the girl. "It typically happens to people who get a real thrill from fighting, they really get into it. So after the battle is over, they're left with like a…." He tried to come up with the right word.

"After effect?" suggested Xena.

"Sort of. They're just still caught up in the excitement. They have to do something to shake it."

"Like what types of things?"

Prostig now stepped back a few times and unsheathed his sword. "Some just practice with their sword to work it off. Some I've heard run or horseback ride even." He shrugged before giving his sword a good spin. "Others have sex." He licked his lips then added, "Guess it's all what you're into."

"Hmmm." Xena unsheathed her sword. "Sounds interesting."

"I've heard it can be intense sometimes."

Xena chuckled a little at that. "I guess I wouldn't know." She grinned and asked, "You ready?"

"Come on, kid," taunted the large man.
Xena's grin only got larger as she stalked forward to Prostig.

After their practice, the pair went back into the camp for the celebration. Yet on the way, Xena started asking the raider about the prisoners.

"Well, they're taken to Hecht's compound."

"Who goes?" asked the curious teenager.

Prostig raised any eyebrow slowly. "I'm in charge of the delivery. Typically Tracker comes with me, sometimes Latho, and some of the others. It depends on how many women we have. Why you ask?"

Xena shrugged. "Just interested."

"Interested how?" The raider saw his tent just ahead.

"Lyceus and I wouldn't mind going… if we can."

Prostig came to the entrance of his tent and stopped in front of it. "Why, kid?"

"I just like travelling, honestly."

The raider crossed his arms and pushed his arms against his chest. "Alright, kid… you two can come. We could probably use the extra help." He turned to his tent but called, "See yah over at the celebration."

"Yeah, see yah, Prostig." The young woman quickly made her way over to her and her brother's tent.

That evening, Lyceus and Xena joined in the celebration in the main portion of the camp. Most of it consisted of drinking and socializing as well as eating. It was also the first time either Lyceus or Xena had ever drunk. Both of them found themselves partial to the ale more than anything. Although they were both careful about how much they did drink but by the time they left the party, they had a good head buzz.

When they did make it back to their tent, it was fairly late however the celebration was just in the middle of things. It didn't take that long for Xena and Lyceus that night to get to sleep, the ale mainly putting them both to sleep. However the night's rest was rather restless for them, especially Xena. Her dreamscape seemed to continue growing darker and darker with each passing night.

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That following day, the raiders hardly stirred in the camp, many still out cold in their tents if they made it to their tent. The day after the raid was mainly dedicated to recovering from the party; little activity went on if any. The next day, however, was when Bracis requested for Prostig to take the hostages to Hecht. Bracis had suggested Prostig take four others with him and to take the jail wagon to keep the women in for the ride.
Prostig followed his leader's orders. He'd selected Xena, Lyceus, Latho, and Tracker to come with him. He then prepared the jail wagon with Xena and Lyceus's help and hooking two horses up to the wagon. Then he, Tracker, and Latho loaded the women into the wagon by the late morning. In the meanwhile, Xena and Lyceus took care of their things and tacking up Argo.

"Are you two ready?"

"Yeah, we're set," answered Lyceus.

Prostig peered up at Xena, who rode her mare now.

Xena nodded her response back.

"Alright." Prostig went over to the wagon and climbed up. "Lyceus, ride with me."

The young man took a deep breath and went over to the wagon. He hauled himself up into the seat.

The raider glanced back to Latho and Tracker. "Ready, boys?"

"Yup," answered Tracker.

Prostig turned back around and adjusted the reins in his hands. He cracked them, which brought a sudden jerk to the wagon as the horses started moving.

"How long does this take?" inquired Lyceus.

"We'll be there tomorrow… in the late morning or so," replied Prostig. "We have to make it to his compound."

"Where's his compound?" Xena had brought Argo along side the wagon but on Prostig's side.

"Have you ever heard of Summons?"

The young woman's lips and eyebrows were pushed together, in thought. "Small town, right? I think south west of here."

"That's the one. His compound is about fifteen minutes just south of the town."

"How large is the compound?"

Prostig returned his attention to Lyceus. "It's not that large but he does keep it under guard because of the slaves. He doesn't believe in letting his… money runaway."

"That makes sense," agreed Lyceus.

"Those kids ask a lot of questions," muttered Latho to Tracker. He and Tracker were walking behind the wagon, keeping an eye on the women.
Tracker thought about it but shrugged. "Nah, they're kids... kids always ask a lot of stuff."

"Yeah five year olds," chided Latho. He settled his eyes on Xena's back. "They're up to something."

"Latho, you worry too much," complained the small raider.

Latho ignored his friend's words and decided he'd keep an eye on those teens. What he didn't know though was that Xena had heard the entire conversation. Xena had a natural knack for being able to hear the lowest whispers and it so happened she'd been paying attention to them. She'd already sensed Latho was questioning how suspicious she and Lyceus would act yet for some reason; she had faith in Prostig and Tracker. The fact that Prostig and Tracker were with them kept her less on edge more than anything.

The trip remained quiet from there out. The group continued their way south-west to the town of Summons and mainly stuck to the roads, especially considering the wagon would not travel through the wooded areas. But not until late that afternoon, did they meet up with some company on the road.

"Wahoooo," called Prostig, he pulled back on the reins.

The horses whined but came to a sudden stop.

Xena let Argo go ahead a little more but stopped her as well. "That doesn't look too good," she muttered. Just ahead she could make out three armed men coming towards them.

"Take these, Lyceus." Prostig gave him the reins. He jumped off his seat and quietly unsheathed his sword. "Stay here, Xena."

The teenager nodded and pulled hard on Argo's reins.

The mare understood the signal and began walking backwards.

"Tracker, Latho," called Prostig.

The two raiders came around the wagon from either side and joined Prostig.

"Oh, company on the road," joked Tracker.

"Bandits," muttered Prostig.

Lyceus sighed then propped his elbows onto his knees and dropped his chin into his hands. "We miss out on the fun."

Xena chuckled as she relaxed in her saddle.

The three bandits closed in on the group and noted the three men. They then saw the
wagon with Lyceus on it and Xena on a horse next to it. They had no idea what was in the wagon but it was two of things they figured, people or animals.

"What can we do for you, gentlemen?"

The middle bandit stopped and looked at the very large man. "Just curious as to what you got in that wagon."

"Nothing of your business," replied Latho, he gave a smug look too.

"Help us!" suddenly called out a woman's voice.

Xena turned in her saddle and punched at a bar. "Be quiet," she growled lowly. She narrowed her eyes at the woman that'd spoken up.

The woman actually felt herself shrink from the nasty look she'd received from the younger woman.

"Sounds like they have a nice wagon load," joked one bandit.

"Just walk away," suggested Tracker.

"Hey little man, shut the Hades up," growled a bandit.

Tracker didn't care anymore; he jumped at the guy in the middle.

Latho pulled out his sword and took the closest bandit.

Prostig took care of the remaining one.

Xena sighed as she watched the three raiders fight the three bandits. She leaned forward, her arms resting against the saddle horn. She watched them fight back and forth. She saw Prostig was the first to get his opponent down. After Prostig knocked his man out cold, he turned his back on him to see if he could help out his friends. Xena though realized the bandit wasn't really unconscious and was getting up with his sword. "Hades," she hissed. She reached behind her back while calling out, "Prostig!"

Prostig started to turn around.

Xena knew it'd be too late so she quickly reacted and brought her dagger around and threw it.

By the time Prostig had turned around, he'd found the bandit caught in mid action but stopped by a dagger in his sword hand. The bandit's sword was on the ground now and Prostig took the chance to run his sword through the bandit's stomach.

Prostig reached out with his left hand and jerked the dagger out of the man's hand. He then pulled his sword out and watched him fall down. He sighed then cleaned off both blades. By then, Latho and Tracker had disposed of the other two bandits. So he went back to the wagon with them but approached Xena first. "Here." He held up the clean dagger.
Xena reached down and gently took her dagger.

The large raider climbed back into the seat with Lyceus. He quietly took the reins back and waited until Tracker and Latho were behind the wagon again. He brought the reins up but paused and looked at Xena. "Thanks."

Xena said nothing back but smiled.

Prostig cracked the reins to continue the journey.

Around a candlemark before sunset, the group stopped and made a small camp just off the road. Xena had agreed to catch dinner if she didn't have to cook it. So she'd brought back several quail and two rabbits for dinner. They'd all ate quietly and never fed the captives. Throughout the night, each person took a shift to stay on watch. Xena had the last shift and she had to wake everybody by the morning.

So, the trip to Hecht's compound was not much longer after they'd left the small camp. Once they came close to the village of Summons, they went around so they wouldn't attract any attention. Both Lyceus and Xena felt a bit nervous when they knew they were coming closer to Hecht's compound. Xena also felt excited because she could only hope Gabrielle was still there.

Yet once Hecht's compound came into view, Xena's shoulders slowly slumped. She realized just how fortified and well protected the compound was made. It wasn't large as Prostig had said but it was protect by huge walls and on the walls were guards monitoring everything.

At the gates, the group waited to get authorization to enter. Once they were approved, the huge, thick wood doors slowly creaked open for them. Prostig urged the horses into the compound where they were met by several guards and one man.

"Welcome back, Pro," greeted the man.

Prostig halted the horses beside the guards. He climbed off the wagon and said, "Nice to see you again, Hecht."

"How have things been?" inquired the slaver.

"Pretty well."

"Bracis is well?"

Prostig nodded while walking over to the wagon with Hecht. "He is well… business is good. How is business with you?"

"Never better." Hecht happily smiled then turned his attention to the seven women in the wagon. "Very nice, Pro. I see it was a good raid."

"It went well."
"Which town?"

"Cirra and Athium," replied the raider.

Xena had been watching Hecht and Prostig. She now realized the women in the wagon had huddled to one side of the wagon, further from Hecht.

"Do you plan to stay for the night?" inquired Hecht.

"No, we need to return to Bracis right away," replied Prostig.

The slaver nodded and turned to his guards. "Take them out and put them away."

The guards quickly moved to the back of the wagon and threw open the doors. They started pulling the screaming women out one by one.

Hecht turned to the raider with a large leather bag. "I like these ones, Pro. Tell Bracis the extra is a gift for his continued business."

"Thank you, Hecht." Prostig quickly tied the pouch to his side. He then held out his arm.

"Take care, Pro. Thank Bracis for me." The slaver briskly shook the raider's arm then released it.

Prostig lifted himself back into the wagon. "Take care, Hecht." He circled the wagon around.

Hecht watched the raiders leave his compound. That was when he noticed for the first time the young woman riding on the large horse. He suddenly had a confused look. "How interesting." He then saw the teenager turn some in her saddle and looked back at him. He quickly took in her facial features before she turned back around. "Very interesting." The raiders left and his gates started to shut so he decided to return to his previous work.

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It was now the mid to late afternoon, the raiders had gotten rather far from Hecht's compound by now. The ride had remained quiet like it had yesterday and earlier today.

Tracker had noticed his tent mate was extra quiet than normal. They were still travelling behind the wagon just because they were use to it. Tracker suddenly elbowed his friend and asked, "Why so quiet?"

Latho shook his head and looked at Tracker. "Thinking."

"Oh, be careful," teased the small raider.

Latho rolled his eyes and he returned his eyes to Xena's back.
"What's wrong?" Tracker whispered, "You keep looking at her."

"I don't know… I keep thinking I've seen her before."

Tracker was shaking his head as he said, "I doubt it, Latho. You have a bad memory from getting hit over the head too much."

Latho turned his head to Tracker then looked at Xena again. "Tracker, I know when I've seen somebody before." He paused but said, "I'll figure it out… sooner or later."

It wasn't until about two candlemarks before sunset that Prostig decided to make camp. The raiders found a good secluded but open spot that happened to be next to a fairly good sized spring. Again Xena offered to do dinner and suggested fish from the stream, trout to be exact.

The group had quickly set up camp then Xena and her brother went down to the spring to catch the fish together. The other three raiders remained in the camp, resting from the long day of walking. Both Tracker and Prostig sat on one side of the fire while Latho was on the other.

"When you think we'll make it back at camp?" inquired Tracker.

Prostig was sitting on a log by the fire and he looked over at Tracker, who was on the ground. "Probably in the afternoon. I think Bracis has plans to head west again."

"Why is that?" cut in Latho.

"He wants to add more to the sector."

Tracker looked back at Prostig. "We're going to war?"

"I think so," answered Prostig.

Latho huffed and shook his head. "Finally."

"Latho, we're not ready for Lex."

Latho looked across to his friend. "Tracker, we can handle that warlord."

"I don't know," argued Prostig, "last time we couldn't."

"We have more men since then," reminded Latho.

Tracker shook his head. "Need more skills… not men."

"Mmmm," agreed Prostig.

Latho huffed and lowered his head as he leaned back against the tree. "We can take them," he muttered.
Xena finished rolling up her pant legs after just rolling up her sleeves and started wading into the water.

"Xena, this isn't going to work." Lyceus folded his arms over his chest.

"Sure it will, Ly." The young woman went out into the water until the water reached just under her knees.

"It won't," protested the brother, "there's no way in Hades somebody can do this."

Xena shook her head as a grin spread across her lips. "Have some faith, Ly." She bent forward and lowered hands into the water.

Lyceus decided not to argue anymore. He just sat down on a rock. He briefly looked down at his sister's boots and cloak on the ground. Looking back up, he curiously watched his sister stand in the water bent over. He sat there waiting and waiting; he dramatically sighed once to get his sister's attention but got none. He then shifted on the rock more from his butt getting sore. "Xena," he whined.

"Wait, Ly."

The brother groaned and slumped forward, looking down at his boots. He then heard something splashing around in the water, he lifted his head up.

Xena suddenly threw up her hands with something wriggling in her hands. She tossed the wriggly item at her brother.

"Oh gods!" screamed Lyceus, he jumped up from the rock when the fish landed at his feet. "Xena!"

The teenager laughed at her brother. "Thought I couldn't do it, huh?"

"Um wellllll...." Lyceus shyly laughed and became perplexed at how his sister did this trick. He looked up and now noticed Xena had her back to him. He just sat back down and tried to think about how she did it.

Tracker and Prostig were quietly talking back and forth in the camp.

Latho, however, was keeping to himself, still thinking. He was still trying to recall where he'd seen Xena before or even her mare. Slowly his eyes travelled over to Argo. He noticed how the horse was still tacked up, her reins tied to a tree branch. He kept staring at the horse, especially the backside of her.

Then he had a quick flash back of when he was on a chase, alone and after a man and a girl. It was the good chase he had in the town of Potidaea a year ago. He remembered chasing after that family where there were two men and four women. One man was on a labour horse alone, another horse had one woman with her two children then the third had an older man with a dark haired, tall girl. He then recalled
the chase he had to grab that girl when she'd fallen or even jumped off the golden mare.

Latho suddenly sat up when Xena's face suddenly fit the girl's face. He looked back at the mare and instantly recognized her as the same horse he'd chased after for so far. He quickly stood up and said, "I'm going to check on the kids." Without another word, he hurried out of the camp.

Tracker followed him until he was gone; he then looked back at Prostig. "What was that?"

Prostig didn't answer, as he became a little worried.

Latho slowed down when he neared the spring. He went a little closer then realized he was in earshot. He hid behind a tree and just listened.

"Xena, you think Gabrielle was there?"

Xena still had her back to her brother. "I'm not sure, Ly."

Lyceus looked down at the three fish in front of his feet. The fish weren't hopping around as much now. "Are we going to go back, sis?"

Latho quickly grinned when Lyceus called Xena sis. He knelt down but didn't move just yet.

"Yeah, we will, Ly." Xena felt a fish brushing her fingertips and she instantly clamped her hands around the fish. She pulled it out of the water and threw it to her brother.

Lyceus sprung up onto his feet and caught it. He fought to keep it from jumping from his hands and managed to put it in the pile. He sat back down then asked, "I hope we find her there and free her from Hecht."

Latho slowly began to realize now why these two teenagers were in the raiding party now. They were impostors bent on finding out information about Hecht. He felt his anger starting to boil up. He grounded his teeth then decided to act. He looked over his shoulder and noticed several bushes were directly behind Lyceus. A nasty grin developed on his face. He lowered himself down onto his stomach and started crawling towards Lyceus.

Xena started to get a bit frustrated since no fish were coming back to her. She needed just one more fish so there would be enough for everybody. She tried remaining motionless.

Latho stalked closer and once he came close enough, he waited.

The brother yawned then stood up from his butt being so sore.

The raider found this to be the perfect moment; he sprung up directly behind Lyceus. He leaned forward some and brought his right hand around and over Lyceus's mouth. His other arm came around the boy's waist. "Don't even breathe hard," he muttered.
Lyceus stiffened when he heard Latho's voice. He tried to frantically think of what to do.

Latho now noticed there was an unsheathed dagger on Lyceus's side. He reached down with his left hand and pulled it free. "Nice dagger," he uttered, "as a matter of fact, it was mine. Nice of you to clean it up for me before I kill you with it."

Lyceus's eyes widened but before he could do anything, Latho lifted him up and pulled him over the bushes.

Xena shook her head and called, "Ly, I don't think I'm getting anything." She waited to hear some type of response from her brother but she didn't get one. She slightly turned while straightening up. "Ly?" She realized he was gone, the fish were still on the ground but Lyceus wasn't there. "Lyceus?" she called. She focused her eyes at the woods when she heard a tree branch snap. "Ly, what you doing?" Still she didn't get any response from her brother.

The teenager quickly got out of the water and put on her boots then cloak. "Lyceus?" she called again. She unrolled her pant legs furiously. Xena decided to find out who snapped the tree branch, she hopped over the bushes. "Lyceus?"

"Xena," called Lyceus, his voice sounded like it was in pain.

"Lyceus?" Xena hastily pinpointed her brother's voice then raced in that direction.

"Where are you?"

"Over here."

Xena could just make out his voice. She felt a bit panicky when his voice sounded so low. She went past a few more trees then found her brother on the ground. "Lyceus, wha…." She dropped down beside her brother, his eyes were barely open. "Ly?"

Lyceus forced his eyes open. "Latho is here," he whispered. He could barely formulate his words, his eyes so heavy.

Xena grabbed her brother's hand; it was covering something on his side. "Lyceus, what's going on?" She felt some kind of liquid on her hands, coated from Lyceus's own hand. She turned her hand over to see all the blood on it. "Lyceus, what the Hades happened?" She pulled her brother's hand away to see the wound now.

"Latho," rasped Lyceus, "he stabbed me."

Xena now realized Latho must have finally figured out who she was from his past.

"Xena, I didn't think you survived."

The young woman sprung up and unsheathed her sword. "Latho, you fucking bastard."

Latho was still holding Lyceus dagger that was covered in blood. "I'm so glad I finally get to kill you. It always bothered me you got away."
Xena took a step forward but made sure to keep Lyceus behind herself. "I'll kill you."

"Oh don't worry, I haven't killed your brother yet," the raider teased, "I wanted him to see you die like the loser you are, Xena." He bent his knees and held out the bloody dagger. "You should have never come back, girl."

So much anger grew inside of Xena as she thought about Potestas and now her brother was badly wounded by this same raider. She took several menacing steps towards him.

"Come on, girl," taunted Latho.

Xena suddenly lunged forward after the raider. Her sword completely missed the man.

Latho had jumped aside and now had unsheathed his sword; he still kept the dagger in his left hand though. "Let's finish this, girl." He twirled his sword then brought it slashing towards Xena.

The teenager stopped his sword, she then kicked at him, just missing him. She was so angry that her own rage was overpowering her focus.

Latho started to use this to his advantage and started taking several stabs, swipes, and thrusts at her. Then one stab at her right side caught her right on the arm.

Xena screamed some and stumbled to her side from the pain in her arm.

"Hurts don't it?" Latho had a huge grin as he noticed her breaking down. "This is no game, girl."

Xena looked back with flashing stormy blue eyes. Yet again, she lunged but more blindly.

Latho parried the attack away but he threw a punch at her face.

The teenager leaned back into the punch then she took a kick at her stomach.

Latho laughed and took another hard kick at her stomach.

Xena fell onto her back and lost her sword in the process.

The raider didn't hesitate as he bent down to her left side with the dagger at her throat.

The young woman froze when the bloody tip pressed into her throat. She closed her eyes as her nails dug into the dirt.

Latho lowered his face into Xena's own. "You didn't do bad, girl. I'm even impressed how far you've come to find your family," he whispered. He then considered her for a second, which only caused a satisfying grin to creep along his features. "By the way, that girl, Gabrielle… I killed her myself. You should have seen how she cried and begged for her life. It was so pathetic."
Xena's eyes suddenly flew open to meet dark almost black ones. "You fuckin'-" She fell short when the dagger tip slightly pierced her skin.

"What?" hotly whispered the raider. "It was a good chase, Xena." He prepared to push the dagger into her throat but the sound of a sword unsheathing caused him to stop and look up. "What the…." He couldn't finish his words when he saw a sword hilt swinging around towards his head. The hilt smashed into the side of his head and sent him onto his side.

Xena scrambled for her sword that wasn't far away.

Lyceus dropped his sword but now his hands were bleeding from holding the blade so hard. He slumped forward after losing so much energy from swinging the sword and sitting up on his knees.

Latho though was now up on his knees and glaring at Lyceus. He flipped the dagger to hold it by its blade now.

Xena had turned around in time to see Latho pulling back his arm with a dagger. "No!" she screamed. She sprinted forward after Latho but Latho had already thrown the dagger. By the time she made it to Latho, it was too late and she simply kicked him in the face sending him flying onto his back. She spun around to see Lyceus lying on his side with the dagger sticking out from his chest. "Lyceus, Lyceus?" She dropped to her knees beside him, grabbing his shoulders.

Lyceus's eyes were closed but his left hand slightly moved and closed over his sister's hand. "Love you, sis," he muttered then his grip loosened.

"Ly?" whispered the older sister. "Ly, come on." Xena felt tears come down her cheek. "I love you too, Ly," she whimpered. She furiously wiped her tears away and she turned her head to Latho.

Latho had just started to shake off the hard kick he'd gotten. He started to stand up now.

Xena stood up to her full height, her sword in her right hand. She didn't say a single word, her darkening eyes remained locked on the raider. She lifted her sword and was about to stalk forward but suddenly arms wrapped around her from behind.

"Don't, Xena," warned Tracker from behind.

Latho laughed at the girl being held back. "Nice timing, Tracker." He started walking forward but stopped when a sword from his right came at his neck. He turned his head to the right. "Prostig, fuckin' put your sword down."

"No, Latho." Prostig held out his hand. "Give me your sword."

"No!" yelled Xena, she tried to struggle against Tracker. "Let me go, Tracker," she growled.
"No, Xena." The small man grabbed Xena's right arm and slammed her elbow hard against his armour.

Xena's involuntary reaction was to drop her sword. She hissed and tried to fight Tracker more. "He killed Lyceus!" she yelled.

"Pro, get the Hades out of the way," growled Latho, "this girl joined the raiders because she's trying to find her family. She's the girl from Potidaea that I tried to hunt down."

Tracker furrowed his eyebrows as he realized it too. "Now I do remember I saw you in the village, hiding against a house with a little girl in your arms. I didn't come after you because...." He trailed off as it sank in who this girl was in his arms.

Prostig glanced between Xena and Latho. "Latho, you just killed this boy for no reason."

"He's her brother... and he was helping her. Who the Hades cares?"

"I care," growled Prostig. He ran his blade along Latho's neck as he stepped closer to him. "I would kill you, Latho now if you weren't in the raiding party," he hotly whispered.

"Prostig, don't let him get away with this," growled Xena and she struggled against Tracker more.

"Xena, there's nothing I can do." Prostig turned his head to the teenager. "To Bracis, Latho hasn't done anything wrong... he's actually helped stop intruders."

"No." Xena dug her nails into Tracker's arms but it didn't seem to help. "You fuckin' bastard, I'll kill you."

"I don't think so, girl."

"Latho, give me your sword," ordered Prostig again. "If you don't... I will run you through no matter what."

Latho looked in the large man's eyes and knew his words were real. He handed over his sword.

Prostig held Latho's sword in his right hand.

"What about Xena?" asked Tracker.

"We have to take her back to Bracis," spoke up Latho.

Prostig pressed his sword against Latho's neck more. "I'm in command here, Latho. Shut the fuck up." He turned his attention back to Tracker. "We're going to let her go." His eyes shifted to Xena, "Xena, you are to leave if you ever show near Bracis, I can guarantee you that he will kill you. Take your brother and your horse and get out of here. Do you understand me?"
"Pros-"

"Xena, do you understand me?" growled the large man. "I am doing you a huge favour here."

"He is," whispered Tracker. "Bracis could kill him for this."

Xena closed her eyes and tried to control her anger. Slowly her dark blue eyes opened and she tried to remain focus on Prostig, not Latho next to him. "Alright," she whispered painfully.

Prostig nodded to Tracker. Tracker finally released the teenager.

Xena took a step towards Latho, her eyes locked on him and his smug expression. She forced herself to turn away and she bent down beside her brother. Her shaky hand came forward and grabbed the dagger that was embedded in her brother's still chest. "Oh gods," she whimpered.

Tracker felt his heart drop as he watched Xena's fingers curl around the hilt.

Xena bit her lower lip so hard it started to bleed. She counted to three mentally then wrenched out the dagger. She could faintly hear a rib bone crack inside his chest. She held the dagger in her right hand and lifted it, it was coated in Lyceus's blood. She then watched the blood ooze down the blade, over the hilt, and touch her index finger. She suddenly jumped and threw the dagger onto the ground; she furiously wiped the blood off her finger onto her pants.

Prostig lowered his head and turned it back to Latho. "Alright, let's go into camp. Latho." He turned Latho around and pushed him towards the camp. He marched Latho into the camp.

Tracker bent down and picked up Xena's sword.

Xena closed her eyes. She tried to hold her tears back; it was too hard as her warm tears slowly rolled down her cheeks. She kept her eyes closed as she slid her arms under Lyceus's body and urged her legs to lift them both up. When her weak legs finally had them up, she opened her eyes again.

"Come on, Xena," whispered the raider.

Xena urged her legs move one in front of the other. She gradually made her way into the camp. She stared down at her brother, hoping to see his chest move up and down, it never did. Once inside the camp again, she saw Latho was inside of the jail wagon, locked up tight. Prostig stood in front of the wagon to make sure Xena didn't make any moves for him.

Tracker followed Xena until she was at her horse. With his free hand, he was able to untie Argo's reins and placed them towards the saddle.

The young woman bent down and lowered Lyceus onto the ground again.
Xena wiped her tears away then slipped her left foot into the stirrup. She hoisted herself into the saddle. She slipped her other boot into the other stirrup.

Tracker held out Xena's sword.

The teenager took her sword back and sheathed it quickly.

Tracker then bent down to lift Lyceus's body up as high up as he could go.

Xena leaned over and took his brother back, lowering him into the saddle in front of her. She kept one arm around him, and she noticed his body was still warm. Her right hand clumped up the reins.

She tapped Argo in the side.

Argo didn't whine for once, she followed her master's orders and began walking.

Tracker lowered his head and walked away, out of the camp.

Prostig remained in front of the wagon as Xena came past.

Xena had her eyes lock on Latho as she went by the wagon.

"Xena, go home... please," whispered Prostig. He suddenly had hollow blue eyes rest on him. "Go back."

Xena looked away and just went into the surrounding forest; she disappeared into the setting sun.

~*~*~*~

Xena arrived just outside of the village. She reached up and pulled off her hood just after pulling Argo to a halt. She stared at the town and felt so many memories lift up inside of herself. She sighed and dismounted Argo. It seemed liked she'd been gone for years yet she knew it had only been so many days. She pulled Argo's reins over her head then stopped to look behind her mare.

The small yet long wooden box was tied to Argo from behind. Etched on the top of the box was the letters L y c e a u s in gold.

Xena had used the remaining dinars to have the oak box made for her brother. She turned her head away and patted Argo's neck. With a shaky breath, Xena started walking into Amphipolis. She at first kept her head up but as soon as she was past the small gates of Amphipolis she received so many looks that arranged between angry, surprised, confused, disgust, and curious. All of the looks made her drop her head and she almost wanted to leave yet her mind made her go forward.

When she arrived at her mother's tavern, she signalled Argo to stop along side. Xena stood there, frozen by her own fear. She could feel her stomach dropping and her heartbeat growing faster. Yet somehow she managed to put one foot on the step then
brought her other foot to the next step and gradually went up to the door. Her sweating hand grasped the door handle and pushed the door open.

The door shut behind her and it caused a slight boom to ring through the tavern.

"Hold on, I'll be there," called out Cyrene's voice from the kitchen.

Xena didn't move, she remained in front of the door. She raised her head up when she saw the kitchen door push open and her mother came out.

"Here I…." Cyrene stopped after she came around the bar and saw who it was at the door. "Xena?" A happy smile grew on her expression. "Oh gods, Xena." She rushed over to her daughter and pulled her into a hug.

Xena hesitated about hugging her mother back but she wrapped her arms around her.

"Oh gods, sweetie. I've missed you and Lyceus so much." She kissed her daughter's temple.

Xena almost started crying at that point when she heard her brother's name.

Cyrene loosened the hug, leaned back but didn't let go. "Where's your brother, honey?"

The teenager swallowed and didn't say anything.

"Honey, what's wrong huh? Where's your brother?" Cyrene started to read her daughter's expression and saw her eyes going watery. "Xena, what's happened to your brother?"

The only thing Xena could say was, "he's outside."

Cyrene didn't move at all nor released her child. "What's ha…." She lost her own words, as her fears since they'd left suddenly became more realistic. "He isn't?" she pleaded.

Xena dropped her head down, not able to look at her mother any longer.

"Oh gods… no," Cyrene released her daughter and stood there. "Oh gods…."

"What's happening?" Toris was standing on the bottom step. He'd just lost his smile after hearing his mother.

Cyrene finally forced herself to go outside, she rushed out.

"Xena, what's happened?" Toris got no response.

"Oh gods no!" cried out Cyrene.

Toris look away from his sister to the open door; he now saw the coffin on the ground. "Oh gods… Lyceus." He raced outside, brushing past his sister.
Xena turned around, her arms around her body and all she could do was watch her mother kneel down beside Lyceus's coffin. Toris had sat down on the steps, not able to stand any longer.

"Oh gods no Lyceus." Cyrene had her hands on the coffin and so many tears were coming out.

Toris turned his head to Xena. "What happened?" he coldly asked.

Xena licked her lips, she could barely see since her eyes stung so badly. "He… he was killed… by a raider."

After her daughter's words, Cyrene lifted her head and her eyes locked on her child. "Xena… you were responsible for your brother." Her right hand never left her youngest son's coffin. "You should have never let him go with you."

"I… I…" Xena lost her words.

"How could you do this, Xena?" yelled Cyrene.

Xena tore her eyes away from her mother. She now realized people in the area were looking at them. Her mother calling her name returned her attention to her.

"Xena, this is your baby brother."

"I… I know, mother," whispered Xena.

"How could you do this?" hotly whispered the mother. "You were responsible for him." She stood up now and went up a step, her finger pointing at Xena. "You are responsible for his death." She threw up her hands in the air. "You got your brother killed!" she yelled in angry.

"It… it was an accident," pleaded Xena. Her eyes stung even more as tears were now coming out and she became light headed. "I didn't mean-"

"You didn't mean it?" yelled Cyrene, "What the Hades were you thinking, Xena? Your brother is dead thanks to you!"

Toris couldn't take the yelling and fighting, he dropped covered his ears as his lap became wet from his tears.

"Because of your obsession of a dead girl you've gotten your brother killed!"

Xena tried to push away her mother's words.

Cyrene finally stopped and tried to calm down but a look down at her son's coffin only furthered her anger. She climbed the remaining steps and approached her child. "Leave my home, Xena," she whispered half angrily and half painfully.

Xena looked up quickly. "Mother-"
"No," cut off Cyrene, "Leave now. I don't want you back here," she hotly whispered. "Go!"

Xena stared at her mother, surprised by her words and amount of anger. "I…" She fell short on her words as her mother's angry eyes made her shrink. All she could do now was leave, she brushed past her mother. She raced down the steps and went to her mare. She grabbed a dagger from behind her cloak and cut the ropes to Lyceus's coffin.

Cyrene stood there, watching her every move.

Xena quickly mounted her horse and without looking at her brother or mother, she kicked Argo incredibly hard.

Argo whined and broke off into a gallop towards the entrance of Amphipolis.

Cyrene remained standing until she saw her daughter disappeared out of town. She then had to sit down, her strength gone but her eyes remained on Lyceus's coffin. She raised her eyes to the point where Xena had ride off a second ago. "Oh gods… what have I done," she whispered.

Toris had finally removed his hands from his ears. He tried to think about what to do to help. He looked up to his mother, grabbing her hand.

"Toris, I don't know what I've just done." Cyrene squeezed her son's hand.

Toris's hand went pearl white from his mother's grasp. "I can go after her… bring her back."

Cyrene stared at Toris then slowly shook her head. "No… let her go. She won't come back after what I've said to her."

"But… you can tell her you didn't mean it," pleaded Toris, his face was soaked and red.

"She won't… believe it," whimpered Cyrene. She let go of Toris's hand and dropped her face into her hands. "Oh gods." She began crying and whimpering. Her entire life seemed to crush down on her, she felt so desperate as her anger seeped away and she missed her two children. She was left with a dark hole inside of herself.

"I want my two babies back," she rasped out between her tears and sobbing.

Section Two

Part 3: Gabrielle's Third Year

Suddenly a very happy smile formed on her expression when her mother came out of the kitchen with a huge nut bread and fifteen lit candles in it. She then realized everybody around the table was singing happy birthday to her.
Hecuba came up to Gabrielle's right side and carefully lowered the nut bread cake in front of her child. She then stepped back and just admired how happy her daughter was now.

Slowly the singing died out and everybody cheered the small bard to blow out the candles.

Gabrielle giggled some, leaned forward while taking a deep breath, and blew out the candles in one shot.

Everybody cheered and clapped their hands.

Hecuba quickly relit many of the candles in the large dining room. She then sat back down at the table. "Go on and cut the nut bread, honey."

The smiling bard looked up from the bread and asked people how large they wanted their slice. She would then cut the piece perfectly and passed the plate to them. She continued this until everybody had his or her slice and she was left with cutting her own piece. The entire group then quietly ate their nut bread.

Gabrielle couldn't help looking at everybody around the table, feeling so surprised about their reaction to her birthday. She first looked to her master, Cornelio, who was at the other end of the head of the table. Then to his right was Michulus's wife, now widower, Maria and beside Maria was her newborn, Joseph. Gabrielle then shifted her gaze over to Cornelio's left side where his wife was sitting, her name was Adara. And last was her mother, Hecuba, just to Adara's left.

The bard had come to consider herself rather lucky with her new master. Cornelio was the complete opposite of his former son as well as much older. His wife, Adara, was a beautiful woman who only treated her as one of her own. Gabrielle had come to love Cornelio as if he was her own father, the male figure in her life she'd missed since her father's death.

Since she, Hecuba, and Maria escaped to Cornelio's home, everything for them had changed. They were still considered slaves yet they were family too. They were also paid by Cornelio, not very much about three dinars a week but it was something and nothing they ever expected. Cornelio would also make sure to have them sent to the local village market at least once a month for their pleasure.

As far as Cornelio and Adara were concerned, their slaves were workers living with them. Hecuba and Gabrielle were the only two slaves on the grounds, the rest of the people that worked the fields were true farmers and Cornelio was considered a gentleman farmer. He would receive so much of the profit that the farmers would get for their crops.

Gabrielle had also been fortunate enough to be able to keep the horse that had followed them from Michulus's stables. She'd come to adore the horse more than anything, he was a friend she'd never expected but never took for granted. After many days, she'd finally decided upon a proper name for him with Maria's help. His name was Torqueo, fast wind, that's what it meant and that's exactly how fast he could gallop. And now, Gabrielle and Torqueo had grown a bond that was unbreakable as
well as meaningful.

Hecuba looked up after she finished her bread. She saw her daughter was now taking a small but second slice of the bread. "It must be good," she observed aloud.

The young slave chuckled and replied, "Yes, it's wonderful, mother. Thank you."

"I'm not the only one to thank," whispered the mother.

Gabrielle smiled sheepishly and looked down at Cornelio, Adara, and Maria. "Thank you so much."

"I hope you enjoyed yourself today, Gabrielle." Cornelio sat back into his chair. He briefly scratched at his snow white beard then dropped his hand back into his lap.

"I did very much. I enjoyed having the day off." The bard's smile seemed to grow as she continued speaking. "And such a wonderful dinner with all my favourites and the nut bread to top it off."

Maria smiled happily at the girl's gratitude.

Adara peered up at her husband and reached under the table to grasp his hand. She squeezed it rather tightly.

Cornelio nodded at the bard's words then peered over at Maria.

Maria realized what the look was about and she focused back on Gabrielle. "Well, your day hasn't quite ended, Gabrielle. We still have one last thing for you."

The young slave's eyes widened in shock. "No, no I can't take anything else. You've given me more than should be offered." She'd raised her hands up and shook her head.

Hecuba reached over and clasped her child's hand. "Do not disappoint, honey," she whispered.

Gabrielle's eyes shifted away from her mother to her master.

"Come down here, Gabrielle."

The bard licked her lips and nodded at her master's words. She slowly stood up and went down to the other end of the table. She stood between Cornelio and Maria.

Cornelio smiled softly at the young girl and quietly asked, "I understand you enjoy writing?"

"I... I did, sir," replied the bard.

Cornelio folded his arms in his lap and he continued studying the slave. "Do you still enjoy stories and writing?"

"I have not heard any in a long time, sir nor written any."
"Do you think you still would?" countered Cornelio.

Slowly the young girl nodded and replied, "I know I would, sir. I miss my quill and scrolls."

"Then you shouldn't have to worry anymore," cut in Maria. She'd been reaching over to her right to pick up something.

Gabrielle finally looked at her and realized in her lap was a satchel full of scrolls.

"This is for you, Gabrielle."

The bard couldn't believe Maria's words, she had to make sure. "It can't…"

"They are," reassured Maria. She stood up and carefully slipped the satchel's strap over Gabrielle's shoulder.

The small slave stood there, stunned by the weight on her shoulders, something she'd missed since she was a child.

"And you might need this as well, dear."

Ivy eyes lifted from the filled scroll satchel to Adara. Gabrielle almost cried when she saw Adara was holding up a beautiful white quill. She covered the lower portion of her face with her hands and tried incredibly hard not to cry. "Oh gods," she murmured between her hands and lowered them. "That's so beautiful."

Adara handed the quill gently to Cornelio, who then passed it on to Gabrielle.

The small bard spun the quill between her fingers to get a full view of it.

"We all pitched in to help get you these things," mentioned Adara. "We hope you'll treasure them."

"Oh gods yes I always will," promised Gabrielle.

"Just one last thing," cut in Cornelio before Gabrielle walked off. "Pick up that scroll." He directed to the scroll directly in front of his plate.

The bard looked at him with a worried expression. She'd seen the scroll earlier at the start of dinner and kept wondering why it was there.

"Go ahead," urged Cornelio.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and settled her quill carefully onto the table. She then reached forward and gently picked up the scroll. She turned it over until it faced her properly. With her free hand, she held the ribbon that had an ornament at the end. She wasn't familiar with the design but she knew it was of great importance. She looked back at her master in fear. "Are you sure, sir?"
"Of course, go on," persisted the older man.

The bard took a deep breath and slid the ribbon off with care. She then slowly unrolled the scroll but was not sure if she was allowed to read it.

"Read it too, please."

Gabrielle nodded at her master's command. She started at the top where it opened with a 'Dear Gabrielle….' and continued into the body of the letter. As she kept reading, her emotions began to emerge and at the end, she broke down crying.

Maria smiled but somewhat sadly. She took a quick glance at her newborn to make sure he was okay. She then stood up and embraced Gabrielle in a strong hug.

The bard hugged Maria back tightly and finally pulled back after several seconds. She wiped her tears away and smiled at Cornelio.

"I hope you're happy with it, Gabrielle." Cornelio lifted his left hand from his lap that was still laced with Adara's. "It's our gift to you."

"Thank you so much, Cornelio and Adara." The small girl sensed a few more tears but she quickly wiped them away with her left hand. "I… I… I'm not sure what to say. I just know it's always been my dream to go to the Academy of Performing Bards and I never thought it would happen after everything."

"That's what your mother said too," whispered Adara.

Hecuba's face was coated in tears but she was smiling.

Gabrielle quickly went over to her mother and hugged her. "Thank you, mom."

"Cornelio and Adara made it possible," uttered Hecuba between the hug.

When the mother and daughter separated, Cornelio decided it was time for everybody to get some rest after tonight. Gabrielle thanked everybody several times and made sure to give each person a hug. After the dinner and gifts, Gabrielle and her mother cleared the table and left the dirty dishes in the water filled sink for tomorrow. They then went to bed like the others had earlier.

Gabrielle slowly closed the door to her and her mother's room. It was on the same floor as everybody else's except they were further away but it was nice to have their own large room together.

Hecuba sat down on the edge of her bed and peered across to her child. "Did you have a good birthday, honey?"

"It was wonderful," replied the bard. She went over to her bed and carefully placed the scroll satchel, quill, and acceptance scroll down. "I didn't expect any of it."
"I was surprised by Cornelio and Adara's offer to send you to the Academy."

Gabrielle shook her head as she went to the other side of the room and sat on her mother's bed beside her. "I don't understand why they did it." She sighed and thought more about it. "I mean, it's rather expensive to send somebody there. Not to mention I'm not sixteen yet."

"Well honey... I think Cornelio found a way around your age. And don't forget, Cornelio is rather rich as well as well-known."

The daughter shook her head in amazement at what happened to her tonight. "I just don't understand why," she uttered.

"I do not either," agreed Hecuba, "nor would Cornelio explain it to me. I didn't question him." She fell silent and knew her daughter would not talk much more of it. She reached over and grasped her child's knee. "Ready to sleep?"

The bard thought about it and almost said yes but shook her head. "I think I might go talk to Cornelio."

"You want to know why huh?"

The teenager faintly nodded. "Get some rest, mom?"

"I will, honey. Do not be long, okay?"

Gabrielle leaned over and kissed her mother's temple. "I won't, promise." She stood and hurried out of the room.

Hecuba listened to the door closing and she remained still, just thinking how happy her daughter was. Yet her thoughts shifted to her youngest and her mood turned. She missed Lila dearly and there were moments like this that reminded her of her lose. She tried to hold back the tears that still plagued her like her fears. She forced herself to get ready for bed.

Gabrielle had gone back down stairs and could only hope Cornelio was in his office. She hurried to the other end of the house and noted light was pouring out from underneath the door. She felt relieved and quickly knocked on the door.

"Come in," called Cornelio.

The bard opened the door slightly and peeked into the office. "May I come in, sir?"

"Of course," replied Cornelio.

Gabrielle eased into the office and approached him some.

"Sit down, please," offered Cornelio.
The bard slightly nodded and sat down in the comfy, large chair in front of her master.

"I suppose you're here to ask me about the Academy?" Cornelio relaxed back into his large wood chair, his hands resting in his lap.

"Yes, sir. I was curious as to why you're doing this for me."

"It's not just for you, but for your mother too and your future."

Gabrielle merely shook her head, she was becoming more confused.

"Gabrielle, as much as I've tried to make you and Hecuba feel comfortable here and not like slaves, you both still remain as ones." Cornelio paused and considered the best way to explain everything. "I do not agree to slavery nor does Adara. She and I have bought slaves numerous times, mainly young ones, to try and exploit a talent of theirs. It is our hope each time that they master their talent so they can go out in the world and face it."

"I'm still confused, sir. Why would you do such a thing?"

"Because we don't agree with slavery but there is little I can do to override it." Cornelio dropped his head to one side then tried to explain more. "I want you to go to the Academy and learn to be the best bard. I want you to graduate with honours. Then you are to come back to me, show me what you've learned and only then can I grant you freedom."

"Freedom?" whispered the bard in awe.

"Yes."

The teenager couldn't believe what he said and she shook her head. One thing though still confused her so she quietly asked, "Why can't you now?"

Cornelio straightened up in his chair and pointed at the brand on the girl's hip. "That symbol, Gabrielle... that brand is a special one. And I don't mean special as in no means good." He slipped back into his chair. "That particular brand binds you for life as a slave. There are two types of slaves, those types that are not branded and can be set free and the others that are branded and cannot ever see freedom." He laced his hands together and considered the girl for a moment. "There is a list out there of slaves with brands. Any slave that has ever been branded has also been recorded. The most infamous slavers keep a list and continually update each other on the newest slaves."

"Why would they do this?"

"Because they cannot lose their profits or their work."

"Work?" Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "You mean, to somebody like Hecht I'm a piece of... art?"

"Pretty much," confirmed the lord. "He's put time, effort, money, and experience into
you. And because of this, the slavers brand you and record your name, looks, origin, and any slaves that might be family. If you're ever found without a master, by right Hecht can lay claims on you and hunt you down."

"By the gods," uttered the surprised bard.

"And sending you to the Academy is extremely important to you never being found by Hecht or anybody else." Cornelio sighed then rubbed his beard a little. He lowered his hand and explained even further. "If you can start at the Academy and master your talents as a bard then I'll know you can take care of yourself in this world. I will not have to worry about you stumbling into anybody's hands. You can make a name for yourself and start over, Gabrielle."

"A name? You mean… a new name?"

"Yes, unfortunately it would mean you'd have to change your name, Gabrielle. It is however a small price to pay than losing your freedom. And you also must never let anybody see your brand unless you're positive you can trust them."

The bard sadly nodded and asked, "What about my mom?"

"That will be between you both. She may go with you if you think you can support her. Or she may stay and continue here where she knows she'll be safe."

Gabrielle chewed on her lower lip.

Cornelio saw how nervous and fearful the teenager was right now. He stood up from his chair and came over to her. He bent down in front of her and grasped her knee. "Gabrielle, I have faith in your talent. Go to the Academy and learn to be a bard, follow your dreams. Come back to me and prove to me what you've learned and I have no doubt you'll have your freedom."

The small girl smiled at his words. "I hope I can do just that, sir."

"I have every bit of confidence you can, Gabrielle."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Gabrielle?"

The bard's smile went more sheepish as she asked, "May I request one thing?"

"What is that?"

"Can I take Torqueo with me?"

Cornelio laughed quietly at the request yet nodded. "Of course, he is yours."

"Thank you for everything, sir." The bard leaned forward and hugged the older man. Cornelio smiled happily and hugged her back tightly. "I've never seen one as hopeful
as you, you will do fine," he promised. When they separate he said, "Now get to bed. It is late."

"Yes, sir. You too."

"I will," promised the lord. He stood up and stepped back as Gabrielle slid out of the chair. "Goodnight."

Gabrielle smiled back at him. She opened the door but said, "Goodnight." She left the office and returned to her room. It wasn't long before she was out of her clothes and in her nightshift. She quietly crawled into bed and slept peacefully for the first time in years.

~*~*~*~

The next morning, Gabrielle had wakened up a little later than normal. She'd rushed to get ready for today's work and was about ready to hurry out of the room but stopped with a second thought. She furrowed her eyebrows when she realized she hadn't checked the date of when she'd be due at the academy.

The small bard released the door knobbed and quickly raced to the acceptance scroll she'd stashed away in her scroll satchel. She pulled it out and hastily unrolled it. She skimmed through it and finally found the date near the bottom. "Oh gods… in a week," she breathed out.

Gabrielle's left hand was on her forehead, her mouth slightly hanging open, and her legs went weak. She sat down on her bed and just stared at the date. "I have to prepare," she rasped, "I haven't written anything in a long times, gods. I haven't really told a story either… well that's not true." She stopped as she thought about the last time she told a tale. "I told mom and Maria about the mythological Amazons but gods that doesn't count." She laughed and shook her head. "I have to practice; I need to write a story or two. Then check over my spelling… gods can I even still write?" She then giggled at herself for getting so flustered. "Gods! I'll be in the Academy in one week!" she yelled and jumped up from her spot. She furiously rolled up the scroll and pushed it back into the satchel.

The young slave went running out of her room, slamming the door behind her, and tumbling down the stairs. She went directly to the kitchen where she knew her mother would be right now. She threw open the door and scanned the large kitchen for her mother.

"Dear, what's wrong?"

"Mom!" yelled the teenager, "I'll be at the Academy in a week!" She was hanging in the doorway, looking in at her mother.

"Yes, honey I know this."

"Mom! One week, hello???" The bard took a few steps in and started talking rapidly, "I haven't written anything in forever and I haven't told a good story to anybody in a long time. I'm not ready for this! I have to get ready for the Academy or I'll never
"Honey, calm down." Hecuba suddenly had a grin at how excited her daughter was becoming. She threw the dishcloth over her right shoulder and approached her child. "A week is plenty to prepare, honey."

"No its not!" yelled the bard.

Hecuba's grin grew more now. She grasped her daughter's shoulders and whispered, "You'll be fine, Gabrielle. You're an excellent bard and it comes naturally."

"You really think so?" asked the worried bard.

"Yes," promised Hecuba. Her grin turned into a soft smile. "Practice this week and I'm sure you'll be plenty ready by the time you go."

"I don't know," muttered Gabrielle.

"Honey, you'll be just fine." Hecuba pulled her child in and hugged her tightly.

"Thanks, mom," uttered the teenager.

"Welcome, honey." The mother stepped back then asked, "Are you hungry?"

For an answer, Gabrielle's stomach roared.

Hecuba grinned down at her daughter's stomach. "I thought you were."

The stomach growled back.

"Mother," complained Gabrielle. She covered her stomach with her arms and laughed at her tummy.

Hecuba had already returned to the kitchen counter and was picking up a plate full of food. "Sit down, honey."

The bard noted her mother had already set out utensils for her. She sat down, deciding her stomach was right after all. She immediately started eating her breakfast without a second thought.

"You know, you're going to meet a lot of new people at the Academy," mentioned Hecuba, she was now sitting down across from her daughter.

"Yeah, I guess I am," muffled out Gabrielle between her eggs.

"A lot your own age."

"Or older," reminded the teenager.

Hecuba finally leaned back into her chair. "You'll enjoy yourself, honey. I'm so happy you're having this chance."
Gabrielle nodded and finished off her eggs. She was about to start her fruit but paused as she said, "You know what Cornelio told me last night?"

"What's that?"

The bard pressed her fork into the grape. "Well he told me he's sending me not just for the experience but to help me to… take on the world, so to speak."

"What you mean?" Hecuba hadn't known why Cornelio had decided upon the bard education but never disagreed.

"He wants to set me free from slavery," explained Gabrielle, "but he says I can't because of the brand. So by sending me to the Academy it'll give me something to financially stand on and remain independent. I guess he then hopes I'll never get caught and returned to slavery." She was about to lift the grape as she stared down at it but she lifted her eyes to her mother. "He said if I come back and have proven myself, he'll let me leave and go on my own. And you can come too if you feel you want to."

Hecuba just stared at Gabrielle, not believing a single word she just heard.

Gabrielle could tell her mother wasn't sure what to say at this point. So, she just lifted her grape and chewed on it while she waited for her mother to process it all.

"Free?" whispered Hecuba after about a minute.

The bard faintly nodded, she had her head down and her fork piercing another grape. "Free."

"Gods…." Hecuba just seemed to stare at a black knot in the wood table, still trying to grasp her daughter's words.

Gabrielle felt a small grin tug at her lips. She reached out with her left hand and grasped her mother's hand that was near. "Mom, we can be free in two years."

Hecuba squeezed her daughter's hand tightly and began crying.

The bard's shoulders dropped and she quickly stood up. She went over to her mother but without breaking their locked hands. She knelt down, leaned forward, and hugged her mother.

Hecuba continued to cry with her head buried in Gabrielle's neck.

For the rest of the day, Gabrielle busied herself with various chores. She knew her mother would stay rather busy with caring for Joseph since Maria was still slightly recovering from the pregnancy. Cornelio was busy all day with business, dealing with his various farmers on his lands. Adara would occasionally assist Gabrielle in her chores despite the bard's protests.
By the evening though, the small family came together in the dining hall again to enjoy one of Hecuba's meals. For once, there was a change in the order of the meal. At the end of dinner, Cornelio requested that Gabrielle tell a story for them.

The bard was caught off guard by the request yet felt so pleased by it. She stood up and went around the table to stand in front of everybody, directly in front of the huge fireplace. She paced back and forth for about a minute trying to put together a good story. Everybody waited patiently for her and saw her come to a stop in the middle and look at them with a wild, happy expression.

Soon the family was woven into a tale about two women travelling together, both fighting for the greater good and both trying to seek some kind of meaning in their lives. Hecuba instantly realized who the two women were despite their name changes; it made her sigh sadly at the memories of Xena. The rest of the family was unsure about who the characters were, too lost in the story to take notice.

It hadn't taken but a single sentence for Gabrielle to suddenly return to her bardic side. She was moving back and forth, slightly mimicking her character's actions and changing her voice tones to match their own. She brought her characters to life as she spoke her story. At the end of the story, Gabrielle paused then spoke her last words:

"The friends would continue to travel the known-world in search of adventure even though both were scared they could lose the other. But what neither realized was both of them would never give up or truly separate because they held each other in their hearts." Gabrielle let the last few words roll off her tongue slowly then went quiet. She realized everybody was still staring at her and she now felt a little uneasy. "It was that bad huh?"

Maria started to giggle and replied, "No, it was wonderful, Gabrielle."

Adara's expression shifted from awe into a softer one. "I love it, Gabrielle."

"Excellent, honey," praised her mother.

The bard sighed but realized Cornelio hadn't approved of it and her eyes flickered over to him in worry.

Cornelio slowly nodded his head, and he said, "Beautiful, Gabrielle."

The teenager sighed in relief. "Thank you, sir."

Maria yawned and when she opened her eyes again after the yawn, she realized Joseph had fallen asleep in her arms. "I believe it's time for bed for Joseph and me," she quietly mentioned.

Adara softly smiled when she saw her grandchild relaxed in her mother's arms and a bit of drool at one corner. "I'll help you, dear." She quietly stood up.

Maria carefully and slowly stood up with Joseph in her arms. She cradled him tightly against her breasts while going around the table. "Thank you for the story, Gabrielle."
"You're welcome, Maria." The bard smiled at her friend and watched her leave with Adara.

Cornelio gradually stood up and looked at the teenager. "I hope you'll have another story for tomorrow night, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle became shocked by the request but hastily replied. "Yes of course, sir."

Cornelio winked at the girl then made his way out of the dinning room. "Goodnight, ladies."

"Goodnight, sir," called Hecuba and Gabrielle together.

The teenager glanced to her mother after the master was gone. "Did you ask him to do that?"

Hecuba shrugged while gathering the dishes around her.

"Mother," growled the young slave.

Hecuba picked up the plate full of dirty dishes. "You're welcome," she teased and walked off through the door that was behind her.

Gabrielle laughed then realized she needed to help her mother. She quickly gathered up the dishes and pushed through the door into the kitchen where her mother went earlier. "Thank you, mom."

Hecuba flashed a smile; she was busy washing the dirty dishes in the gigantic bucket of warm water. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself as much as we did."

"I did," agreed the teenager. Gabrielle lowered the dishes into the wash bucket and also kissed her mother's cheek. She then hurried out of the kitchen to gather the rest of the dishes.

Hecuba continued washing the dirty dishes then dropping them into the next bucket full of clean water.

Gabrielle entered the kitchen again with another armload of dishes. She lowered them into the dirty dish bucket too then went to the other bucket. She pulled off a dishtowel from the counter and started pulling out the clean dishes from the clean water bucket. She shook the water off each one, dried them, and put them back in their homes in various areas of the kitchen.

"I think everybody enjoyed the story," commented Hecuba.

"Yeah I think so too," agreed the young woman. "I know I did," she teased.

The mother softly chuckled, she was busying herself with the cleaning the plates now. "You put Joseph to sleep."

"Well… always a tough one in every crowd." Gabrielle spun around after putting the
mugs up in a cupboard.

"I think he was tired," reminded the mother.

"I know, mom." The bard pulled out several utensils from the bucket and started drying them. As she was putting the utensils away, a thought occurred to her. She peered across to her mother then looked back at the drawer now restocked with clean forks, knives, and spoons. She pushed the drawer closed and returned to the clean bucket. "Mom?"

"Yes, honey?"

"If…." Gabrielle stopped herself and decided to rephrase her words. "When we're free, are we going to look for Lila?"

Hecuba suddenly stopped doing her work and just stared down into the murky water. "I… I don't know, honey."

The bard shook her head and reached into the water. "I've been thinking about it a lot." She pulled out a pot and started drying it while saying, "You could stay here a little longer and I could go look for her."

"Honey, you have no idea where she is right now… if she is even alive."

"I know, mother but we could try."

Hecuba was grasping the rim of the bucket and started to squeeze it harder. "I know, Gabrielle but it's almost… impossible to find somebody when they're a slave. It's like… it's like finding one piece of straw out of an entire bail."

Gabrielle stopped drying the pot and considered her mother's words. "But with enough determination and work, I could find her mother. By then, I'll be resourceful enough too."

The mother wasn't sure what to say at that point. She just reached over with her right hand and grasped her daughter's hand. "One thing at a time, honey. Let's get you through the Academy first, okay?"

Gabrielle licked her lips and slowly nodded.

The mother and daughter quietly went back to cleaning the dishes together. For the rest of the time, they remained fairly silent, both thinking about what the future would bring for them. After they finished cleaning up the kitchen, they headed upstairs to their bedroom for the night. Both were rather exhausted especially Gabrielle after telling her story and it wasn't long before they were asleep.

For the next few days, the daily routine continued except with Gabrielle's added stories after dinner. Each story for that week was based on the two women and their adventures. By the third night, Gabrielle had become so immersed in her bardic side, she started writing again. At first, she was unsure what to write about but then decided she'd start a diary type of story, recording her life in a story. She liked that idea and
began unrolling a scroll each night to ink out her muses.

As the days continued to grow longer with summer's approach, Gabrielle's time in Cornelio's household was becoming shorter. On her day to travel, she made sure to do all her chores that morning then in the late morning, she went upstairs to gather her things. She tried to think about what she needed to do other than gather her stuff. That's when she realized she would need to take care of Torqueo and ready him.

While Gabrielle was preparing her things, a knock at the door came to the room. The bard looked at the open door and turned around when she realized it was Cornelio.

"I see you're packing."

"Yes, sir."

Cornelio took a step into the room but stopped and put his hands behind his back. "You are taking Torqueo with you?"

"Yes, sir if that is okay….?"

"Of course, he's always been yours. Make sure to take a set of saddlebags as well, Gabrielle."

"Thank you, sir."

Cornelio smiled some then went serious again. "Do you have many clothes?"

"Only two sets, sir."

The master's lips pressed together tightly then relaxed again. "Well, I will give you some money to pick up some more in town."

"Its okay, sir. Two is plenty."

Cornelio shook his head in protest. "You'll need more clothes especially when winter comes later this year."

"But sir."

"Don't make me pull a master's order on you, Gabrielle," stated the lord. Although he was serious he was also grinning.

"Yes, sir."

"Also, I am having two friends of mine from the village stopping by."

Gabrielle suddenly had a confused look as to why he was telling her this. "Sir?" she questioned.

Cornelio rocked on his feet a little then explained more. "They're going to escort you to the Academy. I want to make sure you get there safely."
"Thank you, sir."

Cornelio faintly nodded then turned around to leave. "Make sure you find me before you leave, Gabrielle."

"I will, sir." Gabrielle watched him start to leave but she quickly went after him. "Sir?"

Cornelio turned around; he was standing in the hallway. "Yes?"

The teenager grabbed the frame of the doorway. "May I ask a favour?"

Cornelio approached the girl and asked, "About?"

"Finding somebody for me."

Cornelio slowly raised an eyebrow but said, "Go on."

"I was hoping you might be able to find the whereabouts of my sister."

"Sister?" whispered Cornelio.

"Yes, sir. She is also a branded slave like mom and I. She was sold to a different master and not to Michulus."

Cornelio considered what she said and now recalled the young girl on the stage before Hecuba's auction. "I do recall her there."

"Sir, do you think you could find out where she is?"

The master shook his head because he knew exactly what Gabrielle wanted to do. "Gabrielle, even if I find out where she is... the current master could know who you are." He sighed though when he saw the desperate look on the girl's face. "I will try to find her, Gabrielle. Once I have, I will try to buy her from her current master."

The bard's expression brightened up. "Oh gods, honestly?"

"I will try my best," promised the lord.

"Thank you, sir." Gabrielle sprung forward and hugged the older man.

Cornelio softly laughed and hugged her back. "Now, please get ready. There's isn't much day light left for travelling."

"Yes, sir." The teen stepped back and briefly watched her lord leave. She then rushed back into her room and organized the remains of her stuff. After she felt she had everything, she went barreling down the stairs and raced to the stables. Once in the stable, she dropped her items near the stall door and smiled at Torqueo. "Hey, boy."

Torqueo whined his greeting back.
"Ready to go to the Academy?"

The stallion threw up his head and slammed his right hoof on the ground a few times.

"Me too." Gabrielle grinned and went down to the other end of the stable. She gathered up her horse's tack and went back to his stall. She went inside and started tacking him up. It wasn't long before she had Torqueo ready and out of the stables. Gabrielle had also made sure to put on the saddlebags and filled them with her stuff and tied her scroll satchel down. Slowly, the pair made their way back to the house where they found two men outside on horseback with Cornelio.

The bard approached the men and gave them shy smiles.

"Go find your mother, Maria, and Adara," ordered the master.

"Yes, sir." The teen hastily tied Torqueo's reins to a post then rushed into the house.

"I will be back, gentlemen." Cornelio went back inside of the house but waited at the front doors. He saw everybody gathering around him one by one. The last person to arrive was Gabrielle and her mother. "Are you ready, Gabrielle?"

"Yes, sir," replied the young slave.

Cornelio smiled at her answer. He stepped forward and gently grasped her shoulders. "There are two things you must know and remember, Gabrielle."

The bard faintly nodded.

"First, you are still a slave and must be very cautious. Do not let anybody know about your brand. Is that clear?"

Gabrielle bit her lower lip but whispered, "Yes, sir."

Cornelio squeezed the young girl's shoulders some then continued his words. "And second, the people at the Academy will know you as my grandchild, nothing more and nothing less."

"Yes, sir," repeated the slave.

Cornelio smiled warmly at the girl then stepped forward and hugged the girl. "Work hard."

The bard held tightly to Cornelio, and she received a kiss on her forehead from him. She saw him step away and she shifted to Adara.

Adara wished Gabrielle good luck and gave her a hug as well.

Next the teenager said goodbye to Maria and Joseph, giving them each a hug and Joseph a kiss on his cheek.
Last, the bard said goodbye to her mother.

Hecuba tried not to begin crying as she hugged her child. She knew this was the start of her daughter's freedom despite she would miss Gabrielle. After she separated from the hug, she whispered to Gabrielle her love and for her to be careful.

Gabrielle tried to ease her mother's worries with one of her bright smiles. She knew it would only help so much but she was led out of the door with Cornelio. She went over to Torqueo and untied his reins. She threw them over his head and went to his side. With a deep breath, she grabbed onto the saddle horn and back of the saddle. She gritted her teeth and hauled herself up into the saddle like numerous times before this one.

Cornelio looked over at the two men. "Please get her there safely by tonight."

"We will, Cornelio," promised one man.

"The gods bless you both," whispered Cornelio. He then looked at Gabrielle and said, "Be on your way, Gabrielle."

The bard nodded and urged Torqueo to turn around. She started for the gates at a slow walk.

The two men quickly followed after the young woman.

Gabrielle looked back to her family that stood on the porch of the house. She waved to them all and smiled. "Goodbye!" she called back. She watched as everybody but Cornelio waved to her. She sighed as she shifted back into her saddle.

"So you're Gabrielle huh?" asked one man.

The young slave looked at the man and smiled at him. "Yes."

The man chuckled deeply and said, "I am Rothman and this is Balta."

"You're becoming a bard?" inquired Balta.

Gabrielle smiled at the question and nodded. "I am."

Rothman suddenly grinned and asked, "Care to practice on us?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "If you're both interested…?"

"Certainly," insisted Balta.

The bard looked away as she considered a story to tell them. She chewed on the inside of her mouth then looked back at them. "Ever hear how the Gorgons became to be?"

Both men shook their heads, already interested in the topic.

"Well…." Gabrielle eased into her story as her right hand freed from her reins and
started waving her words around from her lips.

The ride to the Academy of Performing Bards wasn't that long after all, as Gabrielle had thought. Her story had made everything a lot more bearable and it wasn't long after her story that they saw the Academy just ahead in the distance.

Balta smiled at the young woman and said, "Thank you for the story, Gabrielle."

"You're welcome," replied the teenager.

"Yes, it was very excellent. It made this trip a lot better." Rothman however laughed quietly and added a second thought. "I don't know how we'll stand the ride back."

Gabrielle grinned at his comments. Then for the first time, she studied them both and realized that they were carrying swords. She almost was shocked but quickly looked away before her expression showed any surprise. She hadn't expected them to be carrying weapons but that's when she knew Cornelio was serious about her being careful. It was in that instant that she realized just how much she needed to guard her brand as a secret like it would mean death for her if anybody knew of it.

As the group neared the gigantic building, they noticed there were a few other people going inside already. The two boys going into the Academy were rather young about Gabrielle's age. Around the large Academy building were several smaller buildings most likely dorms. Then surrounding the grounds were either fields or small olive groves. The crops and olive groves must provide a small stipend for the Academy the bard figured.

The teenager looked over at Rothman and Balta, a thought occurring to her. "How far is Athens?"

"About half a candlemark over those hills," replied Balta.

Gabrielle nodded and looked back at the Academy. Once they were before the building, she dismounted and approached the man that stood at the doors.

"Who are you?" inquired the older man.

"I am Gabrielle."

"Letter?" urged the man. He had a scroll in his right hand, he was busy unrolling it and checking it.

The bard, however, was fishing through her scroll satchel, looking for her acceptance letter.

Both Rothman and Balta exchanged looks but neither moved from their spots behind the bard.

"Here it is." Gabrielle walked up to the man and held out her scroll; in her other hand was Torqueo's reins.
The man hastily rolled up his scroll and took Gabrielle's. He scanned through it then rolled it back up. He handed it over. "Cornelio?"

"Yes, sir that's my grandfather," explained Gabrielle.

The man suddenly smiled at the young woman and said, "Well welcome to the Academy of the Performing Bards, Gabrielle." He slightly turned and pointed past the huge building. "Behind the academy building is a stable if you wish to stable your horse." He then returned his attention to her and the two men. "And these gentlemen are….?"

Gabrielle looked back at Rothman and Balta then looked at the man again. "They were here to escort me," she explained.

"Very well."

Rothman looked from the man down to Gabrielle. "You will be fine from here, Gabrielle?"

"Yes, thank you both," replied the bard. She turned around and neared them a little. "Thank you so much."

"Enjoy your time and you'll do wonderful," praised Balta. "I'm sure we will see you some time soon."

Gabrielle smiled and watched the two men begin to leave. "Bye!"

The two men flashed smiles at the girl and waved before disappearing down the road. The young teenager sighed deeply and looked back at the man. "Stable is behind?"

"Yes," replied the man.

Gabrielle nodded then decided to go ahead and stable Torqueo. Once around the building, she found the stable and took Torqueo there. She went inside and found no other horses in any stalls. "Looks like it might be a lonely two years, boy."

Torqueo whined and shook his head.

"Don't worry, I'll visit each day and we'll go for rides. How's that sound?"

The stallion threw up his head and whined. He then started heading for a stall.

"That one?" Gabrielle opened the door and led him into it. First she untacked the saddlebags and set them aside on the stall door. Next she started taking the rest of the tack off him. It didn't take her long to settle Torqueo in for the day. She was also happy to find a feedbag and a gigantic bag of grain at the end of the stable. She made sure to fill the feedbag and take it to her stallion. After she tied the bag up for him, she grabbed her saddlebags and went back to the front of the academy.

"Are you ready?" asked the man at the doors.
"Yes," replied the teenager.

"This way then. I'll show you to your dorm." The man walked off to his right and went to a long but still small building that ran alongside the academy building. "There is only one other girl that will be in your class."

"Only one other?" inquired Gabrielle.

"Yes," responded the man. "She hasn't shown just yet however you two will bunk together. The rest of your dorm mates will be three young men. They're very nice boys." The man climbed the three steps up to the porch of the dorm. He pushed opened the door and walked past six beds and came to the end of the dorm where there was another door. He swung it open and revealed a small but adequate room for two people. "You will be staying here."

The bard looked around in the room after she stepped in then looked back at the man. "Thank you, sir."

"Its not sir, I'm Feodoras."

Gabrielle chuckled quietly but smiled at the man. "Thank you, Feodoras."

"And dinner will be shortly." Feodoras glanced out the small window and saw the sun was low in the west. "Normally at sunset."

The young bard had settled her items down on one bed in the room and returned her attention to Feodoras. "Thank you."

Feodoras smiled some and stepped back into the doorway. "Enjoy your time here, Gabrielle. If you ever need anything I'm here to help." He turned then silently left the empty dorm but not without closing the door to Gabrielle's room.

Gabrielle sighed contently even though she was slightly homesick already. This was the first time she was truly ever on her own. On one hand, she was rather excited and couldn't wait to begin classes tomorrow but then she was rather scared as much as nervous about what laid ahead of her. Trying to keep her mind off things, she went to the window and studied the area more. Her eyes then lifted up to the sky and studied all of the thick clouds rolling in now. "Mmmm it'll probably rain," she concluded quietly to herself.

The bard then sat down on the foot of her bed and tried to relax for the first time today. She felt rather exhausted from the long, busy day. She then suddenly fell back into her bed and closed her eyes. "Gods I'm so tired," she moaned. She reached over her head and grabbed the pillow just above her head. She tossed it over her head and decided maybe a few minutes of sleep would be good before dinner.

Yet as the few minutes rolled by they soon turned into several candlemarks. And despite the entire ruckus in the main hall of the dorm, the young bard never woke up. It wasn't until the sound of thunder crashing outside did she finally wake up in surprise.
"Gods," moaned Gabrielle in the dark. She sat there, rubbing her face and trying to wake up. "I wonder how long I slept for?" she muttered. She glanced outside after realizing it was dark now but she could hear the rain coming down rather heavily. But now she had a slight problem since there was no candles lit in her room and she didn't quite know where they were in the room.

Suddenly the lightening flashed and lit up the bedroom.

"Wait, there's one on that desk." Gabrielle stood up and carefully stepped forward some. She was grateful for the light pouring in from under the door from the main dorm hall. She found her way to the desk and fumbled around for the candle and flint stone, she was successful. After several strikes, she was able to light the candle. Then carrying it over to the other candle on the next desk, she was able to light that one as well.

The bard returned the candle to her desk and sat back down on her bed. She stared at her saddlebags next to her and she debated whether to unpack now or tomorrow. She honestly felt like just crawling back in bed and sleeping more.

Gabrielle covered her mouth has she yawned. She looked out of the window and was lowering her hand from her mouth when the lightening flashed. In that brief instant, she had seen Feodoras not far off in the distance with two other figures.

The bard furrowed her eyebrows at who could possibly be outside in weather like this. She went to the window and leaned against the sill. She now could see Feodoras was holding a lit torch that was flickering wildly in the rain. His torch was lighting up a woman's face, an older woman but not extremely old. For a brief instant, Gabrielle felt her heart stop when she saw the details of the woman's face. She had a well-chiselled face, almost high cheek bones, and midnight hair. "Xena?" she whispered and almost went through the window but she didn't when she saw the woman in the flash of lightening.

The woman was rather tall but not quite Xena's large height and she did have black hair but wavy. Her face was chiselled and hard yet her entire face was more rounded compared to Xena's. Gabrielle though knew the woman must have been around Xena's age or so.

Gabrielle then realized there was still another woman beside this tall woman. Well this other woman seemed a little smaller and possibly younger. She could barely make out the girl's features since she was hidden well in her cloak like the older woman. As she kept watching, she saw some kind of exchange between the two women. The smaller one handing over something kind of long and thin then it disappeared under the tall woman's cloak.

Feodoras then directed the young woman to follow him but before she did, she hugged the taller one.

The older woman hugged the younger one tightly then whispered something in her ear and pushed her off. After that, Gabrielle lost any trace of that tall woman in the
darkness but she was able to watch Feodoras and the young woman head towards her dorm.

"Must be my roommate," considered Gabrielle aloud. She quickly moved away from the window, not wanting to be caught spying or anything. She now heard the dorm door at the other end swing open and two sets of boots tap down the hall.

For the first time, the young bard recognized other voices in the dorm, young male voices. She picked out three of them and knew that her dorm mates must have arrived while she was asleep. But now the tapping of boots was right in front of her door and a knock came at the door.

Gabrielle hastened to the door and pulled it open, a huge smile on her face.

"Evening, Gabrielle." Feodoras smiled warmly and pushed his hood away. "Your roommate finally showed up."

The bard chuckled some and looked past him but still couldn't make the girl's face out with her hood over her head. "Thank you, Feodoras."

Feodoras nodded and stepped away to let the other female into the room. He quietly left the dorm to let everybody get accompanied.

Gabrielle closed the door after the girl entered the room.

The girl swung her pack off and tossed it onto the bed. She also had a satchel on her side, which was actually under her cloak and she put it on the bed too. She then faced Gabrielle and pulled her hood back. "Hi," she greeted.

Gabrielle stared at the young woman and took in her features. She was slightly taller than her and had rather curly blond hair. Taking a quick glance at her body, she was rather slim but very muscular and wore very unusual clothes. Finally she looked at her face and she had an amazing smile and bright amber eyes. "Um... hi," she greeted back shyly.

"Quite some weather out here huh?" inquired the young woman. She was running her hands through her thick, curly hair then untying her cloak.

"Uhhh... yeah it's really raining." Gabrielle felt rather shy now and wasn't sure why either.

The young woman softly chuckled and took off her cloak finally. She swung it around and tossed it on her bed. She then looked back at the other woman and realized she was a little uneasy. Her broad shoulders slumped and she stepped closer, holding out her arm. "I'm sorry. I'm Ephiny."

Gabrielle only stared at her in awe between what she looked like and what she was wearing.

Ephiny dropped her head to one side when she realized the other woman was just baffled by her. But then she felt a warm arm clasp her own finally.
"I'm… I'm Gabrielle," muttered the bard.

Ephiny briskly shook Gabrielle's arm and smiled at her. "Great to meet you, Gabrielle." She released the small arm and turned around to her stuff on the bed. She picked up her cloak again and carried it over to the room where she found several pegs on the wall. She hung her cloak from there. "Where you from?"

"Um… uh…." Gabrielle sat down and shook her head. "I'm sorry." She shook her head and laughed at herself. "I'm really sorry."

Ephiny turned around and looked at the other girl in curiosity. "Sorry about?"

"For being so… rude," answered the bard. "I've just never seen…." She wasn't quite sure what the right words were for what she was trying to explain.

"A woman in these clothes?" teased Ephiny.

"Uh… well, yeah basically," agreed the teenager.

Ephiny felt a grin tug at her lips as she approached the other woman some. "Well they're customary from where I am from." She went back to her bed and started opening her bag.

"Customary?" whispered the confused slave.

"Yes." Ephiny straightened up and had a mask in her right hand. "I am an Amazon." After she spoke those words, she completely lost all comprehension in the other girl. All she saw was Gabrielle sitting there, mouth hung open, wide eyes, and a look that was a mix between shock and awe. Ephiny couldn't control herself and started laughing at the girl.

Gabrielle shook her head but couldn't shake away her surprise. "You… you can't be… they're just…."

"Legend?" finished the Amazon. "No, we are as real as the Gods."

"Oh gods," whispered the bard in awe.

Ephiny laughed softly and decided to sit down now. She carefully placed her mask behind her and looked back at the other woman. "Don't start worshipping me or something," she teased.

The bard half glared at her roommate but yet she had a silly grin. "I'm just surprised is all."

"I noticed," pointed out the Amazon. A few chuckles came from Gabrielle, which only made Ephiny grin more.

The slave girl was about to say something else but stopped when somebody knocked at the door.
"Must be our dorm mates." Ephiny stood up and went over to the door. She pulled it open and found three young men all peering in at them. "Yes?" she inquired.

The boys looked at Ephiny for the first time and smiled at her.

"Hi, we thought we'd introduce ourselves."

The two girls grinned but it was Ephiny that said anything.

"Well, I'm Ephiny and this is Gabrielle," introduced the Amazon.

The young man nodded and smiled, he looked back at the two other young men behind him. "This is Twickenham."

Twickenham waved and gave a shy smile. "H-h-h-hi."

"Then beside him is Stallonus."

"Hi, girls," greeted the Stallonus.

"And I'm… Orion." Orion smiled warmly at them. "We thought somebody was in there, but we weren't sure until Ephiny showed up."

"Oh yeah sorry. I was asleep," confessed Gabrielle.

"Wait, a-a-are you a-a-an Amazon?" spoke up Twickenham.

Ephiny looked over at the young man and grinned. "Yes, how could you tell?"

"I think it was the outfit," replied Orion.

"You mean an Amazon that fights with swords and bows and arrows?" Stallonus waved his right hand around like he was mocking a sword. "I heard so many stories about how they fight the centaurs." He jumped forward and pretended to stab at an imaginary centaur.

The small Amazon giggled a little at Stallonus words. "Yes, the same."

"That's cool," praised Stallonus.

"So you two are here to become bards too?"

Gabrielle's eyes flickered back over to Orion. "Yeah… my grandfather is sending me here."

"My sisters have sent me here," added in Ephiny.

"All of us…." Orion gestured to himself and the two other boys. "We won a bard's contest. So did another friend of ours."
"Who's that?" inquired Gabrielle.

"His name is Euripides. Trust me, you'll know when you meet him."

"All four of you won?" asked the curious bard.

Orion faintly nodded. "Yeah, there was a big bard's competition in Athens to come here for the two years. Since we all won we don't have to pay, it's all funded."

"Oh gods… wow. Was it really hard?"

"N-n-n-o j-j-just a little n-n-nerve racking," explained Twickenham.

"Well… anyway we thought we'd introduce ourselves," explained Orion. "We know you two must be tired after travelling."

Ephiny nodded her head in agreement. "I had a long ride from the Nation myself."

"Yeah, I bet… how long was it?"

Ephiny turned her head to Gabrielle. "About a four day ride."

"Then we definitely should let you rest," cut in Orion. "Goodnight and sleep well."

"G-g-goodnight." Twickenham smiled and shyly slipped away.

"Night, girls."

Orion grabbed Stallonus's shoulder and tugged on him to follow.

The two young men went back down the aisle to their beds.

Gabrielle and Ephiny giggled together and closed the door to their room.

Gabrielle rested on the door while she watched Ephiny go back to her bed.

The small Amazon sat on the foot of her bed and looked up at her new friend. "I need to organize some of my stuff before we sleep. Is that okay?"

"Oh yeah sure." The slave smiled softly and added, "I need to unpack too. I went to sleep right when I got here."

The Amazon chuckled and said, "You must have been tired."

"Yeah I really was," agreed the smaller girl. She went over to her bed and grabbed a hold of her saddlebags.

"You came by horse?" observed the Amazon.

Gabrielle glanced at her own saddlebags then back at her friend. "Yeah, I did."
"So did I." Ephiny grinned and said, "I was wondering whose horse that was in the stable. He's really beautiful."

The bard flashed a smile as she went to her desk. "Thank you. His name is Torqueo." She lifted her saddlebags up then lowered them onto the desk. She quietly went through her stuff.

"I like that name." The Amazon picked up her mask and carried it over to the small dresser. She placed it on top of it. "My mare's name is Diana."

"Diana?" Gabrielle turned her head back as Ephiny turned to face her. "You mean as in the Roman version of Artemis?"

"The same," agreed the Amazon.

"That's right… I forgot the Amazons praise Artemis."

Ephiny nodded as she went back to her pack. "Artemis is our goddess."

Gabrielle shook her head. She returned her attention to unpacking her few items. "I never realized Amazons were real. I mean… I've heard so many legends and when you hear that many you wonder if any of its true."

Ephiny laughed quietly while pulling out several scrolls. "Well some of them are far fetched… especially the one about us cutting off our left breast."

The bard straightened up and had a very painful expression. "Godssss… I've heard of that one."

"Yeah, that one is not true," argued the Amazon. She was busy pulling out a drawer at her desk and putting scrolls away, a quill or two, and bottles of ink. "What are some of the others?"

"I heard ones where Amazons were known to… just disappear in the forest. Some say the Amazon would turn into a tree or bird."

Ephiny suddenly cracked up laughing. "Oh sweet Artemis, I never heard of that one!"

Gabrielle had an amused grin. She finished tucking her new scrolls away with her quill and ink jar. "Yeah, I didn't believe that one myself. But at the same time… where ever there's smoke there's fire."

"True," agree Ephiny, "there's some kind of truth to it."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle carried her saddlebags over to her dresser. She started to pull out her few items of clothing and putting them away in her drawers. "Oh Hades," she grumbled.

Ephiny glanced over, away from her dresser to Gabrielle. "What's wrong?"

"I forgot to stop in the town on the way here. Cor… my grandfather gave me money to
buy more clothes."

The small Amazon shrugged and went back to putting her clothes away. "Nothing to worry about. We're just outside of Athens. We can go there together and go to the market."

"Really?" asked the surprised bard.

"Yeah sure," promised the Amazon. She then looked back over at her friend. Gabrielle had her back to her so it gave her a few seconds to actually study Gabrielle for the first time. The bard wore typical peasant clothes, which was a long brown skirt and a blue top. She watched as Gabrielle bent forward to put something in the bottom drawer. That's when Ephiny noticed something odd on her friend's right hip just between the shirt and skirt. She couldn't quite make out the thing but she quickly looked away when Gabrielle turned around. "Athens's market is huge," she resumed.

"Gods… I've heard there's anything you can think of there."

"That's what I heard too," agreed the Amazon. She then noted Gabrielle had finished unpacking and was settling her saddlebags into a corner. "I think I'm going to change into my night shift."

Gabrielle chuckled and said, "Sounds like a good idea." She was back at her desk and opened her bottom drawer to slip away her small pouch of dinars. She returned to her dresser and was pulling out a night shift.

The two girls kept their backs to one another as they each changed into their night shifts. Once they both were sure the other had changed, they turned around.

"I hope its okay I have this bed." Gabrielle lifted an eyebrow in question.

Ephiny shook her head and said, "Don't worry. I rather not sleep near the window, personally."

Gabrielle went over to her desk to blow out her candle, then to her bed and pulled the sheets back. She crawled into her bed and settled in comfortably.

The young Amazon also took care of her candle then went to bed.

"So what type of bard are you?" spoke up the slave.

Ephiny glanced across the room. Slowly Gabrielle's face was forming as her eyes adjusted to the dark room. "I like to write poetry the most. How about you?"

"Well… I'm always between writing a story and telling one." The teenager pressed her lips together in thought then added, "I think I like to tell them more. Then I get an immediate reaction from my audience."

"Something you can see."

"Yeah, exactly," agreed the slave. "But at the same time, I like to know my scrolls
might be handed around and live longer than me."

Ephiny chuckled yet had to agree with her friend. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Sssso… why are you here?" Gabrielle suddenly realized how it sounded and she hastily added, "I mean I know why you're here. It's just… confusing why an Amazon would want to be a bard instead."

The teenaged Amazon gave a long sigh and tried to think of a reply. "Well… I love being an Amazon but I also love to tell stories in poetry." She paused while fiddling with her bed sheet. "I guess I'm here to figure out whether I want to be an Amazon or a bard."

The slave considered her friend's explanation. She stared up at the ceiling then turned her head to Ephiny. "Why can't you be both?"

Ephiny turned her head to her friend. She just stared at Gabrielle for several seconds then turned her head away. "I don't know… I just never saw an Amazon also being a bard."

"Why not?" argued the teenager.

Ephiny opened her mouth, trying to come up with a response yet nothing was coming to mind. "I'll have to think about that one," she finally said.

Gabrielle chuckled quietly to herself. She remained quiet for a few minutes, just thinking about her day and everybody she's met. She didn't know what to expect tomorrow let alone in a year or two. She was stunned enough what had happened to her in almost three years. She then thought more about Ephiny and her way of life or that of an Amazon. It was something she'd only heard about but could never quite imagine to its fullest. She slowly turned her head back to Ephiny. "What's it like to be an Amazon?"

The young Amazon felt a very warm grin pull at her lips. She'd been expecting that question all night and finally here it was. "It's wonderful… hard but wonderful."

"How is it hard?" probed the slave.

"Well, when you're in training to become a true Amazon it's a lot of work."

"What you have to do?"

Ephiny quietly laughed because of just how curious Gabrielle was. "Well normally the mother trains her daughter or daughters to think like an Amazon. She teaches them at a young age that women are not passive to men, that Amazon means strength, and that to be apart of the Nation means to stand for something. We learn that being an Amazon gives us honour and one huge family."

Gabrielle giggled at that, just trying to imagine so many women together like that. "What happens after that?"
"Well around the age of thirteen they start the train us how to hunt, exercise, teach us Amazon law and history."

"They teach you how to fight?"

"Yes but that isn't until we're fifteen."

Gabrielle quickly turned her head to Ephiny. "So you can fight?"

The young Amazon chewed on her lower lip, just trying to hold back her grin. "Yes."

"What can you fight with?"

"Mainly a staff. Before I left, they just started to train me with a sword."

"Oh gods really?" asked the excited bard.

"Yup. Since I mastered the staff then I could move onto the sword."

Gabrielle had one of the hugest grins on her face as she imagined all of this in her head. "Who teaches you to fight? Your mother too?"

The teenaged Amazon lost her grin at the mention of a mother. "Not normally. A weapons master in a class trains you. Although when you master a staff you're given your mother's staff that she earned after mastering the staff."

"So it's a tradition? For each mother to pass onto her daughter her staff?"

"Yes, exactly," agreed Ephiny.

Gabrielle chuckled at that and shook her head some. "Gods that's so amazing." She chewed on the inside of her mouth some between being a little hungry and being a little excited. "What does your mother think about you being here?"

The Amazon closed her eyes when she heard the question. She took a few deep breaths then quietly said, "My mother has... passed away."

"Oh gods, I'm sorry, Ephiny." The bard turned on her left side to face her friend. "I didn't mean to-"

"It's okay," protested the Amazon, "you didn't know." She turned her head to the other bard. "My mother was killed when I was a child. She died in a battle against the centaurs. I had no other blood family... no sister. So I was taken in by another Amazon."

"Who was that?" persisted Gabrielle.

"Well she isn't too much older than me so she really acts as my sister than my mother. Her name is Eponin."

The slave felt a warm smiled appear in her expression. "So she's taken care of you?"
Ephiny rolled onto her left side now and smiled at her friend. "Yeah, she's wonderful and I've been lucky. She's twenty years old but she acts about thirty."

Gabrielle giggled at that and said, "Yeah, I had a friend like that too."

The Amazon smiled at that and let out a content sigh. "Despite losing my mother, I've been fortunate still. Eponin took me in because the same thing happened to her mother. She knew what I was going through and despite the elders saying she shouldn't take me in, she did anyway."

"Wow, she must be pretty independent."

"Yeah she really is," agreed Ephiny. "Even now, she's working towards becoming the next weapons master. Our current weapons master is aging and so she's selected several younger Amazons to become the new weapons master."

"So if the current weapons master likes what she sees then she'll pick Eponin?"

"Yeah, and Eponin has been training very hard for it." Ephiny went a little quiet but added, "She brought me here actually."

Gabrielle had already figured that out for herself. Now she had a name for the face she saw tonight in the lightening. She was about to ask another question but before she could, her stomach spoke up first.

Ephiny's eyes lowered to the stomach under the bed sheets. Her amber eyes then lifted back up to Gabrielle. "You feed that thing?"

The now blushing bard started to laugh and muttered, "No, I was sleeping."

A very amused grin creased Ephiny's lips. "Well, I do have some trail food leftover from my ride here. Would you like some?"

The slave instantly brightened up at the mention of food. "Yes, please."

The Amazon chuckled and quickly moved out of her warm bed. She went over to her pack and opened it. On the bottom were the remains of her trail food. She pulled it out and tossed it over to her friend.

Gabrielle caught it after just sitting up. She quickly broke off a piece of the bar and thoughtfully munched on it.

Ephiny grinned and hastily got into her bed again.

The slave quietly ate her two trail bars and she realized Ephiny was faintly watching her. "These are good," she mentioned.

The Amazon grinned as she turned her head away. "Glad you like 'em." She shifted her arms up and slipped her hands under her pillow. "So what you think tomorrow will be like?"
"I'm not sure," confessed the teenager. "I guess we're going to start classes." She popped the last bit of bar into her mouth and chewed on it while thinking more about Ephiny's question. "I think I've heard that we get into a lot of different things."

"Like what?" asked the curious Amazon.

"Like a little acting, some history of bards and writing." Gabrielle had finished her last bit and slid back under the covers. "It's not just learning how to write or be a bard but to make it almost a religion."

"It makes sense to know the history behind writing."

"Yeah," agreed Gabrielle. "I heard that at the end of our second year we have a big test."

"What kind of test?" urged Ephiny. She felt her stomach knot up just at the thought of a test.

"I think we get up in front of an audience and I mean an audience of strangers of all types. And we have to tell them a story." The teenager glanced at Ephiny then back at the ceiling. "The audience is who passes us or not."

"Oh Artemis," groaned the small Amazon. "I can tell stories in front of my sisters but in front of strangers… I don't know."

Gabrielle quietly chuckled but reassured her friend. "Well I think that's what the two years are all about. It helps us build up to that point."

"That's true," agreed Ephiny. "I'm excited but really nervous whether I can do this or not."

"Me too," agreed Gabrielle. She slowly closed her eyes.

"Tired?" asked the Amazon in a soothing tone.

"Yeah." Gabrielle felt a yawn come over her for the first time tonight. "And I know tomorrow I'll be exhausted."

Ephiny closed her own eyes and muttered, "Goodnight."

Gabrielle grinned at the small hint. "Goodnight and sleep well."

"You too."

The pair of friends gradually fell into a peaceful sleep. Neither one of them woke up during the night, both too worn out from all the travelling. It wasn't until about a candlemark after dawn did somebody knock on their door.

"Come on, girls. Its time to get up."
Ephiny shot up after hearing Stallonus's voice. "What time is it?"

"A little after dawn," replied Stallonus. "Our first class starts in about half a candlemark. So hurry up if you want breakfast."

"Alright, can you wait for us?" she called through the door.

"Yeah of course. Orion and I are still here."

"Alright, we'll be quick." After saying that, Ephiny looked over at her friend and realized Gabrielle was still sleeping and rather hard. "Well… quick as we can be." She chuckled and threw off her covers. She sat on the bed and tried calling to Gabrielle. "Hey, Gabrielle time to get up."

The small bard muttered something incoherent.

The teenaged Amazon had a lopsided grin but she reached across and grasped Gabrielle's shoulder. She lightly shook the smaller woman. "Come on, Gabrielle. We have to get going." She noticed misty spring eyes studied her now. "Morning, sleepyhead."

Gabrielle smiled but a shy one. "Mornin'. Time to get up already?"

"Afraid so." Ephiny stood up and in the process brushed back her curly blond hair. "Better get ready." She went around her bed to her dresser. She started pulling out clothes for today and they were more traditional villager clothes than her Amazon attire.

Gabrielle had her back to Ephiny and was working on changing into her clothes from yesterday.

By the time they were both finished, they were already headed to the door. That was when Gabrielle noticed Ephiny wasn't wearing her Amazon leathers this time. Instead Ephiny had on skirt similar to Gabrielle's but it was a little shorter. She then had on a loose white blouse that was short sleeve. Ephiny had also pulled her hair back since it was a bit long. Yet Gabrielle did see two small feathers still weaved into Ephiny's hair and she had on a feather necklace.

Together the friends left the room and met Orion and Stallonus in the main dorm area.

"Morning," greeted Orion. He brushed back his wavy blond hair and smiled at both of them. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah we did," agreed Gabrielle.

"Hey you're not wearing your Amazon clothes?" observed Stallonus.

Ephiny shook her head and looked down at her own body. "No." She pulled out her skirt some. "Thought it'd be too much." She lifted her head back up, she revealed a grin.
"You look nice," commented Orion.

The Amazon's grin shifted into a warm smile. "Thank you." She then furrowed her eyebrows. "Do we need to bring anything? Scrolls or quills?"

"I don't think so," replied Orion. He then glanced at Stallonus then back to the two girls. "I think we better get to the dinning hall. Twickenham and Euripides are waiting on us."

"Oh sorry," cut in Gabrielle. "We better go then." She was the first heading for the door. Orion joined her side and Stallonus and Ephiny followed behind them.

The group cut across the grounds and went to the back door of the Academy building. They went inside and it was Orion that led them all to the dining hall. Once they were there, they were greeted by Twickenham and Euripides. Orion made sure to introduce Euripides to both Ephiny and Gabrielle. After that, the group hastily gathered up platters of breakfast and quietly ate together. Then time ran out for breakfast and they all had to rid of their dirty dishes. They then hurried to their first class of the day, which was in the west wing of the Academy.

When they came inside, there were already several other new classmates inside and sitting down. Gabrielle was in the back of the group with Ephiny. As they walked down the aisle together, they brushed past an eerie type of man.

Ephiny glanced back at him when he bumped into her. She tried to ignore him as she took a seat beside Gabrielle on a bench.

"Take your seats, please so we can begin," announced the master bard. He was an older man but well distinguished. He had climbed onto the stage in front of the class and began to address them. "For the next two years, your lives will be given over to the muse. At the end of that time, you all will become a true bard." He paused and studied each of his students then continued. "Great story telling, it comes from our observation of life….

Ephiny quickly looked over her shoulder at the same strange man from earlier.

"What's the matter?" whispered Gabrielle.

The Amazon sighed and turned her head back around. She whispered, "Nothing. I'm just thinking like Eponin." She shrugged. "I mean, what could happen here?"

The master bard had been giving his speech but Ephiny's talking had disrupted him. He cleared his throat to gain the two girls' attention. "As I was saying. How do we translate an event into a reverting, engaging story? That is the goal of the bard."

Suddenly, that strange man in the corner of the room came running and screaming down the aisle. He pulled out a dagger and charged at the master bard. He leaps up onto the stage and plunges his dagger into the master bard.

All the students started yelling and getting up to help the master bard and stop the assassin. But before anybody could get to the assassin he was gone out of the window.
Gabrielle and Ephiny were bent down beside the master bard.

However the master bard was already getting up and yelling, "That's enough!" He got up to his feet and saw everybody surprised by what happened. "Calm down, everyone settle down. What you saw, just now, was an event. Now how do you make it into a story?"

Gabrielle shook her head and cut into it hastily. "That was a cheat."

The master bard's eyes widened between shock and insult. "Excuse me, young lady?"

The slave shook her head but felt a grin tug at her lips. "That wasn't an event. That was a manipulation. You see, the real story would be now if you were really dead because… most people think of death as the end." The bard paused as she looked at everybody, her eyes were glowing. "When in fact, death can be the beginning of a wonderful tale. It all started when her love was sent to the land of the dead….

Gabrielle continued into a tale about how two soul mates were separated by death. But death was never able to separate neither their love nor them for too long.

At the end of Gabrielle's story, everybody was silent but then began to applaud. The small bard grinned at her classmates, slightly bowed, and hopped off the stage.

Ephiny had an amused grin as she followed behind her friend. She sat back down in her spot again beside Gabrielle. "Nice one," she whispered.

"Thanks," uttered the slave.

The class continued into the late morning with the master bard explaining the next two years ahead of the students. He also emphasised that there would be vacations from time to time and that they would be announced two weeks prior. Otherwise, the master bard did not go into great detail of each class but did express that there would be a lot more to story telling than they expected.

After the first class introduction, the students all broke to have a short break before their first real class. They all soon found out what some of their next few months would hold for them. Their morning classes would consist of a combination of reading other great bards as well as developing their own writing skills. Then into the afternoon, their classes changed over to the history of writing and a class solely on building techniques to stand before an audience of any type or size. Out of anybody, their last class of social barding was the hardest for Twickenham due to his own speech troubles. For Ephiny, her toughest class was the writing class and trying to expand her talents beyond poetry. Gabrielle's hardest class was more or less the social barding because she didn't have much practice in telling stories before anybody but her family.

It wouldn't be until five days later would they get two days off to rest and relax. That was how the system would run for them, five days of classes from sun up to the mid afternoon then two days off and back to classes. It was on their first two days off that Ephiny and Gabrielle decided to go to Athens and especially to the market.
Gabrielle and Ephiny were just on the outskirts of Athens. They had decided to take their horses with them since both horses needed the exercise. They'd ridden to Athens at a mere walk since the city wasn't really far and they'd gotten an early start. The entire ride over, Gabrielle would ask countless questions about the Amazon Nation. Ephiny was surprised just how much her friend wanted to know about the Amazons. Then on the other hand, she'd picked up on the fact that Gabrielle never spoke of her life or her family. It made her worry as much as made her suspicious.

"So anybody can be an Amazon?"

"Pretty much," replied Ephiny. "I mean, as long as you're a female and you believe in Amazon philosophy, then yes."

The bard grinned as she looked back at her friend. "So I could be an Amazon?"

"Yeah sure." The teenaged Amazon had a huge grin. "If you really wanted to."

The slave shrugged her shoulders as she considered it but knew it was impossible due to her circumstances. "I'm not sure I'd quite fit in." She then had a funny look and a very devilish smirk appeared. "I mean, I'd have to ask my grandfather if it's okay by him first."

Ephiny suddenly turned her head to her friend and had a very annoyed look.

Gabrielle started to laugh incredibly hard.

"Ha, ha, ha… you're a smartass, aren't you?"

The teenager gave a few more soft laughs then finally replied, "I guess I can be."

The Amazon shook her head as she settled back down. She scanned the area around her and noticed most of the homes just outside of the city were more or less farmers. "Sssso…" She glanced at her friend then back ahead. "You and your grandfather are close?"

Gabrielle fiddled with Torqueo's reins in her hands. She knew she'd been talking about the Amazons every since she'd met Ephiny and not once about her own life. "Yeah… we're close."

"What about your mother and father?" probed the Amazon.

The small bard debated what she should say because she couldn't lie despite she'd lied already. "My father is dead," she confessed, "My mother lives with my grandfather."

"I see," whispered the Amazon. "I'm sorry."

"Its okay," protested Gabrielle, "my father has been dead for years now."

Ephiny sighed sadly at her friend's words. She could understand how Gabrielle felt since she'd lost her own father as well. "Any siblings?"
The slave chewed on the inside of her mouth and decided a half lie wouldn't be too bad. "No."

The young Amazon could tell her questions were bothering her friend and she wasn't quite sure why. Maybe it had to do with bad memories or maybe she just didn't want to talk about it. "You know, you don't have to talk about any of it if you don't want to," she uttered.

Gabrielle was petting her stallion's neck but stopped and looked up at her friend. "It's okay, really. My life is… complicated so to speak."

"I know how that can be." Ephiny sighed and turned her head away. She saw the gates of Athens were just ahead. "We mind as well dismount."

"Mmmm," agreed the bard. She urged Torqueo off the road so she wouldn't get in the way of the travellers not far behind them.

Ephiny followed her and dismounted off her mare.

Together, the friends walked back onto the large dirt road and continued towards Athens. In tow were both of their horses. Once they made it into Athens, they first looked for a stable, which didn't take too long. After their horses were stabled up, they went in search of the market.

"You know what you need?" asked the Amazon.

Gabrielle glanced over at her friend then back down the street. "Just some winter clothes."

The Amazon faintly nodded and pointed ahead. "There's a sign."

The pair approached the sign and realized the market wasn't far off. They followed the direction of the sign and came just on the outskirts.

"Keep your purse close," suggested Ephiny. She tugged her cloak closer around her body just to be safe. "Probably more pickpockets than customers."

The bard chuckled at her friend's words. She then instantly saw a stand with clothes. "Come on."

Ephiny grinned when she saw the stand full of clothes. "I have a feeling you like to shop."

"Yeah I do," admitted the slave, "I like to haggle too."

"Oh sweet Artemis," whispered the Amazon.

Gabrielle glanced back at her friend and for once she took notice of the fact that Ephiny wore her Amazon attire instead of her peasant clothes. She slowed down a little and walked beside Ephiny. "I meant to ask you, why'd you wear your Amazon stuff?"
The young Amazon gave a faint grin. "For protection."

"From what?" teased the bard, "Merchants?"

Ephiny laughed softly and pushed her friend forward. "Don't jinx us, Gabrielle." She watched her friend enter the stall of clothes. She stood on the edge of the stall and just watched their surroundings. If it was something her sister Eponin taught her it was that dinars and crowds do not mix. She sighed and shifted her cloak around more.

Gabrielle was busy picking through the clothes and deciding on something to wear. "Hey Ephiny, how about this?"

The Amazon looked across the stall and saw her friend holding up a green halter top and a short brown skirt. "You call that winter attire?"

The bard studied the clothes then grinned at her friend. "I guess not huh?"

"It looks nice though," the Amazon admitted. "Try it out anyway. It'll be good for this summer."

Gabrielle nodded and tossed the two items over her left arm. She then continued picking through the clothes.

Ephiny continued to watch out and made sure her friend was safe. She sighed and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm going to try these out," called the bard.

The Amazon grinned and nodded.

The small slave went over to the merchant and asked him for the changing tent.

The merchant pushed the young woman into a small tent to let her try the items.

Gabrielle first tried out the two items for winter clothing. She decided they would fit pretty well. She was content with them and took them off and decided to try out the last two items. She folded up the winter clothes and set them down beside her long skirt and blue top. She then slipped into the short skirt and pulled the green halter top over her head. She realized she needed to lace up the front of the halter top, which took about a minute. After she was finished, she looked down at herself and really wondered what it looked like.

The bard decided she would need her friend's opinion so she poked open the tent flap some. "Ephiny?"

The Amazon looked over at her friend and her jaw almost hung open. "Gabrielle?"

The bard gave a shy laugh and said, "Is it me?"

"Ummmm… wewllllll…." Ephiny was scratching the back of her neck. "Look in the
mirror," she suggested. She pointed to it just off the bard's right.

The slave slipped out of the tent and stood in front of the mirror.

The merchant grinned and said, "Another year or so, and you'll fill that out nicely."

Ephiny saw the huge blush creep up her friend's neck at the merchant's words. She tried not to start laughing but she also knew how her friend felt.

The bard sighed as she tried to hide the blush. She looked over at her friend. "Seriously, what you think?"

"I think its you," replied the Amazon. "Go for it. You're just gonna need boots or something instead of those sandals."

"I'll need boots for winter anyway," agreed the bard.

Ephiny faintly nodded and watched her friend go back into the tent. She waited about another minute or two and saw Gabrielle come back out.

The bard haggled the price a little with the merchant then paid him. She took the clothes and carefully tucked them away in her pack and swung her pack on again. "Boots?"

Ephiny faintly nodded and said, "Let's go down here more."

"Anything you need?" inquired the teenager.

"I don't think so." Ephiny sighed and peered up at the sun. "Except maybe lunch."

"I second that."

The Amazon softly chuckled and said, "After the boots we'll get lunch."

Gabrielle nodded but was now focused on finding a leather stand where there might be some good boots for her. She made sure to quickly scan each stall but wasn't having much luck. So far there were several stands with only fresh food. Then she finally saw a leather stand not far ahead.

"I see it too," teased the Amazon. "Let's go." She weaved her way through the people with her friend tagging behind her.

Once they were at the stand, Gabrielle started milling through the items. Ephiny was right beside her, trying to help her decide on the right type.

"How about these?" The young Amazon held up a pair of light brown boots that would actually cover her friend's entire calf.

"Hey, those are nice." Gabrielle took them carefully and turned them around. She inspected the sole and knew they were petty thick, good for travelling and riding. "I'll try these out."
Ephiny gestured to the chair off to one side.

The bard sat down and slipped off her sandals. She then slipped her feet into the boots and took a minute to lace them up. Once she had them laced, she stood up and walked around in them.

"How they feel?" inquired the Amazon.

"Pretty good," replied the bard. She jumped a few times and felt content with them. She looked over at the merchant. "How much?"

"Twenty dinars."

Gabrielle gave a dramatic surprise look. "Twenty dinars? They're only worth ten," she countered.

"Seventeen," shot back the merchant. He folded his arms and tried to look stern.

"Thirteen nothing higher," stated the bard.

The merchant narrowed his eyes and growled, "Fifteen."

Gabrielle shook her head and countered, "Fourteen."

"Fine, fourteen." The merchant held out his hand.

The slave bit back her grin as she reached to her side where her dinars were attached. She pulled out the money and handed it over. "Thanks." She went back over to her sandals and decided she'd keep the boots on to break them in for the day. She swung her pack around and slipped her sandals into it. Once she had them away, she put her pack on again and looked at her friend. "Hungry?"

"Let's go," urged the Amazon. She immediately pushed her way into the crowd and headed for the end of the market. "Just too many people," she complained.

"I know, tell me about it," agreed the slave. "I like markets but I'm squashed," she complained.

Ephiny chuckled and reached back with her hand. "Stay closer," she urged.

Gabrielle was hesitant for a second but grabbed her friend's hand. She felt Ephiny lace their hands tightly together and it helped her make her way through the people.

Once they made it out of the market, Ephiny released her friend's hand and turned to her. "I think the food is this way."

Gabrielle looked off Ephiny's left shoulder and saw a street lined with taverns and inns. "I think so," she agreed.

The two girls started down the street and read over the tavern names.
"I think I could eat a whole pig," whined the bard.

Ephiny shot a devilish grin. "Don't let me hold you to that."

The teenager just returned the grin but continued looking over the taverns. Just ahead she saw a man sitting on a porch of a tavern. She looked at him a little harder and realized he was either a warrior or soldier since he had a sword at his side. She quickly looked away and instinctively shifted closer to her friend.

The Amazon tried to figure out why and when she saw the man, she immediately knew why. She hung her head back down and only hoped the man would ignore them. But she then heard a whistle as they came closer and she gritted her teeth. All she could think was she did not want him to move down those steps.

Right after they passed by the steps, the man clunked his heavy boots down and said, "Where you two girls going huh?"

"Ignore him," whispered the Amazon.

Gabrielle took a shaky breath and hoped he wouldn't bother them. She tried to mix into the small crowd but she knew her and Ephiny were easy to spot. In the background, she could hear the man following behind them. "Ephiny, he's not going to leave."

The young Amazon took a deep breath and tried to think of something to do. She thought about ducking into a tavern but he would still follow and that would give her less room to move about. She finally decided the best move was to have a confirmation. "When I stop, I want you to stay behind me. Okay?" she whispered.

"What you going to do?" asked the worried bard.

"Just stay behind me," half growled the Amazon. She saw her friend nod and she could also see her eyes full of fear. She sighed and hoped this was for the best. She suddenly stopped and waited for her friend to get behind her. She turned to face the man following them. "Look, just stay away from us," she warned.

The handsome warrior approached them a little more. He grinned. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Because I don't like being followed," growled the young Amazon. She pushed her cloak out of the way.

The warrior's eyes went a little wide when he saw how this girl was dressed and that she had a sword at her side. He quickly reached to his side and extracted his sword. "This isn't a game, kid."

The Amazon gave a huge grin and unsheathed her short sword. "Oh I know." She noticed the crowd of people were moving out of the way and circling them. Everybody was interested in what was going on between them.
The warrior a step closer and twirled his sword.

Ephiny moved in closer but made sure to keep Gabrielle close in sight. She bent her knees and locked her dark amber eyes on her opponent. So many times she'd trained in the Nation for this type of thing but this was real.

The warrior brought his sword out and tapped it against Ephiny's a few times. His serious expression relaxed and suddenly he grinned. He lowered his sword and stepped back. "I like you."

Ephiny let out a gigantic sigh and straightened up. "What you want?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing but an answer." He glanced about the area and saw the crowd was going back to their business. His eyes shifted back to the Amazon.

Gabrielle carefully approached them and stood beside the Amazon. "What's going on?"

The man glanced over at the small girl.

"I'm not sure," whispered Ephiny. She still didn't feel right to sheath her sword. "Who are you?"

The man sighed and put his sword away finally. "The names Iolaus. I was curious as to why two young girls are wondering through the streets alone."

Ephiny chewed on the inside of her mouth but felt a little more at easy. She sheathed her own sword and pulled her cloak back around her body. "We're from the Academy of Bards."

"Really?" asked the curious man. "Strange to see an Amazon in these parts. Hard to believe you go to the Academy."

"She does," confirmed Gabrielle.

Iolaus switched his attention over to Gabrielle. "What is your name?"

Gabrielle looked at her friend and saw she was okay with answering. She looked back at Iolaus. "I'm Gabrielle and this is Ephiny."

Iolaus held out his arm and shook with both of them. "I apologize for coming off the way I did."

"It's okay." Gabrielle even reassured the man with a smile. "Ephiny is just overly protective."

The Amazon grunted and folded her arms over her chest.

"She has right to be." Iolaus sighed and looked down at the various inns and taverns. "Are you both hungry?" He smiled back down at them. "I'll take you both to lunch to
"Hey sounds good to me." Gabrielle brightened up and looked at her friend. "Ephiny?"

The young Amazon couldn't help the grin and she nodded.

"This way then. I know the best tavern down here." Iolaus hastened them down the street to the tavern. He crossed the road and went up a set of steps into a nice tavern.

Gabrielle stepped in behind her friend. She gazed about the clean tavern and decided she'd like today's lunch probably. She was directed to a round table in the corner.

Iolaus sat down and watched the two young girls sit down as well. "Where are you two from? Well, I guess I know where you're from, Ephiny."

The Amazon grinned a little and relaxed back into her chair.

"How about you, Gabrielle?"

The bard fidgeted a little.

Ephiny noticed that and she even realized she had yet to know where her friend was from originally.

"Potidaea," she quietly replied.

"Really?" Ephiny turned her head to her friend. "I heard they just recovered from a raid a couple of years back."

"That's what I heard to," agree Iolaus. "Were you there?"

"No, no," protested the small bard. "My family had moved before all of that. I live northwest of Athens."

"Articia?"

The slave nodded her head. "Just outside of the small town."

"Huh." Iolaus looked up when the barmaid joined them. "Can we get three mugs of water? And whatever the lunch special is."

"Of course." The barmaid gave a warm smile then strolled off.

Iolaus looked back at the two girls. "I'm from Thessely."

"What you do, Iolaus?" inquired the Amazon.

Iolaus chuckled and folded his arm over his chest. "I was a thief."

Both Ephiny and Gabrielle stared at him in amazement.
Iolaus grinned at their reaction then he let it slip away. "But I don't do that work anymore."

"What you do now?" Gabrielle felt rather intrigued now.

"A friend of mine and I travel around and help people," simply explained the man. "We just met; he actually helped me get out of the stealing business."

"Gods really?" Gabrielle was rather excited to meet somebody like this. "You mean… you and your friend go around fighting for good?"

"Pretty much," replied Iolaus. "Its tough work but rewarding."

Ephiny glanced at Gabrielle and noticed she was absolutely engrossed in his words. She felt a grin tug at her lips as she looked back at the man. "You enjoy it?"

"So far, yes."

Gabrielle shook her head. "How'd you become a thief to begin with?"

Iolaus sighed and was about to tell them how but he stopped when the barmaid arrived with their mugs. He took his mug, thanked her, and then returned his attention to them. "My family had a hard time… there wasn't much money to go around. After awhile, I resorted to stealing to survive and been doing it ever since."

"Until your friend stopped you?" probed the curious slave.

"Uh huh." Iolaus took a long drink from his mug then lowered it back down. He shifted his attention to Ephiny and asked, "How are the Amazons?"

"They are okay," whispered Ephiny.

"I heard they're still in constant turmoil with the centaurs."

The young Amazon gave a long sigh but nodded her head. "We always seem to be."

"How long has it been going on?"

"Sweet Artemis… I believe five years," replied Ephiny. "Actually longer. I think it really started when I was just born." She shook her head and exchanged a glance with her friend. "I wish they would have a truce."

"Why hasn't there been one?"

"Just too many grudges." Ephiny gritted her teeth some yet tried to calm herself. "Every Queen we have seems to think the centaurs need to die."

"Why can't they have a treaty?" urged the bard.

Ephiny looked at the young slave and shook her head. "Like I said, the Queens don't want it."
"What about the Amazons?" protested the bard.

"Some want it… others do not. The Amazons that have been affected the most won't have anything to do with it." She turned her head away and lowered it, just staring into her mug.

"But…." Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows then said, "You lost your family to them. Do you want the wars?"

"No," uttered the young Amazon. "Holding a petty grudge like that will only cause more death and suffering. Both the Amazons and Centaurs could benefit from one another."

Iolaus had been carefully listening and he asked, "There's nothing that can be done?"

"I don't know much," responded the Amazon. "I was brought up to hate centaurs."

Iolaus considered the young girl's words. "And I know it wouldn't be welcomed if my friend and I showed up to help huh?"

"Unfortunately not." Ephiny lifted her cool amber eyes to meet Iolaus. "The war can only be stopped by the Queen. Until we get a Queen that wants peace, there's nothing much that can be done."

After she finished speaking, the barmaid appeared with their lunches. She put them in front of everybody along with utensils. Quietly everybody began eating their meals.

Gabrielle thought more about what Ephiny said about the fighting and the centaurs. She felt her heart sink at the thought of Ephiny having to suffer such a legacy as that. Inside of her, she wished somehow she could help her friend but knew there was nothing she could do in her position.

"So," started Ephiny, "where are you headed?"

Iolaus looked up from his meal when the question was directed to him. "I'm headed south really." He chewed on a little more of his food. "I guess you two will be heading back to the Academy?"

"Yes," replied Gabrielle. "We were here for the day to shop."

Iolaus nodded. "How is the Academy?"

"Well… we had our first five days of classes. I enjoyed it." Gabrielle looked at her friend in curiosity.

Ephiny chuckled some and spoke her opinion. "I like it. I'm more a poet though than a bard."

"Poet huh?" Iolaus smiled at that. "I enjoy beautiful poetry."
The young Amazon gave a shy smile and looked back down at her food.

"And you're into story telling?"

Gabrielle swallowed the remains of her pork then nodded her answer. "And writing," she added.

Iolaus finished the rest of his meal and pushed the plate away some. "I hope I hear both of your names in the future."

"Gods we hope so too," joked the slave.

Ephiny softly laughed at her friend. "Well, I think Gabrielle will do the best out of any of us from the class."

"Ephiny, I'm terrible at it."

The Amazon turned her head to her friend and pointed a fork at her. "You are the best I've ever heard."

"And just how many bards have you heard?"

Ephiny opened her mouth to respond but she had no number.

"See!" Gabrielle looked away and teased, "I'm the only one you've heard."

"You're still good," protested the Amazon.

Iolaus just simply watched the exchange between the young women and smiled to himself. He then watched them finished off the rest of their meals and also pushed their plates away. "I'll go pay the bill and I'll be back."

Gabrielle watched him leave and then she leaned over closer to her friend. "He's cute."

Ephiny grunted and whispered, "If you like short men."

The bard giggled and pushed her shoulder against Ephiny's. "Admit it, he's cute."

"Yeah but he's not my type," protested the Amazon.

Gabrielle accepted that and straightened up. "He's nice though."

"Yes."

The bard felt her grin leave when Iolaus returned to the table.

He stood in front of them and asked, "Are you both ready to go? I imagine you have to get back."

"We do." Ephiny stood up and waited for her friend to get up too.
Together the small group left the tavern.

"We have to get our horses," reminded Gabrielle.

"Where is the stable?"

"This way." Ephiny stepped ahead of Iolaus and led them to the stables.

Once they made it there, Iolaus stopped at the front and the two girls faced him. "Now that I know you both are safe and have full stomachs, I think I'll be on my way."

"Thank you for the meal, Iolaus."

The young man smiled at the bard. "You're welcome. I'm glad you both enjoyed it."

Gabrielle felt her own smile tug at her lips. She stepped forward and suddenly hugged the man.

Iolaus was surprised but hugged the young woman back. After she released him, she received a very brisk arm shake from Ephiny. "Be careful. If you two every need help just give a holler." He took a few steps back.

"Thank you, Iolaus." Ephiny smiled and watched him turn to leave.

Gabrielle felt Ephiny brushed past her and went into the stables. She however stood there and watched the man walk down the street. When he was rather far away, she noted a taller man reappeared beside Iolaus and patted his back. The bard huffed at this but figured it had to be Iolaus's friend. She shrugged it off and went into the stable to get Torqueo.

~*~*~*~

"Gods you met a thief?"

Gabrielle nodded her head while she sat on the foot of her bed.

Stallonus felt his awed expression grow.

"Ah a ghost among the wealth, plucking what is not his to better serve him." Euripides crossed one ankle over the other as he sat in the chair in the corner of the girls' room.

"He didn't hurt either of you?" asked Orion again.

"No." Gabrielle exchanged a look over to Ephiny, who was sitting on the foot of her bed too.

"Nope," confirmed the young Amazon. "He was pretty nice."

"You t-t-t-two are s-s-s-so lucky," stated Twickenham. "I n-n-never get to m-m-meet people like t-t-that."
"This was three days ago?" spoke up Orion.

Gabrielle nodded and then added, "In the Athens market."

"That will make a g-g-great s-s-story," reminded Twickenham.

The slave giggled at the boy's suggestion but had to agree. "Yeah it will."

"Speaking of stories, you should tell us a story about the Amazons battling the evil centaurs," spoke up Stallonus.

Ephiny almost groaned aloud at his request. She wasn't always into the great battles of Amazons and centaurs.

"Stallonus, I don't think Ephiny is much into those," cut in the bard.

Stallonus's shoulders drooped some. "Yeah but I bet those are some of the most action packed stories ever." He suddenly jumped to his feet. "Amazons on horseback." He unsheathed an imaginary sword. "Fighting the evil centaurs." He waved his imaginary sword. "The Queen of the Amazons in a death combat with the leader centaur." He jumped back and forth, left to right swinging his sword. "Only one can win and all the Amazons rely on their Queen." He jumped forward and stabbed at the air.

"It's not quite like that." Ephiny grinned at the boy. "But a little."

"Do you know how to fight?" Orion furrowed his eyebrows at the young Amazon.

"A little yes," admitted Ephiny.

"Gods, can you show us?" spoke up Stallonus. "I'd love to see it."

"I don't think so," replied Ephiny. "I don't have a sword or anything." She caught the confused look in the corner of her eye from Gabrielle. "I wasn't allowed to bring one into the Academy."

"Well I guess y-y-you cannot b-b-blame them."

"Yes, to wield a blade among the halls of learning wouldn't be very wise."

"No it wouldn't," agreed Gabrielle. Her eyes flickered over to her friend.

Ephiny just ignored the look.

Orion stretched his legs out on the floor and pushed his back against the wall. "What does everybody think of the master bard?"

"A man with a bushel of brains," spoke Euripides, "but no seeming patience for the young."

"I agree." Gabrielle uncrossed her legs and let them hang off the end of the bed. "He seems nice though."
"I think you got him good that first day," spoke up Stallonus.

"Yeah, did y-y-you s-s-see his expression after G-g-gabrielle's story?"

Orion softly laughed while staring at the floor. "It was a good one." He then felt a yawn come over him and he realized they'd all been in the girls' room for a couple of candlemarks now. He looked over at Euripides. "Do you need to head back to your dorm?"

Euripides gave a half groan and half sigh. "I suppose all great story tellers must even find an end to their day."

"I a-a-agree." Twickenham stood up from his spot on the floor.

"I'm sure you both want to sleep?" Orion stood up and smiled at the two girls.

"Yeah, I'm worn out," admitted Ephiny. She hopped off her bed and opened the door for the boys. "We'll see you guys tomorrow."

"When Apollo begins his race across the heavens," announced Euripides.

"Until then, Euripides." Ephiny grinned and watched him head out of the room into the dorm hall.

"Goodnight, Euripides," called Gabrielle.

The young man stopped and smiled back at the bard. "Goodnight, Gabrielle." He then turned back and headed for the door.

The three other boys left the girls' room but made sure to say goodnight to them. Once they were all gone, Ephiny closed the door quietly and turned around to her friend.

"What was that entire Amazon poop about the sword?" hotly whispered the bard.

"Amazon poop?" The Amazon quietly laughed at the intended insult. "Its centaur poop and it was for my own sake." She went over to her bed and fell into it.

"Ephiny, you lied to them," she whispered.

"No I didn't... I just twisted the truth a little."

The slave lifted an eyebrow at her and gave a serious look.

"Gabrielle, Eponin made me promise to keep a weapon. I gave her my regular sword before we separated but I kept a short sword."

"Why'd she want you to keep it?" asked the worried bard.

"In case something happened. She just worries." Ephiny sighed; she closed her eyes and added, "I couldn't say no."
"I guess I can understand why." Gabrielle pressed her lips together in thought. "If somebody found out an Amazon is here, they could come after you."

"Yes," agreed the Amazon. "Our enemies could... I have to be careful."

"I know." Gabrielle slipped out of her bed and decided to get ready for sleep. "We probably should get ready."

Ephiny opened her eyes a little. "I guess your right. Dawn will be here soon enough."

"Mmmm." Gabrielle held back a yawn but continued to lean down to her second drawer to pull out her night shift.

The friends quietly changed into their night shifts and crawled into bed after blowing out the candles. The next day they were all busy with their usual classes. By the afternoon, both Ephiny and Gabrielle were tired of the classes and also boiling hot from the approaching summer. They returned to their room and Ephiny suggested they go for a ride on their horses to cool off.

Gabrielle quickly agreed but not before changing into cooler clothes. She put on her green halter top and short brown skirt she'd bought at the Athens market four days ago.

The Amazon decided she liked that idea and also changed into her Amazon attire, not caring for once what everybody else thought.

The pair then raced out of the dorm and headed for the stables at a jog. They came bursting into the stables, startling both Diana and Torqueo. The two horses whined but settled down when they knew it was their masters. They soon found themselves all tacked up and being towed out of the stables.

Ephiny and her friend mounted their horses and started on a walk out of the Academy. Soon as they were on the road outside of the Academy, they broke out into a full gallop down the road.

"Wahoooo!" yelled Ephiny. She shook her head and felt her hair shaky in the cool breeze.

"This is great!" yelled the bard.

The young Amazon laughed and said, "This is one way we cool off in the Nation!"

"What's the other way?"

Ephiny grinned and called out, "Take a swim!"

The young slave laughed because she should have known that. She saw her friend lift herself out of her saddle and stand up by the stirrups.

Ephiny closed her eyes and held out her arms, trying to recall all the times she had to
learn how to do this when she was younger. This was a lesson well taught to any young Amazon so they could learn better control and balance while on horseback. It was something Ephiny had easily learned and enjoyed.

"You look like you're on a bow of a ship," joked Gabrielle.

The Amazon started to laugh at her friend's words. "I'm flying, I'm flying!" Both she and Gabrielle started to laugh hysterically. Ephiny then sat back down in her saddle and took the reins again. "Let's go into the woods." She slowed her horse down a little and turned into the woods.

Gabrielle quickly followed behind. She was amazed at how Ephiny managed to find some kind of trail in the woods.

The teen Amazon continued cantering through the woods, really not sure where this trail would lead them but it didn't matter. It was about another minute or so and Ephiny spotted a large lake ahead. "Oh Artemis, you are too kind," she whispered and slowed her mare down. "There's a lake ahead."

Gabrielle hurried Torqueo up to Ephiny's side and then slowed down. "Gods there is."

"How about that swim?" teased the Amazon.

The teenager brightened up at the suggestion and hurried Torqueo into a trot now. "Let's not waste time."

Ephiny laughed and pushed her mare into a trot too.

When they arrived at the lake, they realized it really wasn't a lake when they heard the low rumble of a waterfall. It was actually a small river that shaped out to a lake then narrowed back into a river.

"Gods wonder if anybody else knows about this place?" Gabrielle pulled on Torqueo's reins and he stopped at her command.

"Probably since there's a trail," reminded the young Amazon.

"You're probably right." Gabrielle carefully dismounted her stallion and pulled his reins over his head.

"Come on." Ephiny was already off her mare and headed down to the water's edge. She found a tree close to the edge. She removed Diana's face piece and let it hang off the tree branch.

Gabrielle was doing the same with Torqueo's face tack. As soon as she had it off, Torqueo was already drinking the water happily. She placed the face piece onto the tree branch as well and looked at her friend.

Ephiny finally forced her attention from the glistening river to her friend. "What we waitin' for?" She bent down and started unlacing her boots.
The small bard laughed some and bent down to also start unlacing her boots.

Ephiny was much quicker at getting her boots off. Once she pushed them aside, she was already removing her Amazon leathers.

Gabrielle almost fell over at seeing how bold her friend was about removing her clothes. She just kept her head hung low but heard Ephiny go running into the water then a loud splash.

The Amazon dove under the water for a ways then reappeared in the middle of the river. "Come on, Gabrielle."

The bard laughed shyly and stood back up after taking her boots off. She fumbled to unlace her halter top as she watched her friend swim around. "How's the water?"

"Just perfect, a little chilly at first but nice." Ephiny could tell now that her friend was shy about removing her clothes. So she decided to help her out by diving back under the water and heading for the waterfall.

Gabrielle sighed a relief and hastily took off her top and slipped out of her skirt. She tossed them by her boots and sprinted into the water. "Oh gods that's cold!" she squealed and dove under the water after she landed in it.

Ephiny had heard the bard and started laughing at her. She saw her pop up further away but in the middle of the river. "Its nice though huh?"

"Yeah it is," admitted the bard. She dove back under water and swam towards her friend.

The Amazon saw the bard coming and she rose up to the top right next to her.

"This is really nice," admitted the bard. She closed her eyes and just enjoyed the chill water cooling her body off. "I'm so glad you found it, Eph."

Ephiny had her eyes closed but they now flew open when she heard the nickname. "What'd you call me?"

Gabrielle opened one eye then the other. "Eph…?"

"I thought so," The Amazon slowly felt a smile crease her lips. "I like that." She closed her eyes again. "Eph."

The slave gave a wry grin as a chuckle rippled through her. "I like it too."

The two girls remained quiet and still for a little while as they enjoyed the cool water.

Gabrielle then heard Ephiny shifted a little and she suddenly was being drenched by water. "Ephiny!" she screamed.

The Amazon laughed evilly and continued splashing at her friend.
The bard then dove under the water suddenly.

Ephiny then didn't know what happened until she felt water going all around her and she realized Gabrielle had pulled her under. She opened her eyes and glared at the bard then bared her teeth in a grin.

Gabrielle tried to scream under water but it didn't quite work. She took off swimming as fast as she could go.

The Amazon quickly followed after her friend but she had better practice as swimming and especially under water. She saw her friend starting to rise to the top of the water and she grinned.

Gabrielle broke the top and spitted out a mouthful of water. She knew Ephiny was right behind her and she saw a rock just ahead of her. She quickly swam for it.

The young Amazon broke through the top and continued to follow after her friend. "Come back here, you chicken bard!"

The slave screamed and swam around the rock.

Ephiny came closer and stayed on the opposite side. "Gabrielle, you can't get away."

Gabrielle just stuck her tongue out to egg her friend on more.

Ephiny growled and tried to swim around but Gabrielle moved hastily.

"Come on you big bad Amazon," taunted the teenager. "Feathers aren't so good in water huh?" she mocked.

The Amazon narrowed her eyes and suddenly yelled, jumped up onto the rock and threw herself at the bard.

Gabrielle screamed and dove under water just in time as her friend crash into the water behind her. She quickly swam away but just knew Ephiny wasn't far behind her.

Ephiny swam after her friend and was starting to catch up to her. She saw Gabrielle rise back up to the top but she didn't because she had a little more air to go. She headed directly for the waterfall and was just barely able to make it. She pushed herself and was able to come up between the waterfall and the rock face. She took a deep breath and she looked through the water carefully. She could make out Gabrielle's silhouette just ahead and she was frantically turning every which way. A devilish grin crept into place.

"Ephiny?" yelled Gabrielle. She spun around in the water looking for her friend or some sign of her. "Ephiny?"

The young Amazon evilly snickered at her friend. She took one last deep breath and dove back under the water. She swam towards her unsuspecting prey, ready to seek revenge on her.
Gabrielle continued to turn around in the water, looking for her friend.

As Gabrielle turned, Ephiny started to make out an odd design on Gabrielle's right hip. It was the same one she'd seen over a week ago and now she could make it out a lot more clearly. Ephiny suddenly stopped as she realized that it was no tattoo but a brand, the brand of a slave. She shook her head and widened her eyes at finding this out about her friend, she would have never imagined but it explained so much for her. She decided she'd keep it to herself until later and right now she wanted her revenge more than anything.

The Amazon continued towards her friend and had to act fast before her air would run out. She suddenly sprang out of the water behind her friend and wrapped her arms over Gabrielle's chest and waist. "Amazons are made for water," she teased and suddenly pulled her friend into the water.

Gabrielle screamed half to death then felt herself dragged under water. She sensed the warm arms letting go of her but she turned around and saw the smirking face of her friend. She had no air left so she made for the top and took several deep breaths.

Ephiny rose back up and chuckled evilly.

"Gods you scared the Hades out of me," rasped the bard.

"I know." Ephiny snickered and brushed some of her curly bangs off her forehead. She settled back down but asked, "You're okay, right?"

"Yes," replied the bard, she smiled warmly. "I'm getting a little chilly though."

"Yeah me too," agreed the Amazon. "Let's hit the shore."

Gabrielle seconded that idea and started swimming beside her friend. She then recalled about her brand and she almost stopped swimming but did not. She realized Ephiny was on her left side so that meant if she got out of the water she'd have to keep her left side that way until she had her skirt on to hide it. Or if they dressed back to back she would be safe enough. She kept praying to herself that Ephiny would turn her back to her so they could both dress privately as possible.

Ephiny sensed her friend's quietness and knew something was bothering her. For some reason, she knew it was about the brand and she decided not to lead on yet that she knew about it. When she got to the shore, she hurried to pick up her items then walked around Diana and started slipping into her clothes.

Gabrielle sighed happily and gathered up her items. She moved behind Torqueo and took her time changing knowing there was no risk now. "Thanks for the swim, Eph."

"Hey thank you too," called back the Amazon. "We'll have to remember this place for later this summer."

"Yeah, I agree," called the bard. "You think we should tell the boys?"

The Amazon laughed while she slipped her boots on and started lacing them. "Nah,
just between us."

Gabrielle grinned, she liked that idea. "Okay."

Ephiny chuckled to herself and stood back up after getting her boots laced up. She went to the tree branch and took of Diana's tack.

Gabrielle was just finishing with lacing her own boots and came back around Torqueo. She was taking her time to put Torqueo's face tack on again.

Within a minute or two, the girls were finished with their horses and ready to mount them. At the same time, they mounted their horses and turned them around.

"I'm not exactly ready to head back," complained the bard quietly.

Ephiny gave a small grin but urged her mare to walk. "We'll take our time getting back but we don't want to miss dinner."

Gabrielle felt her tummy growl quietly in agreement. "Yeah… I think you're right."

The young Amazon gave a bright smile. She turned her head away and continued watching the path, making sure not to stray off of it. She debated with herself when would be the best time to talk to her friend about the brand. She considered talking about it in the privacy of their room but she was too worried one of the boys would over hear them. She then thought it could wait until the next time they went for a ride, maybe tomorrow. Yet, Ephiny knew she really couldn't wait until then either, she had to know now. She broke her thoughts away and decided to pull Diana off the trail into an open patch in the woods.

Gabrielle had a confused look but followed. "Where we going?"

"Just thought we could take a break," casually replied the Amazon.

The teenager shrugged it off then pulled Torqueo to a halt when they were in the opening.

Ephiny had done the same and was already dismounting from her mare. She glanced over to see Gabrielle was doing the same now. So she left Diana's reins over her head because she knew they wouldn't be very long.

Gabrielle noted Ephiny was starting to sit down against a tree trunk. After a deep breath, she walked over and sat down beside her friend. "It's been a nice day," she mentioned.

A warm smile creased the Amazon's lips. "Yeah, it has been." She fell silent as her smile slipped away. She dropped her head against the tree and her eyes gradually closed. She tried to think of the best way to start this conversation out but nothing really came to mind. And then, she had a second thought. "Gabrielle?"

"Mmmm?" The bard had lifted her head and peered over at her friend. She noted how Ephiny had her eyes closed and relaxed against the tree.
"You said you're originally from Potidaea?"

The slave felt her stomach turn at the mention of the topic and her hometown. "Yes," she simply said.

Ephiny chewed on the inside of her lip. She was silent for awhile just thinking about her friend. After a deep sigh, she asked, "You said you weren't there during the raid, right?"

Subconsciously, Gabrielle's right arm slipped down some and covered the spot where her brand was located. "We uh… moved before that, yes." She bit her lip, she hated lying but she also knew what was at stake if anybody knew that she was really a slave.

The Amazon picked up on the hesitation and felt a little sad for prying. On the other hand, she'd felt lied to and wanted to know what was really going on with her friend. She lifted her head some then looked at Gabrielle. "If you weren't then why do you have the mark of a slave?" she whispered gently.

Gabrielle felt her heart drop and her entire body started to shaky in fear. "I… I…." She fell short on her words and she closed her eyes tightly, a few tears tried to break through.

Ephiny sighed at how scared her friend was now. She completely moved and faced Gabrielle. "Gabrielle?" she whispered and reached over with her hand. "It's okay, honestly. It doesn't matter to me if you're a slave or not. You're my friend… my sister." She then saw as very sad green eyes opened up to her again. "Its okay, I promise."

Gabrielle suddenly broke down into tears and she leaned forward into Ephiny.

The Amazon sadly smiled and pulled the smaller girl in closer. She felt Gabrielle's wet face burying into her neck and staying there as warm arms encircled her tightly.

The teenager tried to regain control of herself and when she did, she lifted her head back up. "I'm sorry, Ephiny. I didn't mean to lie to you… its just…. I had to."

The young Amazon reached up with her right hand and wiped her friend's tears away, drying her cheeks. "I understand, Gabrielle. I guess I just don't understand how somebody that's a slave can get into the Academy."

The bard slightly grinned at her friend's words. "Neither do I but I did."

Ephiny was about to ask another question but stopped when she saw the sun was getting low in the west. She looked back at her friend. "We'll talk about it later, okay?"

Gabrielle nodded and released the Amazon. "Thanks, Eph."

Ephiny was first on her feet and helped Gabrielle up as well. "Come on, I'm starving."
It'd been over fourteen days since Ephiny found out about Gabrielle's brand. They never had time to really talk to one another about the brand or how things came about to begin. Ephiny never felt like there was a right time or place since they both were busy and always had company.

For Gabrielle though, she felt a lot more at ease around Ephiny. She now knew that Ephiny didn't care that Gabrielle was a slave. Although, she had guesses that Ephiny in no way agreed to slavery in the slightest bit. But they hadn't had much time to discuss it all. She realized though that Ephiny was an Amazon, which by no means meant that Ephiny was a slave to nobody, not even society.

Gabrielle considered that rather ironic, two friends that were from either extreme. Gabrielle was a slave in every form possible with no abilities to protect herself. Ephiny though, she was free as a bird and knew how to cut a man down in half. No wonder why the Amazons chose the bird as their symbol, it now made perfect sense to the bard.

Even though Gabrielle was growing closer and closer to Ephiny with each day, she still felt a large part of herself dark. It was the part of her that was never dark when Xena was around her, it was never missing. Ephiny seemed to bring back many things to Gabrielle's life yet there was always something lacking. At the same time, Gabrielle began to love the Amazon for so many things but mostly her friendship. She never imagined finding another friend again let alone one she could call her sister too. And the day Ephiny confronted Gabrielle about the brand only seemed to tighten their bond all the more.

Today though had been a long day for them. They'd finished dinner about two candlemarks ago and were now busy doing homework at their desks. Homework, which was something new to both of them but it was something they would do to pass their classes. Gabrielle knew they would be finished their work soon enough and maybe for tonight she could get some time alone with Ephiny. She'd been dying for that since the afternoon Ephiny knew she was a slave.

Ephiny stretched out her legs under the desk and looked over at her friend from across the room. "You almost finished?" She noted how Gabrielle had her head hung low, eyes locked on her scroll, and the tip of her quill in her mouth. At first, Ephiny didn't think Gabrielle heard her but then slowly soft ivy eyes lifted to her.

"Yeah, almost," replied the bard.

The Amazon grinned and started rolling up her scroll. She'd finished her work and decided to tuck the scroll away into her satchel. She pushed her chair out and straightened out her skirt after she got up.

The slave lowered her head back down and continued on her homework. She scribbled a few things then stopped, reread and then wrote a few more things down. She reread the entire scroll and sighed after she sat back from reading it. She then felt warm hands clasp her shoulders.
"Finished?" questioned the Amazon. Ephiny began kneading the tight shoulders under her hands.

"Yeah I think so." The bard placed her quill down on the desk and dropped her head back.

Ephiny smiled down at her friend. "Feel like a walk?"

"That sounds nice," agreed the slave. She stretched her legs and arms out as a yawn came over her. She then stood up and Ephiny's hands slipped off her shoulder.

"Come on." The young Amazon led her friend out of the room and into the dorm.

Orion and Stallonus looked up when they saw the two girls come into the dorm.

"Where you girls going?" inquired Stallonus.

"For a walk," replied the Amazon. "Where's Twickenham?"

Orion turned a little in his desk chair to look at them better. "He's at the library to do his work." He glanced between Ephiny and Gabrielle. "How'd your homework go?"

"It was too bad," spoke up Gabrielle. "How's yours?"

"Almost finished."

Stallonus huffed. "I hate homework." He turned back into his chair and continued on his work.

The two girls chuckled to one another and went through dorm to the door.

"See you two later," called Orion. He watched them leave then he glanced over to Stallonus. "What you think that was about?"

"What you mean?"

Orion shrugged as he returned his focus to his work. "Just… they were in a rush."

Stallonus didn't answer for a second but muttered, "That's girls for you."

Orion grinned to himself at Stallonus's reply.

Both Ephiny and Gabrielle walked closely together as they headed for the main entrance of the Academy. The spring night was rather warm yet there was a slight breeze. The sky was well lit with stars and the moon lighted their way.

"So I guess in two weeks we get a break," mentioned the bard.

The young Amazon smiled. "Yeah, I can't wait."

The slave giggled quietly to herself. "You'll go back to the Amazons?"
Ephiny slowly nodded her head. She reached up and brushed back some of her curly hair. "I'd like to see Eponin again and my sisters."

"Well its fourteen days we have off," mentioned Gabrielle. "Plenty of time."

The Amazon faintly nodded then looked at her friend. "Where will you go?"

Gabrielle sighed and hung her head down. She watched the various rocks under her feet pass by but she lifted her head back up. "Back to see mother and… my master," she whispered.

Ephiny was just able to hear what her friend said but almost grabbed her into a hug to comfort her. "Who is… your master?" She felt like it was a sin to mention Gabrielle's slavery.

"His name is Cornelio," answered the bard. She sighed and folded her arms over her chest. She noticed they'd already gone past the Academy building and were walking down the main road a little ways.

Ephiny turned off the road and went into the woods but not very far. She found a log and sat down on it, she straddled it between her legs though so she could face her friend.

Gabrielle sat down as well but didn't staddle it like Ephiny. "Cornelio is a wonderful man."

"Is he the one that sent you here?"

The bard gradually nodded and laced her hands together in her lap. "It's funny Ephiny…." She lifted her gaze to her friend. "I've been enslaved and Cornelio is trying so hard to… unenslave me."

The Amazon dropped her head to one side, not fully understanding.

"He sent me here to learn how to be a bard, obviously." Gabrielle turned her head away and studied her own hands. "What he hopes is that I'll learn enough so that I can go out on my own." She lifted her head again and looked at her friend. "So he can set me free."

Ephiny suddenly smiled brightly. "That's wonderful." But she lost her smile when Gabrielle didn't return it and only looked away again.

"The only problem, Eph is that… I've been branded." She shook her head and whispered, "I'm a slave for all of my life. There is truly no freedom for me." Gabrielle returned her attention to her friend. "Whether I have a master or not… I'll be living in constant fear that somebody may find out I'm a slave. And we all know how people look down on slaves."

The young Amazon sighed deeply and reached over to take her friend's hands into her own. She squeezed Gabrielle's smaller hands. She wasn't sure what to say. So wanted
to tell her to join the Amazons because there word slave meant nothing to the Amazons let alone a brand. Once more, she squeezed Gabrielle's hand and finally peered up into Gabrielle's worried eyes. "Never say never, okay?"

"Ephiny, there is no way for me to have true freedom," whispered the bard. "Whether I am a slave of a master or a slave to my own fears… I'll never be free."

Ephiny quickly released on hand and lifted up to cup her friend's chin. "You will see freedom one day, I promise." She sadly smiled and rubbed her thumb against Gabrielle's jaw line some. "Just have some hope, okay?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes and let Ephiny words and touch soak into her. She actually seemed to calm her own fears. Maybe there was hope after all. Here is her best friend promising her a better future and it seemed to renew her hope. Slowly she opened her eyes again. "I will try."

The Amazon smiled brightly at this and released her friend's hands and removed her hand from Gabrielle's jaw. "I have an idea."

The slave perked up at the mention of an idea. "Go on."

Ephiny grinned devilishly. "Come to the Amazons with me."

"To the Nation?" whispered the surprised bard.

"Yes." Ephiny's grin grew larger. "You're always asking me about them and what my life is like there. Come with me, you'll see for yourself."

"But… my mother. I'd like to see her and Cornelio."

"Wait, wait." The teenaged Amazon was grabbing a hold of her friend's arm. "We'll stay one week with the Amazons and then the other with your mother. How about that?"

Gabrielle was staring down at the silver lit grass, chewing on the lower part of her lip. "I'm not-"

"Please," begged Ephiny.

Gabrielle was trying to think of some other reason why not but she couldn't come up with any. And when she really thought about going to the Amazon Nation, she started to get very curious and excited. Now a huge grin broke out across her expression. "Okay, I'll go."

Ephiny suddenly leaned forward and hugged her friend. "You'll love it!"

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle had been travelling for the past day on Torqueo with Ephiny at her side. Ephiny had told her it wouldn't be much longer that they'd come upon the Amazon territory. With each step that Torqueo took, Gabrielle became more nervous.
Ephiny had noticed her friend was growing quieter. She figured it had to be because they were nearing the Amazons. She looked over and grinned at how Gabrielle had a very distant look. "We don't bite," she teased.

The slave quickly shook her head and looked across to her friend. "Sorry," she whispered and a slight blush crept up her neck.

The Amazon knew she was right and chuckled at her friend's embarrassment. "It's okay. I think you'll like it."

"I think so too," agreed the bard.

Ephiny smiled and turned her head away. They'd been following this road since they left the Academy. It first led north then headed due east bypassing the Nation's territory. Soon as they were close enough, they would cut off the road and head into the woods towards the Amazon forest.

Gabrielle was rather excited to meet the Amazons and especially Eponin that Ephiny mentioned so many times. She took a quick look at Ephiny again. The Amazon was dressed in her Amazon attire but this time she wore her mask as well but it was pushed back onto the top of her head. The long strands of coloured straw tangled with Ephiny's curly hair and flowed down her back. She quickly turned her gaze away, worried Ephiny would catch her staring. She absolutely adored Ephiny in her Amazon attire and the mask seemed to complete the transformation for a true Amazon. Gabrielle became so lost into her thoughts that she almost didn't hear Ephiny calling her name.

"Gabrielle," hotly whispered the Amazon.

Gabrielle halted her stallion beside Ephiny's horse. "What's wrong?"

The Amazon unsheathed her short sword and pointed ahead with it. "Some bandits ahead."

The slave looked away and her eyes slightly widened when she saw two men with weapons approaching them. "Oh gods."

"Stay on your horse," ordered Ephiny. She dismounted her mare. "I'll take care of them."

"Ephi-"

"Don't argue," growled the Amazon. She was too concerned about her friend's safety to fight about anything. She walked ahead of the two horses and bent her knees.

The two bandits had seen the two travellers sooner and already had their weapons out. One bandit stopped and lowered his mace to his side. "Great… two teenagers again."

The other bandit had a sword and groaned at his partner's words. "They're not the
same ones."

"Yeah but I remember what happened the last time," he complained. "I still have splinters in places I don't want to mention after being tied to that tree."

The swordsman shook his head and decided to forget him. He approached the young girl and noted her attire. "Oh you're some kind of female warrior huh?"

Ephiny narrowed her eyes after hearing his mocking words. "An Amazon," she corrected.

The swordsman's expression took on a bit of surprise but he tried to hide it. "Well little Amazon lets see what you got." He spun his sword.

Ephiny gave a huge grin and twirled her own sword.

The bandit charged Ephiny and clashed his blade against hers.

Gabrielle sighed and leaned against her saddle horn, just watching them. She noted how the other bandit was leaning against a tree and shaking his head. She wondered why he wasn't joining into the fight but she wasn't about to ask him. Her eyes flickered back over to Ephiny and watched as the Amazon took a slash at the swordsman.

The bandit didn't move far enough away and the tip of the blade caught his right shoulder. He growled and lunged at Ephiny again.

Ephiny stepped aside and watched him blow past her. She brought her sword around and knocked him in the back, sending him on his back. She hastily moved and pressed her right boot into his mid-back. She pressed the tip of her sword into the back of his neck. "Want another round?"

The swordsman groaned and dropped his face into the dirt. "I hate kids," he grumbled.

The Amazon decided to leave him alone so she returned to her mare. She mounted Diana and nodded at her friend.

The two girls urged their horses forward; they went around the swordsman still in the dirt and then passed by the other bandit.

The bandit with the mace smiled at the two girls and said, "Have a nice afternoon."

"You too," called Ephiny with a laugh.

The bandit watched them go then looked back at his partner in the dirt. "Are you satisfied now?"

"Damn teenagers," complained the bandit again. He started to lift himself up.

Ephiny and Gabrielle were still laughing with one another about the two bandits.
Gabrielle stopped her giggling and smiled at her friend. "You fight pretty well."

Ephiny grinned. "Thanks." She sighed contently then recalled how she acted earlier. "Sorry that I snapped at you. I just didn't want you getting hurt is all."

"I know," whispered the bard. "Thank you."

"Anytime," Ephiny gave a genuine smile but quickly look away when she felt too shy about it.

Within half of a candlemark the pair were pulling off the road and entering the forest. Gabrielle started to observe everything more carefully in hopes she'd see some kind of signs of Amazon life.

Ephiny felt a grin tug at her lips. "We're not quite in the forest yet."

The bard gave a shy smile and tried to feel embarrassed again as she looked around at the forest again. "How far are we from the territory?"

"About another ten minutes or so."

Gabrielle nodded and adjusted the reins in her hands. "I'm beat though."

"I am too," agreed the Amazon. "We travelled all night," she reminded.

"Mmmmm." Gabrielle gave a deep sigh. "We'll sleep well tonight." That then made her think about where she was going to sleep. "Eph?"

"Hmmm?"

"Speaking of sleep… where am I going to sleep?"

The Amazon almost replied with an I don't know but she laughed at herself and looked to Gabrielle. "You can stay in my hut or stay in your own guest hut."

The slave blushed at Ephiny's offer and she quietly asked, "It's okay… if I stay with you?"

"Yeah sure." The young Amazon smiled warmly and shook her head. "We can pull in a small pallet. It's not a problem."

"Thanks… just it'll be my first time there and…."

"I understand." Ephiny gave another smile for reassurance. She then stopped her horse, which caused Gabrielle to do the same. "We need to dismount."

"Are we close?" asked Gabrielle. She was busy getting off her stallion and pulling the reins over his head.

"Yeah." Ephiny walked in front of Diana and adjusted the reins in her hands. "It's better to go in on foot."
"Oh… okay." Gabrielle was completely unsure about any of this and just followed her friend. For about another minute or two they continued walking through the forest and Gabrielle started to realize the forest was rather quiet. She furrowed her eyebrows at this, she didn’t hear anything. There were no birds or animals or even insects just the occasional tree leaves ruffling from the breeze.

The young Amazon turned her head to one side and stopped walking.

Gabrielle took a few more steps and stopped and looked back at her friend. "What is it?"

Ephiny held up her hand and slowly a grin spread across her lips.

The bard tilted her head to one side, mocking Ephiny's action. She tried to figure out what Ephiny was doing and it was then that she heard a bird. It was the first animal she’d heard in awhile.

The young Amazon lifted her head back up and held up her hands to her mouth. She repeated that same bird sound.

Gabrielle became a little confused but then she saw three women with masks on fall out of the trees before them. "By the gods," she whispered in awe.

Ephiny took a few steps and came closer to Gabrielle.

The three women all pulled their masks back simultaneously.

"Ephiny?" whispered one Amazon.

"Hi," greeted Ephiny. She had a warm smile.

"What are you doing here?" inquired the same Amazon. She approached the two young girls. "And who is this?" her dark brown eyes lowered to the girl.

"Well, I'm on a break from the Academy." Ephiny took one last step and tugged on Diana's reins for her to follow. "And this is my friend from the Academy, Gabrielle."

The three Amazons all looked at the small bard.

Gabrielle gave a very shy smile at the three older women.

The lead Amazon neared Gabrielle and Ephiny and kept her full attention on Gabrielle. "It's nice to meet you, Gabrielle. I'm Masika." She held out her arm.

Hesitant at first but Gabrielle took the offered hand and shook it hard. "Nice to meet you, Masika."

Masika showed a faint smile and looked back at the other two Amazons. "Behind me are Eilis and Maired."
The slave saw each of them smiled to her when their names were announced.

"Nice to meet you, Gabrielle." Maired gave a warm smile.

"Welcome to the Amazon Nation," added in Eilis.

Masika looked to Ephiny now. "How long are you here for?"

"Around five days." The young Amazon crossed her arms over her chest. "My friend Gabrielle here kept asking me about us." Her eyes flickered over to Gabrielle then back to Masika. "So I thought I'd just show her."

Maired quietly chuckled and spoke up. "I'm sure she'll regret agreeing."

Ephiny have glared at Maired but knew she was only teasing.

"I'm actually fascinated by the Amazons."

Masika almost rolled her eyes at Gabrielle's words. She simply turned around and said, "Let's get into the village."

"I know the way, Masika," protested the young Amazon.

Masika held up her hand for silence and got no more rebukes. She continued trekking through the woods towards the village.

Gabrielle swallowed the lump in her throat. She already sensed the tension and was surprised by it. She shifted closer to Ephiny and was about to ask something but hesitated when the two other older Amazons came closer.

"So where are you from, Gabrielle?" inquired Maired.

"Potidaea."

Maired nodded her head and smiled. "I've been by there but never was in the town."

Gabrielle sadly smiled and looked down at the ground passing under her feet.

"You'll enjoy it here," persisted Maired. "It's very different."

"Don't scare her off now, Maired," teased Eilis. "She hasn't even gotten into the village."

Maired huffed and mock glared at the other Amazon. "Eilis, she obviously is interested." She revealed a huge grin to Gabrielle. "We want to show you all about the Amazons."

Ephiny groaned dramatically and rolled her eyes. "I'd like to keep her for a friend a little longer than this."

Eilis and Maired quietly laughed together.
“How long have you both been Amazons?”

Eilis smiled at the bard’s curiosity. “I’ve been here all my life.”

“I have as well,” cut in Maired. “It was my mother’s mother that first came to the Amazons.” She softly smiled and added, “It is in our line to be the priestess of this particular village.”

“Priestess?” Gabrielle had a confused look.

“We worship Artemis,” reminded Ephiny.

The slave still had a slight confused look. "Then you sacrifice to Artemis?"

"Sometimes, yes," answered Maired. "But the priestess is apart of the culture so that the Amazons remain connected to the goddess."

Gabrielle slowly nodded her head. "That makes sense."

"And Eilis over there.” Maired signalled over to the other Amazon. "Her line is to be the healer.”

The bard pressed her lips together and thought about what Maired told her. She then looked at Maired again. "So are you both now the priestess and healer?"

"Almost," answered Eilis. "We're both in training with our mothers."

"We can practice," further explained Maired. "But we're not officially the priestess or healer." She then looked up at Masika, who was staying several steps ahead of them. "Masika up there… she's meant to be one of the council members in the near future."

"Council?"

Eilis grinned and glanced at Ephiny. "You didn't tell her much about the Amazons huh?"

The young Amazon gave a dramatic sigh. "There's too much to tell, Eilis."

The healer second that and looked at Gabrielle. "The Amazons have a council made up five Amazons. Masika will soon be one of them. Her mother is the head council member because she's the oldest. Generally the council is made up of elders. Masika will actually be the youngest yet in the council."

Gabrielle chewed on her lower lip. That's when she decided that explained why Masika was rather serious and stern. "There's a lot to the Amazons huh?"

“Yes there is,” agreed Eilis. She fell silent though as they were nearing the gates of the village.

As Gabrielle entered the village, her eyes grew wider and wider. She never imagined
such a place full of women that were all warriors. It simply astounded her to no end. There were no men and there was no woman without a weapon at her side. All of them wore leathers and had feathers tangled in their hair. They milled about the village carrying out various duties.

Ephiny and Gabrielle were led to the stables first to take care of their horses.

Masika stopped in front of the stables and turned to Ephiny and Gabrielle. "I assume you can handle things from here, Ephiny."

The young Amazon bowed her head slightly while saying, "Yes, thank you, Masika."

The older Amazon briskly nodded and walked past the two young women.

"Talk to you both later," called Eilis.

"Enjoy your stay, Gabrielle," called Maired. She rushed off to join the other two Amazons for the remained of their patrol duty.

Gabrielle shook her head and looked at Ephiny. "Why is Masika like that?"

"It's just who she is," explained the young Amazon. She nodded at the stable. "Come on." She urged Diana into the stables and found an empty stall.

Gabrielle was able to get the stall across from Diana's. She led Torqueo into it and began untacking him. "I'm really tired," she mentioned.

Ephiny sighed and was just finishing up with the tack. "Me too. I do want to see Eponin though."

"I know." The slave put the tack away and slid the saddlebags off Torqueo's back. "I'll see you tonight, boy."

Torqueo whined and watched his master leave the stall.

"I can't wait to meet her," added Gabrielle.

Ephiny smiled. She had her saddlebags as well and was coming out of the stall. "We'll drop this stuff off at my hut. Then we'll go see Eponin."

"Where you think she is?"

"My guess… at the sparring fields." The young Amazon was walking out of the stables with Gabrielle. "Plus I want you to meet two other friends of mine."

Gabrielle brightened up at this information. "Who is that?"

"My friend Solari and the Queen's sister Terreis."

"Wow… the Queen's sister?"
"Uh huh." Ephiny smiled warmly and said, "I'm close with her." Her smile though fell as she realized she had to tell her friend a few specific details. "Gabrielle, there are some things you need to keep in mind."

"What is that, Eph?"

The young Amazon sighed and gazed about the village, looking at all her sisters but her attention returned to Gabrielle. "Terreis is also the Princess. When you speak to either her or the Queen, you must address them as Queen or Princess."

"I understand."

"Terreis will most likely tell you to call her Terreis." Ephiny sighed a little. "But the Queen however, she will not let anybody call her by her name unless it's with her title."

"What is her name?" inquired the inquisitive bard.

"It's Queen Melosa." The young Amazon saw her hut just ahead and smiled inwardly at seeing it again. "She's been the queen for about a year now. She takes her position very seriously and demands respect."

Gabrielle felt her stomach turn at how serious her friend was telling her this. "Terreis is not as serious?"

"She is… but she's also still young. There are certain points where she knows to stop playing friend and play princess. Queen Melosa however, she is queen all the time… she keeps no friends that close."

The small bard digested everything her friend told her. She made a mental note to make sure to address all of the royalty appropriately.

"Here's my hut." Ephiny suddenly had a happy smiled as they approached the door. "Nothing like home." She pushed open the door with her free hand.

Gabrielle went inside behind her friend. "Gods it's big."

The young Amazon laughed quietly to herself and settled her saddlebags off into a corner of her room. "Bring your saddlebags over here."

The bard was looking at everything in the hut but realize Ephiny had spoken to her. She ambled over to her friend and put her saddlebags down beside Ephiny's. "My house was this big," she joked. "Well maybe not quite… my bedroom and my sister's bedroom together."

A small laugh left the Amazon as she went over to her bed. She ran her right hand over the clean bed sheets then looked at her friend. "Come on, let's go find Eponin." She saw a huge smile appear on Gabrielle's face. "You'll love her."

The small bard gave a shy laugh and nodded. "I hope she likes me."
"She will," promised Ephiny. She'd come closer to her friend and grabbed her hand then led her out of the hut. Once she was out of the hut, she released her friend's hand and hurried off towards the sparring fields.

Gabrielle rushed along and started to get excited about meeting Ephiny's older sister. She'd heard so much about Eponin and it was like almost meeting a legendary hero.

Ephiny started to slow down when she saw the sparring fields just ahead. "Here we go." She pointed just ahead.

Gabrielle focused her eyes and noted three young Amazons practicing with these short stick like weapons. Then in front of them stood a much older Amazon that kept a close eye on them.

Ephiny approached the edge of the sparring field but stopped and watched the three Amazons practicing.

"What are those weapon they have?" whispered Gabrielle.

The young Amazon grinned and answered, "Chobos. They don't look that menacing but at close range, those things can hurt."

"Huh." The small bard watched the three Amazons practising with their weapons, pretending to fight an imaginary enemy in front of them. She then glanced over at the older Amazon that carefully watched them. "Is that the weapons master?" she whispered.

"Yes," replied Ephiny. "And that's Eponin." She pointed to the Amazon in the middle.

Gabrielle immediately recognized her from the first night at the Academy. And now she had a better look at Eponin's body since it was hidden in a cloak last time. To Gabrielle, Eponin was rather muscular and even more muscular compared to Ephiny. Eponin also had a larger body built in comparison to Ephiny. Gabrielle came out of her thoughts when she heard the weapons master order them to stop.

"Take a break, ladies," ordered the weapons master. "We'll start back up in about fifteen minutes."

Ephiny's eyes were still on Eponin and suddenly a smile that just appeared on her face that reached her eyes.

Eponin faced their direction and realized that one of them was Ephiny. She almost dropped her chobos but gathered herself and rushed over to Ephiny.

"Eponin!"

"Ephiny!" squealed the older Amazon. She suddenly stumbled back when Ephiny jumped into her arms and hugged her.

Gabrielle giggled and covered her mouth to muffle the giggles.
Eponin squeezed really tightly and lifted the smaller Amazon off the ground then lowered her back down. "What are you doing back here?" she asked and her expression was filled with worry.

Ephiny took a few deep breaths after the huge hug. "I'm on a break. So I thought I'd come home for a visit."

Eponin switched her left chobo out of her hand and held both of them in her right hand. "I'm so happy you came home." She then realized she had yet to know who the other female that was near Ephiny. Her golden eyes lifted up to Gabrielle. "And who's this?"

Ephiny had a shy smile as she turned to Gabrielle. "Um Eponin, this is my friend from the Academy. Eponin, meet Gabrielle."

The Amazon quickly looked over the small bard and a warm smile came over her. She stepped forward, switched her chobos to her left hand and held out her right arm. "Hi, Gabrielle."

"Nice to meet you, Eponin." Gabrielle's face was faintly red as she took the muscular arm. "I'm glad I finally get to meet you."

"Finally huh?" Eponin released the bard's arm after shaking it a few times. "What'd you tell her, Ephiny?"

The young Amazon was holding back her grin. "Nothing much, Eponin."

"I doubt that," chided the older Amazon.

Ephiny licked her lips and hastily came up with a diversion. "How's the weapons master training going?"

"Really well actually." Eponin stole a quick look at the weapons master, who was rather far away. "She seems to favour me."

"Really?" Ephiny couldn't hold back her huge smile. "You think you'll be selected?"

"I'm hoping so," replied the older Amazon.

"What you have to learn to be a weapons master?"

Eponin turned her eyes to Gabrielle. "A lot honestly."

"First, you have to know all about weapons," started Ephiny.

"Fighting techniques," added Eponin.

Gabrielle kept switching her eyes back and forth from Eponin to Ephiny.

"Battle techniques," quipped Ephiny.
"Mentality of a warrior."

Ephiny grinned as she saw how Gabrielle was trying to put this all in her head. "Code of the warrior Amazon."

"And mostly, honour." Eponin folded her arms over her chest. "Some other things as well but not quite as big as those."

Gabrielle blinked then whispered, "Oh."

Ephiny laughed at her friend's expression.

Eponin had a large grin and said, "I like her. Where'd you find her, Ephiny?" She peered down at her adopted sister.

The young Amazon had her own grin and just shrugged.

"Well, I'd hate to cut this short." Eponin lowered her arms while a heavy sigh escaped her. "I have to get back to practice."

"We know." Ephiny briefly squeezed her sister's arm and smiled at her. "We'll see you for dinner." She was about to move away but stopped. "You know where Solari or the princess might be?"

"I think they're both finishing up training on the other sparring field, Ephiny." Eponin could see the other two Amazons returning for the weapons master training. "Look there. I'll see you both later."

"See you, Eponin." Ephiny watched her go; she then looked back at her friend. "Let's go find Solari and Terreis."

As Gabrielle and the young Amazon were walking through the village to the other sparring fields, something occurred to the bard.

"Eph, why is the weapons master selecting a new one?" Gabrielle shook her head and added, "I mean, doesn't she have a daughter to carry her line on?"

"That's not always the case, Gabrielle." Ephiny peered at her friend then looked away. "Sometimes a mother doesn't have a daughter to carry on her line. In other cases, the mother doesn't think the daughter can handle the role. And sometimes, the daughter doesn't want to continue the legacy because she doesn't feel fit for the position. Those two cases can be rare though. Generally it's because the Amazon has no daughter."

"Is that the case with the current weapons master?"

Ephiny simply nodded without saying anything else. A second thought then came to her and she quietly added, "Or sometimes the daughter is killed."

Gabrielle just glanced at Ephiny's face but lowered her gaze, not really knowing what to say in response.
The two friends were soon over at the other, much larger, sparring field on the other side of the village. There at the field were at least a dozen young Amazons being trained by two older Amazons. The young Amazons all yielded swords and were learning a fighting technique.

The sight memorized the young slave. She had yet to accept the fact that Amazons were really, it still seemed a little fairy tale like to her.

"Wow," whispered the bard.

"And I thought your imagination could handle this," teased the young Amazon.

"Yes but… its one thing to imagine it," whispered the bard, "another thing to see it."

"Sometimes seeing is believing."

Gabrielle had a rotten grin as she said, "And sometimes believing can be seeing."

Ephiny felt a soft laugh come over her; she just shook her head and looked back at her sisters on the sparring field just ahead of her. "There's Solari over there."

The bard followed her gaze and her eyes caught on Solari. She was about Ephiny's height except a little slender with long, straight brown hair. Her face was beautiful and had extremely soft features to them.

"Over there," interrupted Ephiny's voice, "about two Amazons down from Solari is Terreis."

Gabrielle immediately picked up on the princess and her more royal demeanour. She was about Gabrielle's own height and she had a mix of auburn to reddish hair and rather pale skin. "Does Queen Melosa look anything like her?"

"Nnnmno." Ephiny actually laughed and said, "She looks completely opposite of Terreis."

"How opposite?"

"Like tall, dark and dangerous opposite," explained the young Amazon.

"Godssss… night and day. Reminds me of my sister and…" Gabrielle fell short on her words at mentioning her sister.

"You had a sister?" quietly asked the Amazon.

Gabrielle solemnly nodded her head. "Her name was Lila."

"Was? She was killed too?"

The bard shrugged then lowly whispered, "She might be dead… I really don't know what's become of her." Her eyes lifted to Ephiny.
The Amazon could read all of the emotions in Gabrielle's eyes. She never felt her heart in pain for somebody like she did for Gabrielle. "You were separated."

Gabrielle only nodded then decided she needed to keep walking if she didn't want to break down crying at memories of Lila.

Ephiny was motionless for a brief moment then quickly caught up to her friend. She didn't truly realize what Gabrielle had gone through and continued to go through until now. She couldn't even imagine having Eponin lost in the cycle of slavery, never knowing what became of her or if she was even still breathing. She pushed the thoughts away and came up to her friend. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it."

"Its okay, Eph." Gabrielle tried to reassure her friend but her smile was too sad. "It's just… a life of a slave," she muttered.

Ephiny tried to come up with something to help but could not. She sighed and stopped when they were close enough to the sparring field. She saw that the young Amazons were finishing up their lessons for the day and were sheathing their swords.

One of the older Amazons was speaking loudly to them all.

Ephiny and Gabrielle over heard everything.

"Never forget to think like your enemy, be your enemy and you will stay one step ahead of your enemy. That one step ahead will be what saves your life. Keep that in mind, Amazons because we will soon teach you that advantage." The Amazon stopped walking around the younger ones and put her hands behind her back. "Have a good afternoon and be here at noon sharp tomorrow."

The young Amazons were all smiles as they hurried off to enjoy the rest of their day.

Ephiny had a huge smile plastered to her face when she saw her two friends coming towards them.

When Solari realized it was Ephiny, she broke off running for her. "Ephiny!"

Ephiny laughed and took a few steps but this time it was her turn to stumble back as Solari hugged her furiously.

Terreis caught up to the pair and greeted Ephiny with a large hug as well.

"What you doing back here?" asked Solari first.

"I'm on break." Ephiny couldn't control her happy smile but she quickly recalled Gabrielle behind her. She turned around and said, "And my friend from the Academy came as well."

The two young Amazons finally realized that she was there and they both smiled at her.

"Gabrielle, this is Princess Terreis." Ephiny held out her hand to the princess then
shifted her hand to the other Amazon. "And this is Solari."

Solari quickly stepped forward and held out her arm. "Welcome to the village, Gabrielle."

"Thank you, Solari." Gabrielle returned the smile Solari gave her and shook the offered hand. She then took Terreis's outstretched arm. "Nice to meet you, Princess."

"I'm glad you've come with Ephiny," spoke up the princess. She released the slave's slender arm then looked to Ephiny. "How long are you both here for?"

"About five days…?" She glanced at Gabrielle for confirmation.

Gabrielle nodded her head.

"Then we're going to see Gabrielle's family," added Ephiny.

"So you really have a lot of time off then," concluded Solari.

"Yes." Ephiny folded laced her hands together but behind her back.

"Have you seen Eponin?" cut in the princess.
A bright smile pulled at Ephiny's lips. "Yes, briefly but she knows I'm here."

"Let's all go to my hut," suggested Solari. "We can catch up."

"Sounds good," agreed Ephiny.

Solari led her friends across the village to her hut. When they were all piled inside, everybody took seats in various spots. Gabrielle and Ephiny were sitting on the foot of Solari's bed. The Princess took a chair near the desk and so did Solari.

"How is the Academy?" first started Terreis.

"Its great," answered Ephiny. "Its amazing what you have to learn."

"You like it, Gabrielle?"

The young bard glanced over to Solari and shyly smiled at her. "Yes I do."

Solari grinned out how shy Gabrielle was around them. "We don't bite, yah know."

Terreis and Solari both giggled at Gabrielle's embarrassed expression.

"Come on, you two," complained Ephiny, "she just got here."

"I'm sorry," apologized the Princess. "You'll get use to us then you'll get bored of us."

Gabrielle let out a small laugh as she felt more at ease now. "I don't know about that."
The group of friends continued talking up until dinner time but once they were in the mess hut, they kept right on talking. Eponin though had shown up and joined the group at the dinner table. She too joined into the various topics around the table of friends.

It wasn't until after dinner did Gabrielle finally made a beeline for Ephiny's hut. Ephiny, on the other hand, left with Eponin to spend a candlemark or so with her. The following morning, Solari and the Princess both had some free time in the early morning. So Ephiny, Gabrielle, Solari and Terreis all decided to take a walk in the woods. The girls kept rather close knit to one another as they weaved their way through the forest.

"When will you be back again?" asked Solari.

Ephiny kicked at a stone on the ground then looked at her best friend. "I'm not sure." Her eyebrows were pressed together as she looked to Gabrielle. "Have you heard about our next break?"

The small slave shook her head. "Not yet."

Terreis came closer to Gabrielle and grasped her arm. "Make sure you come back too. Okay?"

Gabrielle peered up into soft brown eyes and a gentle smile took her lips. "I will," she promised.

"Good." The princess squeezed her new friend's arm then removed her hand.

The small group of friends continued deeper into the woods. They came near the border but weren't really paying much attention as they crossed over and went even deeper.

"My sister seems to think so."

Ephiny removed her gaze from Terreis and looked at Solari then back at Terreis. "You really think Queen Melosa would ease up?"

"I think so," replied the princess. "Maybe some time soon it will come true."

Eponin huffed and shook her head. "The centaurs will never agree to a treaty."

"You never know," cut in Gabrielle and everybody looked at her. "Stranger things have happened."

Eponin grasped the younger girl's shoulder. "Gabrielle, you don't understand the centaurs... or the history we have with them."

The small bard's head dropped forward but she then looked up at Eponin. "The cycle of hatred has to stop some time."

Eponin let out a long sigh as she removed her hand. "I don't know how that is
possible."

Gabrielle chewed on her lips then very quietly whispered, "Love." It was so quiet that it could have almost been lost in the breeze.

Everybody stopped and just looked at the outsider then exchanged glances.

The princess took a step closer to Gabrielle. "You know, I think you would fit in around here quite well, Gabrielle."

The shy bard looked up and slightly smiled. "I'm not sure I belong here, princess."

Ephiny had a wry grin and her arms crossed over her chest. "I think Terreis is right."

The princess's smile shifted into a grin. "You would make a wonderful Amazon," she persisted. She was about to add something else but fell short when she heard a funny noise. She looked to her right.

Ephiny furrowed her eyebrows and looked in the same direction.

"What was that?" quietly asked Solari.

Eponin's first instinct was to step in front of her younger friends. She reached behind her back and unsheathed her sword. "Stay back," she whispered.

The princess stepped directly in front of Gabrielle and signalled her two friends closer to Gabrielle.

The slave started to breathe hard, her heartbeat growing stronger.

Ephiny and Solari squeezed tighter to Gabrielle and quietly removed their swords.

Eponin's head snapped to the right when she heard that same sound again.

"What is it?" uttered Ephiny. She bent her knees and eyed the woods in front of her.

"Its sounds like…." Eponin lost her words as she tried to concentrate on this very faint noise, which sounded like wood bending. Then there was a whistling noise and her eyes widened. "Arrow!" she yelled.

Before anybody had a second to react, Terreis screamed.

Everybody turned to her to see an arrow in her chest.

"No!" screamed Gabrielle. She could hear another arrowing coming at the princess. She leaped forward and pushed Terreis down onto her back, covering her body now.

The three remaining Amazons quickly circled around the two girls on the ground, waiting for their attackers to appear.

Terreis was crying some from the pain in her chest. She lifted her head and looked at
the arrow then dropped her head back.

"Relax, Terreis," coaxed Gabrielle. "Everything will be fine."

The princess closed her eyes; she knew it wouldn't be okay. Although she tried to remain calm, she began to breathe hard when her body started feeling weak.

"Get down!" yelled Eponin.

Suddenly another arrow flew in and landed just beside Gabrielle's head that was over Terreis. Then another one appeared next to Gabrielle's right hand, which covered over Terreis's hand.

"There they are!" yelled Eponin. "Stay here, Solari." She waved at Ephiny to follow with her.

Solari stole a quick glance at her two friends on the ground then looked back up when she heard Ephiny and Eponin engaging the enemy.

"Gabrielle," whispered Terreis.

The young bard looked into cooling brown eyes.

"Gabrielle, I want you to take my cast," whispered the princess.

"No, I can't," refused the bard.

"Gabrielle, you must," urged the princess. Her eyes were filling with tears, her expression desperate.

Gabrielle repeatedly shook her head. "I can't."

"Please," rasped the princess, "take my caste, for me… for my people. You… you are a true Amazon. Please, Gabrielle."

The small bard felt tears rolled down her cheeks when she saw Terreis begin to cry. "I…."

"Please, Gabrielle."

Very faintly, Gabrielle nodded. "I… I accept it."

Terreis was just able to smile. "Thank you. Please follow your heart always, Gabrielle." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Gabrielle was biting on her lower lip and she brushed Terreis tears away. Finally the sound of fighting pierced her trance and she looked up with blurry eyes.

"Get them!" suddenly yelled an older Amazon. "Stop them!"

That was when Gabrielle realized another Amazon was approaching them, it was
"What's happened to Terreis?" Eilis rushed over to them.

"She was hit by an arrow," replied Solari. "In the chest."

Eilis's next step faltered but she knelt down as Gabrielle got off the princess

"Oh Artemis," rasped the healer. She sheathed her sword and lowered her head down onto the princess's chest. "She's… gone."

Solari looked from the princess to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle had her arms over her body in a protective manner and her red eyes locked on Terreis's body.

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Ephiny came over to her friend and knelt down in front of her. She wasn't quite sure what to say at this point.

Gabrielle shifted a little on the bed; she didn't dare look at her friend but instead stared at her lap.

"It's okay," finally whispered Ephiny.

The slave gradually lifted her eyes to Ephiny. "You think I'd be use to death after so much."

"Nobody ever gets use to it, Gabrielle." The Amazon swallowed down a lump in her throat. For the past candlemark or so she'd been swallowing it but it was getting harder. "Terreis was a wonderful princess and a great friend. I… I…." She stumbled over her words and her head dropped. Her shoulders shook and she began to cry.

"Oh gods, Eph." Gabrielle bent forward and wrapped her arms around the Amazon. She pulled Ephiny up.

The young Amazon followed the signal and went into the bed with her friend.

The two young women rested in each other's arms in a very long hug. Both of them cried for Terreis as much as for their pasts of losing family and friends.

Finally after a quarter of a candlemark, they settled down and their crying turned into repeated sniffles. Ephiny lifted her head out of the crook of Gabrielle's neck and sadly smiled.

Gabrielle sighed and was about to wipe her tears away but Ephiny beat her to it.

Once the Amazon had her hand away from Gabrielle's face, she could tell just how much her friend had been crying with her. "You okay?" she whispered.
"Yes but I should be asking you that." The young slave sighed as her hand shifted off Ephiny's stomach and now rested on her hip. "She was your friend."

"I know but she was yours too," reminded the Amazon.

Gabrielle gave out a long sigh, she stared past Ephiny and over at the door.

"What is it?" whispered the Amazon.

The bard brought her vision back to Ephiny. "When... Terreis was dying," she uttered slowly and she noticed Ephiny's eyebrows were growing tighter. "Terreis... she made..." She couldn't quite finish her sentence, almost like it never happened.

"She what?" urged Ephiny, she saw how Gabrielle's eyes were distant again. But then she heard Gabrielle whisper, "I'm the princess." Ephiny shook her head and asked, "What?" Finally, grassy green eyes refocused on her again.

"Terreis... I promised her I'd take her caste."

"Sweet Artemis." Ephiny instantly sat up and stared down at her friend, shock was written all over her features.

Gabrielle sat up gradually and just waited for Ephiny to say anything.

"Did... did anybody witness it?"

"Solari," replied the bard.

The young Amazon hastily thought and before she could even say what was going to happen next, the hut door was pushed open.

"Ephiny?" called a strong voice.

"Queen Melosa," greeted Ephiny. She jumped from her bed and spun around. She didn't quite smile yet she didn't show any dismay. She noted behind Melosa was an elder as well as Solari.

Melosa's fast eyes flickered between Ephiny and the outsider. "I was told what happened."

Ephiny bowed her head. She hoped Gabrielle would get off the bed now.

Slowly, the bard slipped out of the bed and said, "I'm sorry, Queen Melosa."

The queen locked her eyes on the young woman beside Ephiny. She fully inspected her over, from top to bottom and tried to sum her up in two words. The first two words that came to mind were naive and innocent. "What is your name?"

"Its Gabrielle," replied the bard.

The queen sucked in her breath, making her chest come out a little more. She
approached the two young women yet never stopped looking at Gabrielle. "I heard what you did for my sister." She lifted her arms and folded them over her chest. "For that, I will always be grateful for." She stopped as if to consider whether her next words were audible or not. "Solari told me what the princess said to you." She looked back at Solari, inspecting her for a moment then looked back at Gabrielle. "This is a huge honour, Gabrielle. Do you know what an Amazon Princess is, Gabrielle?"

The teenager felt herself almost shrink through the floor yet she kept her gaze centred on the queen. "I am not completely sure but I could tell a lot from the princess."

The queen took another step closer to the bard. She never lowered herself, her back ridged but her eyes burning into the small, young woman. "The princess represents the Amazons. She is the future and she is the hope of every Amazon." She fell silent as she breathed deeply, her chest rising and falling in great lengths. "To be frank, you know little of the Amazons… you're young and inexperienced. That does not mean you're not qualified however it does mean you may have time to decide on this. Terreis has offered her caste to you, to deny it would show shame on her yet you're an outsider and there's very little shame coming from an outsider." The queen turned and walked back to the doorway where Solari and the elder waited. She stopped and looked over her shoulder at Gabrielle. "You have until sunset to decide, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle kept her composure as she watched the three women leave the hut. After the door tightly shut, she sighed and her shoulders fell. "By the gods," she rasped.

"I know," reassured Ephiny. "She is… something."

"Something is not the word, Eph." Gabrielle stepped back to the bed and sat down; her knees had weakened on her. She felt exhausted at that point; she lifted her hands up and covered her face.

Ephiny tilted her head to one side, wondering what was going through her friend's mind. "You're not… rethinking your decision… are you?"

"I don't know, Ephiny." Gabrielle lifted her head back up and dropped her hands to her lap. "The queen is right… I am an outsider."

"That doesn't mean anything," countered Ephiny. "How do you think the Amazons first got started huh?" She threw up her hands briefly then they rested back on her hips. "It's not like we're born with feathers in our hair, the Amazon knowledge in our heads, swords on our backs."

"Yes… but I'm not Amazon blood."

"And what is Amazon blood?" almost growled the Amazon. "There is no such thing as true Amazon blood. Amazon blood means spirit, that's Amazon blood… it's not something that runs through your body but through your heart… your soul even."

Gabrielle was shaking her head. She slid off the bed and walked away.

"Don't tell me you're going to give up Terreis's caste."
"I don't know." Gabrielle spun around. "It's not right for me to have it," she argued.

"Gabrielle, she gave you her caste... you promised."

"I'll pass it on then," brushed off the bard.

Ephiny took a few steps, coming closer to her friend. "No, you can't... you promised Terreis. You belong with us, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle felt her mind going dizzy at Ephiny's words. She suddenly growled and yelled, "Ephiny!" She locked her dark forest eyes on the young Amazon and hotly whispered, "I was not born to be an Amazon Princess... I am a slave."

Ephiny was biting back tears now as her temper flared as much as her resentment for Gabrielle's past. "You are not a slave," she rasped, "you can only be a slave to yourself... to your own fears." She saw how Gabrielle turned away, her back to her now. "Gabrielle, you have to stand up to them otherwise you'll never be free of anything." Gabrielle's head slumped forward, Ephiny felt her heart drop and finally her burning tears roll down her cheeks. "Don't do this to yourself anymore. This is not who you are, even I can see that." She came up behind her friend and grasped her shoulders. "Please fight it... I'll help as much as I can."

Gabrielle sensed the warmth of Ephiny's hands push away the cold in her back. She lifted her head and closed her eyes as several more tears rolled down her cheeks. She took a long, shaky breath and turned around.

Ephiny instinctively knew and pulled her friend in for a long hug. She heard so many whimpers of fear or even doubt coming from her friend. She rubbed the bard's back repeatedly and whispered, "It'll be okay... just think, in two years you'll be an official bard."

Gabrielle started to smile between her tears.

"I'll be a poetry extradinar... we'll both be Amazons." Ephiny pulled back a little and smiled, hoping it would ease her friend's crying. "Just think, you'll know how to fight with your body as much as with words," she teased. She felt her smile grow at the future thoughts. "Know what's the best part... well for you that is."

"What's that?" muttered Gabrielle. She had her chin on Ephiny's shoulder but her face buried into long, curly locks.

"Well... you'll be the princess. I'll be an ordinary Amazon."

"And?" urged the bard.

"Aaaand that means you can order me around," she joked.

Gabrielle's smile suddenly transformed into one gigantic grin. Her head flew up and she bared her grin at Ephiny. "I'll take the job!"

Ephiny's eyes widened as soon as she realized what she'd just explained to Gabrielle.
"Oooooh sweet Artemis…." But before she could take any bantering from her friend, somebody rapped on the door again. "Come in," she called.

Gabrielle separated from Ephiny and turned around when she saw Eponin enter into the hut.

"How are you two?" asked the worried Amazon.

"We're okay," replied Ephiny.

Eponin sadly nodded and came closer to them. "They're already preparing Terreis's body… tomorrow will be her pyre."

Ephiny exchanged looks with Gabrielle then she looked back at Eponin. "Eponin, I think Gabrielle and I will need your help with something."

"What is that?" The older Amazon folded her arms over her chest and waited.

"Wellllll… do you know Terreis passed her caste onto Gabrielle?"

Eponin faintly nodded. "Solari told me."

Gabrielle groaned and said, "Does Solari tell everybody everything?"

"Pretty much," replied Ephiny with a faint laugh coming from her. She went serious again and looked to Eponin. "Gabrielle accepted it but there's a small problem."

"Ephiny," cut in the bard, "you're not going to…."

Eponin knew what her friend was asking but she sighed and said, "We need to tell Eponin."

"Ephiny, no."

Eponin could see this exchange would keep going between the friends so she decided to cut into it. "Just tell me, nothing fazes me anymore." She looked at Gabrielle and added, "There's nothing you can tell me that'll make me doubt you."

"How can you be sure?" quietly asked the teenager. "You hardly know me."

"And I don't need to, to know you're a good person, Gabrielle."

Ephiny smiled at her sister's words and she reached over to pat Gabrielle's back. "See?"

The bard gave a sigh, her shoulders slumped but she pushed herself to bring the truth out. "Eponin, I'm… well I'm a slave."

Eponin's right eyebrow slowly went up but she simply asked, "So?"

Ephiny chuckled at Gabrielle's surprised expression; she thoroughly enjoyed it. She
also knew how worried her friend was so she returned her focus to Eponin. "Gabrielle is worried the other Amazons will find out and it'll be a big problem in the Nation."

Eponin nodded a few times, her eyes stared down at the wood floor. She looked at them both again and said, "It could be but personally, I don't think it matters. I think we should keep it's secret for now. And I don't mean because of the Nations but more so because of the outside society."

"You think that's safer?" asked the worried slave.

"Yes… for your safety." Eponin was chewing on the inside of her lip and thought about the small predicament. "We'll just have to be careful… and we can't tell Solari."

Ephiny had an amused grin but she nodded. "I thought we should tell you, Eponin… I know we could use your help on this one."

"I appreciate it." The older Amazon then looked at Gabrielle again. "We'll keep it between ourselves but it shouldn't matter since there are no slaves here. Everything will be fine," she promised.

Gabrielle felt reassured and even calmer now that Eponin supported her. Now all she had to do was learn how to be an Amazon and a princess no less. How hard could it be anyway?

Section Two

Part 4: Xena's Third Year

Xena continued to keep her eyes closed. The sounds around her filtered into her world, became her world now. Her world crashed before her, slammed her and shook her. The salty air floated around her making her slightly intoxicated in the mind. Too much of her world had changed and many memories drove back into her mind, she could recall so much. Mostly, she recalled her second transformation….

"I'm taking this Hades of a ship and I mean now," she hissed.

A few of the crewmen laughed amongst themselves and simply shook their heads at the young woman. Some of them even walked off, going back to their own business.

The captain, however, went down the few steps and approached the girl near the gangplank. Directly behind him were two crewmen, ready to protect their captain. "Look little girl, you should leave… and I mean now," he mocked, "otherwise my crewmen will be more than happy to make… use of you."

"I'd like to see that," she countered, a nasty grin over taking her lips. She suddenly reached to her side, under her cloak and extracted her sword.

The two guards took it seriously and hastily stepped forward, their own swords out now.

The captain backed away, deciding it wasn't worth his time or energy.
"Come on, boys," teased the girl. "Let's play."

"If you insist," growled one guard. He went at her.

The crowd of crewmen gathered around and watched this young woman fight these two much stronger men. Granted they were not much larger than her but they were more experienced. The crewmen started to hoot and holler as they watched the girl beat the stuffing out of the two men. It wouldn't take much effort for her to either trip them up or catch them off guard.

Then finally, she disarmed one of them and without a second thought, she stepped forward and rammed her sword into his stomach.

The guard was surprised and just stared at the dark young woman. When he finally fell, she looked at the other guard.

The guard hastily dropped his sword and took a step back. Even though he gave up, she never showed him any mercy.

The young woman hastily moved in a blur of movement and found him falling off her blade next.

The crowd of men had fallen silent during the demonstration, utterly surprised by the coldness of this woman. To them, it was as if she knew nothing but her goal and it did not matter what stood in her way.

"Stop her!" suddenly ordered the captain in a loud voice. He stepped back when she took several steps towards him. In all of his life, he never felt fear for another person let alone a mere woman. But this woman, her eyes burned with a primal rage and he never knew a fear like this. His eyes lowered to her bloody sword then lifted back up to her dark swirling eyes. That's when he saw her lip twitch up and she took several rapid steps towards him. Before he could do anything, he felt himself stumble back, fall down, and something cold enter his chest. He lowered his gaze and even through his blurry vision, he could see the sword's hilt pressed against his chest.

She waited until she was sure he was dead. She withdrew her sword from his chest and held up her sword, the blood oozed down her blade. "I am Xena and this is my ship." Her eyes narrowed as she lowered her sword back to her side. "Does anybody have any problems with that?"

"None at call, captain," called a crewman. He then yelled, "Xena!"

Another man followed his lead and called out, "Xena!"

"Xena!"

"Xena!"

The dim of praising continued and could clearly be heard through the harbour. "Xena!, Xena!, Xena!, Xena!, Xena!"
"Xena?"

The young woman shook her head; she opened her eyes once she realized somebody was really calling her name. "Yes?" She looked over her shoulder at the crewman. "Is there a problem?"

"Of course not, cap'ain." The pirate pressed his lips together then added, "More like an opportunity."

"I llllove an opportunity." A very cat like grin swept across Xena's face. "What is it, Darman?"

"It seems uh merchant ship ain't far off to the west."

Xena turned her head around and looked towards the setting sun. She could faintly make out the masts of the ship. "How many marks?" She now stared at her first mate.

"Several, cap'ain."

"Hmmm." Xena turned her head back to west, her eyes locked on the merchant ship. "Get us there by mid night and tomorrow night we'll be in port." Her grin remerged as she looked back at the first mate. "With plenty of spoils… women included."

The first mate licked his lips just at the thought. "Deal, cap'ain." He turned around and hastily returned to his station at the helm.

Xena though looked back over at the setting sun. She grasped either side of the railing and leaned further forward, over the bow of the boat. Her rich blue eyes lowered from the west and looked directly down and watched the haul of the ship cut through the water. She sucked in a deep breath and let the salty air fill her lungs. She grinned and almost felt like laughing as she spun around and walked back on deck again.

The ship was large yet fast through the seas so the first mate was able to win the bet. It'd been several candlemarks after sunset but the ship soon caught up to the slow moving merchant ship. Luckily for them, the fight wasn't very hard since the merchant ship had about a dozen sailors. Then again, none of the sailors on the merchant ship knew how to fight.

Xena strolled onto the main deck of the merchant ship. She smiled while looking around at the ship. Her golden armour reflected the mix of torch light and moonlight. "Very nice ship."

The first mate joined Xena at her side. "Satisfied, cap'ain?"

"Very." The captain now focused on her first mate. "What's in the hauls?"

"A little bit of everything. Spices, gold, silk… a mini armoury."

The captain grunted at that but never lost her smile.
"Let go of me yah damn bloody pirate," hissed a struggling man. His hands were tied behind his back and he was being pushed down onto the main deck.

Xena suddenly found the merchant captain thrown at her feet. She sighed as her happy grin disappeared. "We're not pirates," she said while her eyes lowered down to him. "We merely burrow from the rich." She heard several of her crewman laughed at her joke.

The merchant's eyes were slits as he growled at her. "Poseidon be damned himself, you're that woman pirate they all've been talkin' about."

"So I am," agreed Xena. She knelt down and as if from nowhere, there was a dagger in her right hand. "Didn't you listen to their warnings?"

The merchant suddenly straightened his neck out when he sensed a sharp point press into it. "I thought you were… just a myth."

It was almost like Xena had died to hear that phrase all her life. Her eyes were lit up now and her grin bared no signs of hope. "You should have listened," she whispered.

Suddenly the merchant was jerked up to his feet and shoved across the deck towards the bow of the boat. The pirate that was pushing him stopped and looked back at Xena. "What are yer orders, captain?"

Xena considered it for a moment then said, "Cut his head off… then stick it on the bow." A smirk swept across her face. She then spun around and headed for the gangplank that connected her ship with the merchant ship. "I want all the goods in the ship in a candlemark," she yelled out to her men. "So hurry it up." In the background, she could hear the merchant yelling and screaming for his life then… there was silence. Xena shrugged it off, rolled her head around, cracking her neck, and continued down the gangplank. She glanced down at her dagger that she still held in her hand. It sparkled up at her; the moonlight shined the ivy design engraved on it. And when her boots hit the boards of her ship's deck, her memory flashed in an instant.

Xena jerked her dagger out of the tree. She then turned around and went back to Gabrielle, a grin on her face. She handed her friend the dagger back. "Okay, next time focus your eyes just solely on that tree, okay? Forget about everything else around."

This time, she watched as Gabrielle focused even harder and ignored everything else around her. She threw the dagger and it plunged directly into the targeted area.

Gabrielle jumped up and down, she yelled, "I got it that time!"

"I got us there in time," called the first mate. "Time to pay up, cap'ain."

Xena lifted her eyes from the dagger. Her rough smile appeared on her face. "You did, Darman. Head for port… any of your choice."

"Leavin' it up to me, cap'ain?" The first mate chuckled and dropped his head to one side. "You outta know by now which is me favourite."
"I do." Xena chuckled and walked past him. She then suddenly heard her name called out. She stopped then looked back at her pirates on the merchant ship. "What is it?" she yelled.

"What you want us to do with these remaining sailors?" called a pirate.

Xena counted out four of them. She took a deep breath and debated on what to do.

"We can sell 'em to a slaver," suggested the first mate. But then, he didn't know how it happened but he knew he couldn't breathe, couldn't touch the deck with his feet, and a very angry set of eyes were locked on him.

"I have no slaves on this ship," growled Xena, "nor do I make them. Is that clear, Darman?"

"Yesss… cap'ain. It was… a ssssuggestio-" He could barely finish his words before he sensed his windpipe starting to be crushed now.

"I did not ask for your suggestion," hotly whispered the captain. "Now do your gods be damn job and navigate my ship!" She threw him onto the ground and looked back at her stunned pirates on the other ship. "But 'em down in the brig. They'll be dealt with later."

The first mate cringed a little when Xena walked past him. He finally rubbed his neck and was relieved to even be alive at this point. He slowly got back up to his feet then returned to his duties.

Xena slammed the door to her quarters. She started pacing back and forth from the starboard to port side of her quarters. The pacing was slowly wearing off her anger but anymore, something simply as pacing barely helped her temper. She started to slow down and went to the small window. She stared out of it, looking out over the vast open seas that were silver from the moonlight.

Gradually her eyes lifted up from the seas and went to the heavens. The stars were out tonight, bright and brilliant as ever, every single one glowing. Slowly, a certain set of starts began to glow the brightest to Xena and she couldn't tear her gaze away.

"There's no bear, Xena."

The teenager gave a dramatic sigh and once again, pointed out the star layout. "Follow my finger."

Gabrielle snuggled up closer to her partner. "Okay."

Slowly, Xena mapped out the image the stars created. "All those… they make a bear."

"Xena, that's not a bear… it's a ladle." The tiny bard poked her friend's side. "And you say you have no imagination."

Xena growled and dropped her hand back down. "I'm not imagining it, Bri." Her
serious expression didn't break.

Gabrielle almost gulped down a lump but yet she could tell her friend was teasing by the way her eyes twinkled. "It's a ladle," she whispered in persistence.

The teenager couldn't hold back her grin anymore, and she even started to softly laugh. "It's a bear," she argued again.

The small bard shook her head and decided not to bother anymore. She rolled on top of her girlfriend and smiled down at her. "It's whatever you want it to be," As she stared into Xena's glowing eyes, she saw something reflecting back at her almost like small crystals of light. When she used her imagination, it looked like a person holding up a sword and Gabrielle became confused. She turned her head and looked in the same direction Xena was looking. "Oh gods," she whispered.

"What?" urged Xena.

"Those stars… they make a warrior."

Xena furrowed her eyebrows but slowly they loosened as she realized they did create a warrior.

Gabrielle was still staring at it yet she broke her gaze and looked down at Xena. "It reminds me of you, from my stories… when you're a warrior."

Xena's blue eyes focus on Gabrielle briefly; she took in her words, and then looked back at the warrior in the night sky.

The captain blinked and lowered her gaze from the warrior in the sky. Her right hand came up, brushing back her bangs and she almost growled out of frustration. She straightened up and stomped out of her quarters, deciding it was best to keep an eye on her men.

The next day was quiet on the seas. The pirates simply sailed towards the lands of Greece. All of them anticipated a good night at the port; they planned to make it a good night.

Xena was looking forward to it as well. There were rare moments in time that she was ready to set foot on land again. Despite her love for the open seas, she always enjoyed open lands just as much. Even more, she enjoyed the reputation she was gradually growing especially within the ports. For some reason, her name was becoming a myth, a legend among the harbours and between the waters. She couldn't quite understand why the exact reasons were because of the fact she was a woman or because she was young. She also considered it was her ruthlessness against her enemies. In the end, she figured it was all of the above and she made Hades sure to double her efforts at each raid she took on a ship.

By sunset, the pirates were making haste to dock the ship in the port.

Xena stood at the helm after just manoeuvring it against the main dock of the harbour. "Get the gods be damned spring line on, now!" she ordered.
The crewmen scrambled to get the bow spring line into place then the stern one. Once they had them, they began pulling and bringing the ship closer to the dock.

"Get that stern line across!" yelled Xena. She looked behind herself and just saw one of her pirates throw the line across the stern to the waiting man on the dock. When she turned her head around, she was happy to see one of the crewmen tossing the bowline onto the dock. "Take care of the rest, Darman."

The first mate waved from the main deck and called, "Aye, cap'ain."

Xena decided while her men took care of the rest of docking, she would take care of the captives down in the brig. She ordered two men to follow her and they went below deck with her. She went directly to the stern of the ship where they kept all of the loot they've stolen in the past thirty days or so. She unlocked the door and kicked it open. "Each of you, grab an armload."

The confused pirates did what they were told then backed out of the room.

The captain locked up the room again and ordered, "To the brig."

The pirates nodded and made their way back to the main cabin area. They went to the stairwell and went down another deck to the small brig room.

Xena moved past them and approached the cell first. She came to halt in front of it and studied the four men behind the cells. "How is it down here?" She received no verbal response but got plenty of glares from the sailors. "Look mates, I'm going to make this quick and... sweet." Her broad grin shifted into place. "I'm going to let you four go." She paused and watched them exchanged confused and worried glances. "Also...." She held her left hand out to her two pirates. "I'm giving you all the loot that's in my men's arms."

The two pirates had wide eyes when they realized what was happening to their hard earned stealing.

"Cap...." The pirate stopped his protest when he saw boiling blue eyes lock on him. He lowered his eyes to the wood decking below his feet.

"As I was saying," continued Xena, "all that loot... its yours." She waited for them to turn their eyes back on her. "And you may go free tonight. The only thing is you may return here too." She stepped forward; she knew she had their attention now. "What I am offering is this... you join my crew and loot like this...." She held her hand out to her arm loaded pirates. "Will be your only burden in life." She folded her arms over her chest. "But if you decide not to join, you may leave with whatever loot you wish to keep. No tricks... no strings." She lowered her arms and added, "A simple... taste of what this life has to offer." She turned and walked away but not without signalling her men.

The two pirates reluctantly dropped all of the items onto the floor in front of the sailors. They then huffed and followed behind their captain.
The four sailors didn't move or say anything, they just stared at the various gem, gold and silver items on the deck. Then suddenly, one of the sailors went to the gates, bent down, and stretched his arm out to grab a golden plate. "By the gods… there's so much."

The three sailors exchanged looks, each of them unsure but then they scrambled to the bars.

By the early evening, the crew and Xena had left the ship after everything was settled. One by one, each pirate filtered into the dark almost murky town that surrounded the eerie harbour. In the town were several taverns, an inn or two, and a few shops that were closing up now. Then there was one building that all the pirates decided to go to, the brothel.

Xena was the last one to enter the brothel. She'd decided not to remove her armour nor her golden sword at her side however she'd put on her golden cloak for the cool night. She was happy that the brothel also was a partial tavern on the bottom floor. She quietly took a table in the corner and just watched most of her men mix among the seeking women.

After a few minutes, a barmaid came up to her table and asked her what she needed. Xena simply asked for a mug of port. The young barmaid had given Xena a brilliant smile and strolled off to take care of the order. Once Xena had her drink, she didn't hesitate to start on it. For some reason, she'd grown to enjoy the port over the past several months. Never once at home had she'd touch the stuff, not even in her mother's tavern. Yet during her time around her men, she'd tried it and soon realized it was a custom amongst pirates, even men for that matter. She didn't believe showing any flaws, not even with something as small as drinking. She'd quickly learned how to consume it and in large quantities without ever truly falling drunk.

Xena leaned back into her chair a bit, the front legs lifting up and the back of the chair hitting the wall. She held the mug in her hands and occasionally sipped on it but never put it back on the table. As she relaxed at her table, she watched her men continue to mingle with the women as well as drink and eat. To Xena, it could become a rather disgusting sight but she'd grown use to it after so long.

It wasn't after about a quarter of a candlemark that Xena noted a young woman from across the tavern watching her. She tried to ignore her, she diverted her attention to the other side of the room despite the fact she could still see her from the corner of her eyes. She lifted her mug and took a long drink from her port. She settled the mug back into her lap with her left hand under the bottom of it. Then her features started to tighten when she saw that young woman coming towards her.

"Great," muttered under her breath. She leaned forward and the front legs slammed back down onto the floor. Xena placed her mug down on the table and peered up when the young woman was right in front of her table.

"Mind if I sit?" inquired the woman.

The pirate chewed on the inside of her mouth, seriously debating it.
The young woman tilted her head to one side but then suddenly the chair in front of her was kicked out. She took it as an invite so she quietly sat down. "My name is Breanne."

The pirate nodded and sat back into her chair. "I'm Xena."

Breanne's eyes widened and she seemed to almost jump out of her seat. "I... I..."

Xena's right eyebrow slowly rose up.

Breanne laughed a little shyly. She tried to distract herself by brushing back some of her blond hair. "I'm sorry. It's just... I've heard a lot about you."

"Oh?" A grin shaped its way onto Xena's face. "I hope all of it is good."

"Well that depends on your definition of good," retorted Breanne. She leaned forward some and lowered her right elbow down on the table. She then placed her chin into the palm of her hand.

Xena lowered her eyes after having Breanne's dark green eyes settle on her.

"They say you're one of the most ruthless pirates out there," mentioned Breanne.

"Is that all?" joked the pirate. She looked up, her grin had returned. "I'll have to try harder."

Breanne chuckled quietly at that. "Well then, I'm sure you'll be come quite a legend."

"That's the least of my worries," grumbled the pirate.

Breanne drummed her fingers against the side of her face in seeming thought. She suddenly lowered her hand down onto the table. "It is so interesting to meet a pirate like you. I've seen plenty here but...."

"But?" urged Xena.

"But none that are women... well actually...." Breanne was staring at the table then looked up with a bright expression. "I have met one other female pirate. Well not really met more like saw one here before but that was when I was just a kid."

Xena almost wanted to laugh at this point. She never thought she'd meet another chatty blond again.

"What's funny?" inquired Breanne.

"Nothing." Xena licked her lips and peered up from her mug. "You remind me of somebody else."

"Oh?" Breanne became truly curious now. "Who is that? Another pirate?"

"Hardly," replied Xena.
"Who then?" urged the younger woman.

The pirate considered to whether really talk or not but something in her, something dark grew in her. Her eyes seemed to transform into a storm. "Just some girl."

Breanne felt her heart skip a beat. She'd just seen a major shift in this woman and maybe it was the same one her enemies had seen in her. "I'm sor…." Xena's dark eyes made her fall short on her words. At this point, she decided it was probably best to pretend nothing was said earlier.

Xena could tell the girl was backing off now. She felt her smirk appear as she sat back into her chair again.

Breanne looked up from the table after studying the grain of the wood. She then realized the pirate now had a dagger out and was playing with it like a toy. "So how long have you been a pirate?" she asked casually.

The pirate captain gave a small laugh and looked up from her dagger. "For awhile."

Breanne chewed on her lower lip. "So how do you…. attack a ship?"

Xena peered up from the dagger in her hands.

Breanne felt a chill ripple up and down her back.

"You ask too much," growled lowly Xena. She suddenly stood up from her chair and looked to the other side of the tavern at her barmaid.

The barmaid knew the pirate was prepared to leave so she rushed over to collect the money for the port.

Xena pulled out a dinar from a hidden pouch at her side. She handed it over to the barmaid, who quickly left afterwards. She then looked down at the small woman sitting at the table. Without a single word, she spun around and left, her golden cape flying behind her.

Breanna sat there stunned by the events. She then fought with herself wether to follow the pirate or not. Something though made her get up and quickly follow after Xena. She came outside into the dark streets of the town; she hastily looked around for Xena. Suddenly something caught her eye; it was the flash of gold.

Xena continued walking through the town, deciding where to go next so she could enjoy the rest of the evening alone. Although as she kept walking, something made her slow down and then she saw the shadow of somebody catching up to her.

"Xena," called a sweet voice.

The pirate stopped and closed her eyes, her back became more ridged and her muscles tightened with control.
"Xena," whispered Breanne. She grasped the pirate's shoulder, the cool mail chilled her hand but she walked around to face Xena. "You have to tell me something." Very dark blue eyes now opened to her.

"What's that?" uttered the pirate. An edge was in her tone, like she was trying to control something inside of her.

"Tell me who you are." Breanne had some kind of desperate look on her face. As if she could see through Xena and knew this form Xena was taking on was not truly her.

"Who I am huh?" Xena seemed serious but only for a moment. She lowered her head closer to the smaller girl's face.

Breanne sucked in her breath when her lips almost touched Xena's.

"I am a pirate that controls over thirty men." Xena paused, letting it sink in with Breanne. "And I am a killer."

"You can't be," whispered Breanne. "You're none of those things," she further urged. The pirate lost her grin; she felt she was losing some kind of control. And then it happened, she wasn't sure how but she knew it was nothing she'd done.

Breanne had brought her right hand behind Xena's head and pulled her the rest of the way down.

For a brief instant, Xena let go and enjoyed the kiss but her eyes suddenly tightened. She became stiff in the kiss and in Breanne's embrace.

Xena felt Gabrielle's warm tongue against her lips so she opened her mouth cautiously. She moaned when her tongue pressed into Gabrielle's own.

The little bard whimpered and pressed her body against Xena's more.

Xena pulled back some because she felt a little out of control. "Calm down, Gabrielle," she muttered between the kiss.

The younger girl backed off, giving an odd look. "Gabrielle?"

The pirate's eyes flew open when she heard Gabrielle's name whispered from Breanne's lips. Something dark in her surged to life and took control of her.

Breanne's eyes widened in fear when suddenly strong fingers wrapped around her throat. Her vision fuzzed over as she started to lose her breath. "Xena," she rasped.

Xena growled and started to lift the girl up.

Breanne couldn't feel the ground under her feet. She knew Xena was straining to hold her up yet the fact she was in the air struck terror through her. She grabbed at Xena's hand and tried to pry her fingers away and digging her nails in desperation.
"Never touch me again," hissed Xena. She suddenly threw the girl forward.

Breanne rolled in the dirt a bit and finally settled onto her back. Before she could get up, Xena was kneeling down beside her and she tried to breathe again but a dagger pressed into her throat.

"I am a pirate." Xena lowered her face into Breanne's.

Breanne dug her nails into the dirt as intense blue eyes held her in place.

"And I am a killer," hotly whispered the pirate.

"Then show me," urged Breanne. She felt the dagger press into her throat more and the blade started to pierce her skin. "Show me." Her eyes closed tightly, she was prepared to die. There was a pause from the dagger then it suddenly disappeared. Breanne took a small but shaky breath when she realized Xena wasn't going to kill her. She gradually opened her eyes, scared to see what was in front of her yet instead she became surprised. She looked around and only found people were looking at her in curiosity. "Where did…"

"Hey girl, yah gonna sit there all night?" inquired some rough looking man.

Breanne shook her head and continued to look around. "Um… no." She got up to her feet, which in turn made the people leave. "Did you see her?"

"See who?" asked the same man.

"That female pirate," Breanne was touching her neck where the blade had faintly cut her.

The man laughed and shook his head. "There are no female pirates, lass." He shook his head again and walked off chuckling to himself.

Breanne watched him go but then she looked up and down the street. Her shoulders slowly slumped down as she saw no signs of a female pirate at either end of the dark street.

Xena narrowed her eyes from her dark spot in the corner. She whirled around and continued down the alleyway, headed back towards the port. She made a mental note to herself never to let Darman bring them back to this port. As she hurried back, she lifted up her dagger blade and saw a small smear of blood on it. She quickly reached up with her left hand and wiped the blood off, rubbing it into her skin. She slipped her dagger away and it wasn't long before she was back on the docks.

The rest of the evening, Xena remained in her captain's quarters. She'd removed her golden chain mail and put it aside along with her boots and cape but she kept on her silk pants and top. She then went to her small desk and above the desk was a cupboard. She opened the two doors and stared at all of the scrolls inside of it. She ran her finger along all of the scrolls and her hand stopped on one scroll.

A very long sigh vibrated through Xena and her hand continued down the scrolls. Her
hand came to a stop again and she pulled out that scroll and the one to the right off it. After Xena had her two scrolls, she sat in her large bed and unrolled one scroll. She remained there, reading over the two scrolls for several candlemarks until she finally fell asleep out of boredom.

The next morning, Xena was above deck and noting just how many of her men had returned from last night. She stood beside the helm with her arms folded and the early morning sun gleaming off every angle of her. "Telos, where's Darman?"

The pirate, Telos, looked up from his position by the mast. "I believe he's still in town."

The captain folded her arms over her chest. Beside her, she heard one of her men join her side. "Vicerius, take a couple others with you and round up the rest of the men. I want to be out of this port in two candlemarks."

"Of course, cap'ain." Vicerius hurried down onto the main deck and signalled two men to follow him.

It wasn't long before all of Xena's men had returned to the ship. To add to count, the sailors from the merchant ship they attacked yesterday also returned. It left a winning grin on Xena's face once she added them to her count.

Xena was at the helm of the ship, she started ordering her men to prepare for their departure.

Darman came up onto deck and stood beside Xena. He put his hands behind his back and asked, "Where to, cap'ain?"

The captain considered it then look to Darman. "Let's head to Roman waters."

Darman's eyes widened. "Cap'ain, you do realize how they guard their waters…?"

"Yes, Darman I'm counting on it." Xena grinned evilly then yelled, "Get the sails down, now!"

The pirates rushed to put the sails down on the main mast and the mizzen mast. The sails instantly filled with the day's fast breeze.

The pirate ship started cutting through the waves and heading out of the port.

Once they were out of the harbour, Xena spun the helm and sent the ship barrelling to the west. She then stepped away and said, "Stay along the shore line. I want to run into some ships on the way. Is that clear, Darman?"

"Crystal, cap'ain." The first mate took control of the ship.

Xena was about to walk away but stopped and turned back. "By the way, that's the last time we're going to that port."

Darman almost protested but stopped when he got a very angry look. "Aye, cap'ain."
The ship continued into the west but weaving along the shoreline. They had yet to run into any other ships that were worth pillaging. Occasionally they would see fishing boats far off in the distance that were much closer to land. But seizing fish wasn't of much use to the pirates. It wasn't until late after noon that Xena spotted a ship on the horizon.

Xena was standing in the crow's nest of the main mast. She stepped forward and grasped the railing of the crow's nest. She judged the size and type of ship that was ahead of them and concluded it must be another Greek merchant ship.

With a small laugh, she suddenly jumped over the side of the crow's nest and grabbed onto a rope. She went soaring down to the deck and hit the deck with a large boom from her boots. She quickly walked up to the helm and gave orders to Darman. "There's a merchant ship not far ahead. I want it in a candlemark."

"Aye, cap'ain." The first mate grinned and proceeded to order the men to get the second sail down to speed things along.

Xena turned around and folded her arms over her chest. She watched as her men hustled to get the ship prepared. "Vicerius!" she yelled out.

Vicerius looked up from his spot at the mast. He looked back at the sail, adjusted it a little, and then cleated it off. He turned around and hurried up to the poop deck where the captain and first mate stood. "Yes, cap'ain?"

"I want you to give our four new crewmen some weapons and armour."

"Aye." Vicerius turned around.

"And make sure to quickly show them how to use a sword," added the captain.

"Aye, Xena." Vicerius hurried down the main deck and collected the four new men. He took them below deck to the stern of the ship where they kept a small armoury.

"What's the plan, cap'ain?" The first mate glanced at her then back at the seas. "With going into Roman waters."

Xena had a smirk when her first mate asked her that. "I think we've collected enough... funds. I think now we need some weapons and armour."

Darman looked at Xena in surprise but concentrated back on steering the ship. "Yah mean, we're going to attack...." He lost his words, too stunned to finish it.

"Yessss, we're going to attack Roman fleets. They have some of the best weapons."

"By the gods, you are insane, cap'ain." Darman laughed and spun the wheel some. "I love it."

"I thought you would." Xena reached up to brush back some of her midnight hair that was tangled in golden charms. "All we need is one or two Roman ships and they'll
have enough weapons and armour to fill our ship."

"What then, cap'ain?"

The captain had a dark look even though she was grinning.

Darman looked at his captain since he wasn't getting any response. The look on Xena's face was all he needed to see to understand what would happen next.

Within a candlemark, the pirate ship had caught up to the merchant ship. Xena ordered Darman to stay directly behind the stern of the merchant ship.

The merchant ship had quickly realized the pirates were after them. So they'd dropped another sail and were trying to escape but couldn't since the pirate ship was much faster.

Xena began ordering her men to prepare for battle. She unsheathed her sword as she remained next to Darman at the helm. "Alright, get along the port side, Darman."

"Aye, cap'ain." The first mate turned the ship and the winds took them faster to come along the port side of the merchant ship.

"I want that ship in half of a candlemark," ordered Xena to her men. "And bring me the captain of that ship!"

The pirates on the deck either had a sword drawn, a rope in their hands to swing across, or another rope to lash onto the other ship.

Carefully, the pirate ship closed in and fendered up against the merchant ship.

"Attack!" yelled Xena.

The pirates with ropes ran forward and swung across. They neatly landed on the merchant deck. Several other pirates were able to simple jump across the gap. The few remaining pirates hastily lashed the two ships together then boarded the merchant ship.

"Keep things steady," ordered Xena.

"Aye, cap'ain." Darman watched Xena go down onto the main deck and then crossed over onto the merchant ship to join in the attack.

And the pirates held to their captain's orders, it wasn't more than half a candlemark that they had the ship secured. Telos was the one leading the merchant captain across the gangplank onto the pirate ship.

Xena was busy ordering her men to bring the goods from the merchant ship onto the pirate ship. She stood in the middle of the deck, watching every move her men made.

"Cap'ain, I have the merchant ship's captain." He pushed the merchant captain onto the deck.
Xena looked over at Telos and the merchant captain. A huge grin appeared on her expression. "Bring him here."

Telos pushed the captain again and brought him to Xena. He then kicked at the back of his knees.

The merchant captain fell to his knees in front of Xena. He growled as he tried to fight against his bonds since his hands were behind his back.

"You have quite stock, captain," mused Xena aloud. She wasn't looking at him but rather her man carrying the goods over to her ship.

"You'll pay for this," growled the merchant.

Xena laughed and finally looked down at the man. "I don't think so."

"What should we do with him and his men?" inquired Telos.

Xena's dark blue eyes lifted up to the pirate. "How many are left?"

"Two, captain." Telos tapped his sword's blade against his leg. "We have almost all of their supplies on the ship."

"Good." Xena lifted her arms and pressed them against her chest. "Take their sails," started Xena.

"Cap'ain?" Telos was confused by the order.

Xena looked back at him. "Take their sails and lines and charts, destroy the helm, and make sure there is no food left behind." Her eyes then lowered back down to the merchant captain. "Then we'll send them on their way on their ship."

"You can't," growled the merchant ship. "We'll never be able to navigate… we won't survive."

"That's not my problem," evilly whispered Xena. She then nodded at the merchant ship. "Tie him down to the mast."

"Aye cap'ain." Telos hulled the man onto his feet and dragged him back to the merchant ship.

Xena returned to monitoring her men. She felt rather content that the raid went well but then again, raiding merchant ships was become too easy anymore. The raids seemed less of a challenge and more of a bore to her. The thought of entering Roman seas and taking on trained and equipped Roman soldiers just excited her. As she thought more and more about how she'd attack a Roman ship, the more she lost herself to her thoughts.

"No, please no," begged a girl's voice.
Xena immediately broke from her thoughts when she heard the voice. She looked up to the merchant ship where she saw two of her men forcing a struggling girl to get onto her ship.

"We found her hiding below deck," called Vicerius. He pushed her across the gangplank after taking her from the other pirate.

The girl fell off the gangplank and landed face first onto the deck.

Xena walked up to her and stared down at her.

"Not to mention, she's a slave," added a grinning Vicerius.

"Oh?" The captain put her hands on her hips and ordered, "Get up, girl."

The slave pushed herself up with her hands and stood back up. She was rather small and her dark hair covered her face. She hastily brushed it away and now could see the tall woman in front of her. She gasped and stepped backwards, bumping into Vicerius.

"Watch it, girl," growled the pirate. He pushed her forward again.

Xena felt her pulse picked up as she sucked in her breath.

"Xena?" whispered the slave.

Suddenly, the pirate growled and hit the girl across her back. "Don't call her that." He hissed and hit her again.

The slave fell onto the deck again.

Vicerius raised up his sword that was in his right hand.

"Vicerius," warned Xena. She quickly grabbed the pirate's hand. "Don't." Her eyes flashed and she squeezed Vicerius hands very tightly.

Vicerius almost winced but lowered his sword back down.

The captain released his hand and looked back down at the slave. She chewed on the inside of her lip but ordered, "Get up again, girl."

The slave winced in pain but urged her body to get up. She'd had worse before in her life. She looked straight at Xena and despite her fear she almost felt safe.

"Who's your master?" questioned Xena.

The slave knew not to contest Xena or annoy the pirate behind her. "The captain is," she quietly answered.

The captain's eyes flickered across to the mast on the merchant ship and she briefly stared at the merchant captain tied down. She then looked back down at the girl. "He is no longer your master," she simply stated. She stepped back and ran her eyes up and
down the girl's length.

"What should we do with her?" quipped Vicerius.

Darman had come down onto deck and joined Xena's side. "Well we can't have any slaves onboard, can we?" he taunted.

Xena quickly reacted and turned to her first mate. Her dagger had appeared out of nowhere and was pressed against Darman's throat. "I'm tiring of you, Darman. One more insult and I will cut your throat. I am the captain and what I say goes." She lowered her faced into his. "Is that clear, Darman?"

"Aye… cap'ain," rasped the first mate. He stepped back; rubbing his neck after Xena had released him.

The captain tore her dark eyes away from him and noticed all of her men were now watching her. She decided it was best to address them now.

The slave suddenly was jerked from her spot by Xena's strong hand. Xena pulled her in front of her and grasped the slave's shoulders tightly.

"This girl is free on my ship," she called to her men. "But… she is… mine," she hotly yelled. "If I catch any one of you even breathing in her space, I will tie you to the anchor and drop you to the bottom of the sea." She paused and studied her men, all of them held no challenge in their eyes but respect. "Does everybody understand me?"

"Aye, captain!" yelled the pirates together.

"Now get us the Hades out of here!" ordered the captain. "I want us in Roman waters by sunrise." Her eyes then came to rest on Darman.

"Aye, cap'ain." The first mate hurried off to carry out Xena's orders.

Xena took a deep breath, squeezed the slave's shoulders, and released her. She lowered her head close to the slave's ear. "Stay beside me," she whispered but now in a much warmer tone. "If you want to stay alive. Okay?"

The slave swallowed but slowly nodded.

The captain lifted her head and continued to watch her men finish the preparations to leave.

"Are we ready, cap'ain?" yelled Darman.

Xena signalled her men to release from the merchant ship. She saw them hastily pull in the gangplank and untied the lines. "Drop the sails!"

Four pirates rushed to take care of the sails.

The captain looked up at Darman and called out, "Take over, Darman. I'll be below deck."
"Aye, cap'ain."

"Follow me," Xena ordered to the slave.

The slave fell into step behind Xena and went below deck with her. She was led past various cabin doors and even past the gallie. They then came to very stern of the boat within the small hallway. At the end was a large door to what the slave assumed the captain's quarters.

Xena opened the door and stepped inside first. She held the door open for the slave.

The girl quietly walked in then studied the room. She heard the door shut behind and a dead bolt slide into place. She turned around, she faced the dark pirate.

"Are you okay, Lila?" whispered Xena; her expression went soft for the first time.

The slave let out a long breath and her shoulders dropped but a sad smile shaped her expression. "A lot better now." She stepped forward and pulled the older woman into a hug.

Xena stiffened for a moment but gradually returned the hug.

Lila broke the embrace and stepped back. " Gods… what's happened, Xena?" She noticed she wasn't going to get an answer anytime soon. She also realized there was some question written in Xena's eyes and at first she wasn't sure what it was but then it dawned on her. She lowered her head and looked back up. "I… I don't know… where she is," she uttered.

Xena closed her eyes and walked away. She reached up to her shoulders and started removing her golden cloak.

Lila simply watched her. "I've been separated from Gabrielle and mom for over a year now."

Xena tossed her golden cloak onto a chair in the corner. She turned around and just stared at Lila, still in disbelief that she was here. She crossed back over slowly.

"I'm sorry, Xena," uttered Lila. Her face was in as much pain as Xena's.

"Don't be," protested the pirate. "I… I just had… hope."

The slave lowered her eyes to the wood floor. She felt like that same hope had just been drained out of her. She licked her lips and looked back up. "What's happened?" she whispered and she had the most confused expression.

The pirate stared at her for a long time but never replied. She just turned around and walked away. She sat down on the side of her bed and after about another minute or so, she finally looked up at Lila. "A lot has… changed."

"I can tell," agreed Lila. "This is the last place I expected to see you… I didn't even
"Look, you don't belong here, Lila," started Xena, "when we're next in port, I'll have some of my men take you back home."

"No," suddenly protested Lila, fear in her eyes. She grabbed Xena's arm and hastily said, "Xena, I'm branded… there is no freedom for me."

The captain shut her eyes and fought with herself. "Lila, I can't-"

"Xena," cut off the slave. "I can never be free. Second, if somebody finds out I'm a slave without a master it could mean serious trouble." She paused but quietly added, "Besides, I want to stay with you."

"Lila," started Xena but she was cut off again.

"Xena," hotly whispered Lila, "Look you know how stubborn my sister is well I'm the same way. There's no way in Hades I am leaving."

Xena had her mouth hanging open and she finally closed it. She felt a quirky grin tug at her lips. "I can tell." She lost her grin as she became more serious. "We'll talk about this later."

"There's nothing to talk about, I'm staying," reminded the slave.

The pirate sighed, she didn't argue but she didn't agree. "I need to check on my men. Are you hungry?"

"Yes." Lila released Xena's arm.

"I'll be back in a quarter of a candlemark and with dinner." Xena checked her sword at her side then stepped around the young girl. "Stay here," she ordered, "and lock the door behind me."

Lila simply nodded and watched her leave. After she was sure Xena was far down the hallway, she pushed the lock back into place. For a moment, she wasn't sure what to do; she just remained still and held onto the lock and handle. Slowly, Lila released them and turned around. She stared around the small quarters and tried to figure how just how Xena managed to became a captain of pirates. She couldn't even begin to guess how this all came about or even why her sister's best friend was here.

The slave ran her hand through her hair. She looked to her left and stared down at Xena's desk where there were two scrolls settled there. Her eyes then shifted over to two doors just beside the desk. For a moment, Lila just swayed with the rocking boat and debated with herself, her curiosity won out. She walked over to the small doors and grasped the two round knobs. With a deep breath, she pulled open the doors and just felt a bit of shock rush through her. "By the gods," she rasped.

Lila took a step closer and reached up with her right hand. Her hand ran down the length of the leather to the very thick end. "A whip," she whispered. Her eyes then flickered over to the various sets of clothing in the tiny closet. They were all silk items
and rather loose but typical of pirate attire despite their beauty. Then to the far left of the rack were two sets of chain mail for the upper body and shoulders. It was similar to what Xena already wore except they were both silver tone and had a few dents and other wear and tear on them. Then the last item Lila noted was a hilt of a very broad sword resting in its dangling sheath.

Gabrielle's sister stretched her hand out but hesitated to touch the sword. Sucking in her breath, she stretched her hand out further and curled her fingers around the hilt. The hilt shifted a little and reflected a few rays of candlelight at Lila. Lila bit her lower lip then started to gently lift the sword from its sheath. Suddenly a knock came at the door and Lila jumped, she almost dropped the half-unsheathed sword but quickly recovered herself and the sword.

"Lila, I'm back," called Xena from behind the door.

"I'm coming," replied Lila. She pushed the sword back into its sheath and hastily yet quietly closed the doors again. She jumped over to the door and unbolted it. She opened the door and held it as Xena stepped into the quarters.

"I hope you're hungry." The pirate had a large tray of food balanced between her two hands. She walked over to her desk, pushed her scrolls out of the way, and lowered the tray down.

The slave closed the door and returned the bolt to its secure position. "Oh gods… thank you, Xena."

The captain gave a brief and faint smile. "Welcome. Go ahead and get started."

"You're not going to eat?" urged Lila.

Xena walked away and went to her bed. "I need to do something first then I'll join you."

Lila watched Xena with a perplexed look but she soon realized what Xena was doing. She'd sat down on one side of the bed and pulled out a drawer from a nightstand. Lila tilted her head to one side as she saw Xena scribing something into some book, which had blank pages. She figured it must have been some kind of logbook. She turned her attention away knowing it wasn't good to keep staring. She decided to pull out the desk chair and she grabbed a plate that had a type of fish on it. She picked up a knife and fork then quietly ate her meal.

After about ten minutes, the pirate put her logbook away and the quill that belonged with it. She quietly shut the drawer and stood up. She came up behind Lila and grabbed the other plate of fish then sat down on the foot of her bed.

Lila turned in her chair and briefly glanced at Xena then back at her food. "Thank you, Xena."

The pirate peered up from her food. "For?"

"Saving me."
The captain slightly huffed as she returned to eating her meal. "I never expected to find you."

The slave pierced the last piece of fish with the tips of her fork. She didn't eat it yet but instead thought about all the changes. "Why are you here, Xena?"

Xena played with her fish for a little bit, she wasn't quite sure if she could eat it now. "I'm looking for your sister."

Lila sadly nodded; she lifted her fork and ate the last piece of fish. "But…" She wasn't quite sure how to approach her question but she continued with it. "But how did you get here? As a pirate?"

The pirate was busy chewing on her small piece of fish. After she swallowed it, she looked up from her plate. "About a year ago I left home with my brother."

"With Lyceaus?"

Xena nodded some. "We went after the raiders that attacked Potidaea."

"By the gods, really?" whispered the surprised girl. "What happened?"

The pirate let out a heavy sigh. Now she really did not feel like eating. She moved her plate onto the side of the bed. "We joined the raiders and stayed with them until we found out what happened to you, Gabrielle and your mother."

"We were sold to Hecht," explained Lila.

"Yes, I found out," confirmed the pirate. "I've seen his compound."

"You've been there?" whispered Lila in awe. "Then… why are you here?"

Xena was staring at the floor but she lifted her eyes, they were much darker than earlier. "To gather money and weapons… armour as well."

"For what?"

The pirate stood up. Her back was ridged and her expression serious. Her tone was dark as she spoke, "To raise a small army and attack Hecht." She picked up her plate from her bed and came over to Lila.

Lila watched Xena lower the plate back onto the tray. "But… we left Hecht's compound a year ago," she whispered.

"Yes, I know this now." Xena grabbed an apple from the tray and tossed it a few times. She returned her attention to Lila. "It does not matter. I will need the money to buy Gabrielle and your mother from their current owners."

"Xena," spoke Lila softly, "you don't even know if they're still alive." She shook her head and when she looked up again, her eyes were watery. "The man that bought
mother and Gabrielle… he was some politician. He was promoting the war against Rome.

"And?" urged the pirate.

"And I heard rumours his home was attacked by a lynch mob. If it's the same politician then Gabrielle and mother could be dead. The lynch mob destroyed everything and slaughtered his slaves." Lila licked her lips and looked down; she then closed her eyes and took a shaky breath. "It was talked about a lot among the slaves."

Xena lifted her eyes up from Lila. She stared across the quarters to the small porthole. She then realized her fingertips that held the apple were moist. She lifted her hand and saw her nails digging into the apple and the juices of the apple slowly trickling down her fingers. After she extracted her nails from the apple, she looked back down at Lila. "Stay here, I'll be back."

The slave sat there, worried as well as guilty for just telling her sister's best friend that her hopes were a loss. She herself hadn't believed that Gabrielle and her mother were dead. To this day, she still believed they were alive yet every night an eerie bit of doubt took her.

Lila looked up when Xena closed the door. She sighed as she started to think about Xena and her endless quest. Xena was different, very different. Lila recalled how Xena was like another big sister to her. She'd grown close to Xena in the years that her sister and Xena grew up together. She still recalled the day of the raid in her town and how Xena saved her life. She knew Xena was that kind of person, a person that staked her life for others, a type of small hero in her eyes.

As she thought more about how Xena was seeking her, her sister, and her mother she began to realize just how much Gabrielle must mean to Xena. At was at the point she knew exactly the magnitude of the relationship her sister and Xena must have had for Xena to find her. She shook her head at the thought of Xena's quest being in vein. She had to believe too that Gabrielle was alive.

Lila's head shot up when she heard the door open again.

Xena slipped in and closed the door behind her. "Tomorrow morning we'll be in a port. It's a bit far from Potidaea or Amphipolis but I'm going to send a few men with you back home."

The slave shook her head. She stood up and put her plate back on the tray. "Xena, I'm not going to go."

The pirate took two steps and came very close to Lila. She lowered her head close to the girl's face and sternly whispered, "You are going home."

Lila felt her heart pound. Never in the time had she known Xena had she feared the woman but this wasn't the same Xena. She couldn't help but feel the strength just illuminating off Xena and sending a shiver up her spine. She took a deep breath to gain some scrap of bravery. She quietly said, "I'm staying." She instantly regretted it when Xena's eyes went wild at her.
The captain's hands clenched and unclenched several times. She took one deep breath in hopes it'd calm her and give her more patience with Gabrielle's sister. "Lila, this is not an option. If I have to chain you to the horse and have you sent home, I will. Do you understand me?" Before letting her patience thin anymore, she stalked off away from the girl.

Lila felt so frustrated at that point. She wanted more than anything to join Xena, to help her and find her own family. "What? I'm not allowed to find my mother and sister huh?" she yelled between clenched teeth. "They've been taken from me and I've been told they're dead."

"Then they're dead, Lila." Xena spun around, her eyes glowing with anger. "And it is pointless for you to be here with me. You can go home and continue with your life."

"How can you say that?" hotly whispered the girl. "How can you even think that?"

"Because I've done it," replied the pirate. "You learn to move on."

"Well obviously you haven't," hotly retorted Lila, "otherwise you wouldn't be out here looking for my sister. Would you?"

Xena felt her anger growing as fast as her breathing. She was trying to remain patient with Gabrielle's little sister but it was increasingly harder for her.

Lila could tell she was about to push Xena over an edge. She lowered her gaze and tried to think of something less frustrating and with more reasoning. She sighed and looked back up. "Xena, I understand what you're doing, I do but even if I go home… I could be enslaved again." She shook her head and finally felt her frustration come to her in forms of tears.

The pirate dropped her hands from her hips. She came over to Gabrielle's sister and grabbed her shoulders. "You can stay with my mother… that way it's safe."

Lila wiped her tears away and looked up. "No offence, but I don't want to when I know you're out here. Xena, I can help you. I know the circle of slavery… I could find out what's happened to Gabrielle and mom."

Xena studied the girl's eyes. She'd seen that same determination in Gabrielle's eyes and she knew it was backed up by stubbornness. She brought her focus back and squeezed Lila's shoulders. "If this get's dangerous then I'm sending you home. Is that clear?"

Lila tried to hold her smile back as she nodded then whispered, "Okay. Thank you."

The pirate faintly nodded and let go of Lila's shoulders. She started to walk away but stopped and turned back around. "Lila, there is one thing you're going to have to do."

The slave nodded and asked, "What's that?"

"Unfortunately you may have to pretend to be mine at times." Xena folded her arms
over her chest. "I know how that sounds but… some times it's the only way to stay safe. If these men or any others think you're free from any type of… father ownership, husband ownership, lover or whatever… it could get ugly."

Lila swallowed that new information down. She knew she was with a bunch of ruffians but she didn't think it could get that bad. "I understand," she whispered. She knew at that instant she just signed up to be Xena's lover or otherwise pretend one.

"Why don't you get ready for bed? I'm going to take care of this food and I'll be back." Xena was back by the desk, already brushing past Lila.

The slave nodded but quietly asked, "I'm staying here?"

The pirate had the tray in her right hand and her left hand was on the door handle. "What else did you have in mind? You want to sleep in the bunks with my men?"

"Uhhhh… no thank you." Lila gave a shy smile and walked away.

Xena chuckled deeply and left the quarters.

After Xena had returned, she found Lila in the bed already asleep. She'd grinned at that then prepared for bed as well. After she slipped her armour off and boots, she rested her sword near the bed and climbed next to Lila. She remained still in the bed, staring up at the ceiling. She thought about what Lila had told her tonight and about her sister's possible fate. She sighed and rolled to her right side. She stared at Lila's back for awhile.

Xena then noticed something on the girl's back. She reached forward and pulled the bed sheets down some.

Lila's back revealed several deep scars from lashings in her past.

The pirate sighed as much as felt her anger boil up. If it was one thing she'd come to hate over the years, it was slavery. She knew even if she found Gabrielle and saved her from her master she could never truly save her from slavery. As long as there remained some kind of evidence of Gabrielle's existence as a slave then she would forever be one.

The pirate pulled the bed sheet back up and rolled away onto her other side. She closed her eyes and tried to think about anything else but her life. It seemed as impossible as finding Gabrielle.

The following morning, the pirate ship pulled into a fairly large port to pick up supplies. Xena had still thought about sending Lila back to Amphipolis but knew it wouldn't work. So she let it go slowly and remained on edge and Lila always at her side. As of now, Lila and she stood on the main deck, watching the men bring aboard barrels of food and water.

Xena folded her arms and shifted all of her weight onto her right foot. She watched as
the last barrel of water was brought on board and toted below. She then called for the gang planked to be hauled up.

Lila was looking around, taking in the size of the ship and make since she didn't last night. As she looked to the small mizzenmast, she realized that something moved in the barrel at the base of the mast. She furrowed her eyebrows and was tempted to go over and check it. Her better judgement told her not to so she grabbed at Xena's arm.

The pirate quickly broke out of her captain trance and looked down at Lila.

"Xena," whispered the girl, "something… or somebody is in that barrel." Lila nodded at the barrel under the mizzenmast.

Xena looked across to it and narrowed her eyes. She realized there was a cloth over top instead a lid. She straightened up to her full height and said, "Stay here." She reached to her side, extracted her golden sword and she nodded at a few of her near by men. "Get over here, do you hear me?"

Vicerius swung over from the side and landed behind Xena.

Telos came up from behind.

"Don't make a move."

Vicerius looked from the barrel to Xena. "What is it?"

Xena grinned as she pointed the tip of her sword at the rim of the barrel. "We have a stole away." She then moved her sword forward and slipped it under the cloth. She suddenly flung it up and a mysterious man flew out of the barrel.

The man landed on the deck and immediately attacked Xena.

The captain was caught off guard by the sudden attack. She threw a thrust with her sword but completely missed so she kicked at him.

The stole away grabbed her leg and rapidly pinched at certain spots on her leg.

Xena gritted her teeth at the tremendous amount of pain shooting up in her right leg. She suddenly fell to the ground and she saw Vicerius attack the stole away.

Lila backed away, knowing this stole away wasn't any ordinary man. She watched the man suddenly leap up and do a back flip, landed directly behind Telos.

Telos didn't even know what happened, all he felt were two sudden pricks at his neck then he couldn't breathe. He fell the ground and started to watch black spots developed in his vision.

The stole away rolled away and took on several more pirates. She then ran and did a summersault to land on the upper deck, near the helm. She took on two more pirates, easily knocking them off their feet with a quick roundhouse.
Xena dropped her head back when she saw the man leap and go halfway up the main mast. She couldn't believe how fast and agile this man was and incredibly clever. She was astounded but yet she was just as angry he'd made a fool of her.

The stole away climbed the rest of the way up until he came to the crow's nest.

A pirate pulled out his dagger and threw it at him.

Xena watched as the stole away caught the dagger in his hand then leaped away before another hit him.

The stole away slashed the dagger into the main sail and went gliding down with his cape wide open. He neatly landed on the ground and grabbed a spear from another pirate. He hastily ran in a circle with the spear and jumped up when several of Xena's men came at him.

Xena shook her head and decided she had enough of the game. She reached behind her belt and pulled out one of her daggers. She took a quick second to aim then she threw the dagger. Her dagger cut the rope for the main sail, which went falling down and covered the stole away. Xena then lifted herself up with her sword as a crutch.

When she came over to the stole away, her men had already pulled the sail away. She reached down and grabbed the man's hood and jerked it away.

All of the pirates looked on and became shocked; some yelling out it was a woman.

Xena was surprised herself yet she never showed it. She kept her angry demeanour as she glared down at the stole away. After a deep breath, she asked hotly, "What did you do to my leg?" She got no response so she growled, "Fix it." She could tell the stole away was by no means scared of her, she became even angrier. "My leg, fix it!"

The woman looked down for a second and pulled her sleeves up. She reached forward and grabbed the pirate's leg.

Xena sucked in her breathe when she suddenly felt her blood flow return to her leg. She took a deep breath then glanced over at Vicerius. "Bring over Telos. She can fix whatever she did to him."

Vicerius and another pirate went over and picked up Telos.

The stole away shook her head and hotly said, "Tosheo renacho."

"What's she saying?" Xena had a confused look since she'd never heard the language before in her life.

Lila licked her lips and somewhat approached the group. "She said it's too late for him."

Xena's eyes instantly looked over to Lila.

Vicerius grabbed Telos's head and lifted it to only see he was dead. He suddenly dropped Telos's body and came at the stole away. "She's killed him." He'd removed a
long dagger.

Xena stepped in the way and held Vicerius back with her right arm. "No, Vicerius."

The pirate stopped and thought second about crossing Xena. He backed off but didn't put his dagger away.

The captain looked back at Lila. "You speak her language, girl. Come here."

Lila knew she'd just stepped into a hole with this one. She took a shaky breath and came over to Xena.

The captain looked away from Lila then down at the stole away. "Tell her I'll spare her life if she'll teach me how she did that."

The slave faintly nodded then looked at the stole away. "Dash schaspanenal… umm…" Lila stopped and shook her head and continued, "schaspanenal achshenal… lugshigadet." She watched, as the stole away looked from her to Xena then very faintly nodded.

Lila peered up at Xena and saw how a smirk pulled at her lips.

"Take her down below," ordered Xena.

Vicerius quickly moved and grabbed the struggling woman. He dragged her through the small doorway and into the ship.

Lila briefly watched then saw Xena was moving away from her. "Xena?"

The captain turned to her with a raised eyebrow.

"She's a slave."

"How do you know this?" The pirate stepped closer to Lila. "How do you know her language?"

The slave glanced down at the boards under her feet but she looked back up. "My previous master had a Gallic slave… he didn't know Greek and I didn't know his language. So we started to teach each other our own language, that's how I picked up on it. I can speak it and understand it… but I can't read or write it." Lila took a quick glimpse at the door the stole away had been towed away to then she returned her attention to Xena. "Captain, the woman is a slave because she wouldn't be here for any other reason. Nobody from Gaul comes to these parts unless otherwise forced to."

Xena narrowed her eyes and turned away. "Follow me."

Lila felt nervous now but she did as Xena asked her.

They both went below deck and went to the stern of the ship. They went down a set of steps and into a small room where the stole away was shackled to the ground. On the way down, Xena had grabbed a ring of keys and they found the stole away pulling at
her shackles, she tested them.

Xena grinned and suddenly threw the keys at the slave.

The Gallic slave lifted her head when the keys landed by her feet. She reached forward; something seemed to ease inside of her since this pirate was showing her trust. She quickly unlocked the chains and stepped out of them. She then noticed that small girl from earlier was with the pirate captain.

"Lila?" Xena turned her head and looked at Lila from over her shoulder. "Tell her she's safe."

Lila sighed in relief at Xena's request and she looked at the other slave. "Tu eibish."

"And ask her if she's a slave, Lila."

The Greek slave sighed and looked back at the stole away again. "Tu sclabhai?"

"Is ea," replied the Gallic slave.

"I take it that's a yes huh?"

Lila nodded and came closer to her friend. "Lila is ainm dom." She then grasped Xena's arm. "Xena est ainm dom."

The stole away pointed to herself. "M'Lila is ainm dom."

"M'Lila?" repeated the pirate, her eyes locked on the woman.

M'Lila faintly nodded in response but she looked over at Lila. "Ellash is maistir?"

Lila almost responded but looked up at Xena. "She wants to know if you're her master now?"

Xena sighed and shook her head. "Friends."

"Cairde agus Xena is laoch."

M'Lila's eyes widened and she looked back at Xena.

"What'd you just tell her?" whispered the captain.

"That we're friends and you're a warrior."

The pirate almost groaned but held her stoic attitude. She carefully approached the Gallic slave and said to Lila, "Tell her to teach me that thing she did."

Lila licked her lips then translated what Xena asked. "Dash lugshigadet."

M'Lila nodded and started to bend down, her hands out for Xena's leg.
Xena bent over and grabbed the other woman's hand. "No, my neck."

"Ni h-ea," hastily translated Lila, "mio meineal."

M'Lila half grinned but stood up and directed at Xena's neck.

"Is ea," urged Xena.

M'Lila's grin seemed to grow out how Xena tried speaking in Gallic. She held her index and ring fingers together on both of her hands. She then demonstrated where to place her fingers on Xena's neck. She then suddenly pulled her hand back and shot them forward again.

Xena's eyes widened and she fell to the ground. Her breathing had been caught off and her vision started to blacken.

Lila gasped and yelled, "Yoish lemish, yoish lemish."

The Gallic slave stood there with an amused smile, she grinned down at Xena. "Cara?"

The pirate wasn't sure what M'Lila was asking and she couldn't make out Lila's words in the background. She simply whispered, "Is ea."

M'Lila bent down hastily and her fingers snapped the pinch off Xena's neck.

Xena gasped for air as it filled her lungs again. She wiped away the blood from her upper lip as she stood up again. She gained her strength back quickly and she shook her head at M'Lila. "Show me again."

"Lugshigadet tuh."

M'Lila returned her attention to Xena after Lila had translated. She lifted up her hands again towards Xena but the pirate stopped her.

"Ni h-ea," ordered Xena, "agat."

M'Lila felt her stomach turn at the command but she remained calm. She turned her fingers to her own neck and pressed her fingers against the pressure points. "Ablas."

Xena seemed to understand, she pressed her fingers into the spots that M'Lila just had her fingers. She seemed to feel the exact spot and she pulled her fingers away. She suddenly snapped her fingers back and put the pinch on the other woman.

M'Lila gasped and this time she fell to the floor. She closed her eyes and thought maybe this pirate wasn't quite her friend.

"Cara?" whispered the pirate. She was kneeling down and a very evil grin on her face.

M'Lila opened her eyes and rasped, "Is ea."
Xena leaned forward and hastily took off the pressure points.

M'Lila gasped for air and dropped her head forward still breathing hard.

"You two are real funny," spoke up Lila. She came over to the pair and shook her head.

"Well… we have an understanding, I think." Xena smiled at M'Lila when she lifted her head up.

M'Lila wiped the blood away from her lip and said, "Tuigim."

Lila chuckled and translated what the woman said. "She said, I understand."

Xena looked back at the Gallic slave and smiled at her. "Good."

The Gallic slave started to stand up with Xena's help. She then sighed and said, "Ta tart orm."

"She's thirsty, Xena."

The pirate faintly nodded and said, "You can move around in the ship but be careful around the men."

"Lamh arguth loshid cush ni h-ea is caras. Is ea?"

"Is ea," replied M'Lila. She then furrowed her eyebrows and asked, "Ca as duit?"

"Greece," simply replied Lila.

"Lamh cupla Gaeilge," protested the Gallic slave.

Lila shook her head then said, "Ta cupla focal agam."

"Ni h-ea, lamh hagish Gaeilge."

The Greek slave shook her head and just grinned. "Ni h-ea."

"Is ea," muttered M'Lila.

Xena sighed and started to walk off.

"Eluh es?"

Lila quickly realized too that Xena was leaving them. "Eluh I mean, where you going, Xena?"

"To get something to drink."

The girl grinned and followed after her friend.
M'Lila took a step but stopped. "Egloush?"

Lila sighed and said, "Is ea."

M'Lila started to follow the other two women up the stairs.

Xena led them to the galley and went into the kitchen area. She grabbed a mug from up in a large cupboard then went to a covered barrel near a sink. She ripped the lid off and dipped the mug into the water. After she lifted the mug up, she handed it over to M'Lila.

"Go raibh maith agat." M'Lila gratefully took the mug and began drinking it.

"Let's go show her the quarters," quietly mentioned the pirate.

Lila nodded and watched M'Lila hand back the empty mug.

Xena took it and placed it into the sink. She brushed past the women and headed for the galley door. She guided them through the ship and they went up one level where all the cabins were located. They continued down to the stern and came to the last door. She pushed it open and let them both in first.

M'Lila gazed about the room, surprised by its size but she knew it was the captain's quarters.

The pirate stood in the doorway and said, "M'Lila, you can stay here with us."

The Gallic slave quickly turned around, a confused expression on her face.

"Alam hecosh eyah ellus."

"Ni h-ea… ni h-ea urgoosh."

"She says there's no room, Xena."

Xena slowly lifted an eyebrow and folded her arms over her chest. She chewed on the inside of her mouth as she thought about it. She turned around and faced the door to the right of her cabin. She kicked it with her right foot and nodded at it. "Your second choice."


M'Lila studied dark blue eyes but she slipped past the captain and peered into the small cabin room. "Is ea."

The captain nodded and went back into her room.

"Agish elus?"

Lila shrugged and replied, "Mil fhois agam." She peered around the doorway and saw Xena was pulling something out of her closet.
The captain came back around and in her arms were several furs. She handed them to M'Lila.

"Go raibh maith agat." M'Lila smiled and took them from the taller woman.

"She said-"

"I know," cut off the captain. She flashed a grin at Lila then looked at the Gallic slave. "You're welcome."

M'Lila tilted her head to one side but her smile didn't break. She turned around and went into the room.

"Hey, why didn't I get that room?" protested the girl.

"Because you can't fight," dryly replied the pirate.

Lila huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. "Pog mo thoin," she muttered.

Xena then suddenly heard a laugh from M'Lila in the room. She narrowed her eyes and looked at Lila. "What'd you say?"

"I said, I love you," lied Lila and she had a huge, fake smile on her face.

"Hmmmm." Xena kept her annoyed expression but she made a mental note to get back at Gabrielle's sister. She knew it wasn't even close to what Lila had said by the way M'Lila had laughed. She turned her head away and saw M'Lila coming out of the cabin. "Sasta?"

M'Lila blinked when the pirate asked her that in Gallic. "Is ea… go raibh maith agat."

"Xena, are you sure you don't know Gallic?" inquired the curious slave.

The pirate flashed an evil grin then walked off but not without calling, "I could."

The Greek slave's jaw was slack as she watched the pirate walk off.

M'Lila stood next to the other slave and also kept her eyes locked on Xena's reseeding back. "Aglah alainn," she whispered.

Lila didn't think her jaw could have gone any slackier but she thought it hit the floor. "Aaah… is ea."

"Aglah agust tu anamchara?"

Lila went from shocked to plain speechless and she actually started to blush. "Ni h-ea, ni h-ea," she hastily replied then added, "Xena es mo deirfiuir cara."

M'Lila nodded but said, "Ta bron orm."
Lila chuckled and shook her head. "Come on." She grabbed the woman's arm and tugged her down the hall.

M'Lila followed the girl and they were soon above deck in the afternoon sun. She now realized they were already out of port and headed for the seas. "Ca tuahte?"

"Rome," simply replied the girl. She then scanned around for Xena, she quickly found her at the helm with the first mate. "This way."

M'Lila went onto the upper deck.

"Take a break, Darman," ordered the captain.

"Aye, ca'pain." Darman stepped away from the wheel and went below deck for his break.

Xena didn't say anything but looked at M'Lila and held her hand out to the helm.

"Is ea?" asked the Gallic slave.

"Is ea," replied the pirate.

M'Lila felt a small grin tug at her lips and she stepped in front of the wheel.

Lila chuckled and shifted onto the other side, next to Xena. "Xena, we are going into Roman waters, right?"

"Mmmm," replied the pirate. "For a little while then we'll go back to Greece."

"Then what?" urged the girl.

"Then we try to find your mother and Gabrielle."

Lila sighed as that made her think about where her family's whereabouts could be by now. "I hope we find them," she whispered.

"Me too," agreed the worried pirate. "With persistence, we will."

Xena's reassurance seemed to fill Lila for once.

The three women remained on the deck for awhile. M'Lila remained at the helm; she followed the western sun because she knew that was where they were headed. But near sunset, they broke up and let Darman take control of the wheel again. They went back down below deck and into the galley where the cooks had arrived to make the meal for the crew.

Xena and the two slaves gathered up what they wanted to eat. They went to a large bench table in the galley area to eat their meals in silence. After they were finished, they returned to their cabins, M'Lila went into hers and Lila and Xena went into the captain's quarters.
It wasn't long though that Xena stayed, just long enough to remove her armour but she kept her sword at her side.

Lila curiously looked on as Xena went to her desk and opened the cupboard over head. She was sitting on the foot of the bed but she couldn't see what was inside of the cupboard, so Lila tilted her head to one side. Now she saw all of the scrolls inside of the cupboard, she couldn't even imagine how many were in there but she quickly wondered what they contained.

"Didn't think I'd need this one… but I do now." The pirate held the scroll in her left hand and closed up the doors with her right. "I'll be back in awhile. I'm going to talk with M'Lila."

"But…." The slave furrowed her eyebrows at Xena. "You know how to speak Gallic?"

"Not really," confessed the pirate. She held up the scroll in her hand. "I have a scroll on basic Gallic words… but I haven't really studied it enough."

Lila blinked then shook her head.

"Get some rest, Lila." The captain opened the door. "You still look tired."

"I am," agreed the small woman.

"And lock the door behind me." Xena slipped out and quietly closed the door. After a second, she heard Lila sliding the latch back into place. She turned to M'Lila's cabin door and knocked on it.

M'Lila opened it and smiled when she realized it was Xena.

The pirate partially smiled and said, "Dia dhuit."

M'Lila shook her head as a warm smile appeared on her lips. "Dia dhuit. Conas ata tu?"

Xena closed her eyes and tried to recall what that meant. She opened her eyes somewhat and replied, "Ta me ceart go leor."

M'Lila chuckled at her friend's dialect. She pushed the door open more and let her into the room.

"Conas ata tu?" asked the pirate.

"Sasta," replied M'Lila. She knew Xena already knew what that word meant.

"Sasta?" Xena shook her head, a little unsure if the slave was that happy or not.

"Is ea," insisted the Gallic slave. She pointed at Xena then to herself and said, "Cairde… sasta tucka cairde."

The pirate's smile grew a little more. She had to admit too, she was happy that M'Lila
was her friend as well. "Tu sasta."

M'Lila didn't lose her smile and she just stared at the woman for several seconds. She then started to feel a little embarrassed for staring too much so she directed to the furs on the bare floor.

Xena understand the offer and sat down. She watched M'Lila sit beside her and once they were comfortable, she unrolled the scroll and held it out to M'Lila.

The Gallic slave was a little confused but when she looked at the scroll, her face brightened with understanding. "Is ea." She pointed with her finger and ran it down the scroll. She stopped at a word and spoke it, "Ffff... fri...."

Xena grinned and said, "Friends."

M'Lila chuckled and nodded. "Cairde... friends."

The pirate and M'Lila continued to try and talk back in forth in each other's language. Xena was faster at learning Gallic over M'Lila learning Greek but they both were persistent in learning the other's language. It wasn't until near sunset that Xena realized she needed to go topside to check on her men.

Xena took the scroll from her lap and placed it into M'Lila's lap. "I am going up." She directed with her hand to ceiling above her.

M'Lila tried to understand what she said then she repeated the words, "Goi... going up?"

"Is ea," replied Xena. "Lehum... lehum...." Xena leaned over and pointed at a word on the scroll. "You stay, lehum ustas."

The Gallic slave nodded and watched Xena get up.

The pirate noted how M'Lila seemed to watch her with admiring eyes and Xena couldn't help but appreciate it. She winked at the slave then quietly left the room.

M'Lila stared at the door and whispered, "Xena, ta tu go h-alainn." She took a deep breath then stood up, she felt rather hot after sitting so close to the pirate. She held the scroll in her hands and she scanned through it, her eyes rested on one particular word. "Alainn... beautiful." She grinned as she realized how to say the word in Greek.

Once Xena returned, the two women continued to try and teach one another their language. It went on late into the night but eventually Xena stopped themselves. She got up and said, "Sin sin."

M'Lila shook her head and said, "No, do more."

The pirate sighed and shook her head. "Samh."

"Samh con tu."
Xena almost felt herself blush but she just held it back as she said, "No, I am with Lila."

"Lila anamchara?"

The pirate furrowed her eyebrows when she didn't recognize the word.

M'Lila glanced over at the scroll and scanned over it. She found the word that was relatively similar and she pointed at it.

"Lover?" whispered the pirate. She laughed some and said, "Ni h-ea."

The slave nodded at that and said, "Samh con tu."

"Ni h-ea," persisted the pirate. "Lila justa tu."

M'Lila now understood what her friend was trying to say and she nodded sadly. "Codladh samh?"

Xena smiled warmly at that and replied, "I will, you sleep well too." She started to stand up with the scroll and rolled it up as she stood.

"Oiche mhaith," added M'Lila. She watched the captain shift to the door. "Thank you."

"Ta failte romhat," replied the pirate. She opened the door and then added, "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," whispered the slave. Xena slipped out of the door and she looked over at her bedroll for tonight. She then stood up and blew out the candles in the small room before lying back down.

Xena knocked on the door to her quarters and Lila opened the door for her. She went in and realized Lila had been sleeping. She helped the young woman back into the bed then took care of herself.

Early the next morning, Xena got up and left a tired Lila still in bed. She went above deck after getting her gear on and her sword in place. Once she made it above deck, she looked to the north at the land far off in the distance. She turned around and looked up to the helm. "We're in Roman waters, Darman?"

"Aye cap'ain," called the first mate. "Have been for several marks now."

"Good to hear." The captain turned around and looked to the west. That was when she noticed somebody on the bow of the ship. She smiled inwardsly and headed for the bow. She came up behind M'Lila and grasped her shoulders. "Dia dhuit," she whispered.

M'Lila had almost jumped when she felt the hands on her shoulder but she smiled when she saw it was Xena. "Dia dhuit. Nach brea an la e?" She looked back at the seas that were so calm and glistening from the morning sunlight.
"Is ea," agreed the pirate. She massaged M'Lila's shoulders some then let go of her.

The slave scanned the seas and her eyes came to rest on a group of dolphins in the water. She pointed at them and said, "Deilf."


M'Lila licked her lips and turned her head to Xena. "Yes, dolphin beautiful."

The pirate's smile went brighter at how M'Lila tried to speak Greek.

"Dolphin not as beautiful as you," quietly added M'Lila.

Xena didn't look away but her cheeks did flush at her friend's words.

"Ta tu go h-alainn."

Xena swallowed after M'Lila said she was beautiful in Gallic tongue. She knew now she couldn't hide her flushed cheeks especially when M'Lila chuckled at her.

M'Lila lifted her hand and gently placed it on Xena's cheek. She smiled when Xena lowered her eyes but she didn't wait and leaned into Xena.

The pirate held her breath when warm lips touched her own. She didn't resist and mostly because the kiss was so light and gentle. When M'Lila broke the kiss, she smiled but her sad eyes deceived her.

"Ni h-ea sasta?" asked the worried slave.

Xena took a deep breath, the salty air filling her lungs. She let it out and answered the question. "Ta tu go h-alainn."

"Chi?"

"Chi…." The captain shook her head then finished her sentence. "Chi taim I ngra cara."

"Friend?" M'Lila's head tilted to one side. "What… friend?"

"Lila se deirfiur."

The Gallic slave quickly put the puzzle pieces together and even though some were still blank, she had an idea what was going on here. "I am sorry, Xena. I don't know."

"It is okay," promised Xena. "Lila's deirfiur, Gabrielle, eso… eso mo chroi." Her right hand came up to cover her chest over her heart.

"Your soulmate?" clarified the slave.

"Is ea," replied the pirate. "Mo anamchara."
M'Lila sadly smiled and she rubbed her thumb against Xena's cheek. She removed her hand and took Xena's hands into her own. "What happen to… Gabrielle?"

"She is a slave."

"Sclabhai?" translated the slave.

"Is ea," agreed the pirate. "I need to find her."

"Where… where issis she?" asked M'Lila. "What happen to her?"

"I don't know," answered Xena, "I have to find her."

M'Lila released one of her hands and pointed to her chest. "I help."

"Ni h-ea," protested the pirate. She started to shake her head but stopped when M'Lila squeezed her hands tightly.

"No, I help," stated the stubborn slave.

"B'heidir," countered Xena. Her eyes went dark to try and emphasis her point.

M'Lila narrowed her eyes and said, "I help you. No no's."

Xena opened her mouth but a hand quickly covered her mouth. A very annoyed set of amber eyes made her stop.

"I help and you like it." When M'Lila pulled her hand away, she got an amused smile from Xena.

"Do me a favour?"

"Favour," repeated the slave.

"Favour… ummm…." Xena shook her head, trying to think of another world. "To help me."

M'Lila brightened up and nodded. "I help."

"Yes, help." The pirate chewed on her lip then said, "Ashasta congrach Lila."

"Congrach?" M'Lila chuckled and said, "Protect?"


"Tuigim." M'Lila nodded then said, "I protect Lila," she promised.

Xena smiled warmly and leaned forward, she kissed the slave on the cheek. "Go raibh maith agat."
M'Lila chuckled some. "You welcome."

The captain then looked to her left and noticed a lot of her crew were starting to come topside, many of them waking up. She turned her attention back to M'Lila. "Tu ocras orm?"

"Is ea."

"Wake Lila and get food," ordered Xena. "I have to steer the ship."

M'Lila looked over at the upper deck and pointed at the helm. "Statuta?"

"Is ea," answered the pirate.

The Gallic slave nodded and moved away from Xena but before she went any further she asked, "Tu ocras orm?"

"A little… bring me food."

"I will," called M'Lila. She turned around and went below deck.

The captain, however, went to the upper deck and relieved Darman of his duties. She then took control of the ship and decided they would navigate to the south-western waters in hope to meet up with a Roman ship or two. Xena's wish soon enough came true because by the late afternoon, a ship wasn't far off in the distance.

"Darman, take the helm."

The first mate yawned, he'd just woken up but he nodded and came up. He stepped behind the wheel and briefly watched Xena jump down onto the lower deck.

Xena walked over to the main mast and was about to climb up it but a warm hand grabbed her shoulder.

"Ni h-ea," ordered M'Lila.

The pirate arched an eyebrow at the slave.

"I show you to jump," explained M'Lila.

Xena's eyebrow lowered as a very huge grin took over her expression. "Show me," she ordered.

"Is ea." M'Lila took a few steps away from the main mast. She noted Xena was paying attention. "Jump off right foot." She patted her right leg. "You watch." She suddenly broke out into a sprint and leapt through the air at the mast.

The pirate shook her head when M'Lila clung to the middle of the mast.

M'Lila grinned and waved with one hand. "Easy."
Xena rolled her eyes. "Yeah when you have a mast to grab," she muttered under her breath.

"You do," yelled M'Lila. She suddenly pushed herself off and flipped around in the middle of the air to land neatly on her feet.

The pirate sighed but she backed away from the mast. She actually felt a bit nervous especially considering her men were watching her.

M'Lila came over to Xena and said, "Stay calm... be careful. You can do it." She slapped Xena's back hard and grinned at her. "You do."

Xena took a long, deep breath. In the corner of her eye, she saw M'Lila stepping away to give her space. She mentally calculated where she would probably land on the mast and she hoped to the gods she would even make it. Xena gritted her teeth, ran then pushed off her feet, her right foot in the front. The next thing she saw was the mast coming quickly at her; she held her hands out and wrapped her arms around it. Once she was in contact, she hastily wrapped her legs around it and held tightly. Below she heard M'Lila chuckling at her.

"Good," called M'Lila. "Tu eso sasta laoch?"

"No, I'm not a happy warrior," hissed the pirate. "Show me up."

M'Lila shook her head and said, "Lamh agus cos."

Xena rolled her eyes at the response. "Hands and legs... right." She sighed and looked up at the crow's nest. She knew she was going to have to figure this one out on her own.

"What is she doing?" whispered Lila. She just came on deck and the first thing she saw was Xena clinging to the mast.

"She is learning," replied M'Lila.

The Greek slave blinked when M'Lila answered her in Greek. "You can speak Greek?"

M'Lila suddenly had an evil grin. She lifted her right hand and tilted it back and forth. "I speak little."

"Ni h-ea," protested the girl. "You are good."

"Thank you," replied M'Lila. She then looked back up at Xena, who still clung to the mast. "Lamh agus cos," she called out.

"She said-"

"I know what she said," hotly yelled Xena to Lila. She growled and suddenly started to lift herself up the mast with pure muscles.
"Is ea, is ea!" yelled M'Lila. "Rapide!"

The captain had gotten rather far up the mast but stopped just under the crow's nest. She looked down at M'Lila and yelled, "Pog mo thoin!"

M'Lila's mouth hung open. "Ni h-ea!"

"Is ea," taunted the pirate. She reached up with her right hand and opened the latch for the crow's nest. She climbed into it.

"Oh gods… she knows what pog mo thoin means?" whispered Lila. She felt her stomach drop.

"Is ea." For emphasis, M'Lila kissed her right hand and pressed it against her ass. "That is pog mo thoin."

"I know," whispered Lila then she groaned. "I'm so dead."

"Ta tu glan as do mheabhair de focal Xena."

"Is ea," moaned Lila. "I'm really crazy," she muttered.

"Be okay," promised M'Lila. She patted the girl's back gently and looked when Xena got into the crow's nest. "Good job!" she called up.

"Go raibh maith agat," yelled back Xena. She then focused on the reason why she went up here. She looked to the southwest, the direction they were sailing to, and she saw her prize not far ahead. A cat grin suddenly appeared on her face. She turned around and yelled, "Darman, I want the mizzenmast down now!"

"Aye, cap'ain!" Darman ordered a few men to get the mast down. He then looked up to Xena again. "What is it, cap'ain?"

"Roman ship."

"How many marks?" yelled the Darman.

Lila furrowed her eyebrows and looked at M'Lila. "Cath?" she whispered in worry.

"Is ea… a fight, battle," explained M'Lila. "Will be bad."

The Greek slave lowered her gaze and felt a chill ripple through her.

"Juso paidir."

Lila shook her head because she'd given up praying to the gods the day she lost her family.

"You be fine," insisted M'Lila. "I see to that." She gave a warm smile to the girl.

"Go raibh maith agat." Lila tried to smile back but her worries were anything but
happy. Suddenly she heard a loud boom; she looked up to see Xena standing there with a rope in her hands.

The pirate had a very dark look on her face. "Cath," spoke Xena.

"Is ea," whispered M'Lila.

"Tu agus Lila..." Xena didn't know the word so she pointed to the deck.

"Teso ugusa hockia faoi cath," translated Lila.

M'Lila shook her head. "I help you." She pointed at Xena.

The pirate wasn't going to argue about this one. She let go of the rope and came over to the Gallic slave.

Lila could see Xena's anger in her eyes. She took a step back behind M'Lila.

Xena came right up to M'Lila. Her eyes held M'Lila in her place. "Ashasta congrach Lila." She paused and then hotly whispered, "Is that clear?"

M'Lila took a shaky breath and dropped her gaze.

The pirate's hand shot out and she lifted the Gallic slave's head back up. "Is that clear?"

"Is ea," whispered M'Lila.

Xena suddenly had a grin. "Go raibh maith agat." She then walked off, heading for Darman at the helm.

"Fearg," whispered Lila.

"She very angry," agreed M'Lila.

"Scares me some times." Lila came back to M'Lila's side. "She wasn't like that ever."

M'Lila folded her arms over her chest. "Ni h-ea fada," she muttered.

The girl furrowed her eyebrows. "Won't be long before what?"

"Xena eso dorcha." M'Lila was staring at Xena on the upper deck. She felt trapped that she couldn't help Xena at all.

"Dark?" whispered Lila. "Darkness," she clarified.

"Come on." M'Lila took the girl's hand. "Teso ugusa hockia."

Lila nodded and followed M'Lila below deck. She stole one last glance at Xena on the upper deck. She then couldn't see Xena anymore when she entered the dark stairwells to go below deck. She and M'Lila remained in Xena's quarters and Lila tried to teach
more Greek to M'Lila. They also just spent some time talking in Gallic and Lila asked many questions about M'Lila's background. When the pair was in the middle of a conversation, there was a knock on the door.

M'Lila stood up and opened the door.

Xena stepped into the cabin and shut the door behind her. She looked at M'Lila and asked, "Can you use a sword?"

Lila got up and saw M'Lila had confused look. "Tu ooase hakichi?"

M'Lila shook her head at Xena. "Ni h-ea."

The pirate sighed and stepped around the two women. She went over to her closet and pulled out her spare sword that was still sheathed. She turned around and unsheathed the sword.

M'Lila's eyes faintly widened when the thick bladed sword glistened back at her. "Ni h-ea." She held up a hand in protest.

"Is ea," protested the pirate. "Tu esso laoch."

M'Lila shook her head then said, "Tu esso laoch, say ess sclabhai."

Xena almost growled at the Gallic woman. She pointed at Lila then said, "Lila's aingeal."

"She is not," suddenly cut in Lila. "I can protect myself just fine."

The pirate gripped the sword's handle a little harder, her dark eyes lowered to Lila. "She is going to watch after you."

"Xena-"

"Lila," growled the pirate, "do not push it."

Lila blinked and closed her mouth.

"You." Xena lifted her eyes to M'Lila. "Follow me." She went past them both and opened the door. Her and M'Lila left the room and started to head down the hallway.

Lila stood in the doorway and when they were out of her sights, she closed the door and sighed deeply. She sat down on the bed for a moment then flopped back into it. She figured Xena was going to teach M'Lila how to use a sword and a very quick lesson at that. Above deck, Lila could make out the sounds of the crew's heavy feet stomping around. She knew they were preparing for the battle ahead against the Roman ship.

Suddenly the door to the quarters pushed open and shocked Lila. The girl sat up hastily but sighed when it was Xena and M'Lila. When Xena stepped out of the way, she saw that M'Lila had that pirate sword strapped to her side. She snickered quietly to
herself.

M'Lila gave a dirty glare at Lila.

Xena looked between the two women then rested her eyes on Lila. "You two are staying here. M'Lila is going to stay in the hallway. I doubt any Romans will come down here but they might. I don't want them to get in here with you."

Lila started to protest but Xena's raised hand silenced her.

"You are to stay in here, Lila. I don't care what happens, you stay in here with that door locked. Have I made myself clear?"

The small slave gave a huff but nodded. "Crystal, captain."

"Good." The pirate exchanged some type of look with M'Lila then left the quarters.

Lila sighed since she felt like some three year old at this point. She peered up at M'Lila.

"Be okay," promised M'Lila. "You stay here." She turned around and walked out of the cabin. She closed the door and leaned against it.

The slave shook her head and slid out of the bed. She went to the door and pushed the bolt back into place.

M'Lila dropped her head against the door when she suddenly heard a lot of screaming and hollering. "Be safe, Xena," she whispered.

Xena stood beside Darman at the helm. "Get into position, men," she ordered. Her eyes twinkled when they locked on the Roman ship just ahead. "Be ready for anything, boys."

Several of the pirates hooted and hollered in excitement.

The captain withdrew her sword and gave it a small spin. "Put the main sail down," she commanded. She knew they would now just glide right up to the Roman ship. The Romans had already seen them and didn't flee but instead challenged them. This made it even more thrilling for Xena; she'd never had somebody challenge her back on the seas.

The pirate ship sailed towards the Roman ship, both of them coming at each other.

M'Lila lifted her head when she heard nothing but silence. She knew what that meant. Then there was a sudden boom and the pirate ship rolled to the port and almost threw her off her feet. "Shishincoof," growled M'Lila. She held onto the door of her own cabin and once the ship settled down, she let go. Above deck, she heard the sound of pounding boots and angry voices shooting in two different languages.

Xena kicked and sent the Roman reeling down onto the deck below. She looked at Darman and said, "Keep the helm safe." She got a nod from the first mate so she spun
her sword, ran and jumped. She neatly landed on the deck and when she stood up again, she almost had a sword chop her head off. She laughed and caught her enemy's next attack with her own sword.

It didn't take long for Xena to catch her opponent off guard; she ran her sword through his stomach. She then kicked him off her sword and glanced around to quickly count the odds. She grinned when she realized they would definitely win this battle.

The captain reached behind her back with her left hand and extracted her dagger. She came up behind a Roman soldier and lifted her dagger at the same time. Without hesitation, Xena brought her dagger around to his neck and slit his throat.

M'Lila straightened up from the door when she heard a noise. She squinted her eyes to try and see better in the dark hallway. She heard a man yell something in a language she still recognized. "Romans," she hissed.

The Roman soldier wasn't far from entering the hallway for the cabins. M'Lila turned around to where the two candles were that faintly lit the hallway. She stood up on her toes and blew them out. She spun around and crept towards the end of the hallway.

The Roman soldier had his sword out and ready. He came closer to the doorway that led into a cabin hallway. He stopped and spun his sword, his stomach twisted some but he pressed on anyway. He took a step into the hallway but suddenly something jumped in front of him. He felt a stinging sensation on either side of his neck and he fell. He tried to breathe but couldn't, everything was getting darker for him.

M'Lila looked up from the dying soldier only to see two more Romans just ahead.

"Get her!" yelled one soldier.

M'Lila didn't need a translation to know what that meant. She hastily unsheathed her sword and jumped over her recent kill. She spun the large sword and glared at the two men.

One Roman yelled and brought his sword down on her.

M'Lila parried it away then did her own attack. In the corner of her eye, she saw the second Roman coming towards her side. She hastily dropped to her feet and rolled away then popped back up.

The two soldiers briefly stared in amazement but recovered and came after her again.

The Gallic slave fought both men off but she finally caught an opening on one opponent. She ran her sword through his chest and whispered, "Go hifreann leat." She ripped her sword out and looked up at the other soldier. "You next," she spoke in Greek.

The soldier seemed to understand what she said because he backed away. He then suddenly spun around and ran off.

M'Lila had a huge grin at that point yet it fell when she heard the screaming and
yelling above deck. She decided she couldn't wait anymore; she was too worried about Xena. She glanced down the hallway to make sure the soldier from earlier was dead. Content that he was, she spun her sword and started for the stairs to go above deck. As she rapidly climbed the steps, she could make out a few pirates fighting Roman soldiers. She came out and scanned around for Xena. Her eyes came to rest on a dark and angry pirate near the main mast.

Xena kicked backwards and sent her enemy flying that had been sneaking up behind her. She then continued to tackle the soldier in front of her. Behind the Roman, she thought she saw M'Lila coming but she shook the notion away and paid attention to her opponent's fighting.

The soldier brought his sword around and it was stopped by Xena's golden sword. He quickly pulled it away and brought it over head to slash her.

Xena lifted her blade and stopped the sword. Although before she could kick him, he dropped his sword and his eyes rolled up into his head. She watched him fall to the deck and when she looked up, amber eyes met hers. "M'Lila," she growled.

"Ta failte romhat," replied the Gallic slave, a smirk on her face. She then saw a very scared look cross Xena's face and she knew why. Instantly she bent her knees and did a back flip.

The soldier that had been charging M'Lila's back came to a sudden stop when he went right into Xena's sword.

The pirate growled and jerked her sword into his stomach more. "Gods be damned Roman," she hissed.

M'Lila had already landed back on the deck. She watched as the soldier that almost got her fell to deck from Xena's blade.

"Ta failte romhat," joked Xena. She then pointed her sword. "Laoch."

M'Lila took the warning and spun around, her sword up. She caught the Roman soldier's blade and started to fight him back.

The pair continued to fight against the Romans. Xena started to notice the Romans were thinning out so she yelled out for her men to board the Roman vessel.

The pirates all yelled and most of them made a surge onto the enemy ship. A few other pirates dropped a gangplank and went racing over.

Xena, M'Lila and few other pirates took care of the remaining Romans on their ship.

M'Lila killed her enemy and pulled her sword out of his chest. She grabbed his spear from his hands before he fell. She hastily sheathed her sword and rammed the tip of the spear into the deck. "Ramha!" she yelled loudly.

Xena didn't need a translation to know what her friend was about to do. "Duck!" she yelled to her three men.
The three pirates stopped fighting their enemy and dropped.

M'Lila took the opening and stopped running in a circle as she leaped up in midair. She made quick work of the last remaining soldiers that were close to her. She knew one Roman was further away and as she knocked out the last soldier with her feet, she let go of the spear and went soaring through the air.

The Roman soldier didn't know what happen but somehow he ended up on his back with a dark skinned woman standing on top of him.

M'Lila laughed at his confused look. She unsheathed her sword and yelled, "Go hifreann leat!" She plunged her sword into his chest.

The soldier grabbed the blade but his grip loosened and his eyes closed.

Xena came up behind M'Lila as she got off the dead soldier. "Nice job," she praised.

M'Lila sighed and slightly shook her head. She sheathed her sword then looked over at the Roman ship. "We win?"

"Almost," whispered the captain. "Stay here." She briefly squeezed M'Lila's arm then hurried off onto the other ship. She jumped down and neatly landed on the Roman vessel. She scanned the scene and saw the last remaining Roman soldiers were being killed. She grinned and said, "Take hostages if you wish. Let's get everything onto my ship."

M'Lila sighed and came over to the railing of the ship. She brought her arms up and leaned against the railing.

Xena saw her men were starting to gather stuff from the Roman ship as well as strip the soldiers of their armour and weapons. She unfolded her arms from her chest and went back onto her ship. She went to M'Lila's side and said, "Lila is safe?"

"Is ea," replied M'Lila.

The pirate, for some reason, wasn't convinced and only because something turned in her stomach. "Wait here. I will be back." She stomped off to go below deck. When she started for the cabin hallway, she came across a pool of blood near the doorway. She narrowed her eyes and followed the droplets of blood that went towards the cabin hallway. "Hades," she hissed.

Xena silently moved into the hallway after stepping over one dead soldier. She couldn't see very well but she took a steady breath and used her other senses. Her ears picked up on the slow movement of somebody at the end of the hall, near her quarters. She silently moved, and as she came closer to her quarters she saw the form of a Roman soldier.

The soldier's bloody hand stretched out and grabbed the door handle of the captain's quarters. Before he could turn the knob, he felt a sudden jolt at either side of his neck.
Xena leaned close to the soldier's ear and hotly whispered, "I don't think so."

The Roman felt his knees go weak and he landed on the floor.

The pirate stood there and just watched as the Roman died from lack of blood. Once he was dead, she knelt down and grabbed his shoulders. She didn't want Lila to see these dead bodies lying around so she hauled the man off. After she had him near the steps, she went back fro the second soldier and dropped him on top of the first one.

Xena then jumped over their bodies and hastily went above deck again. When she got up, she saw her men were still busy bringing aboard the Roman ship's supplies. She also noted a few captives being brought aboard. Her eyes instantly flashed up to Vicerius, who pushed a large Roman down the gangplank.

"Move, Roman," hissed Vicerius. "Or are you afraid of us huh?"

"I am not afraid," stated the Roman.

Vicerius growled and hit the Roman across his head again. "Are you afraid to die?"

He unsheathed his sword.

The Roman was on his knees in the middle of the gangplank but he straightened up and said, "A brave man only dies once. A man like you dies a thousand times."

"Alright brave man, your one time is now." The pirate raised his sword and brought it down but he was stopped.

Xena gripped Vicerius hand that held the sword's handle. "Tell us, look at him?"

The pirate lowered his sword once Xena let go.

"The robes, the poise." Xena lowered her eyes to the Roman. "Why we have ourselves a Roman nobleman… a valuable commutate."

Vicerius sighed and sheathed his sword. "What are you talkin' about, cap'ain?"

"Ransom… she's talking about ransom, pig." The Roman shook his head at the low intelligence the man possessed.

"That's right. We can get twenty thousand dinars for him." Xena folded her arms, a grin growing on her lips.

"Twenty thousand isn't enough," cut in the Roman.

Xena raised an eyebrow, her voice coming out amused now. "Oh really?"

"They'll never believe you have me if that's all you're asking." The Roman's face shifted into a mocking expression. "I'm worth five times that."

Xena felt a devilish grin pull at her lips. She liked how sure this Roman was of himself. "Very well." She suddenly knelt down though in blur with a dagger in her
hand. She pressed it into the Roman's neck. "But if you're wrong, it's your neck," she hissed. She put her dagger away just as quickly and stood up, hauling the Roman up to his feet now. She looked past the Roman and at Vicerius. "I want you to round up a few men."

"Aye, cap'ain." Vicerius folded his arms over his chest.

"They're to take the Roman ship and sail into a port. They're to deliver a ransom demand for one hundred thousand dinars if they ever wanna see...." Xena lost her words as she realized she didn't know the man's name. She focused her eyes on the Roman. "What's your name?"

The Roman faintly grinned but sternly replied, "Caesar... Julius Caesar."

The captain looked back at Vicerius behind the Roman. "Caesar, Julius Caesar again."

Vicerius turned around and went back onto the Roman ship to gather a few men.

After he left, Xena looked back at Caesar. "You really weren't afraid to die, were you?"

The Roman remained stoic but his tone was taunting. "I knew someone would stop him."

The pirate waved for a few of her men to come up onto the gangplank. She focused back on Caesar. "And how could you know that?"

"I know what I'm fated to do with my life."

Slowly one of Xena's eyebrows went up. "And what's that?"

Julius Caesar slowly revealed his grin. "Rule the world."

Xena held her breath but she quickly nodded her head to her men.

Two pirates jumped and grabbed the Roman. "Let's go Roman," ordered hotly one man.

The captain watched him hauled off onto her deck. She then looked down at M'Lila, who waited for her.

All the previous spoils and now the new supplies from the Roman ship soon weighted down the pirate ship. Xena had ordered Darman to drop the sails and head back for Greece, for safer waters. However the few men that went on the Roman ship sailed north for the nearest Roman port to deliver the ransom demand. Xena remained at the helm with her first mate. She watched as her men finished throwing over the last dead Roman. She travelled her eyes over to Caesar, who was tied to the mizzenmast. But something else caught her eyes, she saw M'Lila coming up from below deck with Lila behind her. She almost smiled at seeing them.

"You two should be asleep," stated Xena once they'd came up to the helm deck.
"I can't sleep," confessed Lila. "Neither can M'Lila."

The captain sighed and then quietly asked, "Did you both eat?"

"No," replied Lila. "We will later though," she promised.

Xena unfolded her arms and turned to her first mate. "Take a break, Darman."

"Aye cap'ain." Darman stepped away from the wheel and took the steps down to the lower deck.

"Come here, Lila," ordered the pirate. She pulled Lila in front of her and further ordered, "Steer the ship for me."

The girl hesitated to take the wheel but she reached up and grasped the handles tightly.

"Just keep going straight ahead." Xena squeezed the small girl's shoulders. She then looked at M'Lila. "Conas ata tu?"

"I okay," replied M'Lila. "You?"

The pirate didn't verbally reply but she nodded her head.

"Xena?"

Xena returned her attention to Lila. "What is it?"

"I was just curious but… why is that Roman tied to that pole?"

The captain's eyes drift over to that Roman. "He's a Roman nobleman."

"La Kasar," whispered M'Lila.

Xena took a deep breath and clarified what M'Lila had just said. "His name is Caesar."

"Why are we keeping him?" quietly asked Lila.

"For ransom," explained Xena.

Lila didn't ask anything else, she was surprised by what Xena told her but then again, she was growing use to Xena's coldness. She and the other two remained on the upper deck for about half of a candlemark. None of them spoke, they still thought about tonight's earlier events. It wasn't until Xena spoke, that the silence broke.

"Let's go below… Darman is coming back."

Lila stepped out of the way when the first mate approached her. She shifted closer to Xena, almost in seeming fear.
Darman just gave a dirty grin at Lila then took the wheel. But he lost his grin when he looked at Xena's face. He cleared his throat and returned to his duty at the helm.

"Let's go," ordered Xena. She signalled them to the steps.

M'Lila went down first, followed by Lila.

Xena was a little further behind.

"Be careful around slaves," called a deep voice.

Xena stopped mid-stride and briefly watched her two friends go below deck. She turned around and faced the Roman. "Oh? And how do you know they're slaves?" She stalked closer to him.

Caesar grinned and replied, "The markings… the clothes. Runaway slaves can be dangerous; they'll turn on you easily."

The pirate closed in and brought her face close to his. "How can you be so sure of yourself?"

The corner of Caesar's lip tugged with a grin. "I told you, I'm-"

"Oh, that's right," cut off Xena, "you're fated to rule the world. Do you really believe that?"

Caesar blankly stared at Xena then said, "Of course. Each event in our life is part of a great plan. There are no accidents… only destiny."

Xena almost rolled her eyes but she decided to continue the amusing conversation. "And who shaped this destiny, the gods?"

Caesar's face went rather serious now. He had Xena locked in his grasp by his voice and words. "Perhaps, or it's the blood in our veins, our souls, our desires… our will. They're all in it together weaving a tapestry we call… destiny."

The pirate's expression broke with a smirk. "Well… I can tell you one thing about your destiny." She leaned in closer and whispered, "You're fated to have dinner in my cabin tomorrow night." She waited then spun around to leave.

Caesar kept his eyes on the retreating figure of Xena. He dropped his head back against the mast and gazed up at the stars.

For the rest of the night, the three friends quietly ate dinner in the galley. Occasionally one of them would try to strike up a conversation but it was hard. Xena had fallen rather quiet now and Lila had to wonder why. She knew it must have had something to do with Caesar.

After the meal, they went down to the stern of the ship. Xena and Lila said goodnight to M'Lila then they separated. It didn't take long for Lila to prepare for bed. Xena, however, pulled out her logbook and a quill; she'd gone to her desk and began
Lila crawled into bed and rolled onto her side. For a while, she watched Xena concentrate on her writing but eventually her eyes drifted shut.

Xena finished her sentence then closed up her logbook gently. She lowered her quill onto the book then turned in her chair. She stood up with the book and quill in her right hand. She gazed over at Lila's sleeping form. She silently slipped over to Lila's side of the bed. She knelt down and studied Lila's face for a long time. It seemed like certain features in Lila's face reminded her of Gabrielle. After a long sigh, she leaned forward and kissed Lila's cheek. If it was one thing Lila was to her, she was her younger sister.

The pirate rose up and put her quill and logbook away in her nightstand's drawer. She then began the task of removing her armour and weapons but always made sure they were in close range to her where she slept. After she had everything off, she climbed into her bed and rested on her back. Her thoughts were still on Caesar and would remain that way all through the night and into her dreams.

The next day brought only more silence during the trip back to Greece. Xena had remained separated from Lila and the Gallic slave. She mostly was above deck and steering the ship. Lila and M'Lila remained in Xena's quarters and Lila continued to teach M'Lila more Greek. It wasn't until the very late afternoon that Xena retired from the helm and went below deck. She went directly to her quarters to find her friends there. She simply raised an eyebrow and ordered them to leave.

Lila stepped out of the room first but when M'Lila started to step past Xena, she was halted.

"Lila is to stay with you," ordered Xena.

M'Lila furrowed her eyes and not because she couldn't understand the orders but because she didn't understand why.

"Keep her with you tonight," whispered the pirate. "I want to be left alone tonight."

M'Lila's confused look left as she figured things out. "Is ea." She jerked her arm free of Xena's grasp and left the room. She pushed Lila down the hall, towards the other end of the ship.

Xena had half turned and remained still until she couldn't hear them anymore. After an annoyed sigh, she stepped over to her door and slammed it shut.

About a candlemark after sunset, Caesar was unlashd from the mast. Two pirates took him below deck and he carefully studied the interior of the pirate ship. When they came to the last door at the end of the cabin hall, one of the pirates opened the door and let Caesar into the captain's quarters.

Caesar had his head turned to the side and after they closed the door, he looked over at Xena.
The pirate was no longer in her normal attire with armour and sword. Instead, she rested on her bed and wearing a red silk dress that covered only certain aspects of her body.

Xena slid off her bed and stood on the tiger rug.

"Where did you steal that dress?" casually taunted Caesar. He started to walk around Xena's quarters.

"Stigiera." Xena half grinned and started to walk around the room. It felt like a dance to Xena.

"Maybe some day you can go back for the rest of it." Caesar held back his grin but his tone was mocking.

"Are you complaining?" Xena arched an eyebrow at him.

Caesar placed his hands behind his back. He stopped and looked at the pirate. "No… not at all, it's lovely." He took a few more steps then stopped again. "Why Stigiera?"

Xena remained still and quiet as she debated how to answer that question. "It's the ancient enemy of my home villages… Amphipolis and Potidaea."

"Amphipolis and Potidaea?" The Roman nodded then furthered his understanding. "So all your raiding and looting is about protecting your homeland."

Xena narrowed her eyes and she walked away. "That's right." She stopped as she considered more of what to say. She came near the bed again and stopped, she faced him. "Potidaea was once raider by a warlord but I've made sure that'll never happen again." She stepped to her left and leaned against the wall. "And what about you?"

Caesar started to pace back and forth now. "What about me?" he replied.

"What drives you?" Xena lifted herself off the wall and walked towards the other side of the quarters.

Caesar finally stopped at the foot of the bed. He sat down; he faced Xena and replied, "The desire to be great."

Xena stopped her own pacing again. She stood there, her eyes pinned on the Roman. "You mean powerful."

Caesar faintly shook his head. "No, greatness isn't just about possessing power. If it was, any thug with an army would be entitled to that label. Greatness is about achieving what seems impossible to other men."

Xena shifted back to the bed. She started to lower herself onto the bed while saying, "Why don't you and I work together?"

"What you mean?" asked Caesar. He resisted his own evil grin but it lurked just under his lips.
Xena remained still on the bed but her eyes never broke away from Caesar's. "This life I'm living is beginning to bore me. I'd love to join forces with you."

"So… you want to help me conqueror the world?"

Xena wasn't sure where this was coming from but something in her craved more strength, more power. "Why not? We'd make an unstoppable team."

"Indeed." Caesar took a deep breath then decided to coax Xena's own ego. "I bet you know a lot about conquest."

Xena felt bolder now, she started to crawl towards Caesar. "Yes, I love it… pursuing the enemy." She paused and took in Caesar's grinning face. "Breaking down his defences, cutting off his only path of retreat." She stopped crawling when her face was inches from Caesars. She reached up and gently caressed his face. "And then closing in for the kill."

Caesar looked her up and down then quietly whispered, "Some enemies are harder than others."

Xena let go of her cat grin, her eyes now as dark as her hair. "Oh, I count on it." She suddenly leaned and forcefully took Caesar's lips.

Lila felt a warm blanket cover her shoulders. She looked up to find M'Lila beside her. She softly smiled and received one back from M'Lila. "What you think is going on?"

"Caesar and Xena?" quietly asked the Gallic slave.

"Is ea," whispered the small girl.

M'Lila sighed and squeezed the girl's shoulders. "I don't know." She lowered her hands and stole a quick look at the main deck of the ship. There were a few crewmen above deck but Darman remained behind the wheel. She turned her head back and enjoyed the scene of the vast waters glittering in the moonlight.

Lila was holding onto the railing. She'd been standing here, on the bow, for some time now. She hadn't even known that M'Lila had disappeared to retrieve a blanket for her but she was grateful nonetheless.

"How long you know Xena?"

"A tri."

M'Lila faintly nodded. She considered what little she knew of Xena as well as Lila. One thing she was sure of was that this Gabrielle must mean a lot to Xena for her to be looking for her.

"I don't like this Caesar," whispered Lila. She involuntarily shivered at just the thought of him.
"Be okay," promised M'Lila but she hardly believe it either. "Xena strong," she quietly added.

Lila chewed on her lower lip and even though she agreed with M'Lila, she still knew how fragile Xena was deep down.

The two slaves remained at the bow of the boat for another candlemark. Neither of them really spoke; their thoughts were on Xena and Caesar. By the time they left to go below deck, Caesar had yet to be returned to his spot at the mizzenmast. And when the two friends went into M'Lila's room they didn't hear any noises coming from Xena's quarters. They simply crawled into the furs and M'Lila had to let Lila sleep in her arms considering the small space.

The next few days were rather tense between Xena and her friends. The pirate remained distant from them and Caesar was never bounded to the mast again. Instead, he remained at Xena's side and he whispered many things into her ear that seemed to make her close her eyes. M'Lila and Lila stayed far from the pair and especially Caesar but occasionally Xena would approach them to see how they were doing.

The sleeping arrangements had changed as well. Xena requested a bed placed in M'Lila's room to make things more comfortable. Lila stayed with M'Lila now. Caesar, however, was never seen going into Xena's quarters but he was never seen entering any other cabin either.

It wasn't until four days later that the pirate ship sailed into a cove and dropped anchor. Word had been sent that the ransom for Caesar was being paid. So the pirates rowed to shore with Caesar and Xena in one boat and ten Roman soldiers met them on the shores.

Xena bent down and cupped a handful of coins, jewellery, and gems. She lifted her hands and let the items fall out one by one until all she had left was diamond earring dangling from her ring finger.

"What's the matter?" called Caesar. He strolled up behind Xena. "Not all there?"

The pirate captain turned to face the Roman. "No, I was just wondering if we'll ever see one another again."

Caesar mustarded a smile and lifted his right hand to press against Xena's cheek. "A moment won't pass when I'm not thinking about you."

Xena couldn't control her smile anymore as she leaned in to capture Caesar's lips in a long kiss.

The Roman pulled back from the kiss. "Now go," he ordered. "I'll find you, I promise."

The pirate walked away and joined her crewmen but she stopped and turned around.

Caesar fist ed his hand and pressed it against his chest then extended his arm.
Xena mimicked the salute then spun around to continue with her men.

Lila and MLlila had both been on deck to witness what happened. And as they saw Xena returned to the ship, they knew nothing would be the same. After the ship pulled anchor, Xena set a course for the waters that crossed between Greek and Roman. Never did they touch a port or any other forms of land for five days. And only once did they come across a Greek merchant ship, which they raided but spared all of the sailors and set them free. On the sixth day, a ship was seen on the horizon around mid to late afternoon. Immediately Vicerius spotted it from the crow's nest and hollered down to Xena.

The captain ordered the ship brought around to join it. It was Caesar's ship.

MLlila had been at Xena's side when it'd been spotted. After Xena ordered the ship to join with it, she grabbed Xena's arm. "Ni h-ea," she whispered.

Xena's happy look suddenly disappeared at MLlila's word. "Its okay… he's my friend."

MLlila's expression went from distressed to scared. "Ni h-ea, Caesar is not friend."

"Yes he is," countered the captain. She jerked her arm free, not wanting to hear anymore protests. She hurried off to join her first mate at the helm.

Lila had just come above deck after feeling the ship dramatically change direction. "What's going on?" she asked to anybody.

MLlila joined Lila and only replied with one word. "Caesar."

"Oh gods," whispered the Greek slave. She hastily went to the side of the ship and gazed across the seas. Her eyes finally rested on the Roman ship.

"We are joining it," uttered MLlila. She went along side Lila at the railing, her expression still pale with worry.

"I don't like this." Lila gripped the railing tightly and she could only wonder what would happen once they joined the Roman ship.

Not long after sunset, the two ships met in the open seas and they gradually joined each other. Xena was at the helm beside Vicerius and Darman. MLlila and Lila however were closer to the bow and MLlila remained rather close to Lila. Once the two ships rafted together, a gangplank was slid from the Roman ship onto the pirate ship.

Xena shifted to the top of steps on the upper deck.

Caesar emerged at the top of the gangplank, his eyes locked with Xena's.

Xena's expression had a faint grin but her heart pounded despite her cool attitude. She admired the new golden armour Caesar bore and how it better distinguished him. Without another thought, Xena went down each step slowly.
Caesar began his own descent onto the pirate ship.

When they both touched the main deck of the pirate ship, they remained motionless but after a moment, they started for each other. Caesar's smile crept along his lips and Xena mirrored it back. When they met midway, they circled one another and lowered their heads. Xena prepared to take his lips so she closed her eyes but suddenly Caesar moved away and grabbed her.

Xena's eyes flew open when she suddenly felt the cold, sharp blade against her throat and Caesar's arm firmly holding her in place.

"Now!" yelled Caesar.

The pirate captain lifted her head and saw the archers on the Roman ship pop up and began shooting. They made quick work of Xena's men then several Roman soldiers raced across the gangplank to take on the remaining pirates.

Xena growled and tried to struggle free but it was useless. She hotly asked, "What you think you're doing?"

Caesar chuckled deeply and lowered his head, his lips just brushing Xena's ear. "This is my destiny… you're apart of it and I'm apart of yours."

Xena watched her men get slaughtered and only a few were shown any mercy. She stretched her head around and found several Romans had blocked in M'Lila and Lila into a corner.

M'Lila kept Lila behind her but she didn't even dare remove her sword, too afraid it'd provoke the soldiers to kill them.

Xena turned her head away and closed her eyes. She listened to the screams of her men dying.

Brutus strolled along and watched as each of the prisoners were pushed onto their knees. "The ship is secure, Caesar." He came to a stop behind Xena's back.

Julius Caesar nodded his approval as he stood behind Xena. "Good. And what of the two slaves?"

Brutus directed to the other side of the ship.

Caesar looked to them as if it was the first time he'd seen them. "Ah yes." He walked over to them, his hands still behind his back. He freed one hand and grabbed the chain between M'Lila's shackled hands. "I see you're in chains again, huh?"

M'Lila gave no other response other than a cold stare.

Caesar gave a fake smile then turned his focus to Lila. "Quite a young one, Xena." He now tilted Lila's head back to study her face. "Very young."
Lila grounded her teeth, if it was one thing she'd learned over the years it was to keep her mouth shut.

The Roman Commander spun around and said to Brutus, "Take them onto the ship. I'll have use for them later."

Brutus signalled for some of the soldiers to take them away. The two slaves were jerked to their feet and hauled away onto the Roman ship. Caesar however returned back to Brutus's side.

"We were going to conquer the world together. What happened to those plans for us?" Xena lifted her head and stared coldly at the Roman.

Caesar blinked a few times but never lowered his eyes to her. "There was never any us, Xena, only Rome… and I am Rome." He smirked for a second then bent forward and quietly added, "Still, don't think what we had was meaningless. I'll always remember it… and you'll have a special place of honor among my conquered."

Xena remained ridged yet her anger grew as each of Caesar's words repeated in her head. Her breathing grew heavy as her thoughts went faster. And something inside of her started to grow darker than before and her rage only fuelled it.

By the early morning, the two ships had pulled into the same cove where Caesar was set free. Caesar and Brutus were strolling along the beach, enjoying the early morning and the salty breeze from the seas.

"She was an easier prey than I expected."

Caesar proudly smiled. "Divide and conquer, my friend. You divide a woman's emotions from her sensibilities and you have her." He then came to a stop and turned some, his back to the seas.

Brutus shifted his hands behind his back, like Caesar.

Caesar signalled the soldier to lift the cross.

The soldier went grabbed the cross and began to lift.

Xena dropped her head against the back of the cross as the blue sky flew past her. Then all she could see was the sea stretching far out into the sky, past the horizon.

Caesar smiled up at Xena and called, "I could have sold you and all your friends into slavery. Xena but that's what any common warlord would do. But with this…" He waved his hand at Xena on the cross then at the few remaining pirates also on crosses. "And especially with you, I define myself to those who would dare oppose me, all those who would dare prey on Rome."

Xena said nothing at first but then spat at him.

Caesar tilted his head to one side. "Goodbye, Xena." He turned but gave one last order
to the soldier that now held a large mallet. "Break her legs." He then walked off with Brutus at his side. In the background, he only heard Xena's scream and it filled him with peace.

Xena dropped her head forward and the extreme, shearing pain sent her into unconsciousness. Everything was dark for her; she saw nothing yet so many things touched her senses even in the darkness. And as she drowned in this black quick sand, she heard something pull her out of her unconsciousness. It was the sound of horse beats in the sand then the yelling of a man.

The pirate forced herself to wake up and when she lifted her head, she slightly made out a hooded figure galloping towards her and the three soldiers.

"I asked you a question!" yelled a soldier.

The hooded figure halted the horse and she suddenly flew in the air. She landed neatly in the sand and fought the three soldiers with ease.

Xena somewhat gave a half smile.

M'Lila pushed the hood back from her head. She grabbed for a dagger from her back and cut the bindings around Xena's ankles. She then stepped back and pulled another dagger from her back. With a deep breath, she focused and threw them perfectly.

Xena's wrists were free and she fell.

The Gallic slave jumped and caught her friend. She cradled Xena in her arms and quietly whispered, "You have to ride. Take the horse and go, Xena."

"M'Lila," uttered the pirate, "I can't… leave me."

"Ni h-ea, you must survive," hissed the slave. "There is healer, Niklio not far. Follow to the village; he's over the mountain's pass." She didn't wait for another protest; she called the horse over and lifted Xena. She hauled the broken woman over to the horse and started to push her up into the saddle.

Xena grabbed the saddle horn and used her remaining strength to pull herself up. Once she was in the saddle, she gazed down at her friend.

"Take these." M'Lila revealed two more daggers she had hidden.

The pirate recognized them as her ivy daggers from her childhood and she quickly tucked them away. Suddenly she looked back when she heard men yelling and running towards them from the Roman camp.

"You must go," ordered M'Lila. "Remember me, Xena." She knew Xena was about to protest again but she harshly slapped the stallion's rear. "Graim thu!" she yelled to Xena then turned around to meet her attackers.

Xena looked back to see M'Lila engulfed by ten soldiers. She tried to move her legs or even her arms but she had no strength or any feeling in her legs. She could only hold
on and watch as M'Lila was beaten to the ground and a soldier held a sword up to bring the final blow. But then Xena couldn't see anymore as the dark night swallowed them and all she could do was turn her head away and close her eyes.

"No Brutus, from this moment on I am no longer subordinate to old men in white robes. I am their rival." Caesar finished his speech then sat down in his chair.

Suddenly, two soldiers entered the tent and stepped forward.

Julius Caesar gave an annoyed looked and asked, "What is this?"

They both bowed and gave a salute then the man to the Caesar's left spoke first. "Caesar, the barbarian woman… the one named Xena… escaped."

Caesar rose up from his seat. "Your life is forfeit… that you already know." He paused and decided on a better approach. "But you can redeem yourself. Take my stentorian guard and find her. I want her lifeless body brought back to me by the end of the night. Go."

The two guards stood up and saluted before leaving.

Niklio heard a knock at his door; he stopped grinding his herbs and jumped to his feet. "What in Hades?" he growled and came over to the door. He flew open his door and brushed the snow away from his face then realized there was a horse at his door. Looking higher up, he found a woman half hanging into the horse. "By the gods." He jumped and went over to her, he pulled her off.

"Are you a healer?" whispered Xena.

Niklio dragged the woman into his house. "You could say that. I'm thee healer." Once he was out of the doorway with her, he kicked back and his door slammed shut. He quickly took her to his table and helped her onto it. "What has happened?" He began to inspect her body.

"My legs," whispered the pirate.

"Among other things," muttered the healer. "What is your name?"

The pirate's head rolled to the right. "Xena," she whispered.

"I'm Niklio." The healer had started at her feet and was now looking over her body at her waist. He came further up her body and only seemed to find a few lash marks here and there along with cuts and bruises. He knew she'd been through a lot. "What's happened?"

"Cross," uttered the pirate. Her eyes drifted shut now and she started to lose consciousness.
Niklio sighed and decided to let her rest. He went to his medicines and pulled out his salve. First he took care of the cuts and lash markings, making sure they were clean and wouldn't get infected. That took him a half of a candlemark but then the hard part came. He put away his salve and bowl of bloody water. Niklio went to the end of the bed and bent down, his eyes carefully inspected the shape of Xena's leg and he was amazed how twisted and mangled they were.

Niklio stood back up and ran his hands down her legs, he sensed every broken bone and shattered joint. He began to greatly shake his head. "You will be lucky, Xena." He stepped back and bent forward; he grasped her right ankle and suddenly jerked.

Xena's eyes flew open as a scream erupted from her lips.

The healer held his breath and he jerked her leg to the right.

The pirate only screamed again and her back arched up some.

"One more to go," called Niklio. He shifted over and grabbed Xena's left leg. "Take a deep breath, Xena."

Xena sucked in her breath but it did her no good when the pain exploded in her left leg now. Her nails clawed the stone bed as she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Niklio closed his eyes against the screeching yell but he jerked Xena's leg to the left and reset the bones into place.

The pirate opened her eyes and sucked in a new breath of air, her eyes stung with tears.

"Take it easy… I've just reset your bones."

Xena's vision swam as she stared at the healer. She lowered her head back down and fell back into unconsciousness. For the third time, everything was dark for her then suddenly everything flashed before her…..

"Xena!" screamed Gabrielle's voice.

Cyrene took her daughter's hand and whispered, "Gabrielle is gone… you have to let her go."

Lyceaus's eyes were closed but his left hand slightly moved and closed over his sister's hand. "Love you, sis," he muttered then his grip loosened.

"Ly?" whispered the older sister. "Ly, come on." Xena felt tears come down her cheek. "I love you too, Ly," she whimpered. She furiously wiped her tears away.

Xena gripped Argo's saddle horn and turned to look behind her mare. She stared down at brother's coffin.

"You are responsible for his death." Cyrene threw up her hands in the air. "You got
your brother killed!” she yelled in angry.

Xena sighed as she stared at the ground passing under her feet as she walked with her brother. "Ly, I had two choices."

"What you mean?"

Xena lifted her head back up, with her free hand she brushed back her dark brown bangs. "I could have sat around in my room and cried about Gabrielle. Or I could have done something about it." She paused then simply stated, "I decided to do something about it."

Cyrene took her daughter's hand and whispered, "Gabrielle is gone… you have to let her go."

"Just… if this is a good idea," confessed the young man. Lyceaus found a good size rock and sat down on it. "I mean, maybe mother is right, you know. There are a lot of dangers out here."

"What happens if she's dead?" whispered Lyceaus.

"Then I can finally let her go." Xena searched her brother's dark green eyes.

"Die you damn raider!" growled the man.

Xena knew what was happening; she'd just finished the knot and had already spun around, unsheathing her sword again. She moved so fast that she had no time to think, only react. She took two large steps then thrust her sword.

"What's wrong?" whispered Xena.

"I… I… heard my mom scream," whimpered Calli.

"Don't worry, she'll be fine," promised Xena.

"Wha-what about my dad?"

"Daddy?" whispered Calli; she'd gone down the steps to meet her dying father. "Daddy?" She looked up and stared across to Xena.

Xena lifted her eyes to the girl; she could feel the girl's pain. It was the same kind of pain she'd felt the day she'd lost Gabrielle. Suddenly her breathing became ragged and her entire world spun, almost to the point everything became dizzy.

"Xena, please!" screamed the small bard. "Oh gods help us!" She held out her hand as she grew further away from Xena.

"Xena," spoke Lila softly, "you don't even know if they're still alive."

"Ly, I don't know if this'll make sense but I just can't live without her." She felt her old emotions for Gabrielle started to push through inside of her. "She means so much to
me, Ly. Just trust me on that."

Gabrielle's face just lit up with a bright smile. She engulfed her friend in a gigantic hug.

Xena was so happy that she took hold of Gabrielle and spun each other in a circle.

The little bard shifted her eyes away from the quill necklace then to her friend and a happy smile formed. "Why?"

"Because it's your birthday and because I love you," replied Xena.

The tiny bard gripped her friend with all her strength. She then peered down below and saw how far the drop was and the pitchfork on the ground sparkled at her. "Oh gods!" She began squirming and struggling.

"Gabrielle, relax please. You'll be okay."

The tiny bard took a deep breath; she closed her eyes and tried ignoring her racing heart.

"Xena," spoke Lila softly, "you don't even know if they're still alive."

Cyrene took her daughter's hand and whispered, "Gabrielle is gone… you have to let her go."

"Because of your obsession of a dead girl you've gotten your brother killed!" yelled Cyrene, her eyes blazed with anger. "Leave my home, Xena," she whispered half angrily and half painfully.

Xena faintly sighed then said, "Lila's deirfiur, Gabrielle, eso… eso mo chroi." Her right hand came up to cover her chest over her heart.

"Your soulmate?" clarified the slave and she received a nod back from Xena.

"Where… where isss she?" asked M'Lila. "What happen to her?"

"I don't know," answered Xena, "I have to find her."

M'Lila released one of her hands and pointed to her chest. "I help."

Xena faced Caesar. "Potidaea was once raider by a warlord but I've made sure that'll never happen again."

"What drives you?"

"The desire to be great."

"They say you're one of the most ruthless pirates out there," mentioned Breanne.

"That's all? I'll have to try harder," joked Xena back to Breanne.
"A moment won't pass when I'm not thinking about you."

Caesar smirked for a second then bent forward and quietly added, "Still, don't think what we had was meaningless. I'll always remember it... and you'll have a special place of honour among my conquered."

Xena's eyes rolled as the blue sky whisked by and her eyes rested on Caesar.

"And especially with you, I define myself to those who would dare oppose me, all those who would dare prey on Rome."

"Break her legs."

"Ni h-ea, you must survive," hissed M'Lila.

"Graim thu!" M'Lila yelled to Xena.

"Xena!" screamed Gabrielle's voice.

"Ni h-ea, you must survive," hissed M'Lila.

"And I am a killer," growled Xena.

"You can't be," whispered Breanne. "You're none of those things," she further urged.

"What drives you?"

"The desire to be great."

"Still, don't think what we had was meaningless."

"Ni h-ea, you must survive."

"Because of your obsession of a dead girl you've gotten people killed!" yelled Cyrene. "Leave my home, Xena!"

"Break her legs."

"Xena," spoke Lila softly, "you don't even know if she's still alive."

"Then I can finally let her go."

"Xena!" screamed Gabrielle's voice.

Cyrene took her daughter's hand and whispered, "Gabrielle is gone... you have to let her go."

"Break her soul!"

Xena opened her eyes and she could barely breathe at first, fear flowed through her.
"Relax," soothed Niklio. "You're safe here."

The pirate finally calmed down and lowered her head back onto the stone pallet.

"You have amazing recuperative powers," he mentioned. "How are you feeling?"

Xena lifted her head again but also held herself up with her arms. "Fine… much stronger." Her eyes then drifted down to her legs. "Those needles are fascinating."

"You're lucky," called Niklio from across the house. "You'll be able to walk again in time."

The pirate lowered herself back down. "With or without a problem?"

Niklio came back over, he was drying his hands. "I have a feeling it won't be a full recovery. You'll have some kind of limp."

Xena sighed and closed her eyes.

"That's better than not walking," reminded the healer.

"Thank you," uttered Xena. She then pushed herself back up because she did not want to fall asleep again. "Just how lo…. " She didn't finish her question when she heard a loud noise at the door.

Niklio looked over when the door flung open and a surge of cold air poured into his home.

"There she is! Get her!"

Xena knew the peace wouldn't last and she wasn't about to be taken back. She pushed herself up, and sat up.

Niklio stepped in front of Xena and tried to protect her. He fought one soldier and managed to send him on his back when he gave a solid kick. However his fighting was short lived when another soldier punched him across the face, knocking him out cold.

One soldier came at Xena.

The pirate rolled back then sprung forward with her legs stretching out. Her feet slammed into the soldier's chest and sent him flying. She then forced herself to stand up no matter the pain.

The three remaining soldiers didn't move, they were stunned by how this woman could stand after just having her legs broken.

Xena grinned and jumped at the nearest one. She took him out with two good punches then she kicked at the other one. The kick almost threw her down onto the ground as well but she just recovered. Xena reached behind her back and extracted one of her
daggers. She quickly moved and slit the remaining soldier's throat.

The pirate watched the dead soldier fell to the ground. She then turned around and saw one of them getting up. She made quick work of him by throwing her dagger into his heart.

By then another soldier was getting to his feet with a sword in hand.

Xena grinned as he approached her.

He brought his sword down on her.

Xena lifted both her hands up, palms pressed together, and she caught the blade between her hands. She jerked the sword from his hands, flipped it, and caught it by its hilt. She plunged the Roman's own sword into his chest.

At that point, her legs ached in extreme pain. She moved back to the pallet and sat back down. After a deep breath, she heard the last soldier begin to get up; it was the one Niklio had taken down. When the soldier was up enough, she reached over and grabbed him. She head butted him then spun him around, quickly putting the pinch on him.

The soldier gasped for air as he slumped down.

"You'll be dead in thirty seconds," casually mentioned Xena. "But know this, you won't be the last. Tell Hades to prepare himself." She felt her racing heart slowly calm but her blood was still on fire with anger. Her eyes glowed with darkness as she whispered, "A new Xena is born tonight, with a new purpose in life…." Xena roughly twisted the man's neck. "Death."

_Section Three-A_
Part 5: Gabrielle's Fourth Year

"The pair continued their journey down the road, not really sure where this road would lead them." Gabrielle saw how the audience's faces were lit up and she concluded her story. "They weren't even sure what their next adventure would be but they did know they had each other." She suddenly smiled and proudly finished, "The Warrior Princess and her bard." She slowly bent forward and bowed to her fellow classmates.

The classroom of students all clapped and few cheered out for her successful story.

Gabrielle straightened up and her happy expression was glued in place by a huge smile. Her eyes finally focused on her best friend, Ephiny, who sat in the middle but off to the right.

The master bard was clapping as he approached the young bard. "Very nice, Gabrielle."
Gabrielle faintly lost her smile when she looked to the serious master bard. "Thank you, sir." He patted her back and she took that as the signal to go back to her seat beside Ephiny.

The master bard shifted in front of the class of twenty students. "As you see, everybody Gabrielle had a very smooth way of telling her story." He slightly smiled. "Although Gabrielle was nervous at the start she managed to control that."

Gabrielle was carefully listening to the master bard's assessment as she slid into her spot beside Ephiny.

"Nice job," whispered Ephiny and she patted her friend's leg. "You were wonderful."

Gabrielle felt relieved and her stomach started to unknot.

"Gabrielle also used her hands to help describe the story," continued the master bard. "Fortunately she didn't over use her hands or body motions to take away from her words." His eyes slightly rested on Stallonus, whom was known for over dramatics at times. He then glanced over at Gabrielle. "You did a nice job, Gabrielle but you still have plenty to work on." He did give her a warm smile. "You've made much improvement since last time."

"Thank you, sir," called back the young bard. She tried to hold back her smile when he spoke to her but it was undoubtable hard to do.

The master bard looked back at the students and asked, "Who is next?"

Ephiny chuckled and reached over to hold Gabrielle's hand in her own. "Aren't you glad that's over?"

Gabrielle grinned and sensed Ephiny's warm hand help calm her. "Yes, really glad."

The Amazon squeezed the smaller hand then released her hold as she looked up when Orion stepped up next. "Oh this should be good too."

"Better even," whispered Gabrielle.

Ephiny rolled her eyes and decided not to argue that Gabrielle was the best bard out of the class. She knew her attempts were fruitless but that's what she decided that made Gabrielle so good. The fact was that the slave never even recognized her own brilliance for story telling.

Ephiny had yet to approach the front of the class to tell her story. She decided she want to go near the end of the class because it would help her to decide on which story to tell. She felt rather nervous because this story telling was one of the large tests to see how much each student had learned. She was confident yet worried she hadn't picked up enough from the teachers but Gabrielle had reassured her on several occasions that she would be great up there.

Gabrielle dipped her head some and stared at her linked hand with Ephiny's. She tried to focus on Orion's story but her mind was slipping to sadder thoughts that she'd been
trying to ignore. She tried to hold back her tears when her heart ached yet again because today was Xena's twentieth birthday. She attempted to force the thoughts away as she lifted her head back up.

Ephiny stole a quick glance and she saw how watery Gabrielle's eyes were and she didn't understand why. For the past three days her best friend had been rather upset and down but refused to explain anything. She knew this wasn't anything new however it bothered her. She offered some comfort by squeezing Gabrielle's hand then she started rubbing her thumb across Gabrielle's hand.

Gabrielle felt some comfort by her friend's idly caress but nothing to stop her emotions. She instinctively reached up with her left hand and tried to clasp the necklace Xena had given her almost three years ago. Yet her hand only touched her bare chest, her necklace long gone since the attack on her village. She'd never known how she lost her necklace but to this day it still seemed to weigh around her neck.

Ephiny took a steady breath then leaned over closer to her friend. "Are you okay?" she whispered. She almost thought Gabrielle didn't hear her but she finally saw Gabrielle nod. She inhaled deeply and straightened back up. Apart of Ephiny couldn't wait for the arrival of spring because it would bring not only new hope but also Gabrielle's sixteenth birthday. She was already considering plans to make Gabrielle's birthday something rather important and large in hopes it'd help her friend.

Gabrielle was rather worried not only with her work as a student bard but as an Amazon Princess. Ephiny had never felt so relieved to have Gabrielle accept the caste as princess until she saw how it bore more weight on the slave. Ephiny started to realize just how hard Gabrielle's life was and especially when she later met Hecuba during their fall vacation.

Ephiny and Gabrielle had stayed in the Amazon Nation for about five days and tried to get over Terries's death. Afterwards, they went to Cornelio's home outside of Articia and visited with them until they were due back at the Academy. For several months, Ephiny and Gabrielle continued with their education as bards and learned much until Solstice break arrived. This time, Ephiny and Gabrielle went their separate ways as Gabrielle went to Cornelio's while Ephiny went to the Nation for the Solstice season.

It wasn't until a few days before the infamous twelfth moon that Ephiny saw Gabrielle again when Gabrielle came to the Nation. Gabrielle had decided since she was the princess that she was expected to show up in the village during the Solstice break. Ephiny and Gabrielle then made their way back to the Academy three days after the twelfth moon celebration. And now for the past four days the class was taking various exams for the midyear and telling a story in front of the class and master bard was one of the tests.

After a few more bards' tales, the master bard decided to end the class and announced tomorrow would be the final day of tests and everybody was expected to complete their work. Ephiny and Gabrielle had tugged on their cloaks and walked out into the brisk winter air as they made their way across to their dorm.

"Wait up, girls!" called out Stallonus; behind him were Orion and Twickenham.
Ephiny and the Amazon Princess both stopped and waited for their friends to catch up.

Orion came up beside Gabrielle and slipped his arm through hers. "How'd you think I did?"

Gabrielle warmly smiled. "You were amazing." She continued walking to the dorm with her group of friends. "The master bard favours you."

"No he doesn't," protested Orion. "He likes you better."

Ephiny just rolled her eyes at the pair.

"Oh come on, Orion." Gabrielle laughed at her friend's disbelieving look. "I was the one that made him look dumb on the first day of class."

"That's t-t-true," agreed Twickenham.

"Yeah, you sure did show him," agreed Stallonus and he laughed. "I loved the look on his face."

"It doesn't matter." Orion brushed back a curly lock of hair. "Gabrielle is a natural talented bard." He suddenly grinned at the young Amazon Princess. "You'll have the 'A' out of the group."

The slave huffed at his confidence because she wasn't so sure herself.

"I know I won't," spoke up Stallonus. "The master bard hates me."

"Stall, you just have to control your acrobatics on the stage," persisted Ephiny.

"Yeah right," chided Orion, "That's like tell Twickenham not to stutter."

"Y-y-yeah," agreed Twickenham. "I c-c-can't help it-t-t either."

Ephiny sadly smiled and shifted closer to the young boy. She rubbed his back in sympathy. "I think I rather stutter or do acrobats on the stage than freeze-up."

Gabrielle glanced over at her friend then slightly shook her head. "You'll do fine, Eph."

"Just try to image everybody in just their britches," suggest Stallonus.

The Amazon groaned and her eyes closed as she tried to wipe away the mental image.

"Stallonus!" Gabrielle laughed at him and looked at Ephiny again. "Just focus on the story, Eph… that's all you need to do."

"I try," persisted the Amazon, "but it doesn't always work."
Orion slipped his arm free from Gabrielle and hurried up the steps of the dorm. He pushed open the door and let everybody in first. After everybody was inside, he closed the door and turned around. "Ephiny, we're all in the same boat as you," he reminded.

Ephiny sighed as she sat on the foot of Orion's bed. She scooted over some when Gabrielle sat down beside her. "Yes but I feel like an idiot every time."

"You're n-n-not." Twickenham sat down on the floor and rested his back against the foot of his own bed. "You're very g-g-good, Ephiny."

The Amazon smiled at him and felt warmed by his genuine comment.

"Just tell a story about the Amazons fighting the centaurs." Stallonus fell back into his bed but sat back up.

"I don't… think so, Stall." Ephiny chuckled and crossed her legs at her ankles.

"Do you know what you're going to tell?" inquired Orion. He moved over to Twickenham and sat down beside him.

Ephiny shrugged then replied, "I'm between two stories."

"Which ones?" urged Gabrielle; she nudged her friend with her elbow.

The Amazon chuckled at Gabrielle but she shook her head. "I can't say."

Before Orion could pursue the issue anymore, he heard a knock at the door so he yelled, "Come in." He suddenly felt a smile take his lips when Euripides entered. "Hey, Eurip."

"Greetings." Euripides kept his normal stoic expression as he joined the group. He slightly inclined his head to Gabrielle and said, "You outshined the average learning bard today."

Gabrielle felt her cheeks flush. "Thank you, Euripides." When she felt her blush settle back down, she added, "You did a wonderful job today too."

Euripides faintly smiled at the compliment and took a seat beside Orion and Twickenham while saying, "I do believe the master bard may not be so proned to agree."

"He will, you'll see." Gabrielle tried to reassure the young man with a confident smile.

"You just have to slow down with the big words," reminded Ephiny.

"Correct," agreed Euripides.

"And add-d-d more emot-t-tions too," reminded Twickenham.

Stallonus suddenly brightened up. "You could try adventures too, Eurip."
Euripides felt his confidence getting deflated really quickly.

Orion sighed at hearing all the rebukes his friends were making to Euripides. "Or you can just be yourself, Eurip."

Euripides lifted his head and one of his rare smiles shaped his face.

"Orion is right," agreed Gabrielle, "just be yourself."

Suddenly there was another knock at the door and they group knew it wasn't any of their friends. Ephiny slid off the bed and walked down to the door. She opened it and poked her head out into the wintry afternoon.

"Hi, Ephiny," Feodoras offered a smile. "Is Gabrielle around?"

"Yes." The Amazon had a concerned look when she noted how serious Feodoras was. "I'll get her." She turned around and called for her friend.

Gabrielle felt her stomach twist for no real reason but she hurried to Ephiny's side. "Hey, Feodoras."

"I need to talk to you, Gabrielle." Feodoras's eyes flickered to Ephiny then back to Gabrielle. "Alone."

The Amazon Princess swallowed but she nodded and buttoned her cloak as she stepped out of the dorm. After Ephiny closed the door, she went down the steps and curiously looked at Feodoras.

"I have some bad news, Gabrielle," carefully started the older man. "We received a letter today from your grandfather."

"Is he okay?" hastily asked Gabrielle.

Feodoras slightly nodded then saw how frightened the teenager had become. "It's your mother, Gabrielle." He paused as he tried to think of the right words to say but none could be right. "She's very ill… your grandfather doesn't expect her to live much longer."

Gabrielle felt this one strike her harder than anything else in a long time. "Gods… no," she rasped and she searched Feodoras face hoping it was some joke or dream. "She… can't be." Her eyes were already stinging. "She was just fine… when I left after Solstice."

"I know, Gabrielle," Feodoras reached in between his cloak and produced an open scroll. "That's why I brought your grandfather's letter." He held it out.

Gabrielle carefully took it, her hand trembling. She couldn't stand any longer so she took a step back and almost fell onto the bottom step.

Feodoras sadly watched but he bent down onto one knee and grasped the young woman's shoulder. "Your grandfather requested you return home for awhile." He
searched Gabrielle's dulling green eyes. "The master bard granted it so you may leave tomorrow at dawn."

Gabrielle's lower lip quivered and she shook her head as her attention centred on Feodoras. "Thank you, Feodoras."

"I'm sorry," whispered Feodoras and after he squeezed her shoulder, he stood up and walked back to the Academy building.

After he was well out of distance, Gabrielle dropped her face into her hands and started to cry. The message from Cornelio rolled out of her lap and fell onto the frozen ground. Gabrielle remained on the step and cried for a long time and it wasn't until the creak of the door behind her caught her attention. She heard somebody coming down the steps but she didn't bother to look but warm arms wrapped around her and pulled her into their lap.

Ephiny exhaled deeply as she hugged her friend in her lap. She knew today was hard enough but whatever news that Feodoras just brought made it even worse. She lowered her head onto Gabrielle's and continued to rock their bodies together some. When she sensed the slave settling down, she whispered, "What's wrong?"

Gabrielle just shook her head and clutched Ephiny tighter.

The Amazon felt her heart drop but her eyes drift past Gabrielle and rested on the open scroll on the ground. She could just make out the handwriting and she was able to read the first paragraph. After she'd read it, she knew why her friend was so upset and it only made her tighten her hug on Gabrielle. "It'll be okay," she whispered in a shaky voice.

"No… no it won't," replied Gabrielle's muffled voice. "She's dying."

Ephiny closed her eyes and lowered her head back onto Gabrielle's. She felt her cheeks warm with hot tears when Gabrielle started to whimper. "Ssssh," she whispered and continued rocking their bodies. "It'll be okay, Gabrielle." She ran her hand up and down Gabrielle's cool back.

Eventually Ephiny was able to help Gabrielle into their bedroom and asked the boys not to bother them. The four boys were curious as much as worried about what happened to Gabrielle when they saw her but they said nothing. Instead the group broke up and went to dinner without the girls.

Ephiny put Gabrielle into her bed then she removed her boots and got into bed with Gabrielle.

Gabrielle instantly rolled over to face Ephiny and she buried her face into Ephiny's neck.

The Amazon pulled her friend into her arms and held her close as possible in hopes it'll help her fears. She didn't know what else to do or even say but her mind tried to come up with something. When she felt Gabrielle drift off to sleep from being so tired from crying, she slipped out of the bed carefully. Ephiny didn't waste a minute to put
her boots on, grabbed her cloak, and ran across the campus to the Academy building. She went in search of the master bard or even Feodoras but she was lucky enough to find the master bard still in his office. She could only hope he would at least hear her out before saying no to her question.

The next morning, Gabrielle came out of her sleep and found she was being tightly held by strong arms. She opened her eyes and slightly pulled her head back to discover it was Ephiny, it made her smile sadly.

Ephiny felt the motion and gradually opened her eyes. "Hey," she whispered. "How you feel?"

"Like a herd of centaurs rolled over me," confessed the small bard. She then had a perplexed look but asked, "You stayed with me last night?"

"Yeah," quietly whispered the Amazon. "I was worried."

Gabrielle hugged her friend then released her but said, "Thank you."

Ephiny reached up and brushed back some of Gabrielle's stray hair. "You're welcome."

The slave sighed as her eyes dropped and stared at Ephiny's neck. "I have to head to Articia today."

"I know," uttered the Amazon.

Gabrielle lifted her eyes to meet with Ephiny's. "You know?"

"Not all of it," admitted Ephiny, "but enough to know what's going on." She paused and pressed her lips together. "I read the first part of the scroll." She inhaled deeply and carefully added, "I can go with you if you'd like, Gabrielle."

"But what about….")

Ephiny faintly smiled and answered the unfinished question. "I talked to the master bard, he gave me permission to go. I'll be doing my test when we get back."

"I…." Gabrielle felt her sore eyes actually sting again. "Thank you, Ephiny."

The Amazon hugged her friend briefly but released her. "We should get ready so we can go soon."

"You're right," sadly agreed the Amazon Princess. She forced herself to get out of bed and when her eyes rested on her desk, she noted the scroll from Cornelio sitting there. She looked over at her friend, who was at her dresser pulling clothes out. "Ephiny?"

The Amazon paused and turned around, an inquisitive look on her face.

"Thank you for last night."
Ephiny faintly nodded. She faced her dresser again and decided to wear her Amazon attire for the journey to Articia. From the corner of her eye, she saw Gabrielle debating about what to wear but she'd decided on her long brown skirt and sky blue top.

It wasn't long before the two young Amazons were dressed in travelling attire and had their saddlebags packed. Ephiny tossed her saddlebag onto the bed then looked over at her friend. "I'm going to take my short sword."

Gabrielle was tightening the buckle over the right flap on her saddlebag when Ephiny told her. "Are you sure?" She looked up from her bag and saw her friend was serious.

"Yes, I'll feel better if I have it." Ephiny knelt down and pulled up the sheet that draped over her bed. She reached under and pulled out the short sword then rose back up.

"Here." Gabrielle quickly came over and helped Ephiny hook the sword onto her back. "Make sure you put your cloak on before we step out of the room."

Ephiny slightly grinned and teased, "Yes, my princess."

Gabrielle just rolled her eyes and walked back to her bag. On the way over, she grabbed the scroll off her desk and shoved it away in her saddlebags. She went over to her desk again and picked up her cloak from the chair where Ephiny must have put it last night. She threw it on and turned around to find her friend had her cloak on too.

"Can you see it?" asked Ephiny. She turned her back to the princess.

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, you're safe." She tied her cloak into place under her chin as she walked to her bed again. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah… how about you?" Ephiny picked up her saddlebags and held it with both hands.

"Yeah, I think so."

Ephiny tilted her head as Gabrielle crossed over to the door with her saddlebags in arm. "We should tack up the horses first, eat, and then let the Feodoras know we're leaving."

The Amazon Princess slightly sighed but she knew her friend was right. "Okay." She opened the door and headed out leaving a baffled Amazon.

Ephiny decided Gabrielle was just trying to retain a strong composure so she let it go for now. She gathered herself and stepped out of the room but shut the door behind her. She saw none of the boys were in the dorm and she decided it was for the best. She hurried to the stables to catch up with Gabrielle and it didn't take either of them long to have the horses tacked.

Afterwards, the pair of friends went to the mess hall in the Academy building and had a brief breakfast. Ephiny also made sure to retrieve two rolls of bread incase she or
Gabrielle got hungry on the ride to Articia. She knew it was only a day's ride but one could never be safe enough. The two girls then went to the main office where Feodoras would work. They let him know they were leaving and he wished them safe travels.

Gabrielle and Ephiny mounted their horses and quickly trotted out of the Academy grounds until they got on the road. Once they were far enough, Gabrielle spurred Torqueo into a full gallop. Ephiny sucked in a cold breath of air then urged her mare into a gallop to follow Gabrielle. Ephiny and Gabrielle rode non-stop to Articia and it wasn't until they approached the town did they slow down to a walk.

Ephiny came up along side Gabrielle. "Saddle sore?"

Gabrielle picked up on the light tease and it made her grin a little. "Not too bad." She looked at the young Amazon. "How about you?"

"About the same," admitted Ephiny. She shifted some in her saddle and felt her legs throb a little. "Not a sore spot at all."

The Amazon Princess could tell her friend was fairly stiff much like Gabrielle but she declined from saying anything. Her thoughts were on her mother and she wondered what her mother's condition was like. She knew she'd find out shortly.

Gabrielle swept a loose lock of her blond hair behind her right ear. She straightened up when she and Ephiny started down the short drive to Cornelio's home. The dirt road was perfectly straight and on both sides leafless olive trees lined the road. Gabrielle never realized how deathly winter could feel like until now as she took in how barren the fields look, the olive trees with no leaves, and the sky was a cloudy grey. The air was so chilled that it seemed to even nip at Gabrielle's heart.

Ephiny had fallen silent like Gabrielle as she took in the quiet grounds. She then realized on the porch of the large white house was a young girl, very young. "Who is that?" she whispered.

Gabrielle focused on the small girl on the porch, whom was sweeping everything clean. "I'm not sure." She considered everything for a moment.

"She mustn't be no more than ten years old," quietly observed Ephiny.

Gabrielle made no response but she agreed with Ephiny. She also had a fair idea that the girl was a new slave that Cornelio may have taken in to help. She looked over at Ephiny. "Let's go to the stables first."

The young Amazon's eyes flickered over there and she saw the stables just offset behind the house.

"Come on," urged Gabrielle and she pushed Torqueo to walk faster.

Ephiny briskly followed behind and she was still amazed by how nice the stables were. It took her all of five seconds to conclude that Cornelio had a lot of money since the stables were well kept, perfectly painted white, and some kind of cobble stone was
used as a floor in the stable except in the stalls.

After the girls had their horses untacked and settled in with some grain feed, they made their way out of the stables. They each had their saddlebags slung over their right shoulder and they approached the front of the house.

When Gabrielle came to the first step, she saw the small girl had frozen at seeing their arrival. "Hello," she gently greeted and smiled at her.

The small child stepped back and seemed to shield herself with her broom. Her eyes flickered from Gabrielle and to Ephiny at her side. She didn't like how Ephiny was dressed and perceived her as a threat.

"It's okay," reassured Gabrielle. She'd caught how scared the girl was of Ephiny and probably because of the Amazon attire underneath of Ephiny's cloak. "I'm Gabrielle."

The girl's eyes instantly widened in worshipping awe. "Grandfather said you would be coming."

Gabrielle took a step up but signalled to Ephiny to wait. "Yes, grandfather asked for me to come home because my mother is sick."

The girl instantly frowned and her head dipped forward. "Auntie Hecuba has been sick for awhile now." Her eyes lifted up to Gabrielle but her head was still tilted forward. "She spoke a lot about you during her long feverish nights."

Gabrielle felt a lump develop in her throat. "Is grandfather home?"

The girl slowly nodded and lifted her head back up. "Grandfather is in his office."

Gabrielle nodded then she climbed the rest of the steps up to come to the top. "What is your name?"

"I'm Mary," quietly replied the girl.

"It's nice to meet you, Mary." Gabrielle held the young girl's gaze and she softly smiled at her. Gabrielle felt her heart warm to this girl because she reminded her very much of Lila but Lila was never quite as shy. "And...." She looked back and held her hand out to Ephiny. "This is my friend."

The Amazon slowly went up the steps and carefully approached the child. "Hi," she warmly greeted.

"Hi-hi." Mary shyly smiled at the teenager that seemed imposing but was very kind too.

Ephiny felt a smile take her lips and she knelt down onto one knee; she became eye level with the young girl. "I'm Ephiny."

"Ephiny?" repeated the small girl.
Ephiny just nodded her head.

Mary tilted her head and her curiosity got the better of her. She lowered her broom to her side and stepped up to Ephiny. She carefully and slowly stretched her hand out and her fingers wrapped around the feather in Ephiny's hair. "Why do you wear bird feathers in your hair?"

"Ephiny is an Amazon," explained Gabrielle; she then caught the rich brown eyes flickering up to her.

Mary's expression brightened when she realized Gabrielle also had a feather attached in her hair but it was further back so she hadn't seen it earlier. "You're an Amazon too, Gabrielle?" She'd released Ephiny's feather earlier and pointed at Gabrielle's one.

The princess felt a bit of nervous come into her. She also knelt down and adjusted the saddlebag on her shoulder. "Yes, Mary… I'm an Amazon too."

Once again that awed expression appeared on the child's face. Mary stepped closer to Gabrielle and grasped the colourful feather in her hand. "Does grandfather know you're an Amazon?" She saw the grin on Gabrielle's face and it made her giggle. "I bet he doesn't."

"No, Mary grandfather doesn't know I'm an Amazon." Gabrielle gently smiled as she reached up to take Mary's small hand into her own. "And you can't tell grandfather either. Okay?"

The girl frowned. "Why not? Grandfather should know everything… he loves us very much."

"Yes he does," agreed Gabrielle, "but I will tell grandfather I'm an Amazon when it's okay."

"Why isn't it okay right now?" insisted the child.

Ephiny inwardly chuckled at the curiosity the child had because it reminded her of Gabrielle's own. She was wondering how Gabrielle liked getting little of her own medicine. "Because Mary, right now Gabrielle's mother is sick and that's who we should be focusing on."

Mary studied Ephiny now and she slowly nodded her head. "Auntie Hecuba is very sick." Her frown grew deeper. "Grandmother and Auntie Maria are not sure she'll live."

Gabrielle felt the lump in her throat return and her stomach sank. "Take us to grandfather, Mary."

Mary nodded and stepped back then turned around.

Ephiny had lost her smile earlier and just quietly followed behind Gabrielle into the gigantic home.
Mary led them through the large house until they came to the far end in the hallway. She stopped at the closed double wood doors and she carefully knocked on it.

"Come in," called a deep male voice.

Mary pushed open a door but had a little trouble until Ephiny helped her. She paused and peered up at the Amazon. "Thank you," she whispered.

Ephiny smiled and pushed the door the rest of the way. "Go ahead, Mary."

Mary went in first, Gabrielle followed, and Ephiny came in last.

Gabrielle set her saddlebag down on the floor in front of the other door and took Ephiny's from hers.

Mary approached the large oak wood desk but stop in front as she watched Cornelio continue to write. "Grandfather?"

"Just a moment, sweetie." Cornelio continued scribbling something, his full attention on the scroll. Yet as he tried to finish his thought, he realized two bodies were behind the small child and a very familiar hand grasped Mary's shoulder. He lowered his quill quickly as he lifted his head. "Gabrielle," he breathed in relief and a smile broke out across his tired face.

Gabrielle returned the smile but worry shined in her eyes.

Cornelio was already out of his chair and he went around his desk.

Gabrielle met him halfway and she was swept into a warm embrace. She buried her face into his chest and her emotions surged to the top. She tightly closed her eyes and held onto Cornelio.

Ephiny dipped her head forward and put her hands behind her back. She felt a little out of place but at the same time she was happy Gabrielle had Cornelio in her life. She knew Cornelio had given so much to Gabrielle and he would continue to support her despite the brand on her.

"I'm so glad you made it, Gabrielle," whispered Cornelio. He loosened his embrace and peered down into emotional green eyes.

"How is mother?" Gabrielle's voice was shaky and raw with emotions.

"Not well at all," sadly replied Cornelio. He finally separated from Gabrielle but he remained close so he could physically look over her. "You look well though, Gabrielle."

The small bard nodded her head. "I have been… well until…" She didn't bother to finish her words; instead she held her hand out to Ephiny. "Cornelio, I'd like you to meet Ephiny."

Cornelio straightened up and clearly inspected the young Amazon that flanked
Gabrielle's side.

Ephiny approached the older man and held out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

"I've heard a bit about you, Ephiny." Cornelio took the offered hand and briskly shook. "Gabrielle spoke highly of you when she was here for Solstice."

Ephiny felt her flush even though she tried to hide her embarrassment. She released the much larger hand and replied, "Well Gabrielle can talk."

Cornelio heartedly laughed.

Gabrielle shot a glare at her friend for the remark.

Cornelio settled down and a soft smile swept his lips. "Gabrielle mentioned you are an Amazon." He'd already noted the revealing leathers she wore under her cloak.

"Yes, I am," replied the proud Amazon.

"Grandfather, did you see Ephiny's feather?" spoke up Mary from her spot behind the group.

Cornelio's expression brightened at the young girl. "Yes, sweetie I did." He bent forward and held out his arms.

Mary took the invite, came over, and had the sensation of flying as Cornelio lifted her up. She then was lowered onto the edge of the desk and she wiggled more onto the desk.

Cornelio took the broom from Mary's hand and set it aside. "Mary, were you outside sweeping?"

"Yes, grandfather."

Cornelio thoughtfully rubbed his trimmed, white beard and studied the girl. "Did you wear your cloak outside?"

Mary's eyes dropped. "No, grandfather."

"See that you do for now on… I don't want you getting sick."

The girl just nodded her head but she straightened up again.

At the mention of sicknesses, Gabrielle let out a deep sigh.

Cornelio heard it and knew what was on Gabrielle's mind. "Gabrielle, you should go up to see your mother." He now faced the teenager. "She's missed you."

"I know," whispered the Amazon Princess.

Cornelio looked back at Mary and held out his hands again. "Mary, take Ephiny and
Gabrielle upstairs, please." He locked his eyes with the small girl. "Gabrielle and Ephiny are staying in the guestroom. You remember where that is, right?"

"Yes, grandfather." Mary was suddenly lifted off the desk and lowered back to the floor.

"I'll speak to you soon, Gabrielle," reminded the older man. His dark eyes then went to Ephiny. "I'm glad you came, Ephiny."

"Thank you, sir," politely replied the Amazon.

Mary had already retrieved her broom from earlier and was headed towards the doors.

Ephiny and Gabrielle followed behind while Cornelio went back behind his desk. The two Amazons collected their saddlebags and quietly left the office. Mary led them upstairs and made a right at the top of the steps.

Gabrielle had climbed the steps and paused at the top, she gazed off to her left at the end of the short hall. She knew her and mother's old room was down there. She slightly jumped when Ephiny touched her back.

"Come on," whispered the Amazon.

The princess nodded her head, turned right, and followed Ephiny down the long hallway.

Mary was already at the door to the guest bedroom. "How long are you staying, Gabrielle?"

The small bard gave a faint smiled and replied, "I'm not sure, Mary."

Ephiny stepped forward and opened the bedroom door. She quietly went inside and lowered her saddlebag onto the bed. She sensed Gabrielle behind her and she took Gabrielle's saddlebag from her.

"Would you like to see Auntie Hecuba?" asked Mary. "She's usually awake by now."

"Yes, Mary." Gabrielle then glanced at Ephiny in question.

Ephiny just shook her head then whispered, "I'll take care of our stuff while you visit."

"Thanks, Eph." Gabrielle then looked at Mary and held out her hand.

Mary understood the signal and took the larger hand into her own. She then led the teenager out of the room and down the hallway.

Ephiny stepped into the doorway and simply watched her friend walk down the hallway, hand in hand with Mary. Ephiny let out a heavy sigh as she folded her arms over her chest. She knew what Gabrielle was going through with losing her mother and it worried Ephiny. She couldn't imagine how Gabrielle would react after the initial shock. Between Gabrielle's slavery, the loss of her sister, and now her mother's
sickness would just build on Gabrielle. How much could her friend take before she broke?

Mary stood on her tiptoes and turned the doorknob but it was Gabrielle whom opened the door. The girl then silently directed Gabrielle into the darkly lit bedroom.

"Who is that?" called a scratchy voice.

"It's me, Auntie Hecuba," called the small girl.

Hecuba pushed up in her bed a little to get a clearer view and her eyes adjusted to the darkness in the room. She quickly realized somebody else was with Mary and for the first time in several days, her expression brightened. "Gabrielle."

Gabrielle squeezed Mary's hand then released it. She came over to her mother's bed and came into a better view for Hecuba. "Hi, mom."

Hecuba's smile grew more when she saw Gabrielle's face better and even better when Mary had open the shades by the window. "You look beautiful as ever, honey."

Gabrielle sadly smiled then leaned forward. She embraced her mother in a strong but gentle hug. "How are you, mom?"

"I'm better, honey," replied Hecuba but her words were a clear lie for Gabrielle.

The young bard sadly smiled and she eased herself down onto the edge of the bed by her mother's side. "Cornelio said you were sick," she whispered.

"Just a bad cold," refuted Hecuba.

After Mary had opened the shades by the window, she'd gone to the bed on the opposite side of the room. She'd climbed up into it and quietly sat but fiddled with the stick of her broom.

"How is the Academy?" inquired Hecuba in a low, raspy voice.

"It's going well," replied Gabrielle. Her right hand stretched out and she brushed back a stray, slightly matted piece of her mother's dirty blond hair. "We just finished exams."

Hecuba smiled happily at the news. "How'd you do?"

"I'm not sure yet," confessed the small bard, "but I think I did well."

"I'm glad," replied the proud mother. She reached forward and clasped her hands with Gabrielle's.

Gabrielle remained silent as she studied her mother's worn face. She could see the dark circles that developed under her mother's eyes. It also seemed as if her mother had aged by ten to fifteen years, her skin more wrinkled than normal, and even her fingers were thinner.
"You've done well at the Academy so far," finally mentioned Hecuba.

"I am trying," encouraged Gabrielle, a faint smile on her lips.

"I know you are." Hecuba squeezed her daughter's hands tightly.

Gabrielle squeezed her mother's hands back and she took a moment to appreciate her mother's crisp green eyes. She knew she could thank her mother for receiving the same radiant and bright green eyes but right now wasn't the time. Instead she noted the deep sadness hidden in them and it sank in Gabrielle's stomach like a heavy boulder. "I think I'll be staying for awhile, mom."

"Honey, you need to be at the Academy." Hecuba had shaken her head in protest and now tried to sit up better but it took too much energy.

"Rest, mom." Gabrielle had freed her right hand and pressed it against her mother's shoulder. "You need to relax." When her mother agreed by lowering back down, she pulled her hand away. "And don't worry about school… the master-bard said it's okay." She noted her mother gave out a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad to hear that," agreed the mother. She shifted a little to get more comfortable. "How is your friend Ephiny?"

"She's great, mom… actually she came with me."

Hecuba's smile suddenly reappeared. "She travelled with you?"

"Yes," answered the bard, "she's here."

"I would like to meet her."

Gabrielle simply nodded but said, "Later, I promise."

The mother let out a faint sigh yet she softly grinned "You're always looking after your mother."

"Always," promised Gabrielle. She leaned forward and kissed her mother's forehead. "You should rest some more, mom."

"Yes," quietly agreed Hecuba. "I feel tired already."

"I know," whispered Gabrielle as she squeezed her mother's hands. "Dinner will be in a few candlemarks so I'll bring it up to you."

"Thank you, honey." Hecuba pulled her covers back up when she felt a cold chill settle over her.

"Sleep well, mom." Gabrielle again bent forward and placed a kiss to her forehead. She then rose up and looked over at Mary.
Mary knew it was time to leave so she slid off the bed and went to the door. She sensed a warm hand touch her midback.

Gabrielle took one last look back at her mother then her eyes flickered over to the open window. She decided the curtains were best left open so her mother would feel better at seeing the sunlight and not so cooped up. She turned back to the already open door and ushered Mary out first. Gabrielle closed the door behind her then focused on the small girl. "Do you have to finish your duties?"

Mary briskly nodded her head, her brown hair falling around her face.

"Okay, go ahead and finish up. I'm sure I'll see you soon."

Mary faintly smile then hurried off to finish her small chores.

"And if you go outside, put your cloak on," called Gabrielle.

Mary was at the top of the stairs but she paused and smiled at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle merely smiled back then watched her disappear down the steps. She then wondered down the long, lonely hallway until she came to her and Ephiny's room. She grasped the cold brass doorknob but she hesitated as she gazed down the hall to her mother's room. After an emotional sigh, she opened the door and went inside to find Ephiny resting on the bed.

Ephiny opened her eyes and turned her head to Gabrielle. "Hey," she quietly greeted.

Gabrielle admired her friend on the bed for a moment then let out a smaller sigh. "Hey." She came over to the bed and crawled into it.

The young Amazon unfolded her arms and opened them in offer.

The bard didn't wait to fall into her friend's arms and become surrounded by her warmth.

Ephiny tightly held on to Gabrielle and kissed Gabrielle's temple. "How is she?" she whispered.

Gabrielle had her face dug into Ephiny's neck but now she pulled back and rested the side of her head against Ephiny's chest. "Very sick, Eph."

"Mmmm." Ephiny tightened her embrace then wrapped her legs over Gabrielle's. "It'll be okay."

Gabrielle didn't have as much faith and she merely buried her face back into Ephiny's neck. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to not think about her sick mother but it was too hard. She let out a ragged breath and whispered, "She won't make it, Ephiny."

"Sssh." Ephiny again kissed Gabrielle's temple and soothingly rubbed Gabrielle's back. "It'll be okay... promise."
Gabrielle knew it was a futile promise but it did reassure her just a little because she knew Ephiny was there for her. Her arms tightened around Ephiny's side and she worked hard to lock down on her emotions just as she had in the past on many occasions. She couldn't believe this was happening to her when she'd already lost so much. Hadn't she given enough sacrifices in her life already?

For about a candlemark, Gabrielle and Ephiny remained in that position until Gabrielle rolled off Ephiny. Ephiny though didn't let her get away and instead rolled to her side and pulled Gabrielle into her arms. At first Gabrielle didn't give in until Ephiny's kissed her cheek only then did Gabrielle turn in Ephiny's arms and wrapped herself tightly around Ephiny.

The young Amazon held Gabrielle and it wasn't even fifteen minutes when Gabrielle dozed off. Ephiny sadly smiled at her sleeping friend then closed her own eyes. The young pair slept for a little over a candlemark before either one of them awoke. Gabrielle was the first to wake up and she felt a little better at getting some sleep. She lifted her head and glanced out the window to see it was near sunset and she knew dinner would be served soon.

"Ephiny," whispered the bard.

The sleeping Amazon mumbled something incoherent.

Gabrielle grinned a little then reached up to brush back some of Ephiny's long locks of curly blond hair. "Come on, featherhead… wake up."

"I heard that," muttered the Amazon.

The bard chuckled when rich amber eyes focused on her.

"You're a featherhead now too," reminded Ephiny.

The Amazon Princess smirked and teasingly replied, "At least I'm not by birth."

Ephiny chuckled then decided to tease Gabrielle back. "Wait until you have a girl and she's old enough. I'll torment her as a featherhead since she'll be direct line."

Gabrielle merely rolled her eyes and patted Ephiny's side. "You wish, Eph." She then quickly rolled out of her friend's arms and got out of bed.

The young Amazon gave a grunt then got out of bed too. "You think I should change out of my leathers?"

"Up to you," offered Gabrielle.

Ephiny lifted an eyebrow from the opposite side of the bed. "You're the princess so I have to follow your orders."

"Like you would anyway," taunted the princess. She then brushed off Ephiny's question with a wave of her hand and said, "Keep them on, Eph."
"Yes, my princess," teased Ephiny as she came around the bed. "I think I'll put my cloak back on... it's a bit chilly."

"I know," agreed Gabrielle. She'd kept hers on while she was in bed earlier, too lazy to bother with it. She glanced over at Ephiny, who was getting her cloak, and Gabrielle realized Ephiny had taken her sword off. She scanned the room quickly and saw Ephiny's sheathed short-sword tucked under the Amazon's saddlebags. "I'm glad you removed your sword." Her eyes lifted and locked on Ephiny.

The young Amazon nodded and came over as she tugged on her cloak. "Yeah, I didn't think it was polite to wear it around." She straightened the collar out on her cloak. "You think Cornelio saw it?"

Gabrielle quickly shook her head. "Your cloak covered it."

"Thank Artemis," whispered Ephiny in relief.

"Come on... let's see what's happening down stairs." Gabrielle left the room with Ephiny at her side.

Together they went down stairs and Gabrielle decided the kitchen would be the best place to start. She slipped into the kitchen with Ephiny behind her. She and Ephiny were instantly surrounded by the wonderful smells of a cooking dinner.

Gabrielle smiled some when she saw Maria and Adara looked to her and Ephiny. "Gabrielle," happily greeted Maria and she quickly left her pot of boiling water to hug the teenager. "I'm happy you're home."

Gabrielle nodded and gave a half smile. She then was embraced by Adara as well. When she broke the hug with Adara, she asked, "Do you need help cooking?" Her eyes flickered over to Maria.

"I think Maria could use a break," replied Adara, "so she can check on Joseph."

"Joseph is fine, mother," called back Maria. She stole a quick look at her mother-in-law then at Gabrielle.

"No, Adara is right," argued Gabrielle. She came over and took over Maria's duties.

Maria came over to the door and for the first time noted the young Amazon. "Oh my, I'm sorry." She smiled warmly at Ephiny, wiped her hand on her apron and held out her hand. "I'm Maria."

Ephiny shyly took the large hand and gave a good shake. "I'm Ephiny."

Adara was beside Maria and her face broke out with a smile. "You're that young Amazon."

Ephiny instantly blushed.
Gabrielle rolled her eyes and looked back at the cooking water. She knew it was being cooked and warmed up for a soup.

"Yes I am," replied Ephiny in a small voice.

Maria and Adara took several minutes to quiz the Amazon while Gabrielle took over watching over the dinner. Eventually Maria left to check on her son while Adara returned to slicing up the vegetables for the soup.

"Have either of you seen Mary?" inquired Adara from the other side of the kitchen.

"No," replied Gabrielle.

Ephiny was sitting at the small kitchen table set off to the side.

"Hey, Eph…" Gabrielle gazed over her shoulder at her friend. "Can you go find Mary?"

"Yes m-"

"Ephiny," warned the bard in a low tone.

The young Amazon hid her wince when she remembered that nobody knew of Gabrielle's Amazon caste. She quickly excused herself and left the kitchen to find Mary.

Adara was quiet for awhile then finally spoke up. "Your mother hasn't been well."

Gabrielle held back her sigh and only nodded.

"Did you visit with her?" urged Adara. She looked over at her slave and felt her heart drop at how distraught Gabrielle was right now.

"Yes," quietly answered the bard. She picked up the bowl of thick powder on the counter and carefully dumped it into the pot of hot water. She started mixing it in carefully. "Adara?"

The older woman looked up from her cutting.

Gabrielle paused in her stirring motion and her eyes met Adara. "Do you think mother will die?"

Adara studied Gabrielle then her gaze eventually dropped. "She's only been getting worse," she honestly confessed.

Gabrielle didn't say anything or even nodded as she went back to the soup.

It wasn't for another candlemark until the dinner was ready and everybody, but Gabrielle, sat down at the table in the main dining hall. Gabrielle had taken two bowls of soap, bread, and utensils so she could eat her meal with her mother. That had left Ephiny alone with Cornelio, Adara, Maria, and Mary; she wasn't sure what to say so
she remained fairly silent. It wasn't until halfway through her meal that Cornelio addressed her and he began his quizzing about Ephiny's lifestyle as an Amazon.

Ephiny noticed he was genuinely interested about the Amazon Nation and not prying. Near the end of the conversation, she was well convinced he actually accepted the concept of female warriors. She wasn't sure why he would but for some reason it stuck in the back of her mind that it had to do with all the women in his life. As Ephiny gazed about the dinner table, she understood now that Cornelio had a house full of strong willed women. And it seemed as if not only did Cornelio condoned it but inspired it for whatever reason. By the end of dinner, Ephiny had decided she really liked Cornelio and that he was probably one of the best people to come into Gabrielle's life.

Ephiny remained in the kitchen after dinner and helped Adara and Maria clean up. She would have felt guilty if she disappeared without offering some kind of help since they let her stay in the house. They all seemed to pick a particular duty: Adara stored away what food she could, Maria washed dishes, Ephiny dried them and handed them to Mary, whom put them away. Ephiny inwardly smiled at the order of operations and for some reason it brought a sense of home and family into her life. She secretly admitted to herself that being a little domestic wasn't all that bad as long as she agreed to it without being forced. She now understood it was a good way to get to know people and spend time with them as she was doing with Adara, Maria, and little Mary.

When they were almost finished cleaning up the kitchen, Gabrielle arrived with her dirty dishes. She handed them over to Maria and thanked her and Adara for dinner. Ephiny slipped closer to her friend and asked Gabrielle how her mother was tonight. Gabrielle had only replied with a sad 'okay' then kissed Ephiny on the cheek for her tenderness. Gabrielle then quietly left the kitchen and went back upstairs.

Ephiny blinked after Gabrielle had left. Never once had she received that type of affection from Gabrielle but she pushed it to the back of her mind. When she was finished in the kitchen, she said goodnight to Adara and Maria then went upstairs with Mary at her side.

"Is Gabrielle okay?" inquired the small girl as she lifted herself up each step, one at a time.

Ephiny smiled at Mary. "She'll be fine, Mary."

Mary sighed and put a lot of effort into getting up the next step. "Auntie Hecuba is not doing well… Gabrielle is upset."

"Yes she is," quietly agreed Ephiny. She shifted closer to the girl and bent down to one knee. "Come here, sweetie."

Mary came over to the much larger girl and was lifted into strong arms.

Ephiny hefted Mary up into her arms and briskly climbed the steps at a fast rate. "So do you know much about the Amazons, Mary?"

"I heard that you can turn into birds," whispered Mary, her eyes wide.
Ephiny almost laughed but there was a huge grin on her face. "Yes, that's why I have a feather in my hair."

"Really?" breathed the small girl in awe. "You can turn into a bird?"

The young Amazon's eyes just glowed at the child's enthusiasm. "It's a secret though, Mary… you can't tell anybody. Do you promise?"

Mary vigorously nodded her head then wrapped her slender arms around Ephiny's neck; her legs already locked around Ephiny's waist. "Can Gabby change into one too?"

Ephiny chuckled at the nickname the child just gave Gabrielle. "Yes, Gabrielle can too."

"Woooow," breathed out the child in awe. She looked at Ephiny as if she were Artemis herself. "Can you show me?"

Ephiny suddenly frowned and shook her head. "No, sweetie I'm afraid I can't as much as I want to."

"Why?" persisted the child.

"Because Artemis only likes us to do it when it's right to." Ephiny paused then added, "We're not allowed to do it for fun but only when we need to."

"Like if you're endangered or need to travel far?" asked the curious girl.

"Exactly," agreed Ephiny. She smiled then came to a stop by her door.

"Could you always become a bird?" further asked Mary.

Ephiny shook her head as she freed her right hand to grasp the doorknob. "No, sweetie… Artemis has to give us that power."

"You've met Artemis?"

The young Amazon chuckled as she pushed the door open. "No I haven't." She stepped into the bedroom to see Gabrielle sitting at a desk by the window; she was working on one of her scrolls. "Gabrielle?" she called.

The small bard pulled away from her scroll and looked at Ephiny. A smile instantly grew on her face at seeing the young child in Ephiny's arms.

"Mary wants to know how Artemis gave us the ability to turn into birds."

Gabrielle looked from the child and stared at Ephiny as if she had three heads. Ephiny lifted an eyebrow for emphasis then suddenly Gabrielle laughed and she smiled warmly at both Ephiny and Maria. "So Auntie Ephiny told you about our secret, Mary?"
Mary's face exploded with a full smile and her eyes lit bright. "Yes, she did."

"Now, you can't tell anybody, Mary… right?" Gabrielle stood up from her chair and approached the two. "Only Amazons are suppose to know about this but Ephiny and I trust you to keep a secret."

Mary thoroughly nodded her head then said, "I won't tell a soul, Gabby."

Gabrielle's smile turned lopsided at the nickname. "You promise?" she urged.

Ephiny chuckled as she stepped closer to the bed and lowered Mary onto the bed.

Mary scooted more onto the bed but her legs dangled off. "I won't, I promise."

"Okay," agreed Gabrielle and she came closer to Ephiny. "So you want to know how Artemis gave us the power to be transformed into birds?"

Mary bobbed her head up and down. "Please please, Gabby."

"Alright." Gabrielle had her hands on her hips then suddenly dropped them. "You see, when an Amazon is first born, Artemis comes down from Mount Olympus."

"What does Artemis look like?" interrupted the girl.

"She's beautiful," replied Gabrielle.

Ephiny nodded her head. "She's tall, Mary."

"Taller than you, Auntie?"

The young Amazon nodded and stretched her arm high up. "Much taller! About to here."

"Wow," squealed Mary.

"And she has hair dark as the night," added Gabrielle, "her eyes are a bright green."

"Like yours," clarified Mary.

"Yes but even brighter than mine." The small bard stepped closer to Mary, bent down to one knee and grasped Mary's knees. "When she looks at you, her eyes locked on yours, you can't help but fall into them. And if you stare long enough into her eyes, you'll be able to see a forest in them."

Mary breathed deeply and she almost thought she saw the trees and grass reflecting in Gabrielle's eyes.

Gabrielle slowly rose up as she spoke again. "Artemis wears gold plated armour and a sword at her side."
Ephiny stepped a little closer. "And on her back, Mary is a large bow that's almost as
tall as her and she uses arrows with golden tips."

"She sounds beautiful," breathed out the child.

"She's one of the most beautiful on Mount Olympus," agreed Gabrielle. "Artemis is
the best female warrior and she is very, very protective of her Amazons."

"Is that why she helps Amazons turn into birds?"

"Yes," replied Ephiny, "because she knows how much we fight and must have ways to
protect ourselves."

"Exactly," agreed Gabrielle, "and Artemis's Amazons are born with the ability to turn
into birds."

Mary suddenly had a confused look. "But Auntie Ephiny said that Artemis had to give
each Amazon the ability."

"They do," hastily replied Gabrielle, "because when an Amazon is born, Artemis
descends from Mount Olympus as a bird herself."

"A big bird too," piped in Ephiny, "bigger than any other bird in the wild. And she's
amazingly beautiful as a bird too."

Gabrielle nodded her agreement. "When she comes down from Olympus, she perches
on a tree just outside the hut where the Amazon mother is giving birth."

"What does she do?" whispered Mary.

Ephiny knelt a little and said, "She cranes her neck out like this." She stretched her
neck out and narrowed her eyes "And just watches the baby Amazon's birth just to
make sure the baby and mother are okay and happy."

Mary happily smiled at that.

Ephiny straightened up and said, "Then Artemis swoops down onto the ground and
transforms into her human form." She glanced over at Gabrielle to take the lead.

"Artemis then goes into the hut after the healer has left." Gabrielle took a step closer
to Mary. "She then comes to the mother's side of the bed and smiles down at her and
the baby Amazon."

Mary stared up at Gabrielle, utterly memorized by the story.

"Artemis then will lift her hand and place it on the baby's chest." The small bard lifted
her own hand and put it on Mary's chest. "She blesses the child and gives her the caste
as a true Amazon of Artemis."

Mary sucked in a deep breath and felt as if Gabrielle was doing just that to her.
"And then very slowly, Artemis will lower her head...." Gabrielle bent her head forward. "Her lips touch the baby's forehead." She pressed her lips briefly against Mary's forehead then straightened back up. "In the instant of contact, Artemis bestows the baby Amazon with the ability to turn into a bird."

Mary's eyes suddenly switched to Ephiny when she moved closer and spoke.

"Afterwards, Artemis whispers a word of thank you to the mother Amazon then quickly walks out. And as soon as Artemis steps out of the hut, she transforms into a bird and flies off back to Mount Olympus."

Mary suddenly let out her breath she'd been holding since earlier.

"But that's not all of it," cut in Gabrielle, who knelt down again. "When Artemis flew off she also left behind a beautiful feather of all colours from her own tail feathers as a gift and symbol to the baby Amazon. And when the baby Amazon is old enough, the mother takes the feather and ties it into their hair."

Mary was so taken with the story and all she did was stretch her hand out and took Gabrielle's feather into her hand.

Ephiny was happily smiling with her arms folded over her chest. She admired the scene of the wonder struck child and how her attention was being held by Gabrielle and the feather.

Mary blinked and finally let go of Gabrielle's feather. "I wish I could turn into a bird."

The small bard softly laughed and clasped the girl's tiny hips. "There are many better things than just turning into a bird."

"Like what?" asked Mary, her eyebrows creased together.

"Like family," replied Gabrielle in a warm voice. "Artemis can give us the ability to turn into birds but she could never give us a family."

Mary looked down at her legs then lifted her head back up. "I wish I knew who my real mother and father were."

"I know," whispered the bard, "but sometimes families change and it turns out for the better."

Mary had lost her frown and started to smile now. "Yes, I have grandmom, grandfather, Auntie Maria and Auntie Hecuba." Her smile grew even wider. "And you're my big sister plus Auntie Ephiny... even Joseph."

Gabrielle softly laughed and reached up to brush back a stray strand of Mary's brown hair. "See? You have a very big family."

"I do." Mary was swinging her feet gently and felt better now. "Thank you, Gabby and Auntie Ephiny for the story."
"You're welcome," replied Ephiny.

Gabrielle quickly stood back up and stated, "And it's time for bed, Mary."

Mary's shoulders slumped but she nodded her head. "I am tired."

"I know." The Amazon Princess picked up Mary and put her on her feet. "Come on, sweetie."

"Will you tuck me into bed?" insisted Mary; she took Gabrielle's hand.

"Welllll...."

"Please?" begged the small girl.

Ephiny chuckled when Gabrielle looked at her for help. She just shrugged in response.

Gabrielle let out a sigh but she was smiling. "Okay. Let's go." She led Mary out of the bedroom.

The young Amazon stayed behind and when her friend and Mary left, she just chuckled to herself. She then decided it was time to get ready for bed too even though it was a little early for her. She figured when Gabrielle got back they would probably do some talking like always.

After Ephiny changed, she crawled into bed and got under the cool covers that quickly warmed around her body. She closed her eyes and it wasn't long before she started to drift off but the door's creak made her open her eyes again.

The small bard slipped into the room and quietly shut the door. "Hey."

"Hey," greeted the young Amazon. "Ready for bed?"

Gabrielle simply nodded and crossed over to her saddlebags near the desk. She took a second first to roll up her scroll and placed her quill next to it. She then knelt down and dug through her clothes until she found her clean shift. After she was out of her clothes and in her shift, she blew out the surrounding candles on the walls. "Brrr it's cold."

"I know, get in bed." Ephiny blinked when the darkness fell over the room but she lifted the sheets some when she saw Gabrielle's figure. She sensed Gabrielle getting in and snuggled up to her side for warmth.

"Oh give me some of your heat," teased the small bard.

"Yes, my princess," joked the young Amazon. She then grunted from a poke she received in her side from Gabrielle. Ephiny then glanced to her right and was thankful for the streams of moonlight coming through the window.

"Are you tired?" whispered the slave.
"Mmmm." Ephiny turned her head back. "Not just yet."

"Neither am I." Gabrielle scooted closer to Ephiny.

"Wait, wait," protested the Amazon. "Scoot back to the middle and I'll come over. I'm not about to get pushed off this bed."

Gabrielle giggled a little but backed up some into the mid but cool part of the bed. "Hurry," she urged between chattering teeth.

Ephiny merely grinned as she scooted over and was instantly wrapped up by an arm and leg. "Better?"

The Amazon Princess nodded and rested her head on Ephiny's shoulder. "You're so much warmer than me."

"Oh yeah, I'm just so hot," joked Ephiny with a roll of her eyes.

Gabrielle chuckled as her eyes slipped shut. "Thank you, Eph."

The Amazon turned her head to the left and rested it against Gabrielle's. "For what?"

"Coming here with me." Gabrielle briefly shivered when a cold chill went down her back. "I really appreciate it."

Ephiny softly smiled and began rubbing Gabrielle's back. "You're welcome."

The small bard stifled the starts of a yawn. "You are going back to the Nation for summer break, right?"

"Oh yes," replied the Amazon. "Have you thought about it?"

Gabrielle let out a small sigh and considered her options. She finally answered the question after about a minute. "I think I might stay in the Nation but I'll have to get Cornelio's permission first."

Ephiny slightly raised an eyebrow at that.

"Not that I truly have to but I know he'd appreciate me seeking his approval before hand."

A faint sigh came from Ephiny. "Yeah, you're right… it's the right thing to do." She was quiet for awhile as she focused on rubbing her friend's back. "Eponin will probably train you to be an Amazon."

"Gods," breathed the bard in awe. "I guess so." A thought occurred to her that made her frown. "I guess I'll have to learn how to fight too."

"Yes," agreed the Amazon. She then furrowed her eyebrows because of Gabrielle's tone. "You don't want to?"
"It's not that I don't it's just… I don't want to kill, Eph."

Ephiny instinctively tightened her hold on Gabrielle. "You… you don't have to, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle bit her lower lip but after she released it, she asked, "Have you killed?"

"No," whispered the Amazon, "I hope I never do but… I think it's a bit unavoidable."

The small bard's shoulders slumped.

"But I think if you only fight with a staff, Gabrielle, you should be fine."

"You think so?" insisted the Amazon Princess.

Ephiny smiled at the concern in her friend's voice. "Yes, it's kinda hard to kill with a blunt object like that."

"Not impossible though."

"No," slowly agreed Ephiny, "but a lot harder than just running a sword through somebody."

Gabrielle had to agree as she considered the idea. "I think I'll stick to the staff then."

"It's a good idea." And for some reason, Ephiny couldn't ever imagine her friend killing somebody. It was as if Gabrielle was destined to always remain innocent and pure. Ephiny secretly admitted to herself she would sacrifice her own innocence to see that Gabrielle stayed true to her ideals and beliefs. "I think you'll be an amazing Amazon."

"I don't know," countered the bard. "I wasn't born for this."

"Hmmm." The young Amazon felt a soft smile touch her lips. "I don't agree." She squeezed the small bard then added, "Time will tell."

"You have more faith than me," argued the Amazon Princess.

"I always have faith in you, Gabrielle." Ephiny again squeezed Gabrielle tightly to offer comfort. "Always."

The small bard tightened her arms around Ephiny to return the gesture.

"Go to sleep," whispered Ephiny.

A smug look developed on the Amazon Princess's face. "Yes, my loyal subject."

The Amazon grunted and just shook her head. "Sleep well."

"You too, Eph." Gabrielle slowly slipped away into her dreamscape. Her dreamscape wasn't as peaceful as it had been for the past several months though.
Ephiny slept a little better but even she was worried and mostly about Gabrielle. Despite she was asleep she seemed to still be in a faint state of consciousness as they slept.

Hecuba rolled her head to the left and her blurry vision partially focused on Adara.

Adara continued to touch the mother's forehead with a wet cloth, beads of water rolling down Hecuba's temple. "Hecuba?" she whispered in hopes to keep her conscious.

Hecuba softly moaned and closed her eyes. "I'm... slipping, Adara," she quietly rasped. Her body was extremely hot, almost on fire yet she shivered with the coldest of chills. She felt as if she was winter's ice in a burning fire.

"You're going to be fine," assured Adara. She continued to touch the younger woman's brow with the now drying cloth. She pulled the cloth away and dipped it in the bowl of water on the floor by the bed. She retuned it to Hecuba's forehead.

Maria now appeared beside the kneeling Adara and she visually inspected Hecuba. She could even tell Hecuba was just barely hanging onto life. She'd been awoken in the middle of the night by the soft moaning. Her room was next door to Hecuba's and Adara had opted to spend the night in Hecuba's room to watch over her.

Hecuba's dimming green eyes lifted up to Maria's constricted face. "Bring Gabrielle, Maria," she requested in a shaky voice.

Maria tensed and looked at Adara.

Adara felt a swell enter her throat. She dipped her head for a moment then looked up at Maria.

Maria had never seen such a grief stricken look before on Adara's face. Not even her son's death, Michulus's death, had brought on such a dreaded look on Adara. It placed fear and pain in Maria's heart.

"Awaken Gabrielle," quietly ordered Adara. Her voice had cracked and her eyes pricked with unshed tears.

Maria felt her knees weaken yet she urged her body to move and she left the small room.

Adara returned her attention to the dying woman and tried to ease her coming passing. She continued cooling her brow and whispering words of faith and encouragement.

Maria gently opened the door to the guestroom and she poked her head in, a candle in her right hand. She silently stepped in and raised the candle for better light. Immediately her heart ached when she saw Gabrielle tucked deeply in the Amazon's arms and head under the Amazon's chin. She could even tell how much Gabrielle
actually meant to Ephiny, probably more than Gabrielle realized.

Maria wet her lips then stepped up to the bed. With her freehand, she gently aroused the small bard.

Gabrielle rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and her vision cleared. "Maria?" she softly spoke.

"You must come," whispered Maria, "it's your mother."

The Amazon Princess didn't hesitate and she efficiently slipped out of Ephiny's arms. When she got out of the bed, she turned and tucked the covers back over the young Amazon. Her stomach was already feeling sick and her entire body was weakening with fear.

Maria ambled out and guided the small bard to her mother's room at the other end of the hall. She didn't need to explain what was going on because Gabrielle already knew without question. She slipped into the room and let Gabrielle in next.

The young slave crossed the distance to her mother's bedside. She relieved Adara of the wet cloth and now took Adara's spot by her mother's bed.

Adara took Maria's candle and lit a few more candles on the dresser near the window. She then clasped Maria's arm and quietly ushered her out. Adara stepped into the hallway with Maria but she turned back and closed the door for privacy.

After the door clicked, Gabrielle finally spoke. "How are you, mom?"

Hecuba's eyes fluttered and she tried to focus on her oldest child. "Gabrielle?"

"It's me, mom." Gabrielle lifted the damp cloth and kissed her mother's heated forehead. She then returned to pressing the cool compress to her mother's head and did her cheeks as well.

Hecuba inhaled a wheezy breath and pulled her right hand out from under the covers. Her frail, hot hand wrapped around Gabrielle's wrist and ceased her tender care. "No more, Gabrielle."

"Mom?" Urgency was in the bard's voice.

"No more," repeated Hecuba and now she smiled her assurance.

Gabrielle felt her throat tighten and her stomach knot up. She removed the cloth and merely returned it to the bowl on the floor. Now she laced her left hand through her mother's hand and tightly held on in hopes she'd never lose her mother.

"I'm going to go soon, Gabrielle," whispered Hecuba, her eyes dull yet her tone grew calming.

"No," refuted the bard, "it's not your time."
"It is," gently spoke the mother. "It is my time."

Gabrielle's eyes began to burn with tears and her pulse grew stronger. "No, mom don't say this… not now, not ever."

"Ssssh," lovingly soothed Hecuba. "It'll be okay, Gabrielle." She eased a caring smile. "You'll be okay."

"Mom, don't leave me… please," begged Gabrielle, "you're all I have left. Don't leave me alone."

Hecuba felt her own throat tighten and her chest heavy with emotions but she did not cry. "I would never leave you… you are never alone, Gabrielle." She licked her lips and turned her head to the left, her gaze went beyond her daughter. "Go to my dresser."

Gabrielle didn't move but finally her mother's words soaked into her mind. She forced herself to stand and she went over to the dresser.

"Bring me that small black pouch."

The Amazon Princess searched and finally found the pouch carefully tucked behind a scroll. She gingerly held it in her right hand and came back to the bedside. She knelt again and held the pouch out to her mother.

With both hands, Hecuba retrieved the black pouch and with much effort, she opened it. She cupped Gabrielle's hand in her own left hand and with her right hand she poured the contents into Gabrielle's palm.

The bard felt a cool metal touched her skin and when she gazed down, she could see something silver flash at her. When the black pouch was out of her view, she focused on the item in her hands. Her breathing stopped yet her heart thundered against her chest as she stared at the necklace in her hand.

"I saved it… during the raid," rasped Hecuba, "I couldn't… couldn't let them take it."

Gabrielle covered her mouth with her freehand and tears freely flowed down her cheeks. She muffled a whimper between her hand then lowered her hand from her mouth. She gently touched the sterling silver quill pendant that rested on top of the chain. It was her birthday gift from Xena that she'd received a day before the raid. Finally she looked to her mother and asked, "How? I didn't know…"

Hecuba had quietly enjoyed Gabrielle's disbelief in being reunited with the precious gift from Xena. "When we got off the horses and the raiders surrounded us."

"You covered us," recalled the bard, "Lila and I."

Hecuba faintly nodded her head.

"We were lying in the cut stalks of wheat," whispered the bard. The day clearly came back to her like it was only a few candlemarks ago. She could still feel her mother's
protective form covering her and Lila; the raiders' horses whining and stomping at the
ground as the raiders approached them. She could now recall how her mother's hands
had quickly gone to the back of her neck. She now realized in that brief instant that
her mother had carefully removed the necklace to hide it away from the raiders. She
finally came out of her memories and focused on her mother again. "How'd you hide it
for so long?"

Hecuba reached up with her right hand and gently stroked her daughter's closest
cheek. "A mother doesn't give all her secrets, honey."

Gabrielle clutched the necklace in her hand as she bent forward and brought her arms
around her mother.

Hecuba wrapped her arms around her daughter and held her as tightly as possible. She
closed her eyes to contain her tears when Gabrielle began to cry furiously against her
chest. "Sssh, Gabrielle." She stroked her daughter's hair and slowly closed her eyes.
"You will be okay."

Gabrielle said nothing, couldn't say anything as she buried her face deeper into
Hecuba's neck.

"You will go on," murmured the mother. She took in wheezy breath but continued to
coax her daughter. "You will grow into a famous bard." She turned her head and
kissed her daughter's temple. "And you will be free." She felt her chest growing heavy
but not from Gabrielle's weight. Even now, her legs were losing sensations but she
knew this was coming and she embraced it. "Look at me, Gabrielle. Please."

Gabrielle bit her lip but she gradually lifted her head and peered down at her mother.

Hecuba tried to wipe the tears away from Gabrielle's cheek but they continued to
cascade down her daughter's face. "Promise me you will not give up."

The bard shook her head and rasped, "I have nothing left."

"Yes you do," insisted Hecuba, "you have your future, your talents...." She wiped
several more tears away then quietly added, "Your hope." She smiled again- a type of
smile that was from her love. "And you must find your sister."

Gabrielle shook her head and began to cry even harder. "She's... she's...."

"She's alive," insisted Hecuba.

"How can you... you be sure?" breathed Gabrielle.

"I know, Gabrielle." Hecuba put her left hand over her daughter's chest. "So do you,
you know. Can you feel her?"

Gabrielle understood her mother's words; she had always felt a connection with her
sister. It was something only sisters had between each other and she felt it, it still
thrived and pulsed maybe dull but there and still strong. Gabrielle started to nod and
she clasped her hand with Hecuba's.
"Find her," whispered Hecuba. "You will see her again."

Gabrielle's tears now returned and she leaned forward again. She gently rested in her mother's arms and held on for as long as she could now.

Hecuba again rested her eyes and her strength was fading. Her arms remain snug against Gabrielle with the last of her will. She continued to sooth her daughter in hopes it'd ease the pain in her heart but she knew she could never stop the pain.

Gabrielle drew in a heavy breath despite she could barely breathe. She now whispered, "Tell father I love him, that I miss him."

"I will," murmured the fading mother. She stroked her daughter's back and then her hand stilled but she didn't loosen her embrace. "Father and I will be with you always, Gabrielle."

"I know," rasped the bard. She buried her face in deeper. Her chest burned and her body felt incredibly heavy now.

"Never give up, Gabrielle," whispered Hecuba. Her arms were loosening and her breathing was moving into a decrescendo.

Gabrielle still clutched tightly to the necklace as she still firmly held to her mother. "I promise, mom... I'll never give up." Her words seemed to ease her mother as her mother's arms grew looser. Gabrielle squeezed her eyes tightly and her body swelled with anger and her heart crushed with pain. "I love you, mommy."

Hecuba inhaled one last time and with her last breath, she warmly murmured, "And I love you, Gabrielle." She turned her head and with her remaining strength, she pressed her cooling lips against Gabrielle's temple.

Gabrielle tightened her arms even harder when her mother's arms went limp then gradually slipped off Gabrielle's back. She suddenly whaled in agonizing pain and she wanted to scream. Scream to bring her mother back so that her mother would hear but her demand never left her lips. She had no strength and she only felt as if life was stabbing her with a sword in her heart and into her soul.

Gabrielle was never sure how long she remained in the room, holding onto her mother's lifeless body. It wasn't until a warm hand touched her back again that she realized Adara and Maria had reentered the room. She wouldn't look at them, she couldn't face them and she didn't want to face life now. Yet with Maria's help, she was able to slowly release her mother and get back up on her feet. Before she did so, she made sure to place one last kiss to her mother's white cheek and in daze, she was led out of the dark room and back to her room.

Ephiny had awoken when she'd heard Gabrielle's loud crying at the other end of the hall. Maria and Adara had urged her not to go into the room and let Gabrielle release her mother to the afterlife. Ephiny had internally fought herself to barge into the room and help her friend despite she knew there was nothing she could truly do.
Now though, Ephiny knew Gabrielle would need somebody or something to clutch onto so that she knew life did continue. Ephiny now stood in the doorway as she saw Maria helping Gabrielle back down the hall to their room. Ephiny swallowed and embraced her friend when she was close enough.

Maria carefully gazed at the Amazon in question.

Ephiny merely nodded her head and ushered the princess into the bedroom. She pushed the bedsheets out of the way again and helped Gabrielle into bed.

The young slave crawled into the bed and drowned into the comfort of Ephiny's arms when Ephiny got in with her. She tried to hide away from her own pain but she could not even though she tried to dam out her emotions. She shook all night, cried and still clutched the quill necklace in her hand. Her fisted hand pressed against her lip in seemingly endless kiss.

Gabrielle faded into her pain from her mother's death and for a long time, she didn't recall much after her mother's death. She'd eventually returned to the Academy after her mother's burial but she didn't even remember the ride back to Athens. Her mind seemed to only retain fragments of things as the late winter blinked past her eyes. She'd never felt so numb against the world but her mother's death had set the seed in her heart.

Ephiny was the only one that seemed to recall any of it. She still could feel the cold wind nipping at her face when she stood in front of the deep hole dug out for Hecuba. She'd kept her cloak tight against her body yet it never seemed to stop the cold wind from biting at her.

She'd seen many people laid to rest but only one other burial had emotionally shattered her. Her mother's funeral pyre was the first and then later Hecuba's burial further ate away at her. She could still see Gabrielle bending beside Hecuba's open sarcophagus and placing the golden coin into Hecuba's open mouth. It was the coin that would see Hecuba's way across the Rivers Styx on Cheron's boat.

And then several unknown men that Cornelio knew closed the lid and lifted the simple sarcophagus to place it within the hole. Adara then read the prayers for Hecuba's safe journey to the afterlife and finally to her husband whom awaited for her. As Adara read, the same men began to refill the hole steadily and in harmony to Adara's prayers.

Ephiny had turned her head to gaze at her friend.

Gabrielle remained still, her head dipped, and her eyes cold as the wind that fought with her. She was silent but watched her mother's burial hole begin to fill with dirt.

Ephiny knew Gabrielle was physically there yet she was almost sure Gabrielle's soul had left her body. She'd never seen Gabrielle's eyes so incredibly dull and lifeless.

Ephiny then recalled lowering her gaze to Gabrielle's right hand that was fisted just below the sleeve of the cloak. She remembered wondering what it was that Gabrielle held so dearly and refused to let the light of day shine within her hand. She never
asked and never pried but she was forever curious to find out what it was that Gabrielle clung to so carefully to in her hand. She only knew whatever the item was that it was enough to keep Gabrielle moving on, it was just enough and Ephiny was forever grateful. She knew there would be an end to Gabrielle's concealment of her emotions and heart.

But Ephiny feared how long it would take. How long would Gabrielle hide away? When would Ephiny see her friend again and see that radiant smile return? Could hope return to Gabrielle's murky green eyes?

Right now though, Ephiny was taking a seat on the soft moss, her back leaning into an oak tree. She felt a soft smile touch her lips as she dropped her head against the tree. Beside her, she sensed Gabrielle settling down and they continued to enjoy the last of their afternoon.

Gabrielle pulled her legs up against her chest and hugged her legs tightly. She'd come to need this position more and more of lately.

Ephiny gazed over at her friend and offered a smile. "Thanks for coming out."

The bard returned the smile but it wasn't very deep. "It is a nice day," she agreed and looked back over the greening forest.

"Spring is setting in," quietly agreed the Amazon. She bit her lower lip as she studied the forest, her stomach turned. She was nervous, incredibly nervous and she knew why. Not only was today the Spring Solstice, full Spring time, but it was also Gabrielle's sixteenth birthday. Originally Ephiny had planned to celebrate her friend's birthday with the boys' help yet after Hecuba's death, she'd decided on another route. She knew Gabrielle would want something more peaceful.

"I love spring," suddenly but quietly mentioned the bard.

The young Amazon now looked at her friend. She was surprised by the admission but yet relieved. "It's a sign of hope returning," she assured. And then Gabrielle looked at her with grey-green eyes that broke Ephiny's heart. She reached over and gently touched Gabrielle's cheek. "There's always hope."

Gabrielle leaned her head into Ephiny's hand and her eyes drifted shut. She hadn't taken any affection since the night of her mother's death. She refused it and refused giving it out but something in her now ached for it.

Ephiny felt her heart breathe again at Gabrielle's resolve starting to give. She scooted a little closer and let her shoulder brush up against Gabrielle's.

When Ephiny's hand left her cheek, Gabrielle opened her eyes and gave a shy smile. "Why did we leave so early from the Academy grounds?"

The young Amazon chuckled and touched the bard's nose. When Gabrielle's expression crinkled playfully, Ephiny just laughed and a soft smile whisked her lips. "Because I thought we could use it." She shrugged and added, "We haven't left the Academy for a trail ride in awhile."
Gabrielle had to agree. She glanced over at their horses, whom nibbled on the grass not too far off. She then returned her gaze to Ephiny and she felt something soften deep in her. "I'm glad we did," she agreed.

"I know," quietly agreed the Amazon. "It's been a hard winter."

Gabrielle didn't say anything; she merely nodded and lowered her chin down onto her knees.

Ephiny carefully brought her right arm across Gabrielle's back. She wasn't sure if Gabrielle would draw away but she took a chance.

The slave was tense momentarily but then she relented. Her posture loosened and she actually leaned into Ephiny. She and Ephiny were quiet for awhile yet she peered up at Ephiny. "Eph?"

The older teenager gazed down in question.

"Thank you," whispered the bard.

Ephiny furrowed her eyebrows and asked, "Why?"

"Because you've been here for me… every step of the way." Gabrielle swallowed and pulled her arms away from her legs. "You're probably the most patient person I've met."

Ephiny tilted her head, still a little confused.

Gabrielle sighed but not at Ephiny, more at herself. She reached across and took Ephiny's left hand into her lap when she lowered her legs. She firmly held Ephiny's hand then explained her earlier words. "I know I've been really distant these past moons… and you've respected that." She drew in an unsteady breath and quietly added, "You don't know how much that's meant to me."

"Yes I do," reassured Ephiny. She leaned her head over and caught Gabrielle's gaze. "When I lost my mother, I too fell into the same pattern as you have… I stopped feeling and I didn't want to feel."

"It took awhile," admitted Ephiny, "and it does still hurt." She reached up and her fingertips touched Gabrielle's chin. "But Eponin was there for me. She let me have my space so I could work my way out but she remained at my side, patient as ever. Eventually I broke and she was there for me."

Gabrielle felt Ephiny's touch leave her chin but their hands reclasped in her lap. "Ephiny… how did you make it stop hurting?"

The Amazon sighed and leaned her head in the rest of the way. She kissed Gabrielle's
warm forehead then pulled back. She straightened up a little then laced her left hand through Gabrielle's hand. "One day while I was at my mother's remembrance marker, I was sitting there… like always." She stared ahead through the forest but her eyes were glazed with memories. "I spoke with my mother like any other time, I cried too and I hurt just as much as the first moment she died." She inhaled deeply then looked at Gabrielle finally. "To this day I'm not sure what it was, Gabrielle but I guess I realized I was tired of hurting, of crying, and of painfully wishing for her to live again. I learned to accept it and let it go." She bit her lower lip a little but she then softly whispered, "From that day on, I decided to celebrate my mother's memory in the life she lived… not in what I lost."

Gabrielle remained silent and she finally tore her gaze away from Ephiny. She now felt the night of her mother's death and the morning of her burial crash on her. She suddenly turned her body to Ephiny and Ephiny caught her and pulled her into her arms.

Gabrielle gasped for her first breath of hope as she snuggled into Ephiny's arms.

Ephiny dropped her head back against the tree, closed her eyes, and felt relief wash over her. She sensed hot tears rolling down her neck and she knew they were Gabrielle's tears of release. She knew now the healing would begin and she could not think of a better gift for Gabrielle.

Gabrielle eventually brought her head up for fresh air. She sucked in a deep breath and warm hands carefully wiped her tears off her cheeks. She actually gently laughed and tried to get rid of the tear stains as well.

Ephiny faintly grinned and brushed Gabrielle's golden hair back to see her better. "Did that help?"

"Gods yes," quietly agreed the bard. "Thank you."

"I'm always here," promised the Amazon.

Gabrielle smiled shyly and nodded her head. She then turned, sat on the ground, and now comfortably situated herself between Ephiny's legs and leaned back.

Ephiny enjoyed Gabrielle being closer to her again. She wrapped her arms around her friend's chest and tugged her body in closer.

The Amazon Princess leaned back and laid into her friend. She relished the comfort and protection that Ephiny willingly offered her. She knew she'd been blessed to have befriended Ephiny and she vowed never to take Ephiny for granted. Her mother was right, she was never alone.

Ephiny leaned her head forward and rested her chin on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Give it time. I promise you it'll get easier."

"I know," agreed the bard. She reached up and rubbed Ephiny's arm. She knew it was reassuring to Ephiny as much as it was to her.
Ephiny smiled a little and rubbed the side of her face against Gabrielle's. She was rewarded by a soft chuckled from Gabrielle. The laugh filled Ephiny and she squeezed Gabrielle tightly for a brief moment. "It is so wonderful to see you again."

Gabrielle squeezed Ephiny's arm again. "I know… as you said, I just need time."

"And I'll be here for you," promised the Amazon.

"Thank you," replied Gabrielle. She couldn't see Ephiny's smile but she knew it was there and it caused her to smile too for the first time in a long time. It felt so good to smile again.

"You know what?" whispered Ephiny.

"What's that?" quietly whispered back Gabrielle, as if she was about to be told a big secret.

"This is my favourite day," murmured Ephiny, "for three reasons."

Gabrielle actually had a grin on her face. "What are the three reasons?"

"First," started Ephiny, "it's the Spring Solstice."

"Uh huh… and?"

Ephiny tightened her embrace around Gabrielle then whispered, "Second, you've come back."

Gabrielle sadly smiled at her friend's words. She leaned her head over and nuzzled her face into Ephiny's cheek. "Third?" she murmured.

"This is the most important," insisted the Amazon.

Gabrielle drew back and lifted an inquisitive eyebrow. Now both her eyebrows lifted into her bangs when Ephiny wildly grinned.

"Third, it is your birthday."

Gabrielle jaw unclenched and her mouth hung open. She hadn't even realized it until now; today was her sixteenth birthday. She clamped her mouth shut and she actually laughed. "By the gods… it is… I forgot."

Ephiny chuckled and brought her a freehand up. She poked her friend's nose. "I didn't."

"You didn't," agreed the Amazon Princess. Then without thought, she leaned in and captured Ephiny's lips in a very light kiss. Just as quickly as she took Ephiny's lips, she pulled away and said, "Thank you."

Ephiny blinked and her cheeks were on fire. She cleared her throat and could only must out, "Happy birthday."
Gabrielle giggled at her friend's shocked reaction. She settled down and just softly smiled at Ephiny. She then leaned back in but paused when her lips brushed Ephiny's.

Ephiny didn't move, she remained still except for closing her eyes.

The bard held her breath as her heart fought about whether this was right. She relaxed and gave into her feelings for Ephiny as she gently took Ephiny's lips now.

The Amazon softly moaned into the tender kiss. She didn't press it and let Gabrielle take control.

Gabrielle's right hand came up and tangled into Ephiny's curly tresses. She whimpered some as she opened her mouth and pushed her tongue forward.

Ephiny shocked with heat that caused her to moan again when Gabrielle's tongue touched her own. Gabrielle timidly explored Ephiny's mouth and then Gabrielle slowly pulled back.

Gabrielle drowned in a deep breath of air and dropped her forehead against Ephiny's. She breathed heavily for several seconds as she tried to collect her thoughts. "Eph?"

"Yeah?" whispered the just as shocked Amazon.

"What was that?"

"Hmmm… a kiss, Gabrielle," concluded the brilliant Amazon.

There was a brief silence then suddenly Gabrielle's body shook with a silent laugh.

Ephiny's lips broke into a smile.

Suddenly Gabrielle started to actually laugh and Ephiny joined her.

The pair fell backwards, Gabrielle on top of Ephiny and the soft moss cushioned them with ease. After a minute, they settled down and just remained in each other's embrace. Gabrielle tucked her head under Ephiny's chin and closed her eyes as she tried to take in her own actions.

Ephiny squeezed her friend then loosened her hold. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," came the honest reply. "You?"

The Amazon was okay as long as Gabrielle was too. "Yes," she simply replied and closed her eyes. As she replayed the kiss in her head, her smile broke out across her face.

Gabrielle must have been doing the same thing because she started to giggle. She settled down and timidly asked, "Am I bad a kisser?"

Ephiny laughed at the outright question. She decided to tease her friend. "You could
"Hey!" shot back the bard, she swatted Ephiny's side. "I'd like to see you do better."

Ephiny raised her head to take on the challenge.

Gabrielle caught the movement and she lifted her own head.

Ephiny sat up, one hand behind her and the other hand captured Gabrielle's chin. Her rich caramel eyes swirled with fulfillment for a challenge. "Gabrielle, never challenge an Amazon." She suddenly leaned her head into Gabrielle's.

The bard's breath was stolen when Ephiny's lips sealed with hers. She held tightly to the Amazon's waist as Ephiny's tongue danced with hers. She never felt such a sharp surge of heat burn in her stomach and grow deeper. When Ephiny started to pull back, she resisted and pressed her lips harder against Ephiny's.

Ephiny grinned into the continued kiss but she had to breathe. She pulled back from the whimpering bard but she ended it with a gentle nip to Gabrielle's sweet lower lip.

Gabrielle softly moaned and her eyes opened to lock on very rich amber eyes. She pouted a little and said, "You kiss way better."

Ephiny dropped her head back and just laughed.

Gabrielle slightly blushed and suddenly threw her arms back around Ephiny's body.

The air was knocked out Ephiny and she fell backwards again. She still managed a few more laughs but she sucked in deeply as Gabrielle hugged her. She remained quiet for awhile while Gabrielle collected her thoughts.

"Ephiny?"

The Amazon noted the seriousness in her friend's tone. She went a little ridged but tried to remain calm. "Yeah?" she whispered and started rubbing Gabrielle's back. But when nothing forthcoming came from the bard, she started to worry a little. "It bothered you?"

Gabrielle sighed and closed her eyes as she rested her head on Ephiny's chest. "The kissing?"

"That and… well the fact you wanted to?" suggested the Amazon.

The bard considered it as she toyed with loose strands of Ephiny's hair. "No… not really," she admitted. "I mean yes in another way."

Ephiny let out a sigh but she tried not to worry too much. She could talk this out.

"Why no?"

"No in the way of kissing another girl," bashfully admitted the Amazon Princess.
Ephiny admitted she was surprised and her question came out shocked. "Really?"

"Yeah," uttered the bard, "I've… I've kissed…." She sighed and finally said it. "I've kissed another girl before."

Ephiny blinked a few times and replayed Gabrielle's words. She hadn't expected that at all and she had to be sure. "Not just your sister or mother?" She paused and then added, "You mean another female?"

Gabrielle swallowed and nodded her head. "Yeah," she murmured, "Three years ago…." She swallowed when she realized it was three years ago to date. "Exactly three years ago."

Ephiny could hear the emotions in Gabrielle's shaking voice. She quickly pushed up and lifted her friend with her. She now sat down and helped Gabrielle sit down in front of her. She looked into Gabrielle's liquid green eyes and took Gabrielle's smaller hands. "She meant a lot to you… I can tell."

"She…." Gabrielle looked up into Ephiny's eyes but she felt uneasy. Her gaze fell and she dipped her head forward but Ephiny didn't give in to it.

The Amazon tilted her friend's head back up and tried to show reassurance. "Please tell me, Gabrielle." Ephiny knew little of Gabrielle's past life before the Academy but she felt it was important to know everything. She would take whatever she could get and whatever Gabrielle offered. "It's important to me."

"Why?" Gabrielle fingered Ephiny's hand from her chin and laced their hands together. "It doesn't matter now… she's gone."

"How do you know?" refuted the Amazon.

Gabrielle's head tilted forward again and she shook it. "I don't know but…."

Ephiny leaned her head forward, her forehead touching the top of Gabrielle's head. She whispered, "Please share her with me."

Gabrielle kept her eyes closed tightly. She was quiet for along while and Ephiny wasn't sure if she would ever speak. Then finally, Gabrielle let go of her long kept secret and breathed out her name. "Xena." She lifted her head and met Ephiny's confused gaze. "Her name was Xena."

The name seemed to imprint Ephiny's mind forever from that point on. She never knew why but it did and it was even harder to forget how Gabrielle's eyes grew so hopeless when she'd said this woman's name. Ephiny drew in a calming breath and asked, "Who was she?"

"She was… my heart," whispered Gabrielle. "I don't know how or why but she was… she was everything to me."

Ephiny could tell this other woman must have been by the way Gabrielle spoke and seemed to cling to each word. "What happened to her?"
"I don't know," admitted Gabrielle. "When my village was attacked by the raiders, my family, myself, and Xena... we all tried to escape." Her lips fastened together for a moment then she finally continued her story. "My father was on our workhorse. My mother, my sister, and I were riding the other horse, he was faster and Xena... she was with Potestas on a golden mare." Her green eyes dimmed with hidden memories. "We rode in the wheat field, at full gallop in a group until the raiders broke us apart."

Ephiny searched her friend's face and in her mind Gabrielle's memories flashed before her.

Two raiders instantly broke apart the group, Herodotus went one way while Potestas, Xena went another way with Hecuba, Gabrielle, and Lila beside them.

Gabrielle had briefly seen the two raiders catch her father but she dug her head into Lila's. She couldn't bare to see them slice her father apart. In the background, she could just make out Xena verbally fighting with Potestas but she never knew about what.

But then the horse she rode suddenly had a surge of strength when Hecuba kicked him harder. She almost felt a rush of hope but when she looked behind, she saw several raiders on horseback catching up to them. She squealed in fear and screamed, "Mother!"

Hecuba stole a quick glance and fearfully rasped, "Oh gods."

Gabrielle screamed suddenly when two raiders came along either side of their horse. One raider slashed at them with his sword and that forced them to ride further away from Xena.

"Gabrielle!" screamed out Xena.

Gabrielle turned her gaze to Xena, who was so far away. Her face suddenly went wet with burning tears and she was filled with dread.

Hecuba tried to get away from the raiders but they finally caught her. Her tired stallion couldn't outrun them any longer and he came to a gradual stop. Hecuba gathered her daughters in her arms and got them out of the saddle. She tried to carry them and run from the raiders as one dismounted as well. She didn't get far and gave up; she dropped to her knees and pulled the two girls under her.

Gabrielle peered through her mother's protective arms and saw an approaching raider with his sword out. She screamed, grabbed Lila, and tried to run but the raider came after them.

The other raider, still on horseback, seized Hecuba and started lashing her hands together.

Gabrielle curled her body over Lila's and she trembled in fear with her sister. She cried out as the raider suddenly grabbed her by her hair and tried to shake her. She wouldn't let go of Lila and the raider grew frustrated and smacked Gabrielle hard
across the back of the head.

Gabrielle cried out in pain and then everything went black when something hard slammed the back of her head. Her only next memory was waking up in a tent, shackles on, and a very large man guarding them.

Ephiny closed her eyes as she sharply inhaled. She finally looked at Gabrielle and pulled her scared friend into her arms.

Gabrielle held tightly and whispered, "I don't know what happened to her, Eph."

The Amazon tucked her face into Gabrielle's neck as Gabrielle's face pushed into Ephiny's face. "I'm sure she's still alive."

The young slave girl shook her head and closed her eyes. "I don't know."

"It'll be okay," gently promised the Amazon.

"I know," quietly agreed the bard.

Ephiny pulled back from the embrace and studied Gabrielle's stricken face. "Xena… she means a lot to you?"

Gabrielle wiped her tears away and slowly nodded her head. "She did… does…." She shook her head in confusion, she was never sure if Xena was or wasn't alive. Somedays it seemed like Xena could still be alive and other days perhaps not.

The young Amazon had carefully watched the conflicting emotions shift across Gabrielle's face. She breathed deeply then whispered, "Have you looked for her yet?"

The slave shook her head. "How could I? I've been a slave."

"I know but…." Ephiny steadily breathed as her mind worked very fast. "Don't you think Cornelio would let you look? I mean logically, where should you start?" She peered up into Gabrielle's eyes. "Your hometown?"

The Amazon Princess shook her head and she tried to regain her composure. She quietly replied, "Amphipolis."

"That's where she's from?"

"Yes." Gabrielle had finally wiped her tears away and she straightened her back out. "That's where she'd probably be."

The Amazon brightened and hastily said, "We will go there."

"Ephin-"

"We will," cut off the Amazon, "Think about it, Gabrielle." Ephiny laced her hands through Gabrielle's. "Summer break will be soon… we'll have three moons off." She released one hand and brushed back Gabrielle's loose hair. "I'm sure Queen Melosa
will let us go on a trip. We can go to Amphipolis… find Xena."

So many emotions struck Gabrielle at once from the promise of seeking Xena. She felt excited at knowing she could be reunited with her best friend. And she was scared, incredibly scared she'd be only reunited with a grave for Xena.

Ephiny saw the conflicting emotions and she tried to brush them off Gabrielle's face with her hand. She couldn't do it and she knew why but her words came out softly. "We'll find out what's happened to her," she promised.

Slowly Gabrielle met Ephiny's gaze and she absorbed the Amazon's strength. She accepted the idea but chided herself not to get her hopes up; she had to expect the worse despite hoping for the best. She sucked in a deep breath and quietly uttered, "I'd like to go back to Potidaea too… back home."

Ephiny hadn't thought about it and wouldn't have suggested either because she knew it'd be hard on Gabrielle. Yet she slowly nodded her head. "We will." She remained silent for awhile and then she realized sunset was coming close. She suggested they return to the Academy for dinner and the pair climbed up onto their horses.

The two Amazons rode back to the Academy and untacked their horses. They'd joined the boys in the mess hall and fortunately the boys lifted the two girls' spirits that evening. Everybody was laughing and enjoying themselves, it wasn't until they returned to the dorm that they realized they had to do homework. The girls went into their room to do their work while Orion, Twickenham, and Stallonus did their own.

It wasn't until the late evening that Gabrielle broke from her homework, finally satisfied with her five poems. She'd fought with them for awhile but she'd finally settled on a running theme between them. That'd been the assignment: to write five poems and place a similar theme in all of them. At first, Gabrielle thought it was a simple task until she sat to do the scribing and then it became harder. She never realized it could get confusing when trying to reword the same theme five different ways. She'd actually required Ephiny's help a few times on two poems.

Ephiny had finished her homework a half a candlemark before Gabrielle. She was now resting on her bed, eyes closed, and just thinking about today. It wasn't until a warm body curled up beside her that she worked out of her thoughts. She smiled and turned her head to the right to find sleepy green eyes looking at her. "Finished?"

Gabrielle grumbled and nuzzled her face into Ephiny's neck. "I think so."

Ephiny chuckled and rolled onto her side. She faced Gabrielle but kept her body separate except for her forehead, which touched Gabrielle's forehead. "I'm pretty beat."

"Me too," admitted the bard.

The Amazon shifted her left hand up and gently traced Gabrielle's soft features. "I thought about what to give you for your birthday."

Gabrielle pulled her head back from Ephiny's touch. "I don't need anything," she
insisted.

Ephiny felt her roaming hand captured in Gabrielle's. "I want to give you something." She quietly considered for awhile and then mentioned, "I want to take you to a play in Athens."

Gabrielle hastily sat up and looked down at her friend. "Eph, you're kidding."

"No," protested the Amazon. She now sat up and comfortable situated herself on the bed. "I hear there's an excellent play showing now. I'd like to take you this weekend to it."

The bard opened her mouth to protest but Ephiny's fingers on her lips stilled her.

"Please?" urged Ephiny, her caramel eyes swirled with emotions.

Gabrielle grasped Ephiny's hand from her lips and slowly she nodded her head. "Okay… we'll go." Her stomach fluttered when Ephiny's face brightened.

"There's just one thing," interjected Ephiny.

The Amazon Princess lifted an eyebrow in question.

The young Amazon chuckled. "I'd like to practice with my sword this weekend."

Gabrielle's face took on understanding and she nodded. "It's been awhile, huh?"

"Yes," sighed the Amazon. "I need to practice… Eponin will be disappointed otherwise."

"So will I," quipped the teasing princess.

Ephiny quietly laughed and grinned. "Besides, I have to stay in shape."

"I know," agreed the bard. She kissed Ephiny on her cheek then slid off the bed. She crossed over to her desk again.

The young Amazon curiously watched and wondered what her friend was searching for in the desk drawers.

"Eph?"

Ephiny heard her name and at first didn't respond but she came out of her revere. "Yes?"

Gabrielle pulled something from her desk drawer. As she approached Ephiny, she asked, "I'll have a lot to learn in the Nation, won't I?"

"I'm afraid so." Ephiny watched her friend sit down beside her. "There's a lot of traditions you must learn, how to fight, the Amazon mentality you have to understand."
The slave took a deep breath. "It would have been easier if I was born an Amazon."

"But you're not," reminded Ephiny, "but you will learn." She tilted her head, her eyes searching Gabrielle's face. "I'll help you, Solari will… Eponin too."

"I know." Gabrielle softly smiled but it faltered. "I guess I'm just scared… nervous." Her eyes met Ephiny's curious ones. "About the queen… what if I can't please her?"

"You will," persisted the Amazon. "Just learn the ways of an Amazon."

The small bard lowered her head and peered into her cupped right hand. "There's so much to learn about being an Amazon."

"There is," slowly agreed Ephiny, "but much to gain too."

Gabrielle smiled at that and for a moment, she enjoyed knowing she was apart of a family, a very big one. It still scared her though to know she was their princess and what terrified her more was that one day she would be the queen. She tried not to think much about that in hopes that Queen Melosa would remain queen for long extent of time. Yet Gabrielle's day would come some time soon.

Ephiny dipped her head and now noted the small item contained in her friend's right hand. She studied it harder and made out the design of a quill. She smiled and looked at Gabrielle's profiled face. "That's a beautiful necklace."

"It is," sadly agreed the bard. With her left hand, she grasped the quill and lifted it from her palm. The chain dangled freely in the air as Gabrielle studied the quill.

"Why don't you wear it?" carefully asked the Amazon. She tried to keep from prying but something told her to ask.

"I'm not sure." Gabrielle's head shook but she still stared at the charm. Her eyes hazed over and memories filtered back to her as the quill sparkled the candlelight into her eyes.

Ephiny remained still and silent as she watched her friend. After a few minutes, Gabrielle came out of her memories and Ephiny took the opening. "Wear it again."

Gabrielle's hand lowered some and she turned to Ephiny a little. She held out the necklace in offer.

The Amazon took the invite. She captured the necklace in her hand and moved behind Gabrielle. She unclasped the hook and gently brought the chain around her friend's neck. She then carefully hooked the necklace and lifted Gabrielle's hair so that the chain slipped to the back of Gabrielle's neck.

The slave grasped the quill in her hand and looked down at it. She thought she'd never welcome a more familiar weight back to her. The quill warmed against her skin and Gabrielle's heart seemed to warm again as well. Just maybe hope was worth hanging onto even during the darkest candlemarks.
That evening, the pair decided to sleep in the same beds, Gabrielle offering the idea. Ephiny didn't refuse and tightly held her friend all night. Ephiny had whispered a finally happy birthday to her friend and Gabrielle turned the wish with a kiss to her cheek. Ephiny knew that was Gabrielle's way of saying thank you and it warm the Amazon. She had no idea what rested ahead of her but she knew Gabrielle would forever figure into her destiny. Ephiny never really believed in fate until that afternoon when she'd seen some of Gabrielle's glow relive again.

As promised, Ephiny a few days later took her friend to the play in Athens. The play had been a classic by Aeschylus tilted *The Seven Against Thebes*. They'd both thoroughly enjoyed it despite how slightly graphic it could be but it never failed to excite them. And to her word, Ephiny also made sure to practice with her sword despite she knew she'd be stiff and sore the next day. During the next painful morning, Ephiny from there out promised herself to practice at least every two days so she could stay in shape. She knew it would not settle well if she returned to the Nation in a moon out of breath, out of strength, and lost skills.

The Amazon Princess understood Ephiny's worries and tried to support her. So Gabrielle always tried to accompany Ephiny into the surrounding woods so that the Amazon could practice. At first, Gabrielle didn't quite pay much attention, her mind drifting into thoughts and story ideas. Then there was this one day that Ephiny done an amazing manoeuvre, which Gabrielle had never seen and it awestruck the bard. From that day forward, Gabrielle would sit on the log on the edge of the clearing and just memorize Ephiny's fluent motions. Gabrielle felt ashamed in ignoring such a beautiful spectacle. Ephiny was so amazing and beautiful as she wielded the short sword. The Amazon would gracefully spin, thrust her sword, and dodge to roll away then pop up on her feet again. Gabrielle had never seen anything like it and she was completely fascinated by the Amazon's abilities. Ephiny danced with beauty, stealth, and strength that Gabrielle had never witnessed in her entire life until now. She now felt the burning desire to learn such technique and to master it.

Soon the summer grew in the air and nature thrived in green and a wash of bright colours. The breeze carried hope once again and the promise of many things to come. And today would be another step for Gabrielle to take as she approached the front door of Cornelio's home. She sensed Ephiny's comforting hand on her back and Gabrielle pushed herself to do this.

Mary answered the knocks at the door and she brightened to see her adopted sister and aunt. "Gabby! Auntie Ephiny!" She jumped into their arms.

Ephiny and Gabrielle both laughed and hugged the child back. They could already tell that Mary had grown some and she already seemed a year older despite she was not.

"Are you finished for the summer?" inquired Mary, she drew back from their hugs.

Gabrielle smiled at the young child and touched her shoulder. "Yes we are."

Mary's face was bright until she realized neither Ephiny nor Gabrielle carried saddlebags. She furrowed her eyebrows and peered up at Gabrielle. "Are you not
staying?"

Ephiny quickly realized that Mary had grown more perceptive. She had to give the girl some credit.

"I don't think so," whispered Gabrielle. She leaned forward, her face more even with the girl's.

"You're… staying with the Amazons," concluded Mary sadly.

The Amazon Princess sighed but kissed Mary's temple. "I think so, sweetie."

"Why?" persisted Mary. She frowned and shook her head. "You belong here… with us."

Gabrielle sighed and now bent down to one knee. "The Amazons are my family, Mary."

"We are too," reminded the child.

"Yes," agreed the bard, "and you're my little sister."

"Why won't you stay?" insisted Mary.

Gabrielle knew this would be hard but she'd made the decision already. "Because the Amazons need me with them."

Mary grew more distraught. "I need you too."

Gabrielle felt her heart break and she now knew how much this girl had grown in her heart in a short time. She leaned forward and pulled Mary into a warm hug. "I know, sweetie but you have Grandfather, Grandmom, and Auntie Maria here."

Mary tucked her face into Gabrielle's neck. "Joseph too."

Gabrielle chuckled and squeezed the girl more. "Joseph too." She pulled back but held the girl's hips. "I'll come for visits," she promised.

That seemed to help since Mary brightened. "Visits?"

Gabrielle nodded.

Mary slightly smiled and felt better. "At least three," she persisted.

"At least three," agreed the Amazon Princess.

Mary sighed and studied her adopted sister. She slowly nodded her head, took Gabrielle's hand, and guided her to Cornelio's office.

Gabrielle could recall the last time this had happened. So much had changed for Gabrielle in just nine moons and she'd never saw herself here. As she crossed the
threshold into Cornelio's office, she absorbed Cornelio's bent head. While Gabrielle had grown her master, Cornelio, had aged extensively these past nine moons. And when his blurry brown eyes met hers, she was convinced he'd gain ten years on him but his powerful hug she received calmed her fears.

"You've completed one year," stated Cornelio, his face in a smile.

Gabrielle dipped her but looked back up, her own smile. "I have, sir."

Cornelio could tell Gabrielle had finally recovered from her mother's passing. He saw the same vibrant life deep within her moss green eyes. He felt so relieved to see her spirit back again. "What do you have in mind for your summer break?" But before he took an answer, he signalled the two seats in front of his desk. "Sit and tell me."

Mary offered a kiss to Cornelio's cheek and then she silently left them.

Ephiny and Gabrielle took a seat and tried to get comfortable.

Cornelio sat behind his desk and studied the two teenagers. He felt thrilled to see the excitement and youth flowing off of them. He especially saw how Ephiny remained close knit to Gabrielle and he inwardly smiled at her dedication.

Gabrielle took a steady breath and decided it was time. "Sir, I think I know what I want to do for the summer." When heavy eyes rested on her, she knew to continue. "Back during the winter break… when I went to the Amazons," she supplied and when Cornelio nodded, she went on. "Ephiny, I, and few other friends… we were on a walk in the forest."

Cornelio tilted his head a little and now stroked his beard as he attentively listened.

"We were attacked," told Gabrielle, "and one of the girls, Terreis, she was badly injured by an arrow. I tried to protect her but her arrow wound killed her." Gabrielle paused as she prepared to explain the rest. "Terreis was the princess and she asked me to take her caste." She paused then suddenly blurted the rest out. "I agreed to take it and now I'm the Amazon Princess."

Cornelio lowered his hand from his beard and rested it on the arm of the chair. He remained silently and curiously watched his young slave.

Gabrielle was squirming inside but she remained calm and ridged in the chair. She knew she had to learn to be confident and sure of herself if she ever expected to be a decent Amazon Princess.

"I see," whispered Cornelio. He bent forward in his chair. "And you wish to be with the Amazons this summer." It wasn't a question but a pure and honest assessment.

"Yes, sir," agreed the bard.

Cornelio nodded his head then leaned back into his chair again. For awhile, he just considered the options and his slave's future. He then focused his attention on Gabrielle. "I will suggest one thing."
Gabrielle slightly tensed but not too visibly. "Yes, sir?"

"I recommend not telling your fellow Amazons that you had to request my permission first."

Gabrielle blinked and looked at Ephiny.

The young Amazon turned her head to Gabrielle; a smile broke her concerned face.

Suddenly the two young Amazons went into a fit of laughs.

Cornelio chuckled too and just enjoyed their easiness. He knew it might have concluded some hidden joke between them but he enjoyed it nonetheless.

Gabrielle stifled her laughter and looked back at her master. "I don't think it'd be a good idea either, sir."

Cornelio softly grinned but he went serious. "You must be careful, Gabrielle." His eye flickered over to Ephiny. "And I'm putting my faith into you, Ephiny."

Ephiny dipped her head in acknowledgement.

Cornelio let out a heavy sigh and returned his focus to Gabrielle. "This wasn't what I had exactly planned."

"Sir?" prompted the confused bard.

"An Amazon Queen," clarified the master.

Gabrielle nodded her head, not really sure what to say.

"However I think it might be exactly where you're needed, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle tilted her head; she was remotely surprised by his agreement. "I will finish the Academy."

"Yes you will," agreed Cornelio. "That is your aspiration." He leaned forward once again. "Becoming an Amazon Queen is your dream."

"Sir, with respect to you and…" Gabrielle held her hand out to Ephiny, "and the Amazons. I never once intended to join the Nation. I just… stumbled into it."

"Perhaps." Cornelio wasn't so convinced. "Perhaps not." He studied Ephiny and he knew how much Ephiny already adored Gabrielle. He looked back at Gabrielle. "Fate has a funny way of making sure certain things do happen that are meant to happen."

Gabrielle was confused but she didn't bother him to explain it. She merely accepted his words and kept them in the back of her mind.

"Spend the summer with the Amazons, Gabrielle." Cornelio nodded his approval.
"You will do just fine there."

"Thank you, sir." Gabrielle's smile had returned.

Silently, Cornelio studied his slave then he bent to his right side. "I do have to inform you about something though, Gabrielle." He let out a heavy sigh as he thumbed through scrolls in his large drawer.

Gabrielle exchanged a worried look with her friend then looked back at her master.

Cornelio straightened up and unrolled the scroll on his desk. "Do you recall asking me to look for your sister?"

"Lila," prompted Gabrielle. Her stomach pitched and she instinctively wiped her now sweating palms on her brown skirt.

"I had trouble," informed Cornelio. He briefly took a moment to skim over the scroll, his memory being refreshed. He gazed back at Gabrielle. "Do you know of Pyrgos?"

Gabrielle quarried her mind and the name sounded familiar. "A town on the west coast?"

"In the Arcadia providence," clarified the master. "That was the last whereabouts of your sister."

Gabrielle's brow was knitted tightly together. "Last whereabouts?"

Cornelio picked out his slave's tension and worry. "Yes, she was sold to an Egyptian slaver by the name of Gurkhan." He started to reroll the scroll but he quietly added, "She never made it there."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and slumped in her chair. "Oh gods," she breathed.

Ephiny reached over and took her friend's hand.

Cornelio could feel Gabrielle's heartache that his news brought on her. He tucked the scroll back into the drawer and quietly added, "The merchant ship that she boarded… it was attacked by pirates."

Gabrielle opened her eyes despite they stung. "Pirates?" she rasped. "She would have never….

"She may still be alive," insisted Cornelio. "But it is hard to say." He laced his hands on top of the desk. "I will keep searching, Gabrielle." He offered a reassuring look. "There is always hope."

"I know," murmured the small bard. She straightened up and tried to not let the news bare her more weight.

Cornelio carefully watched his slave then he decided to go back to the main topic at hand. "When will you leave for the Amazons?"
"Today if that is okay." Gabrielle peered up with anticipation.

"Of course," agreed the master. "But I would like to know where this village is located."

Gabrielle glanced at the other Amazon.

Ephiny nodded her agreement.

The Amazon Princess gazed back at Cornelio. "It is in the Macedonian region."

Cornelio nodded his head. "What is the closest city or town?"

"Aegae is the closest town, sir," spoke Ephiny. "The Nation is due west of Aegae… about half a day's ride."

Cornelio nodded his understanding.

"The Queen," cut in Gabrielle, "her name is Melosa."

Cornelio kept mental notes of the information incase he ever needed to contact Gabrielle. "Does your Nation have a name?" His question more directed at Ephiny.

"Not particularly," replied the Amazon. "We're just known as the Amazons of Macedonia."

"How many villages are there?"

Ephiny did a mental count and she replied, "Around six, sir."

"Around?" prompted the older man.

Ephiny sighed as she decided to explain this one. "Six villages are in contact but there may be more. We're spread out fairly thin throughout Greece and some even outside of Greece."

"Really?" inquired the Amazon Princess.

Ephiny nodded and looked at her friend. "There's rumours that a tribe is in Chin."

"Chin?" whispered Gabrielle. "I've heard of that region."

"It's towards the rising sun," clarified Ephiny.

Cornelio carefully listened and found the information rather intriguing. "How did these Amazons find themselves out there?"

"I'm not sure," replied Ephiny. "It could have been a separation between a village and these ones migrated to Chin." She shrugged. "But nobody is sure if the tribe does exist."
“Gods,” whispered Gabrielle. She couldn't imagine a group of women travelling east and setting up a tribe with so many unknown factors and dangers.

Cornelio folded his arms over his chest and relaxed into his chair. "I believe you'll have plenty to learn, Gabrielle."

The young slave nodded her agreement. She knew she was in deep and that this would be an adventure for her scrolls. "I will enjoy it though."

Cornelio chuckled. "Good to hear." He then stood up and said, "And if you are to make it there soon, it is best you leave soon."

Both the young Amazons popped out of their seats. They were escorted out of the office with Cornelio and down the hall. As they walked, Cornelio spoke to Gabrielle.

"You will visit?" he insisted.

"Yes, I promised Mary."

The master softly smiled, his brown eyes slightly lit up. "And send word if you ever require anything, Gabrielle."

The bard peered up and smiled at him. "Thank you, sir."

As Cornelio led the girls upstairs to visit with Adara, Maria, and Mary he soon realized that Gabrielle had adopted a new family. Despite his agreement to 'release' Gabrielle as a slave he already knew she was free purely by her nature and aspirations. He could only pray that no slaver would ever seek her if word spread of a branded Amazon.

Gabrielle and Ephiny visited with the family for a couple of candlemarks. Then Cornelio announced it was time for the Amazons to leave and head north to the Nation. The pair was led out to the stables so that they could collect their horses. Everybody said goodbye with hugs and promises for a visit within a moon or so. And as Gabrielle and Ephiny rode towards the gates, Ephiny saw her friend's stallion slow down and stop. Ephiny knew why and she studied the wistful look on Gabrielle's face.

When Gabrielle dismounted, Ephiny did the same and offered to take Torqueo's reins. Gabrielle only nodded, handed over the reins, and then walked over to her mother's grave. Ephiny remained on the dirt drive and took some time to give her mare, Diana, some attention. She figured it must have been a quarter of a candlemark until Gabrielle returned.

Ephiny sighed at Gabrielle's blood shot eyes and she gave her a quick hug.

Gabrielle returned the hug and whispered, "Let's go."

The Amazon nodded and mounted her mare and once she was sure Gabrielle was situated, she rode out of the gates.
Gabrielle stole one last look at her mother's grave under the baby olive tree. She then forced her gaze away and focused on the long two day ride north to the Nation.

As the Amazons came closer and closer to the village, Gabrielle shifted more out of her despair. She was becoming excited as much as nervous about taking her position as the Amazon Princess. Ephiny had every bit of confidence in her friend's ability to act as the princess. Gabrielle, however, wasn't sure what to expect and in turn was so nervous to the point of being scared. Yet she knew that Ephiny believed in her and that helped block out most of her fears and give her some confidence.

When the two young Amazons entered the Amazon territory, they were greeted by two older Amazons that were on patrol duty. Gabrielle and Ephiny had been walking, horses in tow, until they heard the bird call of warning and they stopped travelling. Ephiny had her hands over her head first and Gabrielle quickly followed her example.

"Welcome back, princess," happily greeted Maired, she dipped her head and bowed.

"Princess," warmly greeted the other Amazon.

Ephiny glanced over and admired the crimson red spreading across Gabrielle's cheeks.

Gabrielle cleared her throat a little and said, "It's great to see you again, Maired."

Maired straightened up and brushed a few colourful straw strands back that had fallen from her mask. She was still smiling and more so because Gabrielle remembered her name. "You as well, princess."

The princess then shifted her focus to the unknown Amazon. She tilted her head a little and asked, "I'm Gabrielle." She held out her right hand.

The Amazon was remotely surprised but she gently teased, "Yes, I know." She now grinned at Gabrielle's second blush. "I am Syna." She'd clasped Gabrielle's arm and shook.

Gabrielle had never shaken arms, a new concept but she figured it was some tradition.

Maired looked over to Ephiny and smiled at her. "Nice to see you back, Ephiny."

"It's good to be back," agreed the young Amazon.

"Did you both have a good year?" inquired Maired.

"We did," answered Gabrielle. She reached up to sweep a lock of her hair behind her right ear. "We both passed."

Maired chuckled and nodded her head. "And now you'll be here to take Amazon classes." She flashed a grin and nodded off to her right. "We'll escort you both in."

"Thank you," agreed the bard.

Ephiny signalled for Gabrielle to go ahead of her.
The princess fell in step behind Maired and Syna. She looked back at Ephiny and pointed to her right side.

Ephiny shook her head. She wasn’t sure if it was okay for her to walk along side the princess.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and instead she walked slower until Ephiny was at her side.

Ephiny sighed and decided not to argue about it.

Maired and Syna noted their slowed pace so they tried to slow down too.

"Maired?" called the princess.

Maired smiled at Gabrielle as she came to the princess's side. "Yes?"

"I was curious," started Gabrielle, "when do you become the priestess?"

Maired went slightly serious and replied, "Not for another year."

The bard noted that and then posed another question. "How long does it take?"

Maired sucked in a breath as she did a mental calculation. "I believe my mother has been training me for two years now. It'll be three when I am finished."

"Do you do any of the rituals or anything?"

Maired smiled at the princess's obvious curiosity. "Yes, in the second year. I've already began to help preform some of the rituals, sacrifices, and help carry out any other traditions such as inductions."

"Every Amazon is inducted?"

"On many levels, yes," agreed Maired. "When a baby Amazon is born there is a blessing. Then later when the Amazon has reached the age of ten, they receive their feather." Her eyes then flickered over to Ephiny and back to Gabrielle. "At the age of eighteen, the Amazon may receive their Amazon mask."

Gabrielle had caught Maired's brief glance at Ephiny. She looked over at her friend.

Ephiny had sensed Maired's gaze on her earlier and she knew why. She now spoke to Gabrielle. "I might be receiving my mask this summer."

The princess brightened at the news but then her expression faltered. "Might?" she prompted, she looked between Maired and Ephiny.

Maired inhaled heavily and prepared to explain the tradition. "Before an Amazon can receive their mask, they must go through a test."

Gabrielle's eyes widened. "What kind of test?"
Maired chuckled and called out, "Syna?"

Syna had been idly listening to the conversation. She now slowed down and joined them but looked at Maired in question.

"You recently went through the test."

Syna nodded her understanding, she looked to Gabrielle. "It is called the Amazon Judgement."

"Amazon Judgement?" whispered the bard, her stomach already turned just at the words.

Syna nodded and now explained the test. "On the Amazon's eighteenth birthday, she is stripped of her weapons. The queen and priestess then banish the Amazon from the village for forty-eight candlemarks. In those two days, she must use all of her knowledge and training to survive in the wild. Once she has done so then she may return to the village and afterwards the queen and priestess honour her with her mask."


Syna grinned and decided to explain more of it. "It is a test to see if the Amazon has learned enough to survive. It is also a time for her to become one with Artemis."

"And it's a time of self reflection," piped in Maired.

"There are also physical tests," quipped Syna, "to test the Amazon's limits… both mentally and physically."

"Liked what?" inquired the bard.

"It varies," answered Syna, "it depends on what the queen decides." She paused and considered her own trial. "For me, I was attacked in the middle of the night by an Amazon on patrol."

"They're allowed to do that?" asked the surprised princess.

"Very much so," answered Maired. "It's kind of a free for all. If an Amazon is on patrol and spots the Judgement Amazon then the patrol may attack them."

"Or set a trap to capture them," added Syna.

Gabrielle was amazed and tried picturing such a test. "Has anybody ever been hurt?"

"On occasion, yes," agreed Maired, "however the patrol Amazons are not permitted to bring any fatal harm on the Amazon." She chuckled and added, "We're not trying to kill them, just merely test them."

Gabrielle felt awe struck and she turned her head to her silent friend. "When is
Ephiny stared at the ground passing under her feet. She lifted her head to Gabrielle. "Late summer." She then slightly grinned and reminded, "Yours will be in two years."

Gabrielle's mouth hung open and she closed it as she looked at Maired. "I have to do it?"

"Of course," answered Maired. "There are no exceptions, princess."

A ting of fear rippled up Gabrielle's back and she shook her head. "I have a lot to learn in two years."

"Yes you do," agreed Maired. She then patted Gabrielle on the back and said, "Pray to Artemis, princess."

Gabrielle groaned and her shoulders slumped.

Syna softly laughed at Gabrielle's apprehension. "Most Amazons pass the Judgment."

"Most?" squeaked the princess. "What happens if you do not?"

"Then the Amazon must wait another year before another Judgement," replied Maired.

The princess absorbed all the information and she wasn't so sure that she was glad she asked now. She lifted her head and just ahead was the gates to the village. She and the rest of the Amazons slowly entered the busy village and immediately Amazons recognized Gabrielle and Ephiny. Many of them gave a pleasant greeting to Gabrielle and emphasised either princess or Princess Gabrielle. Gabrielle tried each time not to flush or show any embarrassment because she wasn't sure how to react other than thanking them.

Maired and Syna dropped the two young Amazons off at the stables then returned to duty. As Ephiny and Gabrielle worked to untack their horses and settle them down, Gabrielle began to consider things more seriously. She had a lot ahead of her.

"Eph?" called Gabrielle from her stall.

The young Amazon paused in the middle of her brushing but continued. "Yeah?" she called.

"Where am I staying?"

Ephiny opened her mouth to respond but faltered as she realized a small detail. She shrugged and replied, "My hut."

"Oh," mumbled the bard. "I don't get my own hut?"

A sly grin pulled at Ephiny's lips. "Perhaps." Her grin devilishly strengthened and she called, "You'll have to speak to the queen about it."
"The queen?" squeaked the princess. "Just my luck," she further grumbled. She'd finished hooking up a bag of oats for Torqueo and she checked the wood bucket to see it was full of water. She nodded her approval, grabbed her saddlebags, and patted Torqueo on the neck. "Get some rest, boy."

Torqueo threw his head some and nudged his master's shoulder.

Gabrielle smiled and rubbed his nose. "Tomorrow I'll take you to the corral. Okay?"

Torqueo happily whined and stomped his left hoof.

Gabrielle giggled, bent forward and placed a gentle kiss to his forehead. "Be good." She winked and stepped out of the stall. She saw Ephiny coming out of Diana's stall and she flashed a smile.

Ephiny arched an eyebrow at her friend. "Come on."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes but her face was so smug. "I'm sorry, you must have me mistaken for a pet."

Ephiny groaned, rolled her eyes, and just walked out of the stables.

The princess laughed and rushed off to catch up to her friend. "I am the princess," she chided once she came up along side Ephiny.

"And you won't let me forget," teased Ephiny.

Gabrielle's smug look had yet to leave. "Of course not." She then bumped her shoulder against Ephiny's. "Remember it's either princess or Princess Gabrielle."

"Oh sweet Artemis," moaned the young Amazon. "Why did you choose her, Artemis?" Her eyes searched the skies far above for some answer.

Gabrielle laughed and threw her free arm around her friend's shoulders.

Ephiny chuckled and brought her arm around Gabrielle's waist.

"Just princess works," murmured the bard.

"Gabrielle," warned the young Amazon.

"That's princess," reminded Gabrielle.

Ephiny growled, removed her arm, and hurried her pace. She looked back over her shoulder and called, "Yes, my prince-ass."

Gabrielle's jaw dropped.

Ephiny finally enjoyed a rich laugh at her friend's expense. She approached the door to her hut and pushed it open. "You're first."
The princess nodded her approval and stepped through the doorway. She smiled at Ephiny's hut and gazed about it as if it'd been too long since she'd been here.

"Which side of the bed?" inquired Ephiny.

Gabrielle's eyes rested on her friend. "I should get the whole thing."

"I don't think so," warned the Amazon. "As far as I'm concerned, you can sleep your royal ass on the floor."

Gabrielle laughed because she was enjoying this gentle banter with her friend. "Left side," she decided.

Ephiny nodded her agreement and she took her saddle bags over to her dresser. As she started taking her regular 'village' attire out, she called, "I'd just put your stuff on the table, Gabrielle." She looked sidelong at the princess. "I don't think you'll be here more than a night or two."

"Yeah?" probed the bard.

Ephiny flashed a grin but before she could answer the question, there was a knock at her hut. "Come in," she called. As she turned around, she saw Queen Melosa open the door. "My queen." She came over and dipped forward in a bow.

Gabrielle followed her friend's example and shyly smiled up at the queen when she straightened up.

"Welcome home, Ephiny," greeted the queen.

"Thank you." Ephiny gave a warm smile as she remained ridged.

Melosa didn't return the smile as her focus went to Gabrielle. "And welcome to your new home, princess."

Gabrielle dipped her head some then replied, "Thank you, my queen."

Melosa instinctively settled her hands on her hips and proceeded to talk to Gabrielle. "Tonight the Nation will celebrate your arrival as well as induct you as the princess." She noted the hidden confused in Gabrielle's eyes. "Right now, you are unofficial the princess until the priestess has blessed the right of caste to you. Tonight the priestess will perform the ceremony and you will take your rightful position as Amazon Princess."

Gabrielle felt a shot of nervous flow through her; her stomach knotted up. She merely dipped her head in acknowledgement, not sure what to say.

The queen shifted her attention to Ephiny. "Ephiny, you are to assist the princess in preparing for the ceremony." She paused in thought. "The weapons master, Eponin, will assist as well."

"Of course, my queen." Again, Ephiny bowed her head. She contained her smile at the
news of Eponin's succession as the next weapons master.

Queen Melosa once again addressed Gabrielle. "With her dying wish Terreis bestowed all of her rights and possessions to you ... and her position." She went silent and calibrated Gabrielle's surprised look. "Now you will take her caste with honour." She didn't wait for any words or further reactions, she only turned and left the two young Amazons to themselves.

Gabrielle let out her held breath. Her shoulders dropped and her body loosened, she looked to Ephiny. "Possessions?"

Ephiny nodded her head. "It is tradition when an Amazon passes their caste onto another." She glanced over at her half empty saddlebags and decided the rest could wait. "We should prepare you. The ceremony will start before sunset."

The bard mutely nodded and followed her friend out of the hut. As she studied the Amazons in the village, she realized they all wore leathers, swords on their backs, and most had masks pushed back on their heads. Gabrielle self consciously straightened out her short brown skirt and wondered if she would soon be wearing leathers too.

Ephiny caught her friend's worry. She smiled to Gabrielle in reassurance and winked at her.

Gabrielle shyly smile and just shrugged.

Ephiny's smile formed into a grin and she shook her head as she approached the door to the office hut for the armoury. She pushed the door open and stepped in to see a familiar face behind the desk.

Eponin lifted her head and instantly her face was taken over by a bright smile. "Ephiny." She jumped from her seat and came around the desk.

Ephiny happily sighed as she was tightly embraced by her adopted sister. "Miss me?" she whispered.

Eponin chuckled and kissed Ephiny's temple. "Always, sister." She squeezed a little tighter then released her. Taking a step back, she admired Ephiny's well fit body and nodded her approval. "You've kept in shape."

Ephiny cleared her throat as she blushed. "I almost forgot."

"I'm glad you didn't." The weapons master chuckled and looked to Gabrielle. She smiled at how Gabrielle had grown some more and was obviously filling out. "Welcome, princess." She enjoyed the blush on the princess's cheeks.

"Thank you, Eponin." Gabrielle put her hands behind her back, not sure what else to do.

Ephiny softly laughed but her attention went back to her sister. "Congratulations, Eponin."
The weapons master dipped her head, a smile taking her lips. When she looked up, her eyes glowed happily and she stood prouder. "Thank you."

"I knew you'd be her successor," pointed out Ephiny.

"I had my doubts," admitted Eponin.

"I didn't," countered the proud sister.

Gabrielle carefully watched the exchange and she admired the bond between the two adopted sisters.

Eponin looked between Ephiny and Gabrielle then settled her attention on Ephiny again. "I assume you're here because of the princess's ceremony."

"Yes," agreed Ephiny, she recalled why she was here. "Queen Melosa said you were to help."

"Yes." Eponin now stared at Gabrielle, as if gauging her.

Gabrielle blushed from the obvious visual inspection.

"We should begin with her leathers," decided the weapons master. "They're in the armoury." She went back to her desk and rolled up a scroll she'd been working on earlier. When she turned around, she ordered, "Let's go."

Ephiny was first out followed by Gabrielle then Eponin. Eponin directed them to the armoury hut next door and told them to wait. Eponin slipped into a side room and the two Amazons could hear her moving stuff around.

Gabrielle looked to her friend and whispered, "Do I choose what I wear?"

Ephiny shook her head.

Before Gabrielle could ask more, the weapons master returned with a set of leathers in her arms and she stepped up to Gabrielle. Gabrielle tensed as she realized they were Terreis's leathers. "I can't...." She started to shake her head.

"You must," urged Eponin, "she left her possessions to you." She lowered the leathers some. "To do anything less would dishonour her."

After a pause, Gabrielle nodded her head.

Eponin carefully handed over the leathers and pointed to a small room to the right. "You can change in there. Afterwards, Ephiny and I will assist in putting the rest on."

"Thank you." The bard quietly walked through the hut and as she went, she glanced over the tables of leather uniforms, boots, and weapons hanging or standing at various spots. She went into the small back room and unlaced her green halter top then worked her skirt off.
"She is nervous," murmured the weapons master.

"Can you blame her?" uttered Ephiny.

Eponin let out a deep sigh. "I suppose not." She looked at her sister. "This will be good for her."

"It already has been," admitted Ephiny. When she got a curious look from Eponin, she explained, "She's been trained as a slave… being an Amazon will break her training."

"Let's hope so," muttered Eponin. "The hardest will be giving her the mentality of an Amazon."

"She has a spirit of an Amazon," argued Ephiny.

"I hope you're right, sister," uttered the weapons master. She then straightened up to her full height as the princess stepped out of the changing room. Eponin felt her breath taken away as the princess gracefully approached them and Eponin now realized what Ephiny saw in Gabrielle.

The bard's nose crinkled up. "It doesn't suit me."

Ephiny chuckled and patted her friend's now bare shoulder. "You are not fully dressed." She gazed at Eponin and nodded.

The weapons master took the signal and went back into the small side room. She gathered up the jewellery, gauntlets, and arm bracers that went with the princess attire and came back out.

Ephiny took the large silver belt from Eponin and stepped up to Gabrielle. She brought the belt around her friend's waist and began to tie it in place.

Eponin set aside the gauntlets on the nearby table. She picked out the two arm bracers and grabbed Gabrielle's arm to slip one on then the second on Gabrielle's other arm.

Gabrielle stood still and let the Amazons put various items on her. She slowly began to calculate the new found weight on her body. When Ephiny had the last gauntlet on and she stepped back, Gabrielle took a minute to look over her body.

Eponin and Ephiny stood back and admired their new princess.

The bard touched her upper chest and then the bracer on her right arm. She looked back at the Amazons.

"Wait," interrupted Eponin. She came behind Gabrielle after she grabbed a blue necklace from the table. She'd almost forgotten until she'd spied Terreis's necklace on the table. Eponin reached up with her hands, taking the clasp of the quill necklace into her fingers.

"No, don't," protested Gabrielle, her right hand securely fastened around the quill.
Ephiny saw her friend's distress and looked to her sister. "Leave it, Eponin… it'll be covered."

Eponin nodded and released the clasp. She brought the blue and brown beaded necklace around and let it rest on Gabrielle's chest as she hooked it into place. She then returned to Ephiny's side and took in the complete view of their princess.

"I look okay?" asked the shy bard.

Ephiny broke out with a smile. "Beautiful, my princess."

Gabrielle's cheeks heated with a crimson blush.

Eponin chuckled and folded her arms. "Now Gabrielle must choose her weapon."

The princess's eyes widened. "Weapon?" she choked out.

Ephiny nodded and stated, "From childhood every Amazon is taught to use weapons." She stepped around her friend but waved her to follow. "Pick your first weapon." She held out her hand to the racks of weapons in the armoury.

Gabrielle scanned them all and slowly approached the rack of swords. "No, I don't like swords."

"You may not poses one until you've been master something simpler," stated the weapons master.

The bard cleared her throat and shyly looked at Eponin. "Right." She stepped over to the stand of bows and arrows. "Can't hit the side of a Cyclops with a bow and arrow." She shook her head and came to the next rack. "Ah, what's this?" She fingered one of the long wooden weapons. She looked at Ephiny. "Is this the staff?"

"Yes, that's the fighting staff." Ephiny removed the one that Gabrielle had been touching. "Most children begin with a staff." She then turned to Eponin and tossed her the staff. "Eponin, demonstrate."

The weapons master kept a serious face as she took a few backward steps away from the others. She poised the staff horizontally then suddenly began to spin it.

Gabrielle's eyes widened as she watched the weapons master sweep the staff left and right then swung it across her chest.

Eponin finished her demonstration by spinning the staff over head then bringing it down vertically into the dirty floor. She held it out in her out stretched arm and her eyes locked on Gabrielle.

The bard was speechless because she was so impressed.

Ephiny studied her friend then turned to her sister. "Thank you." She took the staff from Eponin and held it out to Gabrielle.
Gabrielle blinked and now stared at the staff. Carefully and slowly, she wrapped her hand around the smooth wood staff at the top.

Ephiny released it and nodded her head. "Now we must prepare you for the ceremony."

"It will be soon," agreed Eponin.

Ephiny nodded and rested her left hand on Gabrielle's midback. "Let's go."

Gabrielle mutely agreed and followed her friends out of the armoury hut.

By that evening, the entire village gathered at the centre where a large fire burned off to the side and drums beat to a certain traditional rhythm. The Amazons had formed a circle and mixed with one another to talk and drink, celebrating Gabrielle's arrival. Within the centre of the gathered circle were several Amazons that danced to the drum beat and chanted as well.

Gabrielle sat on the ground, bobbing her head, and admiring the dancing technique of the Amazons. Just beside her sat Ephiny, who was watching the spectacular dancers and admired them. "There's Syna." She pointed to the third dancer that went around.

Ephiny smiled when she recognized the older Amazon.

Gabrielle admired how Syna's red hair seemed to burn even brighter from the surrounding fire. She realized just how muscular Syna was from the firelight glow making her tan skin stand out. "She's beautiful," she breathed.

Ephiny lifted an eyebrow and looked at her friend. She then noted Eponin behind her and she peered up.

The weapons master just merely flashed a grin at her sister. She then decided it was time so she bent forward and grabbed Gabrielle's arm. "Time to dance, princess."

The young slave was hauled to her feet and took in what the weapons master said. "I'm really, really bad at this, Eponin." When she saw Eponin was ignoring her and trying to push her into the dancing Amazons, she pushed back. "No ... no ... I have two left feet facing backwards." She fell into the circle some and hastily stepped back but only into Ephiny's hands. "Eph, no ... they wouldn't let me dance at the crop festival because I brought a bad harvest."

Ephiny winked and teasingly whispered, "Good luck then."

The princess yelped and was suddenly shoved into the dancers. A dancer swung her into the centre of the circle. Gabrielle threw a dirty glare to her friends.

Eponin remained cool but Ephiny smirked and called, "Dance, princess."

The princess groaned and now studied the dancing Amazons. She slowly started to copy their movements.
Eponin leaned her head closer to her sister's. "Eph?"

The Amazon quickly turned her head to Eponin and saw the curious look. "It's her nickname for me."

"Ah... I see."

Ephiny narrowed her eyes at the wicked look on her sister's face. "Don't even start."

Eponin said nothing, folded her arms, and just quietly chuckled.

Ephiny sighed and returned her attention to the dancers. She now smiled at seeing her friend trying to join in the circle of dancers.

Gabrielle flowed with the dancers and started shaking her head every which way and moving her body. She then hummed the same words and followed the moving circle.

Syna appeared behind Gabrielle and grabbed her waist. "You've got it, princess."

The bard felt her body heat up and she laughed but continued to dance happily. She then got so into the dance that she fell out of the circle near Eponin and Ephiny.

Ephiny covered her mouth as she watched Gabrielle dance in one spot and singing away.

Eponin just lifted an eyebrow at Gabrielle.

Ephiny then noted the end of the drum beat and the queen's approach to the dais. She quickly knelt down to fully bow to the queen's arrival.

Eponin remained ridged since she knew her place in the ceremony. She gazed about as all the Amazons settled and began their full bows but then she looked at Gabrielle, whom still danced.

Gabrielle paused in the middle of her dance and realized everybody had stopped. She shyly laughed at herself then bent down beside Ephiny.

Ephiny glanced over at her friend and laughed at her.

Gabrielle groaned and drooped her head forward more.

"Bring the princess!" ordered Queen Melosa from her spot on the dais.

Eponin bent forward and grasped the bard's wrist.

Gabrielle hastily climbed to her feet.

"Up here, Gabrielle," called the queen.

The young slave followed along side the weapons master. She admired the queen on the dais and she noted the unknown but older Amazon beside the queen.
Eponin caught the curiosity. She bent her head over and whispered, "That's the priestess, Narkissa."

Gabrielle was grateful for the information. Narkissa certainly looked liked Maired's mother by her facial features. The princess climbed up the dais and took her position between the priestess and the queen.

"Before the sun is high overhead," spoke out Queen Melosa, "we will have welcomed a new member to the Amazon Nation, Gabrielle."

The bard tried to remain calm as the queen continued the speech. She gazed about the Amazons, whom remained bowed but heads up; watching and listening.

The queen gave a signal to the priestess.

Narkissa dipped her head and turned to Gabrielle. "Gabrielle, you have been bestowed the caste of princess from Terreis." She locked her eyes on Gabrielle then continued. "Before Artemis, do you accept this honour that Terreis has given to you?"

Gabrielle swallowed and nodded her head. "I do."

Narkissa smiled inwardly but didn't reveal it to the bard. "Gabrielle, do you swear upon Artemis's name that you will fulfil the duties and responsibilities of the princess?"

Gabrielle inhaled deeply, willing her strength to serve her. "I swear before Artemis to serve my nation with all my strength."

Narkissa couldn't hide her smile any longer as she felt Gabrielle's promise touch her. She then turned her head to her right and signalled the weapons master.

Eponin bowed her head as she went up one step of the dais. In her hands was a golden item, which she held up in honour to the priestess.

Narkissa gently lifted the item from Eponin's cupped hands and held it over the bard's head. She nodded to Melosa.

Melosa reached up with her hand and clasped the golden feather over Gabrielle's head. The priestess inhaled deeply and called out, "Artemis, Gabrielle has come to us and joins your Nation of honoured female warriors. Bless her spirit and let her become one with you."

Queen Melosa spoke next; her head dipped back and eyes locked on the skies. "Artemis, Gabrielle has taken the caste of princess. She has promise to serve your Nation with all her strength and honour that you so desire. Please guide her always even through the darkest moments." Melosa brought her head forward and acknowledge the look on the priestess's face. She released the feather's stem and now gathered the same lock of Gabrielle's hair that already had the one colourful feather tied on.
Narkissa took a faint step to her left as she lowered the feather and with her freehand she pulled out a thin strip of leather string. She brought the golden feather's stem to the lock of hair and positioned it behind the colourful feather. With Melosa's help, she threaded the leather string through the stem of the feather then tied the golden feather firmly to the lock of hair.

Gabrielle sensed the priestess releasing her hair and she now felt the extra weight of the new feather. She tried not to smile and keep a serious expression.

Priestess Narkissa faced the Amazons. Queen Melosa faced her Amazons. Together, they called out, "Welcome Princess Gabrielle to our Nation."

Suddenly all the Amazons got to their feet and cheered out.

Princess Gabrielle finally smiled and felt the acceptance of each Amazon's happy cheer. She then rested her gaze on Ephiny further back and her smile grew wider.

Ephiny nodded and mirrored her smile back. She then threw her head back and gave the traditional Amazon birdcall. She was happy when all the Amazons echoed the birdcall back.

Melosa had a hidden smile at seeing her Nation accept the new princess. She bent her head forward and whispered, "Join your nation, princess."

The princess caught the warmth in the queen's voice. She didn't hesitate to step down the dais and join the encircling Amazons.

Priestess Narkissa folded her hands behind her back and looked at the queen. "She is a gift from Artemis."

Queen Melosa peered over at the priestess and only dipped her head in acknowledgement. She wasn't sure whether to like or dislike the priestess's words but she couldn't accept them yet. Instead she excused herself and stepped down the dais.

Narkissa resist her annoyance at the queen. She sighed because she could never understand the quiet competition between the princesses and the queens throughout the years. She filled her chest with a deep breath and gracefully climbed down the dais. She then sensed somebody approached her side, a smile took her lips. "You have chosen well, daughter."

Maired absorbed her mother's rare praise. She rested her eyes on the new princess that joined in the celebrated dancing. "Thank you," she whispered, "I didn't believe Artemis heard my prayers."

Narkissa grasped her daughter's shoulder. "Artemis is always listening."

"Yes, I can see that now." Maired folded her hands behind her back and admired the princess. "I believe she'll serve us well."

"In time," agreed Narkissa, "in time." She squeezed her daughter's arm and quietly
ordered, "Join them for me, dear. I must rest."

Maired dipped her head. "Goodnight, mother."

Narkissa placed a quick kiss to her daughter's cheek. "Goodnight." She then slipped away from the celebration for the night.

Eponin silently watched Ephiny and Gabrielle dance together. Her smile tugged at her lips at seeing how happy both the princess was and her sister. She'd noticed how much Ephiny glowed of lately and it seemed to pour of Gabrielle onto her sister. Eponin felt a warm hand clasp her shoulder. She turned her head. "My queen." She dipped her head in greeting.

Queen Melosa squeezed the weapons master's shoulder in reassurance then relinquished her hold. "Eponin, I'm placing the princess in your care."

"My queen?" asked the confused weapons master.

Queen Melosa turned to Eponin. "She will be your charge." She rested her hands on her hips. "You are to teach her." She glanced at her the princess then back to Eponin. "Teach her to be an Amazon. You are the most qualified, Eponin."

The weapons master was amazed by the request and honoured her new responsibility. "Of course, my queen. I will teach her the Amazon way."

"Excellent." Queen Melosa nodded and took one last stolen glance at the princess. "I will teach her to be the princess."

Eponin nodded and without another word, she watched the queen slip away from her side. Eponin let out a sigh as she continued to watch her friends. She knew the queen trusted her to teach Gabrielle but she knew she had her work cut out for her. She almost let out a groan when she saw the princess trip over her own two feet. "Artemis, give me strength," she prayed.

The following day, the weapons master discovered exactly how large of a challenge she had ahead of herself. She'd decided to break up Gabrielle's day into two areas. The morning consisted of teaching Gabrielle morals and values of the Amazons as well as the legends of Amazons and Artemis. She realized this was the easiest part because Gabrielle attentively listened and seemed to soak in each and every word. Eponin knew it was Gabrielle's bard side that was entranced yet Eponin still had concerns. It was one thing to learn about the mentality of an Amazon but it was another thing to live by it.

Ephiny came by the sparring field late that afternoon and came into the middle of one of Gabrielle's staff lessons.

"Like this," hotly ordered Eponin. She jerked the staff into position on a diagonal in front of the princess.

Gabrielle held her breath as she held the staff properly. She didn't realize how serious Eponin could be until it came down to the staff teachings. Several times, Gabrielle
found her temper growing but she tried to keep it in check.

Eponin was pressing Gabrielle hard as she show the basic manoeuvres of the fighting staff. Not only was she physically pressing Gabrielle but mentally as well. She wanted to determine the bard's breaking point before she lost her focus. She knew Gabrielle didn't realize that ninety percent of a warrior's ability to fight was all in their head.

"Now I want you to do fifty of those sweeps, princess," hotly ordered the weapons master.

Gabrielle was surprised by the amount but obeyed.

Eponin stepped away with her own staff in her hands. She circled around the princess and watched her from all angles. "Faster," she bellowed, an edge in her voice, "Faster."

The bard gritted her teeth and repeated the same defence sweeps but faster though.

Eponin shook her head as she continued to circle the princess. "You're getting sloppy, princess. Faster does not mean sloppier." She took a deep breath. "An Amazon warrior is as gracefully as they are fast." She held out her hand to Gabrielle in example. "Not slow and sloppy." She shook her head and loudly ordered, "Get it right. Fast and graceful, princess!"

Gabrielle groaned as she continued to repeat the actions faster. She knew she was almost on fifty count but she had a feeling she was about to start over.

"Another fifty," ordered Eponin.

The bard sucked in a heavy breath and brought the staff across her back around and across again, over and over.

The weapons master continued to circle and admired how Gabrielle was becoming more accurate and faster. "We have to work that fat off you, princess." She came around to the front. "Amazons are pure muscle." She then suddenly lifted her own staff and poked it into Gabrielle's space.

The bard's drill came to a sudden stop and she raised an eyebrow in question.

"Fifty," stated the weapons master, who had been mentally counting. "Now I want you to spin your staff in front of you." She demonstrated by bringing her staff up horizontally and just spun the staff slow then faster and faster until it was a brown blur. "Go!"

Gabrielle straightened her back and held the staff out. She began to spin it but she fumbled here and there when she tried to speed up.

Eponin let her go; knowing Gabrielle needed time to adjust to the exercise. Again she started to circle the young princess. "Faster, princess." She came around to Gabrielle's right side. "This will help build strength in your arms. The faster you go the more strain."
"I'm… noticing," muttered the tiring princess. She was breathing heavy and her arms burned with pain.

"Good." Eponin paused in front of the bard. "Your arms feel like their on fire?"

Gabrielle merely nodded as she remained focused on the drill.

"That's pain," reminded the weapons master. She began her circling again. "Pain is good, princess. It means you're working hard." A sly grin creased her lips. "It means you're alive." As she came to the front of the bard, she added, "When an Amazon is in battle and when they stop feeling pain… that means only one thing." She paused in front of the bard and tilted her head. "Do you know what that means, princess?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes for a moment but opened them to look at the weapons master. She just shook her head.

"It means you're dead," answered Eponin. She chuckled when Gabrielle faltered but she continued her circling. "Pain is good, princess… don't fear it." She came to a stop behind the bard and noted her stance from behind. She lifted her staff and tapped the back of the bard's knees. "Bend your knees." She came around to the front and faced Gabrielle. "Bend forward some. You're not as stiff as that staff, princess. Get into proper fighting stance." She shook her head and hotly yelled, "Only carnival acts in Athens stand like that not Amazons."

Eponin noted Gabrielle closing her eyes and seemed to be willing for more strength. Eponin was proud of the princess strength so far to continue with the drill. She started to walk away to the wood bench near Ephiny. "Keep going," she called out to Gabrielle.

The princess still had her eyes closed as she spun the staff. She was slowing down but she reached deep inside to urge her body to go faster. She managed a charge of energy but the pain burned in her arms and she bit her lower lip. Slowly her eyes began to sting. "Gods," she moaned, "I can't…"

"What was that, princess?" called the weapons master; she picked up the water skin from the bench.

Ephiny was staring directly at the princess. She knew exactly what Gabrielle was going through and it was just as tough mentally as it was physically.

"She's doing well," quietly mentioned Eponin. She said nothing else and walked away, she noted Gabrielle slowing down. "Are you weakening, princess?"

Gabrielle forced her eyes open and she ignored the lump in her throat.

Eponin stood to Gabrielle's left side. "What's your limit, princess?" She tapped her staff on the ground. "Another three spins… another five." She now tapped her staff on the ground in rhythm to her talking. "One, two, three, four, five… keep going." The weapons master bobbed her head in rhythm to Gabrielle's spinning. "Come on, princess don't give in to your body's weakness." She continued to tap her staff. "Those
feathers make you an Amazon but they don't make you a warrior. You are not a warrior, princess." She now tapped her right foot on the group with her staff's rhythm. She noted the angry tension building in Gabrielle and she wanted to break her. She suddenly grinned and her voice now came out low and taunting. "You are nothing but a silly girl with a stick, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle growled lowly.

The weapons master hadn't expected it but she caught Gabrielle in time. She instinctively had her staff up and stopped Gabrielle's threatening sweep at her head.

Gabrielle breathed heavily, eyes locked and staves locked. "I am an Amazon Princess," she hotly whispered.

Eponin's lips slowly shaped a proud smile. "So you've proven."

The bard realized what she'd done and quickly straightened up. She was about to apologize for her actions but she had a feeling it would have broken her earlier point if she acted regretful.

Eponin straightened up to her full height and lowered her staff. She threw the water skin at Gabrielle, who caught it. "Take a break, visit with Ephiny."

Gabrielle nodded and took the cork off the water skin. She was grateful for the cool water rushing down her parched throat as she walked to Ephiny.

"Don't drink too much," called Eponin, "or you'll have a sore stomach."

Gabrielle almost laughed as she lowered the skin from her mouth. She recorked it and smiled at her friend.

Ephiny dropped her arms from her chest and mirrored the smile. "How are you doing?"

"I was about to ask the same," teased the princess. She wiped off the sweat that had built up on her forehead.

"You'll get there," urged Ephiny. She didn't want to congratulate the bard or repeated what Eponin had said. She knew that most warriors that were in training were never given a word of praise because it only filled them with an ego that they didn't need. It wouldn't be until much later that Eponin would feed Gabrielle's confidence only to destroy her ego in one clean attack. Just another lesson that awaited Gabrielle.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," teased Gabrielle.

Ephiny chuckled and took a seat at the end of the bench. "So what you think?"

Gabrielle shrugged and said, "It's pretty fun."

Ephiny's expression darkened. "Fun?" she repeated and suddenly stood up. "Give me your staff," she coldly ordered.
Eponin had come near the pair and heard the conversation. She decided to stop approaching them as Ephiny proceeded to teach a lesson now. She folded her arms and watched.

Ephiny enjoyed the weight of Gabrielle's staff in her hand. She took a few steps away from the bard. She looked at the staff then back at Gabrielle. "The staff can be mastered as a dangerous weapon… especially against the centaurs."

Gabrielle tensed because she'd never seen her friend get this dark, even threatening. She mentally readied herself for anything.

"Centaurs have certain strengths and weaknesses… they're fast and agile. We use that to our advantage." Ephiny came up to Gabrielle's left side and spun the staff down. "As a centaur passes at full gallop the staff goes here." She touched the tip of the staff to Gabrielle's knee.

Gabrielle looked down; her mind imagined the pain that such an attack would incur.

"This cracks the knee at the joint. This splits the leg forward and drops them to the ground." Ephiny held Gabrielle's gaze, seeing her reaction.

Eponin remained silent and watched Gabrielle.

"As the centaur falls," continued Ephiny. She now swung around with the staff coming up. The staff now pressed against the back of Gabrielle's same knee. "A strike to the lower shoulder dislocates the two front legs."

Gabrielle breathed heavily in response.

"Once the centaur is on the ground, an over head strike…" Ephiny suddenly spun around Gabrielle and swiftly brought the staff to the old bench.

The bench broke in half from Ephiny's powerful blow.

Ephiny raised an eyebrow at her friend and finished her lesson. "Breaks the neck… death is immediate."

Gabrielle swallowed and didn't say anything as she stared at the broken bench to her right.

"If they're lucky," quietly added Ephiny. She now held out the staff in offer.

Gabrielle hesitated but wrapped her hand around the staff.

"Still fun, princess?" inquired the Amazon as she released the weapon.

Gabrielle let out a deep sigh.

Ephiny glanced over at the weapons master and merely nodded.
Eponin understood her sister’s quiet words. She nodded back.

Ephiny took one last look at her distraught friend then decided to say nothing else. She walked off the sparring field.

Gabrielle's shoulder slumped then she felt Eponin's warm hand on her arm.

"Let's continued," gently ordered the weapons master.

Gabrielle dipped her head and just tossed the water skin next to the broken bench. She turned away from the disappearing Ephiny and went back onto the field with Eponin. She continued the defence training for another candlemark before Eponin ordered the end of the exercises for today. Eponin reminded her to meet her in the office armoury a candlemark after sunrise for the usual class.

Gabrielle agreed and said a word of thanks as she walked off the sparring field. Her head was hung down during her slow walk to Ephiny's hut. When she went inside, she found herself alone and everything perfect and quiet. She propped her staff against the wall near the table and chairs then pulled out a chair to fall into it.

The young princess dropped her face into her hands and softly moaned. She was exhausted and her body, especially her arms, were incredibly sore. She lifted her face from her hands and stared at the large bed, debating whether to take a short nap before dinner. Dinner would be in a candlemark but she didn't feel up to sleeping and going to dinner half groggy. She then considered a warm bath to loosen her muscles but before she could act on the idea, there was a knock.

"Come in," she called.

The door creaked open and Solari's head popped around the door.

"Hey, Solari," greeted the princess.

"Just the Amazon I wanted," happily stated Solari. She stepped into the hut and gently closed the door. "How'd your day go?"

"I'm exhausted," complained the bard.

"Good." Solari brushed back a stand of brown hair to get it out of her face. "You'll sleep well tonight, princess."

The young slave grumbled and leaned back into the chair. "How have you been?"

"Pretty good." Solari took the seat from across the princess. "Busy session today."

Gabrielle lifted her head. "You're training?"

The young Amazon nodded her head. "Ephiny and I are in the same class." She crossed her ankles. "We're learning sword techniques."

Gabrielle groaned at the mention of her friend. "I think I pissed Eph off earlier."
Solari furrowed her eyebrows. "What happened?"

The princess shook her head and focused on the other Amazon. "Eponin gave me a short break between lessons and Ephiny was there on the side. So I came over to her and she asked me what I thought so far. I told her it's been fun."

Solari visibly cringed. "What'd she say?"

"More like what'd she do?" countered the princess. "She took my staff and demonstrated to me how Amazons take down a centaur with a staff."

Solari's head bobbed a few times. "That's Ephiny for you."

"She wasn't happy," reminded Gabrielle.

"Don't take it to heart like that, princess." Solari reached over and took Gabrielle's hand into her own. "Ephiny is just trying to show you this is serious." She paused and tried to rethink the best way to explain Ephiny's actions. "She was talking to you from one Amazon to another Amazon. Not as your friend."

The small bard sadly exhaled and stared at the floor.

"Hey," persisted Solari, "she's not mad. If anything, just concerned."

Gabrielle peered up at Solari in question.

Solari chuckled and let go of Gabrielle's hand. "She just wants you to take this seriously because having a good head on your shoulders is what will save your life. Not always the staff in your hands."

Gabrielle accepted the Amazon's words. She now understood Ephiny wanted her to be serious and take Eponin's lessons to heart not only to be a warrior but for her own safety. "Have you seen Eph since class?"

Solari considered and shook her head. "No, not really."

Then to answer Gabrielle's question, the hut door opened and Ephiny stepped in.

"Hey, Ephiny," happily greeted Solari.

"Hey." Ephiny gave a faint smile to Solari then looked at Gabrielle. "Finished for the day?"

Gabrielle moved her head in answer.

"Good." Ephiny folded her arms over her chest. "Queen Melosa has requested I finish Terreis's passings."

Solari took that as a hint and climbed to her feet. "I'll see you both at the mess hut."
Ephiny smiled at her friend and nodded. "See you there, Solari."

"Bye, Gabrielle." Solari gave a reassuring smile to the bard, squeezed her shoulder, and silently left.

Ephiny held the hut door open but ordered, "Follow me, princess."

Gabrielle urged her body to get up despite how much effort it took. She followed the Amazon out of the hut and through the village. She quietly admired the sunset that filtered through the village, the red and orange rays painting the village's huts.

"This way," urged Ephiny as she took a left around a hut.

Gabrielle hurried along and then stopped several hundred paces from a hut when Ephiny stopped.

Ephiny shifted behind her friend and grasped her shoulders. She stared at the hut and whispered, "This is your hut, Gabrielle." She paused then whispered, "It was Terreis's so now it is yours."

The princess couldn't breathe for a moment until Ephiny released her and started for the front door. She hastened to catch up and Ephiny let her go in first. She gingerly pushed the thatched door open and peered into the hut.

"Go on." Ephiny gave a gentle push.

Gabrielle stepped into the hut and gazed about the hut.

Ephiny sidestepped her friend and looked around as well. Nothing had changed since Terreis had lived here. She noted the crossed chobos over the desk that Terreis received from her mother as a gift. She then looked at the bed and admired the painting of a green forest that Terreis had done years ago.

"Eph, Melosa was serious when she said I take all of Terreis's possessions?"

Ephiny nodded and turned her head. "Everything… weapons, clothes, jewellery… everything."

The small bard looked at her friend. "Why? I mean… they're hers."

"Were," corrected Ephiny. "You are essentially Terreis now, Gabrielle." She scanned the room as she continued to speak. "You are her legacy."

Gabrielle felt remorse fill her as she approached Terreis's desk. She'd spotted the dagger earlier on the desk and now she ran her fingertips down the blade. "Did Terreis have a sword or mask?"

Ephiny shook her head as she came over. "She would have received her sword this spring."

The young slave closed her eyes and dipped her head.
"Terreis was born the same time you were," gently mentioned Ephiny. "Actually a day after the Spring Solstice."

"I didn't know," murmured the bard as she now rested her hand on the top of the desk chair.

"I know." Ephiny touched her friend's midback. "It is a good thing that Terreis didn't have a sword."

"Why?" Gabrielle's expression was filled with curiosity.

"If she'd had her sword," explained Ephiny, "then you would have taken it. Then by tradition, it would be your duty to find her murderer and kill him."

Gabrielle shook with fear and looked back at the dagger. "I couldn't kill."

"I know," whispered Ephiny. "But since Terreis hadn't earned her sword yet then it is the queen's responsibility to seek vengeance for Terreis's death."

"Do they know who killed Terreis?" inquired the bard.

"No but Queen Melosa has been working on it." Ephiny sighed and walked away. "If she does find out whom and she avenges Terreis's death then a war will surely break out."

"Why hasn't one already started?" probed the bard. "I mean, a centaur has killed an Amazon."

Ephiny understood Gabrielle's line of thinking and she shook her head. "The queen cannot be sure until she's proven to the council that it was a centaur that killed Terreis." She shrugged as she sat on the foot of the bed. "Until then, it's merely assumptions and Melosa cannot act on them alone."

Gabrielle came over and sat beside her friend. "I thought the Amazons and centaurs have been fighting."

"We have," agreed Ephiny, "but there's been a hidden… silent peace for several years now. It would only take one small thing to break the thin string of peace." She studied her friend's face. "Terreis death will be it."

Gabrielle shook her head. "I hope Melosa doesn't prove it."

"She will," refuted the Amazon. "She won't let her sister go unavenged. Besides… she's been looking for a war against the centaurs."

"Would we win?" inquired the bard.

Ephiny shook her head as she brushed back her hair. "Not without the other tribes' help. We're too small and the centaurs are too powerful despite they're a dying race."
"How can she do that?" murmured the bard.

"Do what?"

Gabrielle looked from the floor to Ephiny. "How can the queen send her Amazons into battle knowing we'll die?"

Ephiny considered the question as she took a few calming breaths. "Queen Melosa believes in her Amazons' abilities as warriors… she believes Artemis will protect us as well. She turns a blind eye to the centaurs' strength and puts full faith into us."

"That's wrong," protested the princess. She stood up and faced her friend. "She'll just get us killed."

"Gabrielle," warned Ephiny, "she is not the only one." She stood and held out her hand to direct the village that was outside the hut. "This entire Nation believes in the Amazon strength, will to defeat the centaurs."

Gabrielle shook her head and walked away. "Not every Amazon."

"No," slowly agreed Ephiny, "not all but most of the older ones do and they teach the younger ones to as well." She shook her head as her hand dropped. "The older Amazons pass the legacy of hate onto the younger and that cycle cannot be stopped."

The princess spun around and hotly stated, "It must stop. War is not the answer."

Ephiny tried to remain calm with a few breaths. She came over to her friend and grasped her shoulders. "Gabrielle, if you were the queen… maybe you'd have a chance in Hades but you are not." She dipped her head, her face closer to Gabrielle's. "Even if you were queen and you showed a fondness to the centaurs the Nation will see you as weak."

"Fondness for the centaurs? Try a fondness for peace," protested the bard. "A fondness for not walking into a slaughter house and being wiped out by a pointless war."

Ephiny squeezed her friend's shoulders then let go. "I know… but you cannot do anything, Gabrielle." She frowned. "To hate the centaurs is a way of the Amazon."

Gabrielle finally relented verbally yet her mind raced with thoughts. She wouldn't agree, could not agree to this pointless frame of mind. She secretly vowed to change her Nation's view on the centaurs and war in general.

Ephiny watched the conflicting emotions. She placed her fingertips under Gabrielle's chin and tilted her head up to meet her gaze. "Making war is simple. Making peace is never easy. If it was, everyone would do it."

Gabrielle licked her lips and Ephiny's wise words settled into the bottom of stomach and weighed heavily.

Ephiny could tell the truth hurt but she knew Gabrielle had to hear it. She stepped
forward and pulled Gabrielle into a hug.

The princess tightly hugged Ephiny back and rested the side of her head against Ephiny's chest. They remained in each other's embrace for awhile until Ephiny mentioned dinner would be soon. Gabrielle's stomach seemed to agree when it growled in happiness. The two friends finally laughed and the tension finally broke down between them.

After dinner, Ephiny helped her friend move into the hut and get settled down. Afterwards, Ephiny kissed Gabrielle goodnight and left her to her own time. Gabrielle spent another candlemark awake and working on her scrolls, keeping a journal on her 'adventures' in the Amazon Nation. She couldn't let this opportunity pass her by without recording every finer detail.

The next morning, Gabrielle headed to the armoury office and found Eponin awaiting her arrival. She received a warm smile from the weapons master and she gave one back. Yet something in Eponin's gleaming eyes worried her.

"You won't need your staff today, princess." Eponin held out her hand.

Gabrielle had a curious look as she handed over her weapon.

The weapons master settled the staff against the wall and said, "Today's classes will be on the run."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "On the run?"

"Yes," Eponin's eyes lowered to Gabrielle's feet. She visually inspected the bard's boots and decided they would work fine. Her head lifted back up and she grinned. "I thought you might like a tour of the Amazon territory."

"Um…" Gabrielle's lips puckered as she decided which answer would be a safer response. "I guess I should know if I want to be a decent princess."

"Excellent." Eponin's eyes now glowed with devilishness. "Let's begin then." She opened the office door and let the princess out first. "This way." She guided Gabrielle down to the gates and idly spoke to her on the way. "How do you feel?"

"Rested," replied Gabrielle.

Eponin's head bobbed. "And your arms?"

The princess blushed but quietly admitted, "Sore."

"I'm very glad." Eponin chuckled at Gabrielle's wistful expression. "It means you worked hard yesterday." She patted the young Amazon's back but stopped when they stepped past the gates of the village. "Now, let's begin class. Ready?"

Gabrielle wasn't sure what she was supposed to be ready for exactly but she nodded.

Eponin chuckled and suddenly broke out into a fast jog. "Come with me, princess,"
she called.

Gabrielle broke into a fast run and caught up then slowed into an even pace at Eponin's side. She now figured out what Eponin meant by 'class on the run' and she didn't like the idea at all now. "Eponin, when you say class on the run do you mean all day?"

Eponin was smug as she looked to her student. "Yes, princess… all day we will run non-stop and speak non-stop until we've seen all the Amazon land." She directed their running onto a path in the now growing woods. "We have much to cover, princess." The only response she received was an audible groan.

The two Amazons ran through most of the forest during the morning, covering a lot of ground. As they ran, Eponin idly talked about Amazon history and the story behind the creation of the first Amazon. Here and there Eponin would ask Gabrielle questions to make sure she was listening as well as get her to talk.

Fortunately for Gabrielle, Eponin's talking gave her a source of sanity during this seeming endless run. It also kept her mind off how tired and exhausted she felt along with sweaty. She promised herself as soon as class was over she'd get a long, long bath and that was another thing that kept her going.

"Hey Ep," rasped the princess.

The weapons master paused in her idly verbal teaching. She noted the nickname that Gabrielle called her and didn't know if Gabrielle noticed it and just said it because she was worn out or not. "Yes, princess?"

"I'm… I'm getting… really thirsty," mentioned the bard.

"Oh… my apologies." Eponin suddenly turned onto another path in the woods and called, "This way, princess."

The young slave quickly veered onto the new path and jogged behind the weapons master.

"Keep up," called Eponin. "Amazons have the endurance of any horse."

"I rather ride one," chided the princess.

Eponin laughed and glanced back at the young Amazon. "It would do you no good, princess if your horse went lame and you had to be somewhere by a certain time."


"You must not depend on anything or anybody, princess." Eponin spotted her destination just ahead where there stood a large oak tree. "An Amazon is fully self dependent and resourceful."

"I'm… noticing this," called Gabrielle.
Eponin softly laughed and as she closed in on the oak tree, she called. "We will stop but as I said we are running non-stop." She glanced back and smirked. "We must run in place while we take our small respite."

The princess nodded her agreement and when Eponin came to jogging stop by the oak tree, she followed suit. She ran in spot but felt a little relieved not to be wondering around what it seemed aimlessly in the woods. She dropped her head back and gazed up the tall tree. "That's an amazing tree."

"Yes," agreed Eponin. "It is here that the first Macedonian Amazon was believed to climb the first tree in these woods. From those high branches, she gazed about these lands and decided this would be claimed as Amazon land."

Gabrielle mentally pictured a large, muscular and dark Amazon among the foliage of the great oak tree; the Amazon gazing about the lands and absorbing a dream for female warriors.

"This tree is sacred, princess." Eponin looked at her student. "No Amazon may climb this tree and the nation endeavours to protect it." She smiled up at the tree then lowered her head. "Many Amazons come here to pray to Artemis or spend time to self reflect on their life."

The princess lowered her head and smiled at Eponin's explanation of the tree. "It sounds very sacred."

"It is," confirmed the weapons master. "I have even spent many lonely candlemarks here during my training as the weapons master… just thinking." She shifted closer and touched the tree with her left hand. "It's believed that being in contact with the tree will bring understanding of one's way as an Amazon."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows and she jogged over to the tree. She touched it as well and she couldn't explain it as she felt some kind of charge in her hand that slowly extended down her arm and into her body. She ignored it just thinking it was her over active mind or tired body.

"It is said that this tree is connect to Artemis," revealed the weapons master. She smiled at the tree's trunk as her hand ran across the smooth bark. "If it ever dies," she whispered and looked to the princess, "that means Artemis has given up on her Amazons."

Gabrielle quickly returned her attention to Eponin.

Eponin slightly grinned and reassuringly said, "It will not die, princess." Her eyes lifted to the tree. "It is a white oak, the strongest of trees and the Amazons' future is as strong as oak."

The princess now smiled when Eponin lowered her gaze to her.

Eponin chuckled at Gabrielle's dreamy expression. She jogged away from the tree and stopped but jogged in place. She cupped her hands over her mouth and as she did a birdcall, she saw Gabrielle jogging to her side.
The princess was curious as to why the weapons master did the birdcall. But soon her question was answered when a patrol Amazon landed from a neighbouring tree.

The patrol Amazon revealed her face by pulling her mask back. "Princess." She bowed her head then smiled at the weapons master. "Master Eponin."

Eponin rolled her eyes and chided, "Just Eponin right now."

The Amazon chuckled and neared the two Amazons, whom continued to jog in place. "So I see today is the infamous running class."

Gabrielle gave a groan but she was grinning.

"Yes," answered Eponin. She then looked at the princess and said, "Princess, this is Deka."

Gabrielle brightly smiled and jogged up to the Amazon, making sure to jog in place as she held out her arm. "Nice to meet you, Deka."

The older Amazon warmly smiled and took the sweaty arm. She admired the young princess as she purred, "A pleasure to meet you, my princess."

Gabrielle hotly flushed and wished she wasn't because her body was warm enough.

Eponin chuckled and jogged closer to the pair. "The princess is feeling a little dehydrated, Deka."

"Oh." Deka blinked, grinned and reached to her side to unhook her water skin. "Of course." She made sure to remove the cap for the princess too then handed the skin over.

Gabrielle happily retrieved it and took a few small drinks. Eponin's words from yesterday about over indulging in water came to mind.

Eponin noted Deka's apparent visual inspection of the princess. She cleared her throat to get Deka's attention then asked, "How goes patrol?"

"Everything is quiet," reported the patrol Amazon. "Any concerns during your run?"

"No, everything seems in order," agreed the weapons master. She noted Deka's attention wondering back to the princess. "When do you finish?"

"In three candlemarks," replied Deka.

Gabrielle finished taking her small sips of water and offered the skin to Eponin.

The weapons master shook her head and halted her with a raised hand. "I'm fine… thank you."

Gabrielle hid her surprise and just recorked the skin. She held it back out to Deka.
"Thank you."

"Oh no, keep it," insisted the Amazon. She chuckled. "I believe you'll need it again later."

"Are you sure?" persisted the princess.

"Oh yes," assured Deka, a huge smile on her face. "I wouldn't want the princess to get overheated."

Eponin rolled her eyes and looked at Gabrielle. "You get to carry it, princess."

"Figured," teased the bard. She unravelled the string that was attached to the skin and brought the strap across her chest, the skin on her back. "Thank you again, Deka."

"Anytime." Deka winked then took a few steps back from the jogging Amazons. "I'm sure I'll see you again, princess."

Gabrielle cleared her throat. "I'm sure," she agreed.

Deka bowed her head first to Gabrielle then to Eponin. "Good day." She bent her knees then suddenly disappeared.

Gabrielle blinked and looked at Eponin. "How do Amazons do that?"

Eponin chuckled and carefully listened to Deka moving through the trees until she was too far to be heard. "You will learn eventually."

Gabrielle's expression darkened. "I will?"

The weapons master laughed and ordered, "Let's continue."

The princess breathed heavily and murmured, "I hate heights." But she continued to jog along side her teacher. As they jogged further north, Gabrielle noticed the end of the forest and they came into a more barren area that had rugged terrain. "Gods… I didn't realize this was here."

Eponin grinned and guided her student towards a small canyon side that was about ten minutes run. "The Amazon lands have very different terrains, princess." She then slowed down a little to come closer to Gabrielle. "Have you been to the east side of the village?"

"No." Gabrielle had a curious expression.

"Ah, that will be next," decided the weapons master. "We will tour the crops and groves."

"You mean… farming?" Gabrielle was shocked.

"Yes, how did you think we sustained life?" Eponin chuckled at the princess. "Amazons are not all warriors all the time. Some of us are healers, other teachers, a
few trade in the various markets, and others are farmers."

"Gods," breathed the bard, "I didn't realize it."

Eponin smiled and when she gazed ahead, she saw the canyon coming into view.

Gabrielle reached up and wiped a thick sheen of sweat off her brow. "I'm getting… hot," she rasped.

The weapons master now grinned and she quietly mused how long it would take Gabrielle to figure out her Amazon attire. When she stole a quick look, she saw the bard was soaked in sweat and her face flushed red. She knew that the formal princess outfit that Gabrielle wore was slowly baking Gabrielle minute by minute. She made a mental note to make sure they returned to the forest under the shade of the trees. But right now, she figured Gabrielle needed a tougher work out for stamina. "This way, princess." She now approached the canyon side that had a small path leading upwards.

Gabrielle gawked and asked, "Up there?"

"Of course," replied the weapons master. "You'll have a reward when you make it to the top." She flashed a grin and led the way up the small trail.

The young slave groaned but faithfully followed her teacher. "Let me guess," she gasped, "a lake to dive into?"

Eponin laughed. "Not quite." She peered back at Gabrielle. "It is something I believe you'll appreciate as a bard." She noticed that seemed to encourage Gabrielle since her pace picked up. "Now then, we should discuss some economics before we reach the east side of the village."

Gabrielle wrapped her right hand around the strap of the water skin. She tried to shift her mind to consider an Amazon economy for the Nation. "Okay, I think I'm ready."

The weapons master made no reply to that but began the economics lesson. "The Nation's sole source of income is our crops and groves plus our yields sustains the village year around."

"Really?" Gabrielle already found that intriguing considering she knew farming since she was a child. She started to estimate just how large those fields had to be in order to not only provide profit but sustain a village of several hundred women. "How many fields?"

"There are exactly twenty-five crop fields, fifteen groves, and twenty gardens."
Eponin took a deep breath to help her pumping heart. She was finally starting to feel the affects of the running but it only urged her to push harder. "Five groves are for grapes while the other ten for olive trees. The gardens are mostly for growing fruits, vegetables, and herbs. I believe though that two or three gardens are specifically used to grow herbs for medicines."

"Wow," breathed the bard.
"Oh," added Eponin, "I almost forgot, my apologies." She glanced back at the princess. "Some Amazons are also herders."

"Herders?" Gabrielle took a deep breath then asked, "Cattle, sheep… pigs?"

"All of the above." Eponin did a quick mental inventory. "Some cattle, sheep, pig but predominantly chickens."

Gabrielle's head bobbed as she listened. "Are the animals for the village or….?"

Eponin shook her head. "The cattle are raised to be sold on the market." She stopped talking as she focused on getting up a steep incline, once she was up, she continued on the winding trail. "So are the pigs and sheep when they become of age."

"The chickens are for…." Gabrielle sucked in a lot of air then finished her sentence. "Are for eggs and meat?"

"Yes," called back Eponin. "The chickens are mainly for us. All our other meats are bought from the market. It's too much trouble to slaughter our own animals for meat."

Gabrielle understood the line of thinking and had to agree. "Who goes… to the market?"

"There are trained Amazons skilled in the art of bartering and they handle the trades." The weapons master slowed her pace a little so that Gabrielle could keep up. "Once a month they take whatever harvest we have and go to Aegae's market."

"Do we get… a lot for the crops?" inquired the curious bard.

"We do well," agreed the weapons master. "And once a year, in the late summer, when the cattle are ready to be sold, there's a large trip to either Corinth or Athens." She slowed down even more when she noted the trail finally widened because they were reaching the top. She came along side the bard. "I recommend going too, princess."

Gabrielle lifted an eyebrow in question.

"What happens," explained Eponin, "is not only does this Nation go but so do several others."

The young bard brightened at the news. "Really? What… what other nations?"

The weapons master chuckled. "It depends really. Last year…." She attempted to recall which nations went. "The Peloponnesian Amazons always go and normally the Thessaly too." She smiled as they came around the last inclined bend and arrived at the top of the destination.

Gabrielle came up behind Eponin and her breath was utterly taken away when she realized what her reward was at the top. "Sweet Artemis," she heaved between a large intake of air.
Eponin laughed and waved her student to follow to the ledge of the canyon top. "Follow me, princess."

Gabrielle had almost forgotten to continue her jog because she was so taken with the amazing view. She now followed Eponin over to the ledge and remained in one spot as she jogged. "This is amazing, Eponin."

"It is beautiful," agreed the weapons master. She was relieved when the breeze brushed her face and helped cool her off. She could tell Gabrielle was just as thankful for the cool wind.

Gabrielle continued to gaze out over the Amazon Nation, her eyes on the village far ahead. "I see the fields," she spoke up.

Eponin faintly grinned and nodded. "Yes, and there are the corrals for the various cattle." She pointed just south-east of the village.

The princess smiled and her eyes went back to the busy village. "What… what other Nations go to the… the markets?"

Eponin back tracked in her mind. "Let's see, I said the Peloponnese, Thessaly, and normally the Epirus too."

The bard mentally counted four Nations all together including theirs. "Eph said there were six Nations."

"That we know of, yes," agreed the weapons master. "The other two are the Thrace and Illyria."

Gabrielle's head moved up and down a few times. She remained quiet as she freed her water skin and took small sips.

Eponin looked at the princess then back over the village far off. "The cattle bring in quite a bit of money for the Nation. The sheep provide our wool for cloaks and other clothing in the winter seasons." She grinned. "You will learn to love wool lined boots for the winter."

Gabrielle suddenly smiled at the concept. "That is a good idea." She chuckled at Eponin's grinning face.

"We are prepared," stated the weapons master. "The pigs also bring in a nice stiffen of money."

"How do the vegetables and fruits do?"

"We don't really trade those," replied the weapons master. "That's for the village." She paused, her lips puckering some in thought. "Although there have been several attempts to start our own winery."

Gabrielle couldn't help but laugh but she quickly regretted it as it made her cough some. She patted her chest and took a small drink of water again. "Amazonian
Wine?" she joked.

Eponin laughed now yet shrugged and replied, "I don't think it's a bad idea." She devilishly grinned. "It might be worth a try to do a winery. We could prosper well with it."

The princess considered it then nodded. "It's always worth a try."

Eponin smirked and patted her student's arm. "There is hope for you after all."

"What's that… suppose to mean?"

The older Amazon winked, turned and headed for the path again. "Let's continue."

Gabrielle threw the water skin onto her back and hurried after the other Amazon. "We're going to visit the fields and groves next?"

"Yes, my princess," called the weapons master. "Hurry up… the trip is easier down the trail."

After a huge breath, the bard urged her legs to catch up to Eponin but she tried to watch her footing too. "Ep, who is in charge… in charge of the Nation's money?"

Eponin thinly smiled at the princess's constant curiosity. "There are two Amazons who handle the flow of dinars. We call them accountants," explained the weapons master, "one accountant manages the money coming in while the other manages what's going out."

Gabrielle nodded her head.

"They also give monthly reports to the queen on how our dinar flow is," included the Amazon. "They're rather good too."

The bard smiled at knowing the Nation's dinars were well cared for. "They must… must work with the traders."

"Yes they do as well as the farmers and herders." Eponin considered that for a moment then added, "Even I have to work with them on occasions."

"Really?" prompted the princess.

"Yes, I often speak with both the accountants and the traders. I have to keep inventory of the armoury. Occasionally I'm in need of supplies such as more weapons, leather hide, boots… items like that." She glanced behind to make sure Gabrielle was close then she looked ahead again. "Sometimes I send out items for repairs, horses to be shoed, or weapons that aren't used to be sold."

"Wait, wait," cut in Gabrielle. She evilly grinned and taunted, "I thought the Amazons were self sufficient and shouldn't depend on anybody."

"The Nation wasn't built in a day, princess." Eponin admired her student's perception
and now chuckled at it. "However it is something we constantly strive to improve." She looked back at Gabrielle then watched the trail again. "I am working towards getting a black smith hut built."

"For our own metal working?" inquired the bard.

"Yes," called back Eponin, "however I keep running into snags."

"Like what?"

"First, finding somebody qualified to act as a black smith." Eponin took a deep breath and continued her explanation. "It's a trade and the trade is run by men."

"So were many other things but we've managed… to master… those arts," breathed Gabrielle.

The weapons master softly smiled and had to agree. "You are correct, princess."

"I bet you," rasped Gabrielle, "there's at least one woman… one woman out there that can do… can do smithing."

"And would you like to find her?" chided the Amazon.

The young slave reserved from laughing and just grinned instead. "You will… work it out, Ep."

"Thank you for the confidence." Eponin flashed a grin but decided to focus back on the main topic. "However the economy is quite integrated and I do not know the finer details, princess." Eponin noticed they were coming near the end of the trail. "You will learn more about the system from the queen."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows but first focussed on hopping over a decent size stone. She landed on her feet and continued jogging. "Queen Melosa?"

"The same," teased the weapons master. "I merely teach you the basics of the Nation like most Amazons. The finer details are what the queen reserves to teach you."

"Why… why can't you?"

Eponin came off the trail and ran in one spot as Gabrielle came to her side. Once she was close, she continued the jog back to the woods. "It is the queen's duty to train you to be the princess. It is my duty to train you to be the Amazon."

"Oh," whispered the bard. She reached up and wiped the sweat from her forehead. "When does Queen Melosa train me?"

"Whenever she and I decide you are ready." Eponin kept her expression serious as she spoke about this topic. "When it is time, Melosa will take you under her wing."

"How long do you think it'll take?" repeated the bard.
Eponin lifted an eyebrow and merely replied, "That depends on you, princess." She then suddenly broke into a faster pace, going ahead of Gabrielle. "Let's pick it up, princess."

Gabrielle urged her burning legs to carry her faster and she did her best to catch up. She was though relieved to return to the shaded woods where it was cooler.

Eponin and Gabrielle eventually made it back to the village and they went to the east side. There they slowed down into a jog and took a tour of the fields, groves, and corral of animals. Here and there Eponin would take a small break and that typically included an introduction to some of the head figures that ran either the fields, herds, or groves. The weapons master then led Gabrielle all the way around the village and as she did, she gazed up at the sun low in the western sky. She stole a quick look at Gabrielle and decided anymore running would be too much for her especially in that attire. So when they came to the gates, Eponin headed in and much to Gabrielle's relief. As soon as Éponin stepped through the gates her jog slowed into a walk and she turned to the princess.

Gabrielle gasped for air, stopped walking, hunched forward, and inhaled deeply several times. "Oh… gods…"

"Don't stop moving," ordered Eponin. "Straightened up and walk around… in a circle, I don't care just walk around."

The princess nodded, rose up, and walked around taking in big gulps of air.

Eponin was doing the same but she tried to remain a little more relaxed, which she was managing. She looked to Gabrielle and said, "I'm glad you stuck with me today."

Gabrielle chuckled and gave a doubtful smile. "I tried my best."

The weapons master only nodded and made no comment. "Okay… we're finished for the day." She brushed back some hair that was stuck to her forehead. "Tomorrow though you have a free day."

"Free day?" questioned the surprised princess.

"Yes," Eponin put her hands on her hips and continued to pace as her heart rate settled down. "You may do whatever you like… rest, sleep, eat, write… walk around… whatever you like. You report to me the next day at the usual time."

Gabrielle nodded but she still didn't quite understand the idea behind the 'free day.'

"Great." Eponin stopped walking and faced the still pacing bard. "And I recommend a bath."

Gabrielle laughed and paused in her pacing. She pulled her water skin free and took a small drink. She corked it and held it out in offer thinking Eponin had to be dying for a drink.

"No thank you," replied the weapons master. She wouldn't show any weakness to her
student so she could keep Gabrielle awe struck. She would wait until she separated to get a drink of water.

Gabrielle closed her mouth instead of gawking. She corked the skin and threw it over her shoulder. "Ep, I was wondering...." She fell short because she needed a deep breath. She cleared her throat and finished her question. "I was wondering if I could get some other leathers....?" She patted her still heavy chest and took a few steps around again. "I don't think this outfit is right... right for these drills."

Slowly a fine smile creased the weapons master's lips. "Of course. I can assign you some more... suitable leathers for training."

"Oh that'd be great," agreed the bard. "I've been roasting in this outfit."

The older Amazon chuckled and waved Gabrielle to follow her. "This way." As Gabrielle walked along with her, she mentioned, "Technically that attire is considered fashionable." She noted Gabrielle's confused look so she clarified herself. "Terreis only wore it formally, occasionally in the winter, and rare occasions on the sparring field if it was a laxed training."

"Oh," murmured the bard. "I wish I'd known that sooner."

Eponin smirked. "We had confidence that you'd figure it out yourself... and you have."

Gabrielle just rolled her eyes.

The weapons master opened the door to the armoury hut and let the princess in first. "Wait here, I'll find you something suitable."

Gabrielle remained by the door as Eponin went to the tables of leathers.

Eponin first sifted through the tops and pulled out what she guessed would be Gabrielle's size. She then went down to the skirts and picked out a skirt that would go from Gabrielle's hips to just above her knees. She let the articles of leather dangle from her arm as she came back to the princess. "Here." She handed them over after doing a check of the tag numbers on the clothes. "If they work, bring the tags the next day and I'll write them off to you."

The princess noted the parchment tags attached to each item that had a number on it. "Oh... okay." She nodded and smiled at her teacher. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Eponin patted Gabrielle's back as the bard turned around. "Maybe I'll see you tonight at the mess hut."

The slave flashed a smile and nodded. "Thank you, Ep."

The weapons master smiled at the nickname and gave a wave as she went to the armoury office hut next door.

Gabrielle watched Eponin go into the office hut then she continued her way back to
After Eponin entered her hut, she was greeted by another Amazon awaiting her arrival.

"My, my… you're looking hot, Eponin." The Amazon clearly inspected the weapons master.

Eponin smacked the Amazon's stomach and side stepped her to get behind her desk. "It's good to see you too, Calandra."

The Amazon smiled as she watched the weapons master get her water skin. "Class was on the run today?"

The amused weapons master peered up with hooded eyes. "Yes." She took a drink of water then after feeling refreshed, she asked, "How did the lessons go today?"

"Excellent," reported Calandra.

Eponin nodded her approval. She'd been working with Calandra from the start of taking her position as weapons master. Calandra along with three other Amazons helped in training the younger Amazons. They were essential to the training and especially now since Eponin spent most of her time with the princess. "How is my sister doing?"

Calandra grinned. "You don't have faith in Ephiny?"

The weapons master shook her head and sat down. She wryly smiled up at her assistant. "I just want to make sure she is well trained since I'm not there to make sure of it."

"Master," warned Calandra, "have some confidence in your assistants." She took a seat in front of Eponin's desk. "Hali, Aricia, Beryl and I are doing well with them."

"I'm glad to hear it." Eponin rested back in her chair and clasped her belt. "I'll be there tomorrow."

Calandra perked up at the news. "A free day huh?"

"Yes," agreed the weapons master. She picked up her water skin again but before she took a drink, she muttered, "It should be interesting."

Calandra silently watched the weapons master drink. She tilted her head a little. "How is the princess doing?"

Eponin recorked her skin and set it aside on the desk. "She is learning," was all she was willing to reveal.

Calandra mocked glared and pushed out of her chair. "We also have to finalize that proposal for the smithing hut."
Eponin dropped her head back and gave a quiet groan. "Calandra, can't you handle that?"

"They need your approval, Eponin." The assistant weapons master smacked the desk with her hand. "Do I look like the weapons master? No, I'm the senior grade."

Eponin chuckled and nodded her head. "We'll go over them tomorrow after the lessons."

Calandra brightened and she ran her freehand through her short brown hair. "Let's hope they pass the queen's approval."

The weapons master shook her head. "I doubt they even get past the council."

Calandra threw up her arms as she stalked over to the door. "Why not? I'm so sick of the politics. We need a smithing hut… we can't kept throwing away this money on customized weapons outside the Nation."

"I know," agreed Eponin "but you know how it looks when the dinars are on parchment."

"The smithing hut will pay for itself," refuted Calandra.

"In five years," reminded the weapons master. "And right now, the stables need some maintenance this summer."

Calandra put her hands on her hips and shook her head at the weapons master. "Who's side are you on, Eponin?"

The weapons master laughed and shook her head. "The Nation's side."

Calandra brushed off Eponin with a wave of her hand. "You need to be selfish once in awhile, Eponin."

Eponin softly smiled and shook her head. "I'll see you, Calandra."

Calandra flashed a smile now and opened the door. "Have a good evening, master."

She then quietly left the hut and Eponin.

Eponin sighed and looked at the report scrolls on her desk from her four assistants. She needed to look over the daily reports to see the progress of the young students then she could finally get a bath before dinner. After about a half of a candlemark, she finished up and decided to leave her office. She stepped out of the hut with her sword in sheath now reattached to her back; she hadn't taken it on the run. However in her left hand was Gabrielle's staff, which she would return later along with a harsh reminder for her student. As she made her way across village, she spotted Ephiny approaching her.

"Afternoon, sister," greeted the weapons master.

Ephiny had a smile as she joined her sister's side. "Finished duty?"
"Yes," replied Eponin. "How were your sword lessons?"

"They went well," agreed Ephiny. "We worked on offence."

"So I read," agreed the weapons master. "The class worked on the horizontal and vertical cuts."

Ephiny nodded her agreement. "I learned a lot," she admitted and she enjoyed Eponin's proud smile. "I heard tomorrow is a free day for the princess."

Eponin shot a faint grin. "Yes."

"You will be teaching tomorrow?"

Eponin mused at her sister's hidden excitement but she relented from smiling. "Yes… I plan to teach your group."

Ephiny chuckled and teased, "You're too kind, Eponin."

The weapons master laughed inwardly but didn't give into the bantering. "Perhaps."

Ephiny studied her sister then removed her intense stare. "How goes things with Gabrielle?"

Eponin's head bobbed. "Well… I'm getting some of your confidence in her."

Ephiny smirked. "It's catching, isn't it?"

Eponin patted her sister's midback. "I'm not her biggest fan like you, sister but she may have potential." She hefted the princess's staff in seeming consideration. "It's too early to tell yet what kind of Amazon she'll be… or future queen for that matter."

Ephiny lifted an eyebrow. "She'll be as amazing as Queen Hippolyta if not better."

"Perhaps," gave in Eponin but she didn't hold the same confidence, the princess still having too much to prove to her.

"Can't you see the potential, Eponin?" persisted the Amazon.

The weapons master shook her head and pointed a finger at Ephiny. "I know what I see… and right now…." She stopped and faced her sister. "I see how you're so smitten with her that you can't see straight."

Ephiny rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips.

Eponin shook her head. "Have you talked to her about it?"

Ephiny sighed and her hands dropped from her hips. "Eponin-"

"Have you talked to her about it?" Eponin tried again, her face more stern than earlier.
"We've danced around it," admitted the young Amazon.

Eponin's right eyebrow was up and she had an annoyed expression.

"I know," hotly stated Ephiny. "I know."

"You need to talk to her about it, sister." Eponin rested a hand on Ephiny's shoulder.

"She's been through a lot… it's not easy."

Eponin shook her head. "Talk to her… soon." Her hand lowered and her mind slipped back to earlier today with Deka. "There are plenty of others waiting in line." She said nothing else and started walking.

Ephiny had a tight face but she sighed and hurried after her sister. "It'll be interesting to see how she does tomorrow."

The weapons master gave a wilful look. "It will be."

"Do you have any idea what she'll do for the day?"

Eponin shook her head. "You know what most Amazons do." She waved a hand then complained, "They sleep in, eat, relax and do nothing."

Ephiny chuckled and replied, "I think Gabrielle will surprise you."

"Ephiny…" Eponin's tone was drawn out with tried patience. "She's not a goddess… remember we worship Artemis… not Gabrielle."

Ephiny glanced at Eponin and remained silent.

Eponin lifted an eyebrow at her sister.

Ephiny suddenly smirked and murmured, "I'd worship her." Her ears rung with Eponin's hysterical laughter and Ephiny joined in too.

The weapons master's laughter died to a smooth chuckle and smile that curled the corner of her lips up. "I love you, Ephiny." She brought her arm around her sister's shoulders and gave her a kiss on the temple.

Ephiny flushed yet brought her arm around Eponin's waist. "I'm your favourite sister."

"Without a doubt," joked Eponin. She released her sister when they came to her hut. She grasped the door handle yet turned to Ephiny.

"I'll see you at dinner, Eponin." Ephiny didn't step away however as she said, "Enjoy the bath."

Eponin winked as she pushed her door open. "Oh I will. See you, Ephiny."
The young Amazon was already headed off and she gave a brief wave. She then continued on her way.

It was another candlemark or so before dinner and the Amazons gathered in the mess hut. Everybody seemed to arrive at the same time and lined up at the buffet table to gather up the prepared meal. Most Amazons sat in groups with their friends in various areas of the hut however for the more prestige Amazons there was a nicer table that was lifted on a dais. Typically the queen sat at the head of the table and down the sides were various members that may or may not join such as the princess, the stratègos and her officers, the priestess, the weapons master, the head of the council, and other various Amazons that held respected titles or ranks.

As Gabrielle stood in the buffet line, she gazed up at the royal table and noted that Queen Melosa was there already and to her right sat the stratègos. As the buffet line slowly moved, Gabrielle considered the stratègos along with the rest of the Amazon army. Eponin had briefly glazed over how the army worked in the Nation and explained that the ranks were setup much like Alexander the Great's army.

At first the princess was considerably confused why the Amazon Nation would base their army on a male leader. It wasn't until Eponin brought to light that Alexander was Great because of his abilities as a military leader. The Amazons decided to base their own army off the principals of Alexander the Great in belief they were just as superior if not more than Alexander the Great. Once Gabrielle realized that she later understood that the stratègos was the same as the commander of the army.

"Hey," greeted a cheerful Solari.

The bard broke out of her thoughts and turned her gaze to the older Amazon. "Hey Solari."

Solari was a few people behind but she waved and called, "You seen Ephiny?"

"Not yet," replied the princess, a shrug of her shoulders.

Solari shrugged back and just paid attention to the moving line.

After Gabrielle finished collecting her food, she debated whether to join the queen up on the dais or to stay below with her friends. She stood off to the side of the hut and debated with herself. Then somebody brushed up against her and she smiled at Solari.

Solari nodded at the royal table and muttered, "Sit with the queen."

The young slave frowned and stared at the queen. "I know I should."

"Just join us later," persisted Solari. "We'll save a spot for you." She noted the more hopeful look on Gabrielle's face. "Promise," she added.

Gabrielle was relieved and she said a word of thanks before heading to the royal table.

Solari briefly watched her go then she went to her usual table where Ephiny and a few others would join her.
Queen Melosa turned away from her conversation with the stratègos and offered a warm greeting to the princess. "Welcome, princess."

"My queen." Gabrielle smiled and bowed her head then took a seat to Queen Melosa's left.

The queen gauged the bard's mood and decided she was in good spirits. She held out a hand to the stratègos on her right. "This is the stratègos, princess." She smiled at the stratègos. "Commander Kalonice."

The bard decided it was best to stand and she held out her arm.

The stratègos was secretly surprised and impressed. She rose up to her full six feet and took the girl's small arm. "Pleasure to meet you, Princess Gabrielle."

Gabrielle dipped her head and replied, "You as well, stratègos."

The commander inwardly admired the young princess as she released her arm. She took her seat again and continued to study the new princess. "So have you learned much about the army?"

The bard shook her head then answered, "Not yet, stratègos." She paused as she considered what else to say then Eponin's teachings came to mind. "Ep…." She faltered and realized the proper title for the weapons master. "Master Eponin taught me some things." She waved her right hand. "Just general things."

The stratègos nodded her head and wrapped her right hand around her mug. "If you would ever like some more detailed lessons just let me know, princess."

The young slave brightened. "I'd be honoured, stratègos."

Queen Melosa had carefully watched the exchanged and approved of the princess's handlings. She then diverted her attention to the mess hut. Most of the Amazons had gotten their meals but some were still left. As she brought her attention back to her table, she spotted the weapons master and priestess stepping onto the dais. "Priestess, Master Eponin."

Priestess Narkissa bowed her head and gave a greeting smile to the queen. "Good evening, my queen." She took a seat beside the stratègos. "Commander Kalonice," she further greeted.

Eponin settled her plate of food beside the princess but looked to the queen. "My queen." She tipped her head then took her seat.

"How are you, princess?" inquired the priestess.

The princess softened to the priestess for some unknown reason. Gabrielle couldn't shake the natural infinitive she felt for the priestess. "I'm well," she replied, "yourself?"
"Excellent," replied the much older Amazon.

Gabrielle dipped her head then peered back up. For a quiet second, she compared the priestess to the stratègos and figured them to be about the same age. Gabrielle began to muse that since the stratègos was the priestess's age that she would soon be replaced since Maired was taking the priestess position. However Gabrielle refrained from asking knowing it wasn't the proper time to ask such questions.

"How goes the training, princess?" interrupt the priestess's voice.

The bard pulled out of her thoughts and now smiled. "I'm enjoying them." She glanced at the weapons master beside her; she clearly blushed from Eponin's inquisitive look.

"I heard class was on the run," pointed out the queen.

Eponin shifted her attention to Queen Melosa. "Yes." Her focus went to everybody around the table except for Gabrielle. "I'm happy to report my pupil didn't collapse."

Everybody around the table quietly laughed and Gabrielle was dying to sink through her seat after being thoroughly teased.

"You should be proud," cut in the priestess, her full attention on the bard. "Not all students survive the class on the run."

Princess Gabrielle beamed and accepted the praising. "Thank you, priestess." But what she didn't catch was the warning glare from the weapons master.

Narkissa merely ignored Eponin's disapproving look and had already decided the princess require some praise.

"You have much to learn," reminded the queen.

The stratègos's head bobbed and her hands folded in her lap. "It only gets harder from here, princess." She knew why Eponin had disapproved of Narkissa's praise and now tried to destroy whatever confidence Gabrielle had taken from it. "Only true Amazons are fit for these classes."

The slave tried to remain confident yet nervousness didn't elude her. "Of course, stratègos." Her lips pierced a little but she stated, "I am prepared."

"I hope so," relented Commander Kalonice.

Before the conversation could continue, Queen Melosa silently rose up from her chair and straightened her back out. Gabrielle heard the clanging, clanging and chatter in the mess hut come to an abrupt stop. Gabrielle was impressed by how much respect the queen evoked in her Nation and her own admiration for the queen heightened.

"Good evening, sisters," spoke out Queen Melosa, "Let's give praise to Artemis for our meal tonight." She gave a signal to Narkissa.

The priestess rose up and when she was at her full but short height, everybody in the
Nation bowed their heads. Narkissa took a deep breath, her eyes scanning the Amazons as she called out, "Artemis, your Amazons celebrate another day under your reign. We thank you for this meal that you've bestowed upon us through blessing our good fortune." She paused then in an amazingly booming voice, she called out, "To Artemis."

"To Artemis," echoed back the entire Nation in harmony.

Queen Melosa and the priestess took their seats again and as soon as they sat the loud clatter and talking continued as if it never stopped. Gabrielle released a held breath and lifted her head. She'd seen this display several times before but it never failed to impress her each time.

For awhile the royal table quietly ate until a new arrival stepped up the dais. The queen first noticed the new arrival and lifted an inquisitive eyebrow because of the Amazon's lack of punctuality.

"My apologies, my queen." The Amazon took a seat beside Narkissa. "I was delayed by work in the council."

"Quite alright, Rena." The queen had a patient look. "Your daughter, Masika, is not joining us?"

Gabrielle perked up at Masika's name. She now knew who Rena was, the head council member.

"She'll be along, my queen." Rena's dark brown eyes flickered down to the buffet where Masika was hastening to get her meal. She returned to the queen. "We had much to prepare for tomorrow."

"Yes," agreed the queen, "the proposals will be in."

The head council member dipped her head.

Gabrielle, from the corner of her eye, took in Rena's features. Rena was much like Masika but with added wrinkles, lighter skin, and salt and pepper hair. And Rena seemed to glow with her age, probably from years of experience Gabrielle decided.

"Master Eponin, are you putting in the proposal for the smithing hut?"

Eponin's attention lifted to the stratègos. "I am, stratègos despite it's a... fleeting attempt."

Commander Kalonice grunted and loudly stated, "The army could use it."

Rena wanted to ignore the jibe but years of experience taught her otherwise. She shot a dangerous look at the stratègos and warned, "I believe your stables need maintenance before you find your cavalry without a home for the winter."

Commander Kalonice smirked at the elder and returned her focus to her meal.
"Let's leave the proposals for later," ordered the queen.

"Of course, my queen," agreed Councillor Rena. Her attention was stolen away when her daughter joined them at the table.

"Good evening, my queen." Masika lowered her plate next to Eponin and bowed her head to the queen. She then gazed at everybody else around the table. "Good evening, everybody."

"Sit down, Masika. You're cramping my neck," ordered the stratègos.

Masika corked an eyebrow at the impertinent commander. She took her seat beside the weapons master.

However it seemed as if the stratègos wasn't finished her earlier banter, her taunting voice filling the silent void. "We were just discussing the proposal for the smithing hut."

Masika peered up with dark, hooded eyes.

Commander Kalonice could tell she was pulling Masika's strings.

"Comannder," gently warned the queen.

The stratègos expression went apologetic before the queen. "My apologies, my queen."

Queen Melosa let it go despite she inwardly enjoyed the banter but she wouldn't let anybody else see it. She was about to return to her meal then hesitated. "Rena, have you met the princess?"

Rena looked to the young princess. "No, my queen."

"Princess Gabrielle, this is Rena… the head council member."

Gabrielle put her fork down and repeated her same actions from earlier. She stood and held out her arm.

The head council member was astounded; she rid herself of the dumbful look and got up. She shook arms and said, "A pleasure, princess."

"All mine, councillor." Gabrielle gave her best smile.

Rena released the small arm then held out that same hand to Masika. "Have you met my daughter, Masika?"

"Yes, we've met," answered Masika, her eyes locked on the young princess.

"This past winter," agreed the bard.

"Excellent," agreed Rena. She took her seat again after the princess sat. She pierced
her chicken with her fork but her attention rested on the princess. "Has Master Eponin taught you much about government?"

"The general gist," replied the princess.

"Ah." The head councillor dipped her head and smiled. "If you ever require more knowledge, please speak with me or Masika."

Masika's eyes flickered from her mother back to her meal.

"Thank you," answered the princess. "I know there must be a lot to the council and government."

"There is," agreed Councillor Rena.

"But more to the army," cut off the stratègos.

Rena casted a dark look at Commander Kalonice. "Don't forget who makes the final say on your operations, stratègos."

The stratègos shot back a grin. "Yes, Queen Melosa has final approval."

Rena held a staring contest with the stratègos but finally decided it was fruitless. Instead, she ignored Commander Kalonice and returned to her meal.

Gabrielle witnessed the display and made notes of it. She wondered why there was so much tension between the stratègos and the council or maybe it was just all fun and games. She truly wasn't sure and she decided she'd have to look more into it.

The meal continued in relative silence but on occasions somebody would speak or question another. Overall, Gabrielle found a lot of unknown tension bouncing off each person and she disliked it enough to knot her stomach up almost to the point of not wanting to eat.

Near the end of the meal, Eponin leaned over to Gabrielle and gently asked, "Would you care to join me? I'm going to visit with Ephiny and Solari."

Gabrielle quickly smiled and nodded. "I would love to."

Eponin's eyes flickered to the queen then back to Gabrielle, her eyebrow arched up in warning.

The princess understood and turned to the queen. "If that's okay, my queen?"

"Of course." Queen Melosa nodded her approval and encouraged her to go with a warm look. "Spend time with your sisters."

"Thank you." Gabrielle stood when Eponin did. She collected her empty plate but made sure to say goodbye to everybody around the table. She then followed her teacher off the dais.
Commander Kalonice finished biting on her carrot stalk as she watched the princess and Eponin leave. When they were out of earshot, she speared the priestess with a dark look. "Narkissa, next time do not interfere with Eponin's training."

Priestess Narkissa resisted from rolling her eyes as she picked up her mug of water. After a moment of thought, she responded to the warning. "The princess could use at least a small pat on the back."

"Narkissa," cut in the queen, "you know the rules."

Narkissa gave up on her drink and put her mug down. She was one of the few that could contest the queen's words without being sliced in half. "My queen, my praise would not be as detrimental to Eponin's training as it would be if it came from you or Eponin herself." She could tell the queen was relenting and she contained her competitive smile.

"I suppose," murmured Queen Melosa but in a stronger voice, she ordered, "But see that you hold your tongue until the proper time."

"Certainly, my queen." The priestess bent her head but her hooded eyes sparkled at the stratègos.

Commander Kalonice saw the taunt and just shot a nasty look. She then let go of it when the priestess patted her leg and she secretly forgave the priestess.

Narkissa noted the stratègos's relaxation now so she went back to finishing her meal.

Gabrielle and Eponin were seated together and across from Solari and Ephiny. The group was chatting away after Solari had introduced two of her friends: Teresa and Jocasta. Gabrielle figured Teresa was about her age, sixteen, but Jocasta was closer to Eponin's age and both seemed quite pleasant. Teresa though was rather shy and only piped in here and there or when her opinion was asked. Jocasta was closer to Solari's personality but she was constantly smiling and laughing; one of the most vibrant, sunny people Gabrielle had ever met. Jocasta's intense cheerfulness seemed to rub off on everybody in the group.

Suddenly, the entire group of friends bursted into a stitch of laughter from Jocasta's story. Gabrielle wiped away tears from her eyes and continued to hold her aching stomach.

"So get this, right…." Jocasta waited for everybody's attention to return to her. "I stuck my foot out as she charged me. Adonia trips on my foot and I'm telling you, she took off into the air." Jocasta jumped from her seat and held out her arms. "Arms and legs wide open as she soared through the air then wham!" She smacked her hands together. "Her face and body went into the mud and she glided for several paces."

The group broke out laughing again at Jocasta's story.

Jocasta sat back down while in a roll of laughter.

Solari inhaled deeply and loudly announced. "Well Adonia proved Amazons do fly!"
The group all hooted and howled with laughter and hands clapping in praise.

"Oh sweet Artemis," breathed Jocasta between her laughing. "Poor Adonia, I think she washed her mouth out for candlemarks to get the mud out." She then bared her teeth and pointed to them. "Grit all in between her teeth."

"Oh gross!" cried Solari then she laughed with the rest of the group.

"Lucky she didn't eat any worms!" called Ephiny.

"Well I'm sure it'd make her regular if she did," hooted Solari.

The group ached with laughter again and tears straining from the corners of their eyes.

"That's it!" yelled a deep woman's voice across from the table behind the group.

The group of friends quickly stopped laughing and looked over at the Amazon.

"I have you know, I fully planned that tactic," proudly stated the Amazon as she now stood in front of the group. One hand on her hip and her other hand fashionably swept back a golden lock of her hair.

Jocasta laughed and pointed at Adonia. "Yes, it's called the A-down-ya-go tactic!"

The air was filled again with a fit of various laughs and clapping.

Adonia remained tall and proud before the other Amazons. When they settled, she cleared her throat and perfectly stated, "Well it worked."

"Which part?" spoke up the normally quiet Teresa, "The flying or the cleaning your teeth?"

Adonia groaned as the Amazons laughed at her more. She shook her head, pushed Jocasta, who was on the edge of the bench, and took a seat with the group. "What other stories have you told them about me, Jocasta?"

Jocasta sweetly smiled at her friend. "Only the good ones."

Adonia laughed and shook her head. "I believe it."

"Hey Adonia," called Ephiny, "have you met the princess?"

Adonia's hazel eyes expanded widely and she stared at the princess. "No," she soothed, "introduce me."

Gabrielle was resisting her usual flush as Ephiny held her hand at her.

"Adonia, this is Princess Gabrielle."

Adonia leaned forward and held out her hand. "It's spectacular to meet you, princess."
Now Gabrielle's attempt to resist her blush failed and her cheeks thoroughly crimsoned. She took the larger hand and gave a brisk shake.

Adonia smirked and teased, "The red cheeks flatter you, princess."

The bard's cheeks went into a richer red and she dropped her gaze.

Adonia released the small, warm hand and chuckled. "So tell me...." She leaned forward, her right arm on the table, and her cheek cupped in her hand. Her intense stare was only on the princess. "How do you take to the Nation?"

Gabrielle cleared her throat and mentally thanked Artemis that her blush ceased. "It's becoming home."

"Beautiful," appraised Adonia. "I consider this Nation honoured to be given your divinity."

The bard blinked as she soaked in the high compliment.

Eponin noticed the uneasiness in her student and she almost gave Adonia an annoyed look but she resisted.

"Thank you," replied the bard, not sure how else to respond.

"Adonia is one of the best students in the sword training class," cut in Solari.

"Really?" perked up the princess.

Adonia revealed her proud smile then stated, "But only when I'm taking flight instead of fight."

The group of friends laughed at Adonia's joke.

Adonia waited for her friends to settle down and she went back to her conversation with the princess. "I heard you go to the Academy with Ephiny."

The small slave nodded her head. "Yes, we'll be going back at the end of the summer."

"Ah haaa." Adonia directed her next question to Ephiny. "How goes it, Ephiny?"

"Excellent," replied Ephiny. "And Gabrielle is number one in our class."

"Ooooh." Adonia devilishly smiled. "An Amazon Princess with an exquisite forte in the art of barding... I am in ecstasy."

"You'll have to tell us a story sometime," piped in a Jocasta.

"Positively," agreed Adonia.

"Maybe when the princess isn't so tired from her classes." Eponin lifted a warning
"Naturally." Adonia smiled warmly and nodded.
The princess softly laughed and promised, "I'll tell one soon."
"Fantastic." Adonia's smile grew even warmer.
"So how'd it go up at the big table?" inquired Jocasta to Gabrielle.
Princess Gabrielle chuckled but peered up at her teacher.
Eponin only shrugged as if to give approval.
"It's different," she finally admitted.
"They don't talk much," added Eponin.
Gabrielle nodded her agreement. "I met a lot of them."
"What'd you think of the stratègos?"
Gabrielle's focus went to Ephiny. "I'm not sure yet."
"I can't take Masika," stated Jocasta. "Rena, her mother, is amazing though."
"Masika just started." Eponin always defended the council members no matter any reputation.
"She's too young to be there," refuted Jocasta.
"How old is Masika?"
Jocasta looked at Gabrielle and answered, "Forty-one and most councillors start out at fifty… sometimes even fifty-five." She smacked the table and stated, "She got in because of her mother."
"Well she is Councillor Rena's legacy," offered Teresa.
Everybody glanced at Teresa and pretty much everybody in the group agreed with nods.
"Still," protested Jocasta, "she's too young."
"Give her the benefit of the doubt, babe." Adonia rubbed her friend's back to calm her.
"Masika did just start."
Jocasta uncharacteristic frown faded and her natural smile reappeared. "I guess so."
Adonia winked and patted her friend's back.
Ephiny had been idly listening but much of her focus centred on Gabrielle. She took notice of how Gabrielle seemed to be somewhere else mentally and not really listening. Ephiny stretched her right foot out under the table and rubbed her boot against Gabrielle's.

The bard's distance stare broke and her eyes sharpened on her friend. Her eyes glowed in question.

"Feel like going for a walk with me?" Ephiny offered a smile to tempt her friend.

The princess dramatically groaned and loudly asked, "Another 'tour' around the Nation?"

Eponin deeply laughed and patted her student's outside thigh. "Class is over, princess."

"I find I'm always in class," chided Gabrielle.

Eponin knowingly smiled for a brief second then turned away.

"I'd love to go for a walk." Gabrielle smiled and stood up when Ephiny did the same.

"We'll see you ladies later."

The group smiled up at Ephiny and said goodnight.

The princess also said goodnight and fell into step beside Ephiny when Ephiny came around the table. After she and Ephiny left, the group continued with their conversation except for Solari. She didn't pay much mind as she watched Ephiny and the princess leave the mess hut. From the corner of her eye, Eponin noticed Solari's curious stare and Eponin kept a mental reminder of it.

Gabrielle quietly walked along side Ephiny, who led them through the village. She stared down at her boots and contemplated her few days so far with the Amazons.

"How you doing?" Ephiny waited awhile for a reply and Gabrielle's answer started with a deep breath.

"Tired, sore… but I'm good." The princess had a half-hearted smile.

Ephiny curiously studied her friend then asked, "Feel comfortable here?"

"Yes," Gabrielle's head also bobbed. "But I guess… I think I'm finally starting to miss home." She sensed Ephiny's confusion so she explained. "Potidaea, I mean. Life has been so… insane that I never had a second to consider how much I miss home." She shrugged and whispered, "Settling down here I guess has me thinking about Potidaea."

The older Amazon now understood and she thought over what Gabrielle told her. When they went through the gates and into the woods, she reached over and laced her hand through Gabrielle's. Ephiny gave a gentle squeeze then she felt Gabrielle's smile on her.
Gabrielle squeezed back and studied Ephiny's soft yet reserved profile. "You know… I really do want to go back to Potidaea." She stared at the passing ground. "For a visit… see how things are."

"I agree." Ephiny never looked at her friend as she spoke but instead watched where they were travelling in the moonlit woods. "Take some time off… visit Potidaea, Amphipolis."

The young bard dipped her head and bit her lower lip. "And maybe Pyrgos."

Ephiny paused in her breathing but silently released a long breath. "You think you'll find something that Cornelio didn't?"

"Possibly," replied the bard. "I'm not sure though." She brushed back and locked a few strands of loose hair behind her left ear. "How do I get the time off, Eph?"

"You'll have to talk to the queen and Eponin."

"You think they'll give it to me?"

The Amazon considered before answering. "I think so… probably not right now but maybe after a moon's cycle of training."

Gabrielle thinly smiled but slowly it slipped and she came to a stop. She turned to Ephiny. "Will you go with me?"

Ephiny couldn't resist smiling as she dipped her head closer to Gabrielle's. "If I can, yes."

The princess chuckled and her smile returned. She dropped her forehead against Ephiny's and closed her eyes. "Thanks."

"No problem," murmured Ephiny. She closed her eyes as well and just absorbed the silent comfort between them.

"Eph?"

Ephiny picked up on Gabrielle's gentle yet curious tone. "Hmmm?"

"Is it okay if I kiss you?"

Ephiny's chest tightened with a laugh but she resisted it yet her lips did curl up into a grin. "Very okay." She didn't move at all until Gabrielle's warm hand touched her right cheek and she leaned into the touch. Then Gabrielle's forehead moved away from hers and soft lips tenderly touched against hers. A whimper passed through Ephiny when Gabrielle gradually deepened the kiss.

Gabrielle took a step closer, which caused Ephiny to encircle her waist. She gave her own whimper as her tongue touched Ephiny's now and she could only recall one other time feeling this good. When she pulled back from the kiss, she took a moment to
tangle her right hand in Ephiny's hair and as she pulled Ephiny back for another kiss, she felt her stomach burn.

Ephiny resist her desires as she drew back for air. She smiled at Gabrielle but took a moment to give a more soothing kiss. When she finally pulled back some, she memorized the wistful and beautiful expression on Gabrielle's face. She'd never seen Gabrielle's eyes so rich and a burning green.

"Ephiny?" murmured the bard.

"Mmmm?" The Amazon bent her head again for another kiss, gently nibbling on Gabrielle's lower lip. She felt her knees weaken when Gabrielle responded with a moan. Again she forced herself to pull back and she brought the side of her head against Gabrielle's, their cheeks pressed together.

Gabrielle let out a content sigh, a smile growing on her face. "I don't think 'friend' is working anymore."

Ephiny's chest shook from deep laughs. She nuzzled Gabrielle's neck and whispered, "I agree."

The bard heavily inhaled as she tried to convince herself she was ready for this step.

Ephiny could feel Gabrielle's uneasiness and she understood why. The past few years had brought on so many changes for Gabrielle and this was another change that brought on more fears. Ephiny knew she had to reassure Gabrielle and for it to work out at the start had to be a positive change in Gabrielle's life. With that in mind, Ephiny brushed her cheek against Gabrielle's and whispered, "I promise it'll be slow."

She then drew back so she could look into unsteady green eyes. "And if you ever want to back out, just so say." She was silent as Gabrielle's worries slowly fled her hazy green eyes. "I worry about you, I care about you, Gabrielle. So I want what's best for you."

"I know," quietly replied the bard. She touched Ephiny's cheek again with her fingertips. She sadly smiled. "I want what's best for you too. I don't want to hurt you."

"Just one day at a time, Gabrielle," reassured Ephiny. "Okay?"

Gabrielle nodded and smiled now. "Thanks, Eph."

"Anytime," murmured the Amazon. She captured Gabrielle's soft lips in another tender kiss when she pulled back; she heard a small laugh from Gabrielle. "What?"

The bard quickly stopped giggling and asked, "Does this mean we're girlfriends?"

"I hope so," teased Ephiny.

Gabrielle nodded and leaned in again but before she started another kiss, she whispered, "Girlfriends."

Ephiny groaned as she tried to force the kiss to an abrupt stop. She started to pull back
while murmuring, "Slower, Gabrielle."

"What?" chided the smirking princess.

Ephiny challenged Gabrielle with an arched eyebrow and indifferent expression.

Gabrielle laughed and swatted Ephiny's hard stomach. "No fun." She then turned on her heels and trotted off back to the village.

"Hmph." Ephiny's eyes slitted, her lips in a secret grin but she followed Gabrielle back. When they were in the village, she took Gabrielle back to her hut.

Gabrielle stopped in front of her door, turned, and leaned back against it. She folded her arms over her chest and softly grinned.

"How about breakfast tomorrow?" inquired Ephiny.

"That sounds good," agreed the princess. "What time do you start class?"

"Three candlemarks after sunrise."

"I'll be at the mess hut before that then." The princess face crinkled up. "You get to start later than I do for classes."

"That's because I've earned it," bluntly stated the Amazon.

Gabrielle laughed and straightened up from the door. "I'm sure," she murmured and leaned into Ephiny.

Ephiny sighed as she returned the tender kiss. She then stepped back and pointed a finger at her girlfriend. "Go to bed." She winked, turned and headed off.

"Goodnight, Eph," called the bard.

The older Amazon flashed a bright smile then disappeared ahead in the torch lit village.

"Hmmm." Gabrielle chuckled and finally went into her hut. She decided to get ready for bed by starting with the removal of her gauntlets and arm bracers.

Eponin approached the princess's hut; in her right hand was Gabrielle's staff. She tapped the top of the staff against the princess's hut door and waited.

Gabrielle was just about to get her nightshift when she heard the knock. She rushed over to the door and opened it to find a serious weapons master. "Eponin."

"Hello." Eponin directed to the staff in her right hand. "You left this in my office." She narrowed her eyes and gently tapped the top of the staff on Gabrielle's forehead. "An Amazon warrior never forgets their weapon."

Gabrielle rubbed her forehead as her shame washed over her. "I'm sorry." She took her
"Don't apologize," gruffly replied the weapons master, "just improve." Without another word, she turned and began walking away.

The princess sighed and briefly watched Eponin leave but then a previous thought came back to mind. "Eponin?" she called.

The weapons master was several paces away but she heard the princess. She stopped and turned back, her hands now on her hips.

"I was just wondering..." Gabrielle propped her staff against the doorway, stepped out of the hut, and hastily neared Eponin. "Would it be a good idea if I ran every morning?"

Eponin blinked and it took her a few moments to absorb the question. She contained her amazement and kept her voice even as she replied, "Yes... that would be a good idea."

The bard beamed at her idea being agreed by her teacher. "I'll do that then," she agreed. "I thought it might be good for me to get in shape."

"It would benefit you," gently agreed the weapons master. She then dipped her head. "Enjoy your day off tomorrow."

"Thank you." Gabrielle wasn't sure what else to say until Eponin was a few paces away again. "Goodnight, Master Eponin."

The weapons master paused in her stride but continued walking as she called, "Goodnight, princess."

Gabrielle studied Eponin's ridged back as she disappeared in the far distance. She sighed and went back into her hut; she was too tired to think anymore about her day. That night she slept extremely hard with a calmer dreamscape than most of her other nights. From the restful sleep, Gabrielle woke up a candlemark after sunrise from the gentle tapping and rapping of beads of water on the top of her hut. For a few minutes, Gabrielle lay on her back and stared up at the ceiling. She just listened to the beat of the rain against the hut top and it soothed her. As she listened to the rain, her thoughts wondered off to her day and what she thought she'd do. She wasn't required to be anywhere until dinner time so she figured she had an option of either staying in the hut and being left to her own devices. Or she could go about the village and visit fellow Amazons so she could learn more. Her curiosity and interested made the final decision.

Gabrielle rolled out of bed and went to her dresser. On top of the dresser, she'd placed the neatly stacked leathers that Eponin had given her. She first picked up the top, which was a simple dark brown leather that had small, short tassels dangling from the bottom and the thin shoulder straps were tightly woven. The skirt was the same rich brown but black glossy leather had been woven in with it. The skirt also had the matching tassel strands from the belt of the skirt that were in a perfect diagonal from the centre and going around to the back.
The princess decided they would probably be perfect for her training and classes with Eponin. She carried them into the side washroom where she got out of her nightshift then put on the leathers. After she'd slipped on everything, she came out of the washroom and stood in front of the full body reflecting glass that sat on the floor by her dresser.

Gabrielle looked herself up and down, her head bobbing in approval. Next she hastily put her ankle tall boots on and laced them up tightly. She was about to leave her hut but a second thought came to mind. She figured she needed to do something with her hair to keep it out of her face if she were going to run this morning. The small, thin strands of leather on her dresser came back to her so she rushed back to her dresser. Gabrielle grabbed one of the three leather thongs and went in front of the mirror again. She pulled her hair back then neatly tied it back with the leather string. However the thick strand of hair that held the feathers slightly loosened from the weight of the feathers. Gabrielle absently tucked the feather in between her hair and felt satisfied they wouldn't move.

The last article Gabrielle grabbed was another thong from her dresser. It was thicker and also dyed a deep crimson red. She tied it to her left arm as she sauntered over to her hut door. The thong now turned into an armband tightly held around Gabrielle's upper bicep and the strands dangled from the side of her arm.

When the princess creaked opened her front door, she stopped in the doorway, dropped her head back and watched the rainfall. "Well," she muttered, "at least I'll stay cool." With a breath that filled her confidence, she stepped out of the hut, closed the door, and instantly became wet but it felt so incredibly refreshing. The cool beads of water rolled down her body with a promise.

Gabrielle decided to start at a jog as she went through the village, headed for the gates. She waved to some unknown Amazons and said good morning to others. Finally she broke into the Amazon woods and went into a slow run through the woods.

After some consideration, she decided she would go to the same cliff side Eponin had taken her. She loved the view of the Nation, a Nation that someday would be hers. During the run, Gabrielle thought about her life so far and how it'd changed. Her new life with the Amazons was a far cry from her previous life in Potidaea or even as a slave. She was still a Potidaean, still a slave, and still an aspiring bard but she was becoming a princess and a future queen. For Gabrielle, becoming the queen of the Macedonian Amazons was an honour and something she had to earn. Despite her enthusiasm as an Amazon Princess all her love went into story telling.

Gabrielle now reached the top of the ridge and walked to the ledge of the canyon side. She came into a slow walk and finally stopped on the ledge. With her hands on her hips, she stared out across her future Nation. Just as yesterday, she was memorized by the beauty and strength of the Amazon Nation, it softened her heart into an warm ache. Could her Nation ever claim her heart and soul such as her story telling did?

The Amazon Nation far below in the distance was busy with female warriors working
about the village, outside the village, and through the trees in the woods. The woods
glowed with a thriving, rich green of life and the crops due east shined golden and
white with the breath of food. And just to the west in the Amazon woods proudly
rooted was The Great Amazon Oak Tree that flourished stronger than all the rest. The
oak tree's roots tightly woven into the ground and her branches flourishing far above
all the others as if reaching out to Artemis herself.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and dropped her head back. The rain slid down her face,
through her hair, and brushed down her body to join her soft skin. She felt as if the
rain was apart of her, a second skin, and it hypnotized her. When she lifted her head
again, her vibrant moss eyes locked on her Nation and a smile stole her lips that
softened her expression. She now held no doubt about her future with the Amazons
but she still remained curious as to what rested ahead of her and her Nation.

Without another thought, the young Amazon Princess turned and continued her run by
first heading down the winding path. When she finally arrived back in the village, it
was about a half a candlemark before Ephiny would begin her class so Gabrielle went
to her girlfriend's hut. After a few knocks, there was no response so Gabrielle figured
Ephiny might have gone to the mess hut already.

Ephiny took a seat beside her best friend, Solari.

Solari offered a smile and she was happy to be sharing breakfast with Ephiny. She
gently touched Ephiny's closest thigh and asked, "How'd you sleep?"

"Pretty good." Ephiny warmly smiled and picked up her fork, prepared to eat her
breakfast. "How was your night after I left?"

"Awesome." Solari warmly laughed. "Jocasta, Adonia, and I went back to my hut."

Ephiny wistfully grinned and nodded. "You get along well with them."

"Yeah." Solari shook her head and chuckled again. "Jocasta and Adonia are a fun
pair."

Ephiny had to agree as she laughed too. "I guess Eponin went back to her hut?"

"Yeah but…." Solari's eyebrows were creased together. "She muttered something
about the princess and a staff." She shrugged with a perplexed look on her face.

"Hmmm." Ephiny wasn't sure what her sister could have meant by it but it probably
had something to do with Gabrielle and another lesson. "I think Eponin is teaching our
group today." She shovelled up some of her scrambled eggs and began eating.

Solari brightened while cutting up her wheat cake. "I can't wait." She smirked and
joked, "Eponin will kick all our asses."

"I know." Ephiny groaned and shook her head, her curly locks moving with her shake
some.

"We're gonna be sssso sore, Ephiny." Solari pointed her fork at her friend. "Guar-
Ephiny slyly grinned at her friend but went back to eating her meal. After she'd taken a few bites from her wheat cake, she looked up just in time to see another Amazon enter the food hut.

Solari opened her mouth as she looked to Ephiny. She said nothing but her mouth remained open. She snapped her jaw shut as she became really confused why Ephiny had such an awed expression. She then followed Ephiny's line of sight and Solari's eyes widened greatly.

Ephiny swallowed when Gabrielle waved to her then came over. Ephiny had never seen so much of Gabrielle's body until now and not to mention she was completely wet from the drenching outside.

"Morning, Eph." Gabrielle adored the dumbstruck look on her girlfriend's face. She barely contained her smug expression as she sweetly smiled at Solari. "Good morning, Solari."

Solari cleared her throat and replied, "Good morning, princess." She blinked when her voice came out a little squeaky so she cleared her throat again in hopes it'd help. "Here for breakfast?"

"Of course." Gabrielle chuckled and turned her attention to Ephiny. "How you feeling, Eph?"

Ephiny's caramel eyes had darkened to a deep golden brown. She finally met her girlfriend's gaze and she worked a smile onto her face. "I'm fabulous." She took a second to shake her desire away despite how impossible it was. "You?"

"Really great." Gabrielle winked then decided she was incredibly hungry. She headed for the buffet table with full intentions to fill her plate.

Solari finally broke from her spell but realized Ephiny hadn't. She slightly glowered at how Ephiny was completely taken with the princess. Solari's stomach twisted and her emotions darkened, her face bitterly bent into a dark frown. "Ephiny?"

The older Amazon broke away at last and blinked at Solari. "Yeah?"

Solari shook her head and bent forward over her plate.

"What?" asked Ephiny, a touch of annoyance in her voice.

"Nothing… never mind." Solari sighed and pushed her eggs around with her fork.

Ephiny saw how angrily constructed Solari's features were and her back incredibly ridged. She hesitated at first but rested her hand softly on Solari's leg. "What's wrong?" she whispered so nobody would hear.

Solari was touched by her friend's concern and when her eyes met Ephiny's, her anger vanished. "It's okay… I forget what I was gonna say."
Ephiny dipped her head closer and gently asked, "You sure?"

Solari nodded and turned away. "Yeah… it's okay."

Ephiny resisted her sigh as she squeezed her friend's leg. When she pulled away from Solari, she spotted the princess coming over to the table.

Gabrielle lowered down onto the table with her full plate of food.

"Hungry?" teased Ephiny.

The bard softly laughed and picked up her fork. "I ran this morning sssso…." She shrugged then didn't wait any longer to dig into her food.

Ephiny softly laughed.

"You ran?" spoke up Solari.

After Gabrielle got down some of her food, she answered Solari. "Yeah… thought it'd be good for me."

"I wish I'd thought of that," muttered Solari. She smirked but went back to her wheat cakes.

"So what you think you'll do for the day?" probed Ephiny. She tried to keep her tone even and not so curious since she wasn't allowed to lead onto anything.

Gabrielle smiled at the question. "I was thinking about visiting some people."

Solari's eyebrows shot up. "Like who?"

The princess shrugged as she cut up her wheat cake into smaller portions. "The priestess, Masika… maybe the stratégos." She pierced a few slices of her wheat cake but she decided to add an after thought. "Thought about even visiting Eilis."

"Really?" Solari pushed her empty plate away.

"Yeah, I haven't seen her since I got here."

Ephiny's head was bobbing. "That's right… you met her when we first came."

Gabrielle nodded her agreement. "Yes, so I thought I'd see her."

"She'd enjoy that." Ephiny smiled her approval then ate the sliced pieces of melon on her plate.

"What time will you two finish training?" inquired Gabrielle.

"Oh centaur crap," breathed Solari, "it could be late knowing Eponin."
"That's right since I'm not with her today I guess you guys get her." Gabrielle chuckled and shook her head. "Sorry."

Ephiny shook her head, a smile touched her lips. "We're happy. Eponin is an amazing teacher."

The princess considered her girlfriend's words and slowly she nodded. "She is." She had to admit, she admired Eponin not only as the weapons master but as her own teacher. Eponin was quite accomplished on several levels and always demanded respect.

Solari silently marvelled at how fast the princess had eaten her breakfast. It made her grin and inwardly chuckle at the plate that was cleared in record time.

"We need to get to class," mentioned Ephiny.

Solari took the hint so she got up on her feet with her plate and utensils in one hand.

"I'll go with you." Gabrielle got up too and followed her friends to the table for dirty dishes. After she and the Amazons dropped them off, they walked out into the warm but wet outdoors.

Ephiny brushed her wetting hair back. "I bet Adonia will fly today."

Solari abruptly laughed and nodded. "I bet you're right."

Gabrielle had an amused look as she listened to her friends. When they came close to the sparring fields, she decided to speak up. "I think I'm going to Eponin's office… just want to say hi before she gets busy."

"We'll go with you," agreed Solari.

The bard smiled and nodded. She slightly turned right and went to the armoury office hut that rested next door to the sparring fields. She knocked on the door and heard Eponin offer entry. She pushed the door open.

Eponin lifted her head and thinly smiled at the group of friends coming into her office. "Good morning."

"Morning, Eponin," replied each Amazon.

"So what happened to you, princess?" inquired the weapons master as she stood up.

Gabrielle chuckled. "I went for a run."

The weapons master paused in the middle of collecting her sword and sheath from the hanging rack behind her desk. "How was your run?"

"Refreshing," admitted the princess.

Eponin nodded as she strapped her sword onto her back. "I'm glad." She came around
her desk and smiled at her sister and Solari. "How are you, Ephiny and Solari?"

"I'm great," replied Solari.

Ephiny smiled. "The same, sister." She tilted her head. "Headed to the fields?"

"Yes." The weapons master approached the group. "Ready to begin your lessons?"

"Definitely." Ephiny's face brightened in anticipation.

Eponin dipped her head and ordered, "Let's head over then."

Ephiny and Solari took the hint, they turned and left first then Gabrielle followed out.

Eponin was out last and she gave her hut door a good slam.

Gabrielle turned to Ephiny and smiled at her. "I'll see you at dinner." She reached over and took Ephiny's hand.

Ephiny felt a little shy, her cheeks tinted red. She didn't say anything but dipped her head in acknowledgement.

Solari's right eyebrow made a slow incline as Gabrielle leaned in and kissed Ephiny softly on the lips.

The weapons master folded her arms over her chest and remained neutral to the situation like it was a daily event.

"I'll see you," murmured the princess.

Ephiny nodded. "See yah… have a good day." She smiled shyly and when Gabrielle winked at her she only blushed again.

Gabrielle started to walk off but her hand still held Ephiny's and she only let go when she'd taken a few small paces. She released her girlfriend's hand and looked to Eponin and Solari. "See you, Ep and Solari."

"Yeah… bye, princess," called Solari, she amazingly held back her jealousy in her tone.

Gabrielle then hurried off.

Eponin shook her head and placed her hand to Ephiny's mid back. "Come on, lovebird."

Ephiny shot a dangerous look to her sister but walked along side her.

Solari let out a grudging sigh as she followed the sisters. She hadn't expected the kiss at all and she should have seen the developing relationship coming between them. She tried to ignore her growing jealousy but it was so hard to block it or even ignore it.
The princess approached the two large doors of the temple. She paused in the large doorway and admired the doors made of pure oak. She pressed the palm of her hand against the smooth wood and traced the detailed carving of a tree in a forest. She was stunned by how amazing the work was and she was so amazed that she stepped backwards until she came to the top of the steps. She tilted her head back and took in the entire view of the meticulous and beautiful carving of The Great Amazon Oak Tree.

"That's so beautiful," the princess murmured. She brushed off the thick sheen of rainwater on her brow then hurried into the temple. She stepped inside but hesitated because she was worried about tracking mud inside of the temple.

"Take your boots off," ordered a deep, booming voice.

Gabrielle looked up from her muddy boots and her eyes rested on Priestess Narkissa, whom stood at the front of the altar. "I'm sorry," she called and bent forward.

Narkissa carefully watched the hunched Amazon untie her boots. She stepped off the dais altar and came down the aisle way between the rows of wood booths. She stopped several paces in front of the princess. "I am surprised to see you here, princess."

Gabrielle picked her boots up and set them aside, away from the doorway entrance. She smiled at her priestess as she brushed back a piece of hair plastered to her wet forehead. "Well Master Eponin gave me a day off and I thought I'd come for a visit."

Priestess Narkissa bowed her head. "I'm honoured, princess." She turned to her side and held out a hand to the altar. "Come with me, speak with me, and pray to Artemis with me."

Princess Gabrielle warmed at the offer and nodded her head. She followed the priestess to the altar and stepped up the dais. Gabrielle observed the gigantic stone statue of Artemis centred and elevated on the dias. Gabrielle paused to admire it while the priestess vanished off to the side to do something.

Narkissa came back over with two red pillows in either hand. She smiled at the wistful stare of the princess. She followed Gabrielle's gaze to the statue of Artemis. "Beautiful, isn't she?"

"Breath taking," murmured Gabrielle.

Narkissa softly smiled and bent forward so she could place the pillows on the floor before the statue. "Kneel, my princess."

Gabrielle looked down and noted the red pillows. She understood and bent down, her knees pressing into the pillow and softening her stature. From the corner of her eye, she watched the much older Amazon kneel down in a graceful, descending motion from years of practicing it.

Narkissa didn't speak for awhile; instead she gazed upon the great statue of Artemis.
Gabrielle wanted to speak however she held her tongue and did the same as the priestess. She'd took in the full detail of the statue that almost touched the ceiling.

Artemis stood tall and proud, her leg slightly parted and her sword was out, locked by both her hands. The blade of her magnificent sword was held vertical so that her eyes looked between the blade. Just behind her could be made out the top of a gigantic bow and strapped to her side was a quiver with several arrow tops protruding out. All of her plated armour was clearly noticeable as it covered her shins, most of her arms, chest, and stomach. Her hair was perfectly still but from the right side of her head was a visible feather that was actually made of pure gold.

Despite the grandeur of the sculpture, Gabrielle couldn't take her eyes away from Artemis's. Artemis's eyes sparkled and glowed brightly with striking and rich emeralds, it was an impressive and amazing display of the goddess's beauty.

"Her beauty never fails to enchant me," quietly spoke Narkissa.

Gabrielle inhaled sharply; she didn't know what to say.

The priestess leaned over and murmured, "Not even those emeralds do her eyes justice."

The princess irregularly breathed from Narkissa's words. "I heard legends that her eyes are the forest," whispered Gabrielle, her voice light and in awe.

Narkissa softly laughed but she nodded. "The legends are true." She turned her head to Gabrielle. "Your heart will stop when you see them."

The princess slowly turned her head to Narkissa.

The priestess had her first view into Gabrielle's own eyes and she sensed her body weaken from the beauty. "By Artemis," murmured Narkissa; she touched Gabrielle's cheek and sharpened her gaze deeper. "I see now why she has sent you."

"Sent me?" Gabrielle reached up and clasped her hands with the priestess. Immediately she felt a charge one that was similar to what she felt yesterday from The Great Amazon Oak. She shook it off and tried to remain focused on her questioning. "She? You mean Artemis?" Her brow was creased and her eyes hollowed with concern.

The priestess gently laughed at the princess's questioning. She laced her hand through Gabrielle's then answered. "Yes, Artemis has sent you to us, princess."

"I..." Gabrielle grew even more perplexed. She didn't know what to think or how to respond.

"Do not be concerned," assured the priestess. "Artemis has chosen you among so many but it was you that she has chosen."

"Chosen?" Gabrielle became more confused and she rubbed her forehead. "What do you mean, priestess? Tell me what's going on, please."
Narkissa enjoyed the princess's desire to understand. She'd never met an individual so concerned with understanding her world around her. It filled Narkissa with confidence of the future. "You were chosen, my princess by Artemis herself."

"To do what?" gently asked the bard.

The priestess's smile grew and her eyes darkened with determination. "Chosen to serve her and her Amazons."

Gabrielle's gaze faltered but she peered back up. "Am I suppose to do something in particular?"

"I cannot be sure, princess." The priestess tilted her head. "That is for Artemis to reveal to you."

"How do you know I'm her chosen?"

"Artemis has told me and my daughter, Maired." Narkissa squeezed the small hand in her own. "Maired prayed for your arrival and Artemis has answered."

Gabrielle couldn't believe what she was being told. She turned her head from Narkissa to the statue of Artemis. She stared up into her amazing emerald eyes.

"Be proud, princess," spoke Narkissa, "you have been chosen."

Gabrielle rotated her head back to the priestess.

"Artemis believes in you and her strength is yours," promised the priestess. "You are one of her chosen."

The bard furrowed her eyebrows when she considered Narkissa's words. "One?" Her eyes narrowed tightly and she asked, "Are there others or will be?"

Priestess Narkissa softly laughed at Gabrielle's intense perception. "Yes," she answered, "there will be another in your lifetime."

"Who?" urged the inquisitive young slave.

"I am not sure," confessed Narkissa, "but she will be reborn from your heart and soul."

"Me?" Gabrielle shook her head; her head spun with so much information.

Narkissa slightly frowned as she gazed upon the statue of Artemis. "Artemis's other chosen will be your greatest threat and all you'll ever need." Her features softened to Gabrielle. "That is all Artemis has told me but you must hold steady when the time comes."

"How will I know when it is her?"

"Artemis spoke that future will darken with the night in the lands of Greece but we
must not fear because the sunrise will dawn again." Narkissa gently brushed at
Gabrielle's face.

The bard felt her worries slowly ebb because of the priestess's touch. Her eyes drifted
shut and Narkissa's next words draped warmly over her and settled her fears.

"Do not be fearful, my princess. Artemis is beside you and nothing will stop you."
When Gabrielle looked at her again, the priestess gently smiled and soothingly
ordered, "Let us pray to Artemis."

Gabrielle dipped her head and faced the statue again. She bent her head forward and
Narkissa's right hand slipped into her left hand. Again Gabrielle felt that energy
charge from the priestess's touch and gradually crawl up her arm and burst through her
body. The energy was warm as much as powerful; it was comforting to the bard.
Together, she prayed with Narkissa to Artemis.

For half a candlemark the pair remained motionless and quiet as they prayed to
Artemis. A mix of wished and desires to understand what rested ahead for the
Amazon Nation. Eventually the peaceful silence was broken in the temple by the quiet
treading of another in the temple.

Narkissa gradually opened her eyes as she heard the person come up behind her and
Gabrielle. "Good morning, daughter."

Maired's lips curled into a small smile; she enjoyed how her mother knew her so well.
"Good morning, mother."

Narkissa's grasp slipped from Gabrielle's grip and the princess stood up.

Maired instantly bowed forward and greeted, "Good morning, princess."

"Good morning, Maired." The bard briefly looked to the priestess when she stood then
gazed back at Maired.

"It is nice to see you here." Maired had a warm smile and glowing hazel eyes.

"I thought I'd visit the temple," mentioned the princess.

Narkissa smiled in response as she held the two red pillows in her right hand. "I was
just speaking to the princess about our brief visions."

"Oh yes." Maired's attention flicked away from her mother back to the princess. "You
have been a gift to the Nation, princess."

"I'm not so sure myself," sadly refuted the princess.

"Do not worry," persisted the Amazon, "there is much still ahead." She then tilted her
had. "Just as much as there is behind you."

Gabrielle had a confused and even suspicious look. "Behind me? How would you…."
"My apologies," cut in the priestess. She dipped her head to Gabrielle then peered up with hooded eyes. "Artemis has shown Maired and I your past, my princess."

Gabrielle's eyes widened and she took a step back, her fears returned. "Everything?"

"It's okay," assured Maired. She reached out and clasped the bard's closest wrist. "We have not spoken about it to anybody… not even to the queen."

Gabrielle released a heavy breath and nodded.

Priestess Narkissa decided the young princess was still worrying so she decided to interject. "We know that you were taken into slavery with your mother and sister."

The young slave's head fell forward and she tried to remain calm in spite of being scared.

Maired stepped closer and tilted Gabrielle's head up with her right hand. "Your secret is safe, princess." She looked to her mother and saw the hidden agreement in Narkissa's eyes. She returned back to Gabrielle and whispered, "And will remain hidden as long as you would like it."

"Thank you," whispered the bard. She shook her head and quietly confessed, "I couldn't tell the queen or anybody else." She sighed, her eyes on the stone floor. "Only Ephiny and Eponin know about it."

Maired had pulled her hand away earlier but she felt the desire to comfort the princess again yet she refrained from it. "We understand."

Narkissa now rested her closest hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Yes, many Amazons would find it unbelievable however they would accept it. What they wouldn't accept is the fact that the truth was hidden from them especially if it's over a long period of time."

"I know," murmured the slave. She locked eyes with Narkissa. "I would tell the Nation but… I'm concerned that word would spread about my brand." Her eyes lowered again. "I have to keep it secret or else the slaver who trained me will most likely hunt me down."

Maired frowned. "Especially considering you are an Amazon Princess."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "It's not my life I'm concerned about but… the Nation's well-being."

The priestess now had a clearer understanding of why Gabrielle kept her brand hidden. "We will never speak of it, princess."

Gabrielle sadly smiled at the priestess. "Thank you."

"If we can ever help you with anything, please visit us." Maired offered a comforting smile.
"Maired is correct," agreed the priestess, "we are here always, princess. If you wish to confide in us don't hesitate to come here." She then held out her hands to direct to the temple. "We offer a place of solace, peace...." Her hands lowered then she whispered, "and open arms."

Gabrielle now smiled. "Thank you, priestess." She then shifted her smile to Maired. "Thank you, Maired."

"You are welcome, princess." Maired mirrored the smile back. "And where are you headed next?"

The young Amazon's lips puckered together as she considered. "I think to see the stratègos."

"Ahha... the stratègos," repeated the priestess.

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow at the priestess, demanding an explanation.

Priestess Narkissa slyly grinned and stated, "Commander Kalonice is quite the... character."

Maired deeply laughed. "What my mother is trying to say is she's taken with the stratègos."

Gabrielle's eyes widened at Maired.

"Maired," warned the dangerous voice of Narkissa.

Maired shot her mother a challenging look. "Well it is true, mother."

"Perhaps but it is neither here nor there." The priestess went serious as she gazed upon the princess again. "You will enjoy what the stratègos has to say."

Gabrielle quietly chuckled and dipped her head. "I have to agree... she does seem like a character."

"Commander Kalonice has her pearls of wisdom but they are black pearls."

Gabrielle tilted her head at the priestess's words.

Priestess Narkissa softly laughed and patted Gabrielle's back. "You will come to understand one day."

The princess left it at that but asked, "Where can I find the stratègos?"

"At this time," considered Narkissa, "mostly likely at her office." She then raised an eyebrow at her daughter.

"I will take you there," offered Maired.

"I'd like that," agreed the bard. "Thank you."
"Go on then," ordered the priestess. "Thank you for the visit, princess. Come in at any time."

"Thank you, priestess." Gabrielle offered a smile then walked down the aisle with Maired.

Priestess Narkissa watched them head to the door then as Gabrielle put her boots back on, she felt a smile come to her.

Maired opened a heavy door and let the princess step out first. She then followed but made sure to flash a bright smile to her mother.

Narkissa chuckled then turned to leave.

Maired pulled the large bronze ring until the temple door slammed shut.

Gabrielle had her head back and watching the sky that was slowly clearing. The rain was only a fine mist now and she figured by this afternoon the clouds would pretty much clear out.

"This way." Maired hurried down the steps and went towards the south side of the village.

The small bard hurried along side. "How do you like the stratègos?"

Maired was silent for awhile as she thought about it. She finally answered after much internal debate. "The stratègos is well balanced... she's been one of the best we've had but... there is room for improvement."

Gabrielle considered that for awhile then an older question resurfaced to her. "Is the stratègos going to retire soon?"

Maired sighed and dipped her head some. "She is becoming of age, yes." She lips pressed together tightly and she looked at Gabrielle. "Yet she refuses to step down."

"Why?" persisted the bard.

The Amazon shook her head. "She believes there is no Amazon warrior qualified to take her position."

"Wouldn't the queen or the council force her to retire?"

"Perhaps but... they would prefer the stratègos to agree upon it." Maired glanced at the princess. "It would do no good to force Commander Kalonice because she may not train her successor properly. Besides, Commander Kalonice has been the stratègos for many, many years and it would not honour her to force her out of her position."

Gabrielle's head bobbed in agreement. "That makes sense."

"The stratègos is excellent and successful in battle however the times are changing as
well as catching up with her." Maired sighed and shook her head again. "I have prayed to Artemis to show us a warrior capable of Commander Kalonice's position as the stratègos."

"One will show," persisted the bard.

Maired smiled at the princess's confidence. "Perhaps you are correct. You have come to us."

Gabrielle chuckled and tried to absorb the faith both Maired and the priestess held in her. She didn't understand where it came from or why but she accepted it nonetheless.

"Here we are," Maired indicated the hut ahead. "That is the stratègos's office." She stopped and faced the princess. "Good luck."

Gabrielle laughed and grasped the Amazon's forearm. "Thank you, Maired."

"My pleasure." Maired winked then stepped away. "Have a good day, princess."

"You too, Maired."

Maired nodded then made the journey back to the temple.

Gabrielle though faced the stratègos's office again and went to the door. She rapped on the door and when she heard Commander Kalonice's distinct voice she entered.

"Princess Gabrielle," greeted the stratègos. She quickly stood from her desk in good form because she respected the princess. "Welcome to my office hut." She held out her arm.

"Thank you, stratègos." Gabrielle clasped arms and gave a good shake.

"What brings you here, princess?" The stratègos took her seat again and curiously studied the bard. "Sit," she offered and signalled a chair in front of her desk.

"Thank you." The small slave took a seat in the wood chair and once she was comfortable, she replied, "I thought I'd take you up on the offer to learn more about the army."

Commander Kalonice's expression brightened briefly but she went stoic again. "It is nice to see your interest, princess."

Gabrielle thinly smiled and nodded back. "As I said before, Master Eponin told me a little but not everything."

"What would you like to know?" insisted Commander Kalonice.

"Well… Master Eponin briefly went over the system of command." Gabrielle tilted her had. "She told me that the army is organized much like Alexander the Great's army."
"It is," confirmed the stratègos. "Hence the reason why my title is the stratègos."

Gabrielle faintly grinned but she lost it to her wondering mind. "Is there a second in command?"

"Yes, the second in command is called the polemarchos." Commander Kalonice straightened up some. "But the polemarchos is only in charge of the foot warriors."

"There is a cavalry too?"

The stratègos nodded her head. "It is a small cavalry but the officer of the cavalry is the ilarchès."

"Who are they?"

Commander Kalonice slightly grinned. "The polemarchos is Officer Galatea and the ilarchès is Officer Rufina."

Gabrielle memorized the names for the future. When she came back to the present, she had another question on her mind. "How many are in the army?"

"Currently we have five hundred warriors all together," replied the stratègos. She tilted her head a little. "A hundred are cavalry and another hundred are archers, the rest are foot warriors."

The young slave shook her head as she did the calculations. "It seems like there are more Amazons in the Nation than five hundred."

The stratègos understood Gabrielle's line of thinking and it made her chuckle. "You are correct, princess however not every Amazon is a warrior."

The small bard suddenly had an astonished look.

Commander Kalonice enjoyed the dumbfounded expression and she felt rather amused. "There are many Amazons who cannot fight."

"Why?" persisted the princess.

"Princess," started the stratègos, "it is not a requirement to be a warrior to be an Amazon."

Gabrielle reached up and brushed back some of her blond strands. "Honestly stratègos, I didn't know that… I just naturally assumed Amazons were required to fight."

"Yes, they are required to learn how to fight so that they may at least defend themselves, protect themselves. But no Amazon is required to be a warrior and participate in wars and battles." Commander Kalonice folded her hands in her lap and studied the conflicting emotions crossing the bard's face. "All Amazons follow one belief and that is that no man is superior to women… god, immortal, or mortal. However not every Amazon believes that it requires bloodshed to stand up against the
male species and protest in this male dominated world."

"But then there's those Amazons that believe the only way to fight back is to take arms."

The stratègos nodded at Gabrielle's words. "And many warriors also believe in protecting their families and home, the Nation." She took a moment to cross her legs at the ankles then she continued speaking. "The Amazons that hold morals against bloodshed instead assist the Nation in other ways such as growing food, raising cattle, or perhaps they are skilled with speaking so they go into trade or diplomacy." She smiled at Gabrielle's warm expression. "I may be the commander of an army, princess but I do not believe war is the answer to problems. However at times it is the only means of protection in this world… it is the last course of action."

Gabrielle now admired the stratègos even more and fully respected her for her views. She bowed her head forward a little and said, "Sometimes I believe in fighting fire with fire but other times…." She lifted her head. "I don't know."

Commander Kalonice somewhat dipped her head in understanding. "It is a hard choice and one may never remain steady on the path once they realize some things."

The small bard adjusted some in her chair to get more comfortable. As she settled down, her thoughts wondered about her own morals. "I think the fighting is okay." Her attention centred on the stratègos. "I just don't believe in killing." She shook her head and she stared down at the floor. "I couldn't… I couldn't kill somebody."

"I respect that," stated the stratègos. She sensed pride build in her but she didn't express it. "However that is a hard path to follow. To fight but not kill." She tilted her head to one side. "That is a very small branch to walk, princess."

"I know," murmured Gabrielle. She shook away her reverie then brought her focus back to present. "I was wondering, where does the queen fit into the system?"

Commander Kalonice roughly smiled at the princess's deep curiosity. "The queen is essentially the true commander of the army." She noted the bemused expression on Gabrielle's face so she further clarified her words. "The queen overrides my control of the army at any time and I'm merely the second in command at the end of the day. However my position to the queen, as the stratègos, is to provide her with knowledge of war, fighting, battle tactics and so on."

Gabrielle considered the explanation; her eyebrows tightened together. "So… in a sense, you're the advisor."

"Yes, exactly," agreed Commander Kalonice. "I am the highest superior in the army but I answer to the queen. I recommend to her how the army should precede, attack, not attack and normally I do lead the army."

The princess was silent for awhile as she absorbed the information. "How does Master Eponin work with you?"

The stratègos chuckled. "Master Eponin is in charge of overseeing the training of new
Amazons both young and old. She also maintains inventory of the armoury as well as maintains the armoury goods."

"You mean as far as weapons that need repair?"

"Yes or any leathers that need major repair. Or perhaps a particular type of weapon is not popular then Eponin will ask a trader to sell it."

The young slave grinned. "An unpopular weapon, I can't imagine."

"It does happen," refuted Commander Kalonice. "At one time, the weapons master, before Master Eponin, tried a new weapon that came out on the market. They were called sais and they're similar to… well forks."

The princess arched an eyebrow.

The stratègos softly laughed at the Amazon's look. "They are small hand weapons, made of strong metal, and have three prongs."

"Huh," murmured the bard. "Do we still have them?"

"I believe maybe only a set or two left from the original grouping." Commander Kalonice shrugged. "They were not popular so they were sold."

Gabrielle remained quiet but then shook her head. "I didn't realize how… well how detailed the Nation is. I mean, the Nation is more than just…." She fell short on expressing herself.

"A tribe of warrior women?" suggested the stratègos.

"Yes." Gabrielle brightened at the explanation. "I mean, the way the legends go they make the Amazons sound like a tribe of brutal, savage women fighting men."

Commander Kalonice full heartedly laughed now and smiled at the princess. "I'm sure that is how it seems to the male species." She chuckled a few more times. "The only reason why this is a man's world is because we let them have it."

The bard turned the stratègos's words over and over in her head. "I suppose that is true," she finally agreed.

The stratègos thinly smiled and began to go stoic again. "Was there any other question, princess?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "Not that I can think of right now." She then eased up from her chair. "Thank you, stratègos."

"You are welcome, my princess." Commander Kalonice also rose up and held out her right arm.

The young Amazon understood the gesture. She gave a strong shake to the stratègos's arm and smiled at her. "Thank you again."
"Visit at any time." Commandor Kalonice sat back down. "My door is always open to you, princess."

The bard felt warmed by the acceptance and happily smiled. "I appreciate it, stratègos." She then stepped around the chair and headed for the door. "Have a good day."

"You too, princess." The stratègos waited until the princess was gone then she relaxed in her chair. "You might make a decent queen after all, princess." Her words quietly rolled from her lips as she went back to her paperwork.

Princess Gabrielle travelled across the village and arrived at the steps of the healer's hut. She went up the three woods steps then just entered without knocking since she knew it was open doors for the hut. When she entered, she found only two Amazons inside looking for help from the healer. She offered smiles to them, received one back, and then she went into the back to find the healer.

As she walked down the small hallway, she saw the office door at the back. She came up to the open door and tapped on it. She smiled when the Amazon at the desk lifted her head and smiled at her.

"Good morning, princess," greeted the healer. She stood up from her desk and came around it. She held out her arm and spoke again. "I am the master healer, Etana."

"Yes," agreed the princess as she took the muscular arm. "I've met your daughter, Eilis."

Etana deeply chuckled and finally relinquished her hold. "Yes, she has mentioned meeting you this past winter."

The bard dipped her head in acknowledgement.

"So what brings you here to my hut?" inquired the master healer, her hands behind her back.

Princess Gabrielle smiled. "I'm just here for a visit." She paused then added, "I would like to meet your assistants. Master Eponin mentioned you had half a dozen under your authority."

"Yes I do so far." Etana stepped around the bard and went to the door. "And we've been busy until just recently."

"Oh?"

The master healer smiled back at the bard. She signalled for her to follow. "Yes, the spring fever seems to finally be backing off." She brought Gabrielle down the hallway some and at the end of the hall, to the right, was another open door. She led the bard inside after her.

When Gabrielle came in, she realized in the middle of the room was a large
rectangular table and three Amazons were working on parchments. She stepped off to Etana's side and studied the Amazons, she immediately recognized Eilis when she lifted her head.

"Good morning, princess." Eilis stood up from her chair and came closer, her arm out. "It's good to see you after so long."

The princess brightened and accepted the arm shake. "It's wonderful to see you too, Eilis."

Eilis grinned and looked to her mother. "A tour of the hut?" She tilted her head. "Would you like me to do it?"

"If you don't mind?" inquired the mother. She also looked to the princess. "If you don't mind either, princess. Unfortunately I have a lot of work to take care of."

"We have proposals due today," piped in Eilis.

"That's what I've heard," agreed the princess. "What is your proposal?" She looked to the master healer.

Etana remained stern as she stated, "Another healer hut. The Nation is growing and so are the ailments, we need more space."

"I hope the council and queen approve of it," agreed the princess.

"We hope so too," agreed Eilis, a grin on her face.

Etana thinly smiled and looked to her daughter. "I leave the princess to you." She then gazed upon the princess. "Enjoy the visit and again, my apologies."

"I understand," assured the young slave. "Thank you."

"Good day." Etana bowed her head then stepped out of the assistants' office.

Eilis had noted the two on looking healers at the table. She turned to them and lifted an eyebrow at them in signal.

The two healers gracefully rose up.

"Princess, I'd like to introduce you to two of our healers." Eilis held out a hand to the closest Amazon healer. "This is senior grade healer Melpomene."

Melpomene took Gabrielle's arm into a good shake. "Or Mel for short, my princess."

The bard chuckled as she let go of the healer's arm.

"And this is our young apprentice Cliona."

Gabrielle now held her arm out to the apprentice healer and took in her appearance. Gabrielle figured the young healer had to be about Gabrielle's age yet she had a
confident air about her. "Pleased to meet you, Cliona."

"You as well, princess." Cliona dropped her arm back to her side.

"Cliona just began with us about two moons ago," mentioned Eilis.

The princess faintly grinned.

"We have some things in common," mentioned Cliona to the princess. "I joined the Nation when you did... this past winter."

Gabrielle perked up at the news. "How do you enjoy it here?"

Cliona now smiled for the first time. "I am incredibly happy to be here. A day doesn't pass when I am not grateful my mother and I were rescued by the Nation."

The princess expression twisted together and she asked, "Rescued?"

Cliona now had the perplexed look as she glanced between her fellow healers then back to the princess. "Yes... the Nation rescued my mother and I from our imprisonment by my father and eldest brother."

Gabrielle tried to rid of her confused look because she knew being the princess meant she was suppose to know everything. She now recovered and nodded her head. "Of course." When Cliona's expression softened, Gabrielle continued to speak. "And who is your mother?"

The apprentice healer warmly smiled and replied, "My mother is Jarina."

The princess nodded her head and filed the information away.

"We should start our tour," interrupted Eilis.

"Please," agreed the bard. She then looked to the two healers. "It was nice meeting you both."

"You as well," agreed Melpomene.

"Enjoy the tour, my princess." Cliona dipped her head then she and the senior healer went back to their paperwork on their scrolls.

Eilis and Gabrielle stepped out of the large office room and into the hall. As they made their way back into the main hut, Eilis shifted closer to the princess.

"I assume you do not know much about the rescues?"

The princess opened her mouth but no words came, she merely shook her head.

"I would provide you with more information but I cannot be sure if I am allowed." Eilis patted the princess's back. "I believe that is Master Eponin's position."
"I will take it up with her then," agreed Gabrielle.

Eilis, the senior healer, nodded her head then started the tour of the healer's hut. And it wasn't until the early afternoon that Gabrielle found herself at the end of the tour. She gratefully thanked Eilis and felt pleased to now understand the finer mechanics of how the healers worked in the Nation. She then left the hut and decided her next stop would be the council hut. When she arrived, she went into the small lobby room and gazed about wondering which way Masika's office could possibly be.

"Good afternoon, my princess," greeted an Amazon to the right of the doorway.

Gabrielle practically jumped but she just reserved herself, her heart furiously pounding from the small scare. "I didn't see you there."

The Amazon contained her grin as she rotated her head to the princess. "I am glad… it means I have done my job well."

"Yes," agreed the sighing princess, "very well indeed."

"May I assist you?" inquired the Amazon, who obviously was a guard.

"Maybe so." Gabrielle squared her shoulders again. "I'm looking for Councillor Masika's office."

"Of course, this way." The guard signalled for her to follow and she went to her right. Gabrielle walked behind and came to the last door on the left. "This one?"

"Yes, princess." The guard stepped back and offered a smile. "Enjoy your visit." She stepped away.

"Hold on," called Gabrielle.

The guard paused and turned around, her face inquisitive.

The bard had a grin as she neared the Amazon, her arm out. "I'm Gabrielle."

The Amazon finally stole a moment to laugh and she shook arms. "I am Vara, my princess."

"Nice to meet you." Gabrielle relinquished her shake.

Vara smiled one last time then returned to her post.

Gabrielle quietly laughed to herself and knocked on the office door. When Masika ordered entry, she went inside and was found Masika behind her desk like many the others Gabrielle had visited today.

"Princess Gabrielle," welcomed the councillor. "What brings you to my office?" She retuned her gaze back to her scroll work, finding it more important. "Something I could perhaps do for you?"
"Yes, if you have time, councillor." The small slave approached the desk but remained tall as possible with a ridged back.

Masika peered up with hooded eyes. For several quiet moments she just gauged the princess and her demeanour. Finally a hidden grin developed on her face. "I believe I have some time." She set her quill into the ink jar and rolled her scroll up. "Please have a seat."

Gabrielle inwardly sighed in relief. She took a seat but still remained calm and in control without showing any submission. "How's your day been, councillor?"

"Busy," admitted Masika. "Yours?" She leaned back into her stiff wood chair.

"The same," agreed the princess.

The councillor leaned her head to the side. "What brings you to my office, princess?"

"Well your mother, Councillor Rena, offered help with understand the council and government. I was hoping you had some time to tell me more."

Masika contained her faint smile and only mutely nodded her head.

Gabrielle took that as a sign to ask her questions. "I guess what I'm really curious about is what's the role of the council."

"Master Eponin has not told you?" asked the surprised councillor.

"She has," confirmed Gabrielle, "but I wanted… well your version, a councillor's version."

"Ah, I see." Masika laced her hands together and rested them in her lap. "The role of the council is to balance the power of the queen so that she doesn't gain too much power in the government. The Nation is not a monarchy but republic."

"A Roman republic?"

"Similar," granted Masika, "but the queen cannot never claim dictatorship."

"Never?" Gabrielle was slightly amazed.

"Well," relented the councillor, "there is one extreme case but it is far too rare."

"What's the condition?"

Masika cautiously studied the bard but did decide to answer. "Only during a siege on the Nation can the queen claim full power but only with the unanimous consent by the council."

"Has that ever happened?"
"No, never." Masika held a hard stare at the princess. "It is an extreme condition and only a queen that can be fully trusted is granted such power."

"Huh." The bard's head bobbed a few times. "And the council is suppose to represent the Amazons in the Nation?"

"Correct."

Gabrielle's mind turned over the information from several angles. Slowly her eyebrows creased together and her eyes darkened with suspicion. "All council members must be a certain age though, right?"

"Yes, a councillor must be forty or older, that is the written law however it's an unspoken understanding that councillors should be at least over fifty."

The princess shook her head, her face still askew with confusion. "And a council of five members fifty years or older represents a Nation of over seven hundred much younger Amazons?"

Masika's expression darkened with warning but she relented from say anything.

Gabrielle huffed and arched an eyebrow at the councillor. "That doesn't exactly represent the Nation sufficiently."

Masika quietly agreed but she wouldn't be allowed to show it. She was a council member and in time she would be the head council member, it was her legacy. "What are you suggesting, princess?" Her voice came out thick and heavy.

"I'm suggesting that if the council is suppose to represent the Nation then they should get more younger members in." Gabrielle suddenly sprang from her chair and started pacing in the small office. "I mean think about it, over half of the Nation is between the ages of five and twenty-five."

"Are you suggesting we put five year olds on the council?" shot back Councillor Masika.

The princess sighed; her shoulders slumped because she knew Masika wouldn't make this easy. "No, what I'm suggesting is we get some younger members. No offence, councillor but the council is not properly representing the Nation."

Masika's face was still dark, her eyes squinted, and her composure very stiff. "I do not believe a council full of young tempered Amazons is what this Nation needs. The council holds elders who have seen much in their time and can properly decide what is best for the Nation."

"But what about new ideas?" countered the bard. She stalked towards Masika as she spoke. "Fresh minds? At least younger voices. I mean a younger councillor will be in the loop with the younger crowd of Amazons and know what they want. How can an elder Amazon know what the younger generation want?"

Masika was breathing hard but it wasn't because she was offended but because
Gabrielle had her mind racing. She reined control of her emotions and returned to her normal calm state. "The tradition has been like this for years, princess."

Gabrielle grasped the desk's edges and bent forward, her eyes locked on Masika. "And new times call for new traditions."

"You are not the queen," hotly reminded the councillor.

The princess smirked and smugly reminded back, "But I will be." She then had a long, silent staring contest with the councillor.

Masika finally broke and a distant grin spread on her lips. "Perhaps when you are queen then the Nation will be prepared for such liberal and chaotic ideals, princess."

Gabrielle chuckled and released the edge of the desk. She took her seat again. "So you don't disagree," she challenged with a grin.

Masika took a moment to decide how best to respond without giving away too much. "I am merely a councillor… not an opinionist."

The princess quietly laughed. "Not that a councillor ever offers their opinion in the matters of the Nation."

The young councillor refrained from saying anything to the joke but her small grin was pulling at her lips.

Gabrielle settled back down and tried to move away from the earlier debate. "I've heard a lot of talk about these proposals."

Masika sighed just at the mention of them. "Yes, it is that time of the season." She leaned back into her chair once again. "Each department submits any proposals for improvements to their department. It is the council and queen's duty to go over them and decide which to approve of."

"Each department?" questioned the bard.

Masika dipped her head before further explaining. "Yes, the departments are such areas as the agricultural, armoury, herders, maintenance, healers, army, and so on." She sighed then continued. "If a proposal is accepted then we do whatever the work is that was decided on at the end. Not all proposals are full agreed upon or there are changes, revisions."

"This happens once a year?"

"Typically, yes," agreed Masika, "only for improvements… it's sort of like spring cleaning for the summer. Through out the year there may be other small proposals but these are the big projects for the summer."

"I understand." Gabrielle's head bobbed a few times.

Masika watched as various thoughts seemed to flick across the princess's face. She
couldn't understand them at all except she knew they were apart of the bard's inquisitiveness.

"Going back to the council and the queen…" Gabrielle again centred her gaze on the councillor. "Was there a reason why the council concept was created? I mean… was there a queen that took on too much power?"

"Yes," quietly agreed Masika, "over a decade ago. There was an Amazon that challenged a queen for the mask. This Amazon beat the queen and took the mask as the new queen. The new queen was intoxicated with her new position as the queen and almost sent the Nation to Hades in a ridiculous war."

"Gods," breathed the surprised bard. "What happened?"

"The queen was killed in battle so the original queen was reinstated without challenge. After that, this queen set out to establish a council to forever balance the power in the government to make sure no queen destroyed a Nation."

"Which queen established the council?"

The councillor warmly smiled and stated, "She was a young queen at the time and still is queen today." Now her smile went prouder. "Queen Hippolyta of the Thessaly Nation."

Gabrielle blinked and her jaw loosened some. "I didn't… I didn't realize she was…."

Masika tilted her head. "She is not just a legend, princess. She is real flesh and blood like us."

Gabrielle chuckled and shook her head some. She swept back a lock of hair as she said, "I didn't know. I've heard so much about her I just thought she was… well a myth."

"She is not," confirmed the councillor. "Perhaps one day you will meet her."

"I would love to." Gabrielle's eyes were lit bright like a grass field in the sun. "Gods that'd be wonderful."

Masika kept a note of that so she'd know to mention it to Queen Melosa the next time she saw her.

"Councillor, has the council ever taken the queen's power away?"

The elder Amazon shook her head and contently sighed. "No thankfully, not since the councils have been established in the Nations. The role of the council has been sufficient in deterring any queens abusing their powers. However if it were to happen then the queen would be stripped of her position and her mask destroyed by the priestess."

"Why is it destroyed?"
"The corrupt queen will have corrupted the mask and it must be destroyed; only the priestess can handle the black mask. The priestess cannot be affect by the corruption since she is protected by Artemis. Afterwards, a new one is forged and the priestess blesses it before the new queen is given her caste."

"How does the priestess destroy the mask?"

Masika frowned. "It is unknown, princess… only the priestesses know the ceremony. It has never been revealed to anybody outside."

"Gods," murmured the surprised bard. "Then what happens to the corrupt queen?"

"The corrupt queen is banished from the Nation for five years. She may go to another Nation however she is not allowed back at her home Nation. Once the allotted time has passed she may return if she wishes."

Gabrielle sunk in her seat at imagining if she ever abused her future powers as queen. She knew she'd be torn if she'd ever hurt her Nation in some way. Then her thoughts slowly went back to Queen Hippolyta and the history that Masika told her.

"Councillor, do the Nations keep a record of things?"

Masika was a little confused but she tried to answer the question as best as possible. "We keep records on certain events, yes. We also keep records on Amazons for particular things."

"What you mean?"

Masika chuckled and she knew this would be another long explanation. "The departments keep records on their personnel but it's typically on significant things." She paused to take a moment to cross her legs under the table. "An example would be with the army, if a warrior Amazon showed bravery in battle then her superior notes it in the records. The Amazon then is given a particular coloured feather to honour her for going beyond duty. You may have seen some Amazons with these feathers."

Gabrielle's expression glazed over with consideration. She suddenly focused back on Masika. 'I've seen some warriors with a dark yellow feather… two or three at a time."

"Yes," confirmed the councillor, "that is for bravery or courage in battle. Green feathers are for excelling in the agricultural or herding areas. A blue feather is for diplomacy. Or a red feather represents innovation or inspiration on the battle field, on the sparring field, in the crops… anywhere really."

Gabrielle agreed and liked the idea of the symbolism of the feathers.

"However," cut in Masika's voice, "records are also kept on what negative actions Amazons take."

The young bard chuckled and nodded. "I thought so." After she settled, she then went back to her original question. "But what I meant earlier was do any of the Nations keep records of the history? I mean what the Amazons go through over time."
Masika considered it then shook her head. "Beyond our personnel records and some significant events, no not really. A lot is passed down by word of mouth but even that is distorted some over time." She narrowed her eyes at the wistful look on the princess's face. "Why are you interested, princess?"

"Well… don't you think the Nation needs a… historian?" Gabrielle sat up and her expression was becoming excited. "Tradition is important in the Nation, right? History is apart of our tradition and tradition is apart of our history. The history of the Amazons should be kept and record for future generations."

Masika's lips were pressed tightly together as she thought over the concept. Her eyes grew distant and her right foot slightly swung, which rested on top of her left leg. "Perhaps you are right, princess."

In reaction Gabrielle immediately brightened up. "Councillor, we should look into this."

Masika shot a grin at the young, ambitious Amazon. "As compelling of an idea as it is, princess I cannot… look into it." The young slave frowned at her but she quickly cut Gabrielle off before Gabrielle refuted her. "However if you are so intent on this idea, princess then I recommend submitting a proposal to the council."

Gabrielle stiffened at the suggestion and she weakly asked, "Proposal to the council?"

"Yesss." The councillor arched a dark eyebrow. "It would have to be approved before some Amazon went romping through the archives and picking elders' brains for history."

Gabrielle sighed but she couldn't let the idea go. "But isn't it too late to put a proposal in?"

"The major proposals are due by sunset, yes however during the next seven days smaller ones may be submitted." Masika sat up then continued speaking. "If you're so intent on this idea of yours, princess then scribe a proposal and hand it in." She slightly grinned and quietly said, "Off the record, you already have my vote."

Princess Gabrielle chuckled and nodded. "I'll give it a try then."

Masika felt her respect go up a notch for the young princess. She liked the spirit in this princess and she was incredibly different than Terreis or any others in the past. "I also recommend you find somebody willing to be this… historian before you submit your proposal. That will be the first thing the council will attack."

"Thank you." Gabrielle smiled.

Masika shook her head and looked down at her scroll. She knew she needed to get back to work.

The bard caught the councillor's diverted attention. She suddenly rose up. "I should let you finish, councillor."
Masika lifted her head and a faint but warm smile touched her lips. "Call me Masika, princess."

The princess returned the smile as her defensiveness to the councillor suddenly died. She now felt fond as much as admiral of the councillor. "Only if you call me Gabrielle."

"Of course, Gabrielle." Masika bowed her head then stood up.

Gabrielle was stunned but she clasped Masika's offered arm.

"I enjoyed our conversation." Masika smirked. "And debate." She relinquished her shake and her next words came out serious despite she was teasing. "Perhaps there is hope for you after all, Gabrielle."

The bard blinked then realized the councillor was joking. She shook her head and as she headed for the door, she shot back, "Perhaps for you too, Masika."

The councillor gave a deep laugh but called, "Goodbye, Gabrielle."

The princess glanced back and smiled. "Thank you." She quietly left the amused councillor to her work. Now she decided her next mission would be to talk to Queen Melosa about a small break. She really wanted to visit both Amphipolis and Potidaea this summer if she wanted to lie to rest her fears and curiosity. Even though it would give her some resolution to the past she had a sinking feeling it would only bring her new fears or even more pain. Gabrielle wasn't sure if she was ready for more pain but she had to know.

When Gabrielle finally was able to track down the queen, she found herself in the stables where she'd originally stabled Torqueo. He was now in the corral with all the other horses while the stables remained empty.

"And over here, my queen you can see the roof damage."

The queen dropped her head back and saw how the wood planks were fairly worn and there were small gaps that went all the way through. She could just make out the clear blue sky through the cracks. "I would say so," she agreed. She then sensed somebody behind her so she turned around. "Princess," she greeted.

The princess dipped her head. "My queen."

Queen Melosa held her hand out to the other Amazon. "Have you met Master Eponin's assistant Hali?"

"No, I haven't." Gabrielle did the traditional arm shake and offered a smile.

"I heard you've had the day off," mentioned the senior weapons trainer.

"Yes." Gabrielle warmly smiled. "It's been a great day too."

Queen Melosa lifted an eyebrow. "A day of writing and relaxing?"
The princess quickly shook her head. "No, I've been visiting various departments. First thing I visit with Priestess Narkissa then Commander Kalonice, next was the healers' hut and just now I'm coming from Councillor Masika's office."

Hali blinked and stared at the princess.

Queen Melosa though remained collected and didn't act at all impressed or surprised. She wasn't about to give this young Amazon any of her respect just yet until she truly earned it on Melosa's terms. "It is reassuring to hear the princess is taking interest in her Nation."

Gabrielle held back from sighing because the queen wasn't giving her any room. "Of course… everything has been rather fascinating."

Hali had kept quiet and just watched the exchange. She wasn't sure why the queen was so incredibly hard on the princess but it slightly annoyed her. As a senior grade weapons trainer, she knew the idea was to teach and bring deep understanding to the students but not punish or frustrate them to make them dislike being an Amazon.

"Fascinating is not the word I would choose," challenged the queen. Her hands now went to her hips, her expression darker than earlier. "Was there anything you needed, princess?"

The bard almost sighed but instead replied, "I would like to speak to you… about a personal matter when you have the time."

Queen Melosa studied the small Amazon and her eyes grew harder still.

Gabrielle held her ground and didn't falter under the queen's scrutiny yet her body grew cool.

"Very well," granted the queen. "Hali and I will be finished shortly… wait for me outside."

"Of course, my queen." Gabrielle bowed her head then decided to leave now. Just before she stepped out of the stable, she could hear Hali continue to speak up the repairs that needed to be done on the stables. She blocked out the conversation as she waited near the door and her gaze wondered through the village. Just off to her right several hundred paces away was one of five gigantic corrals for the horses. It was where Torqueo and Diana both were so she went over to visit her stallion.

Torqueo was on a small hill top and he heard a distinct whistle from his master. He turned his head to the left and he whined when he saw her. Without another second, he galloped down the small, stony hill and came up to the fence, as close as he could get to Gabrielle.

"Hey, boy." Gabrielle bent forward and rubbed his crown. "It's good to see you."

Torqueo whined and nudged at his master's arm. He happily sighed and nuzzled his face into her touch.
"I miss you too." The princess held onto the fence with one hand and her other hand steadied her as she leaned in to kiss his cheek jaw. "Have they been treating you well?"

Torqueo stomped his front leg in response.

"Lots of apples?"

Torqueo dipped his head and shook it.

"No?" The bard giggled and patted his neck. "I'll stop by tonight with a couple. How's that sound?"

Torqueo lifted his head and snorted happily.

"Okay sounds like a date." Gabrielle chuckled and scratched behind his ear some.

Torqueo quietly enjoyed the attention but then he sensed another human near by. He looked beyond his master then huffed in annoyance.

Gabrielle had also felt the other person but didn't acknowledge them because she wanted her time with Torqueo.

"You always talk to your horse?" inquired the rich voice of the queen.

Torqueo whined and glared at Queen Melosa.

The queen lifted a challenging eyebrow at the stallion.

"He talks back," countered the bard. She brought her hand to her face and kissed her fingertips. She then pressed her fingertips against his nose and whispered, "See you tonight."

Torqueo happily agreed with a whine then took off at a trot to join the other horses.

"So it seems," relented Queen Melosa.

Gabrielle turned around and almost leaned against the fence post but thought twice about it.

The queen put her hands on her hips and her mind jumped back to Gabrielle's original purpose. "What did you want to speak about?"

The bard had gone over in her mind how she'd ask the queen about this. She could only hope it'd come out properly without leading to too much information or questioning. "I wanted to ask permission to go on a break for about seven maybe ten days."

"And what do you plan to do?" inquired the queen.
"I would like to return home for awhile… my original home." Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest. "Plus I have… family in another town I'd like to visit that I haven't seen in three years."

Melosa could understand the young girl's desire to visit with family. "What villages?"

"They're both on the border of Thrace… Potidaea and Amphipolis."

The queen tried to recall the locations of the villages and slowly nodded. "Potidaea is on the first Macedonian peninsula."

"Yes and Amphipolis is about a days ride away north-east along the Thrace border."

Queen Melosa pulled away from her memory and gazed back at the bard. "I cannot grant you this time off for another moon. Once you've accomplished more training."

"That's what I assumed." Gabrielle stifled another sigh. "I've waited this long."

"Yes," agreed the queen. "However I do have one condition before you can go."

The young princess tilted her head, eyebrows creased together.

"You must take two competent Amazons with you." Queen Melosa stared hard at the Amazon. "I will not have the Nation's princess wondering around the country-side unprotected."

Gabrielle had slightly anticipated the request and actually hoped for it.

"I recommend you find two Amazons and request for them to go. If they can go then you must let me know so I can approve of them accompanying you." Queen Melosa then hesitated as she considered Gabrielle may have already selected some Amazons. "Have you anybody in mind?"

"Actually I was thinking about Ephiny and Master Eponin." Gabrielle lifted an inquisitive eyebrow.

Queen Melosa had expected as much so she shook her head. "I can grant Ephiny but not Master Eponin. She must remain here for training."

Gabrielle just about audibly groaned when she forgot about that problem. She now had a sinking feeling since she didn't know who else to take since Ephiny and Eponin were the only two that knew about her slavery brand. "I will find another then."

"As soon as you've found a second companion I will approve of your trip." Queen Melosa now relaxed some and asked, "Was there anything else, princess?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "No… thank you, my queen."

Queen Melosa dipped her head and turned.

The young slave watched the queen gracefully and proudly walked away. And finally
Gabrielle let out a deep and long sigh that shook her frame. She dropped her head forward some and with one last glance at her stallion, she headed back to her hut for the rest of the candlemarks before dinner. She figured she'd work on a proposal for the historian while she waited for dinner.

Slowly the days rolled on for the young Amazon Princess. Her training with Eponin gradually grew more intense and Gabrielle each day rose to the challenge. And every afternoon, she'd return to her hut just as sore as the day before yet feeling undoubtedly rewarded for her hard effort.

For several days, Gabrielle had written a proposal for approval on a historian. Ephiny, Solari, and a few others assist the princess by spreading news of the interest in the new position in hopes Gabrielle would find somebody. It'd been five days and only two days were left before the closing of spring proposals and Gabrielle was growing weary that she'd find somebody.

However late one evening, Gabrielle was about to rise from her desk after working on a scroll when there was a knock at her door. The bard half turned in her chair and called, "Come in."

Cautiously an Amazon entered the hut, closed the door, and stood in front of the door. She shyly looked to the princess and gently spoke, "Hi, princess… I'm Gryta and I've heard you're looking for a historian."

Gabrielle, suddenly charged with excitement, jumped up from her seat. "I am, Gryta. Are you interested?"

"I think so," murmured the shy Amazon. She cleared her throat and put her hands behind her back as the princess neared her. "I heard the general overview of the position but I just wanted more details… if that's okay."

"Of course." The bard directed to the table and chairs just beside Gryta. "Sit down and we'll talk."

Gryta nodded then took a seat. She remained ridged and stiff in the chair to show good posture.

Gabrielle slowly sat down and tried to shake her mind away from her scroll she'd been previously working on. "Well in general the historian will keep detailed scrolls of the history of the Amazons." She shifted some in her chair. "This is mainly going to require doing a lot of back tracking on how the Amazons were first started. Then lead up to the events of the present."

"And the historian will keep records of the future events?" probed Gryta.

"Yes," agreed the princess. "However back tracking the past, I think will take plenty of years."

Gryta faintly grin and dipped her head. "I believe you're correct, princess."

The young slave chuckled and tilted her head. "How are you with talking to people?
This will require a lot of talking, especially to the elders in Nations."

"On a one on one basis, I am just fine," declared Gryta but she shyly smiled. "However it does take me awhile to warm up."

Gabrielle chuckled and enjoyed the shy look on the Amazon's face. She took a quiet moment to take in the Amazon's features. Gryta was a little taller than Gabrielle and had rich almost fire red hair that touched her shoulders. Her face was small but round while her nose seemed out of character since it was a bit wide. And when Gabrielle caught her eyes, she enjoyed how they shifted between a blue and a green, they were a turquoise shade. As Gabrielle pulled her focus out, she realized the Amazon must be a warrior considering the dark yellow feather tied behind her Amazon feather. "Which department are you in, Gryta? The military?"

Gryta nodded then answered, "I'm a foot warrior under the polemarchos, princess."

The bard tilted her head to the other side and further inspected the Amazon. Gryta had to be at least twenty years of age but no more than twenty-three Gabrielle decided. "Are you not satisfied with the army?"

"I enjoy being a warrior." Gryta went silent as she pulled together her thoughts into proper order. "Yet I do not find it fulfilling."

"What are your aspirations?" urged the bard. "Is there anything you thoroughly enjoy doing?"

Gryta faintly grinned. "I am curious by nature, princess. I like to investigate things so I can understand them and I admit I am a perfectionist." She lost her grin as she continued to think about herself. "I believe I'd like to be the historian because I believe in history being important." She was staring at her boots but now she lifted her gaze to the princess. "It's apart of keeping the culture in the Nation."

"I agree," stated the princess. She suddenly rose up and crossed over to her desk. She pulled out her top drawer on the right side and thumbed through her scrolls that rested on their sides. She finally found the proposal scroll and brought it to Gryta. "This is the proposal… it'll give you an idea."

Gryta gingerly took the scroll and carefully read over the words.

Gabrielle had taken her seat again and curiously watched Gryta's facial expressions. She was content when a small smile ever so slowly grew across Gryta's face.

When Gryta was finished, she rolled it up and held it out. "I believe I would like the position of historian, princess."

Gabrielle warmly smiled and took the proposal. "You may have it if it is approved by the council." She then stood and returned the scroll to its home in the drawer.

"Will you need my assistance with the council?" spoke up Gryta, her eyes following the princess.
Gabrielle once again took her seat and crossed her legs. "I think it would be best. I will go to the council tomorrow with my proposal. Will you be able to make it?"

"I will be on patrol duty tomorrow," Gryta's face twisted together. "I believe I finish three candlemarks after midday."

"I might be able to get out of class early." Gabrielle was also planning in her head the time. "When you are finished, come to the sparring fields."

"Which will you be on?" persisted the Amazon.

"I train on the far south field."

Gryta dipped her head in acknowledgement. "I will go there first then to your hut if you are not there."

"Wonderful." Gabrielle smiled then stood up.

The Amazon didn't hesitate to stand as well and shifted to the door. "Thank you, princess for your time and the position."

"You don't have it yet," reminded the princess.

Gryta merely bowed her head then stated, "I will soon." She lifted her head with a hidden smug look then opened the door behind her. "Good night, princess."

"Good night, Gryta and thank you."

The Amazon shot a shy smile then silently left the princess's hut.

Gabrielle amusingly grinned and shook her head. "Quite an Amazon," she murmured and went to her desk to finish her scroll.

It wasn't long before the next sun reached in the low east and the rays crept through Gabrielle's window. The princess slowly arose and got ready for her training. It was vigorous and more than yesterday or any day before this one. For the past week, Eponin had Gabrielle warm up with laps around the sparring fields.

Eponin would stand in the middle of the six sparring fields. She would order the princess to run three laps around the three sparring fields; three around three was what Eponin would say. So Gabrielle would heft her staff into both hands and run at a steady pace around the field. In the background, Eponin would yell at her to go faster whenever she slowed, which was becoming rare anymore.

Then the bard would jog into the middle of the sparring field, drop her staff to the ground, and take ten minutes to stretch. The weapons master would near her and begin the verbal lessons about the Nation as Gabrielle stretched her muscles. Then after her stretching, Gabrielle would jump to her feet, her staff back in her hands, and she would go through a system of drills to warm up. As she did so, Eponin would continue to speak and verbally teach about the Nation, that day it was about the mentality of a warrior Amazon. The bard had carefully listened to every detail and
committed it to memory because she knew it was a key element to many of her Amazons in the Nation.

After about a candlemark of systematic drills, Eponin would stop the princess then Eponin would start the staff training for the day that would last most of the day. Near the end of day, the weapons master stopped the staff training early and continued the teachings of the Amazon way.

"An Amazon may not be immortal but nothing is impossible for her," stated the weapons master. She stared down at her student on the ground and Eponin leaned against her staff. "And an Amazon also expects the unexpected."

Gabrielle faintly furrowed her eyebrows when she saw Eponin tense. For some reason, Gabrielle's hands curled around her staff, it was some natural instinct to do so.

Suddenly the weapons master straightened up in a fluent motion and had her staff swinging at her student.

The bard yelped but reacted in time by getting her staff up in horizontal position. Her staff banged loudly when Eponin's connected with it. Her eyes were wide and bright with surprise. "Eponin?"

"Get up," growled the weapons master and she took a few steps back.

The princess bounced up onto her feet and wasn't sure what to expect. Her body tensed, her staff ready, and her mind rapidly processed the next move her teacher would do.

Eponin spun her staff once then lunged at Gabrielle.

The young Amazon automatically went on defence and deflected her teacher's attack. She knew Eponin was testing her to see what she knew as far as her defences went. The test made Gabrielle's stomach turn in nervousness which caused her focus to falter.

The weapons master stabbed at her student with the butt of her staff.

Gabrielle leapt to one side and caught Eponin's horizontal swing with her staff. She wasn't sure whether to try and attack Eponin back but she hadn't learned any offences moves quite yet.

"Come on, princess," coaxed the weapons master, "attack me back."

The bard stepped back and raised her staff. Her knees were bent and her heart pounded but what scared her was the fear coursing through her body. A natural part of her wanted to back away from the fight, a natural instinct, but the part of her that was trained by Eponin wouldn't back out. She would hold her ground no matter what.

Eponin growled and brought one end of her staff at Gabrielle's left knee.

The princess hastened to stop the attack and just caught the end of the staff before it
connected with her knee. She then realized the other end of Eponin's staff was coming at her face so she instantly jumped back in time.

Eponin deeply chuckled and her eyes darkened. "Close one, princess." She tilted her head and took a step closer. "Attack me." She then lunged again with her staff raised.

Gabrielle stopped the overhead attack but didn't respond back with her own attack. She merely side-stepped and adjusted her staff defensively in front of her.

The weapons master kept from getting annoyed at her student's lack of fight. She knew she had to just coax her student into the desire to fight back then Gabrielle would fall into it. "Are you scared, princess?" She faced her student and lowered her staff to her side.

The bard narrowed her eyes and took one step back. She knew there was some trick coming her way.

"Come on, princess I'm wide open for you." Eponin held out her arms. "You couldn't possibly miss." She could tell Gabrielle wasn't going to take the bait and she had to admit that was smart.

The princess was keeping a certain distance as she her mind worked with her defence tactics. She knew so many that she figured she'd be able to arrange one into a decent offence attack. She just needed a little time to mustard one and thankfully Eponin was providing her with that time.

Eponin shook her head then suddenly took a swiping attack at Gabrielle's legs.

The young slave jumped back but this time instead of backing away, she reacted by randomly swing her staff at Eponin's midsection.

The weapons master stopped the attack and she faintly smiled at the princess's attempt. She took offence again and lunged with the butt end coming at Gabrielle's chest.

The bard swung one end of her staff and reflected the butt end away from her. She then spun around ninety degrees and brought her staff around with her. Her left half of her staff came at Eponin's right side.

The weapons master hastily brought her vertical staff to her side and stopped the attack. Then much to Gabrielle's surprise, Eponin gave a high kick at the bard.

The princess was slammed into her side just under her right arm and she went flying into the air.

Eponin put her freehand on her hip and stared at the bard, whom was coming to a dead stop in the dirt.

Gabrielle coughed from the lack of hair in her chest. She dared not to touch her aching side but she peered up at her teacher.
The older Amazon cocked her head to the right side. "You were okay, princess." She then stepped forward and held out her free right hand.

Princess Gabrielle took the hand and was hauled up to her feet. "I didn't expect that," she quietly mentioned.

"No, I suppose not." The weapons master had a hidden grin while she patted Gabrielle's shoulder. She opened her mouth to continue but faltered when she spotted an Amazon off to the right.

Gabrielle followed her gaze and brightened when she noted Gryta.

Eponin caught the excited look on her student's face. "Two girlfriends, princess?"

The bard flushed bright red but offered a dark glare at the weapons master. "No… actually she's offered to be the historian."

The weapons master had heard the rumours circulating about the princess's request for an Amazon to take the position. She felt a smile touch her lips. "Gryta would be a fine historian," she approved.

The princess quickly turned back to Eponin. "You think so?"

"I know so," gently stated the weapons master. "She's curious by nature and loves detail." She nodded approvingly and stared at Gryta. "She will do the position justice."

Gabrielle smiled now but she faintly lost it as she focused on her next duty at hand. "Ep, is it okay if we break early?"

Eponin lifted an eyebrow but asked, "The historian proposal?"

The bard dipped her head.

"Under one condition," started the weapons master, "tomorrow you stay an extra candlemark to compensate."

"Of course," agreed the princess and she couldn't hide her smile.

"You may go then," agreed the weapons master.

Gabrielle didn't wait for Eponin to change her mind. She hurried off and caught up with Gryta.

Eponin leaned against her staff and watched the princess and Amazon head across village to the huts sector. As she watched, she considered all the changes in the princess and she honestly decided she liked them all. Even she had to admit that Gabrielle was quite unusual, which made for a unique princess in all of the six known Nations.

The weapons master pulled out her reverie and decided to head back to her office hut. When she got inside, she spotted her senior grade officer, Hali, at the table to the left
of Eponin's desk.

Hali looked up from her scribing on a scroll and offered a smile. "Afternoon, master."

"How goes things, Hali?" The weapons master propped her fighting staff against the wall behind her desk. She then took her seat.

"Fairly well." Hali returned her attention to her scroll as she brushed back midnight hair. "The others are finishing up with the classes."

"So you snuck out early?" teased the weapons master.

"No earlier than you, I see." Hali shot a grin but returned to her scribing.

Eponin chuckled as she retrieved her new weekly scroll from her desk. She was keeping detailed records on the princess's progress from day to day. "The princess has other engagements."

Hali huffed and shook her head. "What could that be, Eponin?"

The weapons master had just dipped her quill into an ink well but she paused and stared at her senior grade. "She's going before the council."

Hali stopped scribing and looked at the weapons master. "You're joking. About what?"

"A historian," murmured Eponin, most of her focus on her report scroll.

"Oh yes." Hali shook her head and went back to her scribbling once again. "I did hear about that." She chuckled and asked, "Has she even selected anybody? The council will shred her proposal if she hasn't selected somebody." She paused then her taunting voice muttered, "Just like they do to our smithing hut proposal."

"Hali," warned the annoyed weapons master.

"Hey, hey!" Hali held up her hands in defence then dropped them to the table. "You know I'm right, Eponin. The damn council expects Artemis herself to drop down from Olympus and gift us with a smith." She pointed her quill at Eponin. "It ain't happenin', Eponin because we have to find one. You know it."

The weapons master's expression had darkened. "When it is time for us to have a smithing hut, we will get one."

"When the Hades will that be?" shot back the senior grade. "When Artemis turns a man we'll have one." She grunted and turned back to her scroll.

Eponin decided not to continue the argument and went back to her report. After she was finished, she rolled up the scroll and stood up. She checked her sword on her back and decided it was fine so she started around her desk.

"Where you headed?" pried the senior grade.
"To see the princess's proposal be approved," coolly stated the weapons master.

Hali rolled her eyes but head followed Eponin as Eponin went to the door. "You're getting infatuated with her, Eponin."

The weapons master laughed and grasped the handle of her hut door. "Hali, there's a difference between infatuation and pride."

Hali slightly grinned at her superior's remark. "Yeah I guess you're right… the infatuation is Ephiny's job."

Eponin chuckled and was tempted to leave the conversation there but she hesitated. "And it's funny because Ephiny doesn't infatuate that easily either."

Hali smirked. "Are you saying there's a good reason why Ephiny is infatuated with our princess?"

Eponin shot back her own smirk. "You decide." Without another word, she left the hut and started her journey across village to the council hut.

Rena gazed about the council room and table as she expected to finish up for the day. "I believe we are finished… are there any more proposals on the table for today?" As she spoke her words, she caught sight of the council guard, Vara, opening the door.

The princess had stepped in first and caught the tail end of Rena's words. "I have a proposal," she announced and instantly all eyes turned on her and Gabrielle's stomach just dropped to the floor.

"Princess Gabrielle," greeted the head council member. Rena straightened in her seat at one end of the table. "This is quite unexpected."

Gabrielle shyly smiled and stepped closer to the council table. "Well, today Master Eponin taught me that every Amazon warrior expects the unexpected."

All the council members gave a round of deep laughs and smirked except for the Queen, whom sat at the other end of the table.

Gryta had slipped in behind the princess and now slid into an open spot along the wall side in the corner. She noted that all around the walls were lined various heads of the departments such as the priestess, the master healer with her daughter, the head of the diplomacy affairs, the head of agriculture, and there were several others. Gryta's scanning of faces finally came to rest on the stratègos and the polemarchos so her stomach instantly twisted in concern. She realized too that Officer Galatea, the polemarchos, was curiously staring at her, which unsettled Gryta even more so. Suddenly Rena's thick voice cut into her conscious and Gryta returned her focus to the princess's proposal.

"Yes, councillor I have written my proposal," stated the princess. She held out two
Councillor Rena was inwardly impressed but didn't show it. She merely accepted a scroll and noted Gabrielle giving the second one to Queen Melosa. "Go ahead and brief the rest of the council," she ordered to the princess.

The bard nodded and stood beside the head councillor as she formulated a summary in her head. She knew she could speak in front of people when she was telling a story but this was different. She was about to begin but now noted another person entering the meeting room. She saw her teacher, Eponin, enter and silently take a spot off to one side. Gabrielle forced herself to focus though on the task at hand. "I am proposing that the Nation creates a new position." She paused and gazed about the council members before stating, "A historian."

Without missing a beat, the councillors all murmured amongst themselves.

Gabrielle ignored them though and forced her voice to lift in volume as she spoke over the din. "I have discovered in my lessons with Master Eponin that the Amazons hold a very rich, detailed past that is not very well recorded. I believe that since we are a Nation that prides ourselves on traditions and history that we must take it upon ourselves to keep records on both our accomplishments as well as our mistakes." She paused as she scanned the quiet table of councillors. "It is our history that has woven this Nation into what it is today and we must take it upon ourselves to not let it fade away. It is my hope that by keeping meticulous records of the events in the Nation that we will have a past… a history to pass onto future generations of Amazons so that their lives are enriched and are given a sense of pride." She gently nipped her lower lip then finally ended her speech with, "In response to this idea, I am submitting the proposal that the position of a historian is created so that she may trace and record Amazon history."

The council was quiet for several moments then finally one of the councillors gazed at the head councillor.

Rena held out her hand to the fellow councillor and ordered, "Please stand, Councillor Tanya."

Tanya rose up to her short height and locked her gaze on the princess. "Have you confronted the issue with finding a historian? Somebody to volunteer for the position?" She then took her seat again as everybody awaited for a response.

Gabrielle grinned and replied, "I'm so glad you asked." She turned her head to the left and extended her left arm.

Gryta took the signal and peeled away from the wall. She approached the princess then faced the council, her hands behind her back, her back straight, and her expression even.

"This is Gryta, councillors and she has offered to take the position as historian." Gabrielle smiled at Gryta then looked back at the councillors. "I find Gryta will be quite competent to take the position."
From the corner of her eye, Gryta saw the polemarchos whisper something to Commander Kalonice. She tried to ignore them as she remained focused on the proposal.

Suddenly another councillor rose up and she wasn’t much younger than Rena. "I am Councillor Elysa," she introduced to the two young Amazons. Her eyes though fully focussed on Gryta. "Do you believe you are fit for this position, Amazon?"

"I am, councillor," stated Gryta, her voice even and assured.

"What department are you assigned to?" further inquired Councillor Elysa.

"I am in the military," stated Gryta. She’d forbidden herself to fall under this elder’s scrutiny or the hard stares from the polemarchos.

"I see that you’ve received the yellow feather of bravery." The councillor tilted her off to the side. "What were the conditions for receiving the feather?"

Gryta inhaled then calmly reported, "I and two other Amazons were on patrol when we were caught in a small scrimmage against three centaurs. The centaurs had entered our lands and we proceeded to stop them but unfortunately they were rather vicious." Gryta paused and cleared her throat as old memories filtered back to her mind. "There were three of us all together and one Amazon went down with an arrow in her chest. I took it upon myself to fight off the three centaurs as the other patrol Amazon fought to save our sister’s life."

"You defeated the centaurs then?" concluded Councillor Elysa.

"I defeated two, yes. The third fled and I let him go because of my concern for our sister's life." Gryta paused but decided to finish her story. "The other patrol Amazon ran ahead of me to get a healer while I carried the other Amazon back to the village."

"Impressive," quietly agreed Councillor Elysa. She then took her seat again.

The fifth and final councillor rose up and stated, "I am Councillor Hersilia." After the princess and Gryta bowed their heads, she continued to speak. "I am curious, exactly how old are you Gryta?"

Gryta gently smiled and replied, "I am twenty-two, councillor."

"You seem much older than that," relented the councillor, "I like that." She then took her seat again. As soon as she was comfortable, Councillor Tanya handed her the proposal scroll that was being passed around.

The head councillor looked up at Gabrielle from her spot. "Princess, have you considered the expense of this operation?"

The bard’s lips puckered and she sensed the queen's piercing stare on her. "I believe the expense will not be that high." Her expression was tight as her mind calculated what they would need. "The historian would need scrolls, ink, and quills."
"I would assume she would travel," finally spoke the queen.

Gabrielle quickly looked to the queen. "I believe so," she agreed, "since many of the other elders in other Nations will know much of the history."

"So there are travelling expenses," reminded the queen.

"Yes, there will be," agreed the princess. She hadn't quite thought about that but she knew Queen Melosa had a point. Suddenly her attention was redirected to another councillor when they rose up.

Councillor Masika straightened her back out and looked between the members of the table. "I believe the expanse is little of our concern considering how extremely important it is that we retain our Amazon history." She had her hands behind her back as she looked between her mother and the queen. "Besides, I believe the expense will by minute compared to the costs of running… the military."

"I believe you are correct, councillor." Rena dipped her head in appreciation of her daughter's point.

Masika took her seat again.

The head councillor noted the other members had finished reading over the proposal. "How do the four councillors vote?"

Councillor Tanya stood up and stated, "I am in favour."

After she sat, Councillor Elysa rose and voted, "I am in favour."

Councillor Hersilia was next up from her chair and voted, "I am in favour."

Rena then looked to her daughter.

The youngest councillor dipped her head as she stood to her full height. "I am in favour."

Gabrielle's stomach was slowly unknotting but she was still nervous about the Councillor Rena's vote and especially the queen's. She knew it could be Queen Masika's vote that abolished the entire council's agreement.

Councillor Rena steadily rose up and announced, "I am in favour." When she sat, her eyes rest on the queen.

Queen Melosa touched the proposal scroll in front of her. She felt everybody eyes solely on her and she absorbed the power she felt from this. She finally pushed her chair back and rose up to her height. Her attention went around the room then settled on the princess. She kept her shoulders square and her brown eyes were dark with conviction. "I am in favour. Your proposal is granted, Princess Gabrielle."

Gabrielle released a held breath and her shoulders slumped but she was smiling.
Gryta chuckled and patted the princess's tensed back.

Councillor Rena thinly smiled at the happy princess. She cleared her throat and stated, "Congratulations, princess."

The bard dipped her head and offered a warm smile. She said nothing because she knew Rena had more to say.

"And since you're so enthusiastic about this, princess...." Rena paused as a slick smile creased her lips. "You will be in charge of this new department."

Gabrielle slightly tensed at this revolution.

Rena noticed the princess's hesitation and Rena thoroughly enjoyed it. "It will be your first duty as princess."

"Of course, councillor," concurred the princess.

The head councillor revealed a rich grin. "You will assist Historian Gryta with composing her records, categorizing them, and weeding through the... fiction and truth of the history." She tilted her head. "You are an aspiring bard, princess and I believe you are more than competent to handle this duty."

"Of course." Gabrielle's lips slightly thinned but she proudly stated, "Thank you, councillor."

Councillor Rena bowed her head and was grateful for the appreciation.

Queen Melosa now broke in as she straightened her back in her chair. "I assume you will not work on this from day until night, Gryta." She lifted an eyebrow at the young Amazon.

Gryta's bowed her head and stated, "I do not have to, my queen."

"I would suggest not," ordered the queen. "I prefer you to stay with the military since it is obvious of your skills as a warrior."

"I will do so," agreed the Amazon, her head still bowed.

"See that you do." Queen Melosa glanced over at the polemarchos then at Commander Kalonice but her attention returned to the new historian. "I expect you and the princess to work with Officer Galatea about a satisfactory schedule."

"We will," agreed the princess.

"Excellent," calmly stated the queen. "I have no further concerns then." She then gazed upon the head councillor. "Councillor Rena?"

"I hold none either." Rena noted her fellow councillors shook their heads too. "Then we have finished and the position of historian is now established under Princess Gabrielle's supervision." She scanned the room as she further spoke. "Now, are there
anymore proposals for the day?" The councillor patiently waited and nobody came forth. She then stood up and announced, "Then the council rests for today."

Immediately the meeting room filled with voices that all spoke at once.

Princess Gabrielle turned to the Gryta and held out her arm. "Congratulations, historian."

The Amazon slightly flushed but took the princess's arm shake. "Congratulations too, princess."

After Gabrielle released Gryta's arm she said, "Tomorrow hopefully we can talk to the polemarchos about your schedule."

"Yes, that would be best," agreed the Amazon.

Before they could continue discussing, several Amazons approached both Gryta and Gabrielle and started to congratulate them.

The princess and Gryta were so caught up in the congratulations and discussion that they didn't realize how late it was becoming.

Eponin came up behind her student and gently touched her shoulder. "Princess, it is near dinner."

The Amazon that was speaking with the princess paused and looked at the weapons master. She was faintly insulted by the disruption yet also interested by it. "Master Eponin," she greeted.

The weapons master offered a smile to the diplomat. "I see you've met Ambassador Majorie."

"Yes," agreed the princess, "the ambassador was just telling me a bit about the diplomatic affairs."

"Indeed," murmured the weapons master.

The ambassador secretly smirked at the weapons master. "It seems, Master Eponin you have not covered the foreign affairs to our princess."

"No," agreed Eponin, her hand finally slipping from her student's shoulder. "That was a lesson in the near future."

"I would hope so." Majorie chuckled and looked at the princess. "I was just offering to the princess if she wished to know more about foreign affairs to see me or any of the emissaries."

Eponin dipped her head and looked at the bard. "I agree, princess. The ambassador has much to offer on the topic of diplomacy." She paused and quietly added, "It would behove you to not only be a good Amazon warrior but a good diplomatic."
Gabrielle was staring at Eponin and for some reason, she had a feeling Eponin was asking her to pursue time with the ambassador. She nodded then replied, "I will take your suggestion, Master Eponin."

The weapons master felt her tension recede at hearing the possible agreement. She now smiled at the ambassador and she could tell that the ambassador was remotely surprised by Eponin's hidden support. "Good day, ambassador." She bowed her head then looked at her student. "I will see you in the mess hut."

"See you, Ep," murmured the bard and she watched her friend and teacher leave the hut. When she looked back to the ambassador she felt the need to continue their earlier conversation now that Eponin had encouraged her. "Ambassador, do you give lessons at all?"

Majorie's frame shook with a deep laugh and she wonderfully smiled. "I do not typically but for you, princess, I would be more than happy to do so."

The bard now beamed brightly with a smile. "I would thoroughly enjoy it."

The ambassador folded her arms over her chest and tilted her head. "It is reassuring to see a future queen that wishes to be diplomatic as well as militaristic."

Gabrielle shifted her hands behind her back and tried to rub her palms dry despite she was still nervous. "I believe in being well rounded. Plus I prefer to settle a fight with my words before my fists."

"I agree," stated the ambassador. She now bowed her had in respect then when she straightened up. "If you would like, princess I can offer lessons every third evening if you would have time."

"I would love to," agreed the now excited princess.

"Excellent." Ambassador Majorie smiled warmly and unfolded her arms now. "We will begin tomorrow night… in my hut." She now held out her hand.

Gabrielle understood the subtle difference between shaking hands and shaking arms. She clasped the older Amazon's hand and briskly shook. "Thank you, ambassador."

"The pleasure is all mine, princess." Mejorie released the smaller hand then stated, "Have a good evening." She then side stepped the princess and headed for the door but she paused and turned back. "Oh and princess," she called, "be sure to bring some goodies from the mess hut for our lessons."

Gabrielle chuckled and nodded. "I will, ambassador."

Majorie wistfully smiled then stepped out of the now thinning meeting room.

Gabrielle slightly jumped when a hand came to her back again and she relaxed at seeing Gryta at her side. "Are you ready to leave?"

"Yes," murmured the tense Amazon.
The young slave noted how the anxiety flowed off her historian and she wondered what the cause of it was. She gazed about the room and her eyes homed in on the stratègos and the polemarchos. Then it occurred to her that they were nearing her and Gryta. She sensed Gryta's hand on her shoulder gripping tighter and she turned her body to face the approaching military officers. "It'll be fine," she gently assured Gryta.

The historian released her hold of the princess and tried to fall back into her military training of coolness. "Commandor Kalonice and Officer Galatea," she greeted.

"Historian," emotionlessly stated the stratègos. "Princess."

Gabrielle bowed her head to Commander Kalonice. "Stratègos." She then bowed to the other officer. "Polemarchos."

The stratègos straightened to her full and imposing height. "Princess Gabrielle, you are stealing one of my best Amazons."

Despite how serious the stratègos was, Gabrielle could pick up the teasing tones in the stratègos's tone. "I am merely burrowing her at times," she reminded.

The stratègos faintly grinned and chuckled. "Perhaps, until the work mounts and it requires more of Gryta's time."

"Then I will merely steal another of your Amazons to assist Gryta and I."

"You are quite conniving, princess," cut in the polemarchos. "I like that."

Princess Gabrielle softly laughed and smiled at the two military officers. "I just want to see this research taken care of... it's quite important."

"I agree," stated the stratègos. She smiled and offered, "If you need any information on the military do not hesitate to speak with me." Her attention flickered to Gryta. "Either of you."

"Thank you," politely stated the historian.

Officer Galatea then broke into the conversation, her words directed to Gryta. "I admire you for taking this position, Gryta. You will make a fine historian." She paused and looked from the stratègos back to the young Amazon. "Commander Kalonice and I were just discussing how this will benefit the military substantial since you will cover some of the greatest Amazon warriors in Amazon history."

"Yes, I will certainly be recording such accomplishments," agreed the historian.

"I should hope so," agreed the stratègos. "It is quite vital to the military."

"Of course, stratègos," agreed the historian.

The stratègos nodded then looked between the two young Amazons. "We will leave you both. I am sure you're both headed to dinner shortly."
"Yes," agreed the now hungry bard, "I will see you there, stratègos."

"I'll be delighted," gently bantered the stratègos. She then turned her head to the polemarchos.

"Good evening." Officer Galatea smiled then followed her commanding officer out of the meeting hut.

Gabrielle felt her shoulders deflate from tension and she looked at Gryta. "Wasn't so bad, huh?"

The historian could only grin and patted her superior's back. "You did as well as I did, princess."

"Thanks," chided the bard. She then broke into another smile when she saw Masika joining them. "Councillor."

The councillor lifted a warning eyebrow. "Gabrielle," she greeted.

The princess gently chuckled and her head bobbed. "It's good to see you too, Masika."

Masika held out her hand. "Congratulations, Gabrielle."

The historian certainly noticed the difference in titles and wondered how that stemmed. She then realized Masika was holding her hand out to her too.

"Congratulations, Historian Gryta."

The Amazon smiled at her new title as she shook hands with the councillor. "Thank you, councillor."

"I believe you'll be successful at this position," agreed the councillor then she looked to the princess. "And you will lead her well, Gabrielle."

"Thank you, Masika." The bard was clearly blushing as she mumbled, "I will try my best."

"Well then let's hope that's enough."

Gabrielle tensed at Masika's remark but realized she was teasing her. "It's more than enough," she shot back, a grin on her face.

Masika gently laughed and now smiled. "Shall we walk and talk?" She held a hand out to the exit door as the last Amazon stepped out of the meeting hut. "Dinner will be starting and I am starved."

"I agree," whispered the historian and she didn't wait for a response. She headed out of the meeting room.

Masika grinned and looked at the princess. "You first, princess."
The bard rolled her eyes and hurried out of the meeting room with Masika in her wake.

From that evening on, Gabrielle found herself in a flood of work and little time to spend with her girlfriend or her scrolls. On rare occasions, Gabrielle would steal away time and hide in Ephiny's hut to be with her. But those nights were far and few between yet Ephiny never once protested to her girlfriend's busy schedule and instead supported her fully. Gabrielle had found stability in Ephiny's support and it helped her get through each day of wear and tear on her mind and body. Despite the deep waters of stress, Gabrielle thoroughly enjoyed her role as a training warrior Amazon, apprentice diplomat, and supervisor to her historian.

Gabrielle couldn't quite decide which aspect she enjoyed more- her long lessons with Master Eponin or her nightly classes with Ambassador Majorie because in both cases she was filled with knowledge. She'd become quite settled into her role as an Amazon warrior and Eponin was teaching her various offence tactics. Gabrielle had realized that day when Eponin unexpectedly attacked her had been her introductory to offence work. Eponin also made sure to give stark and sound reminders of how important defence was too. On occasions, Eponin and Gabrielle would spar and the weapons master had a way of firmly flipping the bard onto her royal ass at the end of each sparring lesson.

Gabrielle's lessons with the ambassador, however, never landed the bard on her ass much like with Eponin. Majorie each night began the classes with a game of sorts yet it was quite a bit of critical thinking for the bard. Majorie would immediately tell Gabrielle of a scenario and in response; Gabrielle would tell how she'd handle the situation. Sometimes the ambassador agreed to the solution, other times certain aspects distained her, and rare times she completely disagreed. Gabrielle had come to enjoy these crucial games and learned much from them.

Not only had the bard learned about diplomacy, she also discovered what a sweet tooth Ambassador Majorie had on her. Gabrielle made sure to bring sweets each night from the mess hut and the pair would munch on them through the lessons. Gabrielle had been sure nobody could match Xena's sweet tooth but the ambassador was in close tie to her best friend.

But as of now, Princess Gabrielle was carefully pulling out her Amazon Princess formal attire and gently packing it into her saddlebags. As she straightened up in front of her dresser and continued to pack, her thoughts went forward as she considered her future journey to Potidæa and Amphipolis. It'd been over a moon's cycle and Queen Melosa had granted her trip with Ephiny and Solari as her guards.

As Gabrielle packed, her mind went back to the evening when she and Ephiny talked to Solari about going with them. They'd gathered in Ephiny's hut and Gabrielle was the first one to really start on the topic.

"Ephiny and I are going on a trip," mentioned the bard.
Solari perked up at the news and looked between the girlfriends. She was sitting in a chair at Ephiny's table, completely relaxed as well as worn out.

Ephiny was at her desk but now slowly approached the pair at the table.

"Where are you both headed?" asked the curious Amazon.

The princess bent forward and captured Solari's hands into her own. "I'm going home."

Solari's eyebrows knitted together. "To Articia?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "I will be later but I'm going to my real home."

Ephiny knew this would be hard for her girlfriend. She reached down and squeezed the bard's left shoulder for support.

The young slave inhaled heavily and tried to remain calm. "Solari, I'm originally from Potidaea and when I was thirteen my town was raided."

Solari could feel how sweaty her friend's palms were from being nervous. She squeezed her reassurance then asked, "What happened?"

Gabrielle gently bit her lower lip. "My mother, sister, and I were taken into slavery."

Solari's jaw immediately dropped. "Sweet Artemis," she rasped, "I'm so sorry, Gabrielle." Without a second thought, she sprung up from her seat, pulled Gabrielle up, and hugged her.

Ephiny folded her arms over her chest and smiled at the pair. She knew her best friend wouldn't be disgusted or hateful when finding out about Gabrielle's past.

Solari pulled back but held onto her friend's shoulders. "Are you still a slave?" she murmured.

The bard dipped her head. "I am… I'm branded."

Solari shook her head. "You haven't gone home since you were…"

Gabrielle understood the unfinished question and she shook her head. "No, I haven't that's why Ephiny and I are going." She paused as she tried to reorganize her thoughts. "I made the request with the queen to go and she made a condition that I had to take two Amazons with me."

"I'd be happy to come," cut in Solari.

At the offer, Gabrielle's fears instantly melted and she began to smile. "Thank you," she whispered sincerely.

Now Gabrielle, Solari, and Ephiny were hastily racing to the stables where Torqueo, Diana, and a third horse were awaiting them. Eponin had taken the liberty to tack up
the horses for the young friends and it was an excuse for her to see them off. She was undoubtable worried about them making this journey but she knew Ephiny and Solari were quite competent Amazons.

Ephiny went into the stable first and brushed past the weapons master as she got into Diana's stall. "Thank you, sister."

Eponin smirked and leaned against a post as she heard her sister strapping down the saddlebags. "No problem, Ephiny." She turned her head to the left when Gabrielle and Solari went racing in next. "Your stallions are tacked up too."

"Thanks, Ep."

"Thanks, Eponin."

The weapons master quietly laughed as she received the praise from the young Amazons. She watched them rush into their stalls and strap down their saddlebags. "Gabrielle, you do have your fighting staff?"

The bard leaned to her left and hung her staff over the stall door. "Got it, Master Eponin."

The weapons master resisted from rolling her eyes. "Ephiny and Solari, you both have your short swords?"

"I do," called back Ephiny.

"Same here," answered Solari.

Eponin nodded her head approvingly. She then straightened up when all three Amazons came out of their stalls with their horses in tow. "I'll wake you three to the gates." She turned and headed out.

Gabrielle exchanged a look with her girlfriend.

Ephiny shrugged and waved for her to follow.

The three young Amazons caught up to the weapons master several hundred paces ahead of the gates. They were quiet for a little while until Eponin broke the silence.

"You three be safe," ordered the weapons master. She looked between them all. "I will not be happy if I have to send out the stratègos to find your feathers."

The small group chuckled together and gave reassuring smiles to the weapons master.

"We'll be safe," promised the princess.

The weapons master glanced at her student and noted her changed attire.

Gabrielle had decided not to wear any of her Amazon leather and instead went back to wearing her brown skirt and green halter top. She'd figured it was best considering she
was going to Potidaea and Amphipolis where people knew her and may stir up talk about her arrival. She didn't need the rumours to include her new title as Amazon Princess where it could endanger the Nation.

Eponin came to a stop at the gates and faced the three young Amazons. "Will you be going to Articia?"

"Yes," answered Ephiny, "after we stop in Amphipolis." She looked at her girlfriend for confirmation.

The bard dipped her head then settled her gaze on her teacher. "We're going to Potidaea, then Amphipolis, and Articia last."

"You three will be exhausted," decided the weapons master aloud.

"We're young… we can handle it," joked Solari.

Eponin grinned and shook her head. "Be safe, each of you and watch each other's back." She slightly narrowed her eyes and warned, "Do not get into fights amongst each other and separate."

"We know," assured Ephiny.

The weapons master slightly dipped her head then stepped forward first to hug her sister.

Ephiny was surprised but she tightly hugged her sister back.

Eponin kept her lips close to Ephiny's ear as she murmured, "I love you, sister."

Ephiny's embrace tightened and she closed her eyes. "I love you too." She then felt Eponin pulling back and she let go.

The princess was the next one in her teacher's embrace.

"I hope you find what you're looking for, Gabrielle."

The bard squeezed the weapons master more and whispered, "I hope so too."

Eponin pulled back and nodded to her student then she went to hug Solari last.

Solari chuckled in the middle of the hug and teased, "Nothing serious to say to me?"

The weapons master groaned in the middle of the hug and teased, "Don't be a pain in the ass, Solari."

The Amazon laughed as she released the weapons master. "No guarantee there."

"I know," Eponin rolled her eyes then started to walk away from the group. "See you Amazons in seven to ten days."
The three young Amazons turned, waved and all called out, "See you, Eponin!" And then they travelled out of the gates, through the Amazon lands, and caught the main northern road. It would take them most of the day to ride towards Potidaea and they planned to camp about three-quarters of the way so that Gabrielle could have the evening to prepare herself. She didn't know what to expect and she wasn't sure she was ready for it but she would do it.

As of right now, Solari was sitting on a log by a fire they'd started over a candlemark ago. On occasions she would push her branch in the fire and toy with the ambers for some mild amusement. She turned her head to the left and stared at the girlfriends sitting on the ground with their backs against a huge rock. Slowly her eyes travelled down to their linked hands and she could barely make out the low whispers between them.

Solari sighed and turned her head away. She knew this trip would be hard for her and only because she'd have to see them together. It wasn't that she didn't support the relationship but it was the stark reminder of Solari's lack of foresight. At times, Solari could almost scream because of her incompetence for handling the situation completely wrong.

For a very long time, Solari had contained her feelings for Ephiny so long that nobody would have noticed them except for one person. Eponin had insisted Solari tell Ephiny about her feelings long before Ephiny had ever joined up with the Academy, long before Gabrielle. Yet Solari had refused because she felt as if she could never handle being with Ephiny when Ephiny would be attending the Academy. She'd decided to wait it out until Ephiny graduated and then Ephiny would be free of any engagements.

The pain welded up inside of Solari because it was the worst mistake she'd ever made. She'd never been so blind sided by Gabrielle's appearance into the image and Solari had no time to stop the blossoming relationship between Gabrielle and Ephiny. Now it was far too late and Solari felt her regret grow stronger with each kiss Ephiny and Gabrielle shared because it slowly ate Solari apart. Despite her pain, Solari never once gave the couple a deathly look or talked unkindly about them because she supported and wanted them happy. Yet Solari would always harbour this sickening and sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach about their relationship.

"It'll be okay," murmured Ephiny, her thumb running across Gabrielle's knuckles.

The worried bard nodded and leaned into her girlfriend. She rested her head against Ephiny's shoulder and she sensed strong arms encircling her. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine what tomorrow would bring when they would enter Potidaea midday.

"What do you think you'll find?" whispered Ephiny. She leaned her head against Gabrielle's.

"I'm not sure," admitted the bard. A thought occurred to her in response she shivered. "My father's grave," she murmured, "I hope my old home."

Ephiny kissed her girlfriend's temple. "I'll be by your side."
Gabrielle tucked her head under Ephiny's chin more. She closed her eyes and a sad smile pulled at her lips. "I know," she whispered, "thank you." She sighed and slowly her eyes opened again. This time, her focus centred on Solari over by the fire. Her expression squeezed together tightly as she studied Solari more closely. She'd never seen Solari so slumped forward and such a sad expression on her face. Solari was a naturally joyful and bouncy person so Gabrielle knew whatever was bothering Solari it had to be bad. And as she thought about it, Gabrielle realized Solari had really been quiet for the most part on the journey today. "Ephiny?" she murmured.

Ephiny lifted her head and tucked it down, closer to Gabrielle's. "Yeah?"

"Is it just me or is… Solari just not herself?"

The older Amazon lifted her head and stared over at her best friend. "She could be tired."

"I don't know," countered the princess, "she's not even this quiet when she's tired."

Ephiny's lips thinned and she considered her girlfriend's words. She couldn't help but worry about Solari more than most of her friends because she always wanted Solari happy. As her thoughts continued, Gabrielle's voice cut in again.

"I'm gonna go check on her." The bard placed a gentle kiss to her girlfriend's chest then stood up.

Ephiny let her go and watched her approach Solari.

Gabrielle sat on the log beside Solari and gently nudged Solari with her shoulder. "Hey."

Solari offered a faint smile and replied, "Hey." She turned her head back and poked her branch into the fire to keep her distracted.

"Thank you again for coming, Solari."

"You're welcome," sincerely replied the Amazon. "How are you holding up?"

"Nervous… scared," admitted the princess.

Solari nodded and squeezed the princess's knee. "It'll be okay."

"Yeah I know." Gabrielle sensed Solari's hand leaving her knee. She debated how to start ask how Solari was doing without letting it reveal too much about her concerns. "How you doing? Are you tired from the ride?"

"I'm okay." Solari pushed a few ambers around then pulled out her stick to let it cool. "I guess I'm tired too."

"You haven't been your… upbeat self."

Solari shrugged and tried to offer a reassuring smile. "A good night's rest will help
"I hope so." Gabrielle leaned against her friend and brought an arm across her back. "Eph and I have been worried."

Solari chuckled but more so to free Gabrielle of any concern. She felt the princess squeeze her shoulders across the back and she smiled. "Thanks… I'm okay honestly."

"Hope so," murmured the bard but before she could say more, her girlfriend had appeared beside them.

Ephiny bent down and looked between her girlfriend and best friend. "I think I'm going to get some rest. I'm beat after that long ride."

"Me too," agreed the bard.

"I'll be along in a minute," assured Solari. She looked between her worried friends and gave them smiles.

Ephiny noted despite the smile that Solari's brown eyes were almost dark as night. It was rare for her to see Solari's eyes that dark and almost hollow but she knew she couldn't talk to her here with Gabrielle around. She simply dipped her head and said, "Goodnight, Solari."

Gabrielle smiled at Solari and patted her knee. "Sleep well, okay?" She didn't wait for a response as she joined her girlfriend in the bedrolls near the fire.

Solari quietly watched them crawl into the bedrolls together and she pulled her gaze away from them. She went back to staring into the fire and teasing the ambers with her branch.

The following morning, the three friends broke camp about two candlemarks after sunrise. The morning was a bit chilly at first for a summer's day but it quickly heated up, the sun on the left of their faces as they rode south. They were on the road that travelled the first peninsula and they went first through the town of Olynthus.

Gabrielle knew it'd be a half a candlemark and they would enter Potidæa next, her stomach was twisting tighter and tighter. She first began to notice the familiar lands and landmarks on the road as they closed in on Potidæa. When they were on the last bend of the road, Gabrielle spotted an old and rather large olive tree that her and Xena had climbed on several occasions. Instantly the bard's eyes stung but she refused to cry after so long.

Ephiny and Solari pulled their horses back into a slow walk as they neared the gates. Ephiny came along side Gabrielle's stallion and grasped her knee.

Gabrielle briefly squeezed Ephiny's hand on her knee but removed her hand. Her attention was fully on the small wood gates of the village.

Ephiny pulled her hand back and adjusted in her saddle as she took in the view of the nearing town. She tried to mentally picture a young and bright Gabrielle running
around and getting into all kinds of trouble. It made her inwardly grin at the mental images.

When the small group entered, they were immediately noticed by the townspeople, all eyes solely on them and especially on Gabrielle.

The bard refused to let their curious stares affect her. She kept her back straight, her gaze ahead, and she lead her friends to where her home was or once was. As her old house came into view, her throat tightened her heart pounded against her chest. Her hands grew sweaty as her body trembled.

Solari and Ephiny both visually inspected the house from afar. It was rather worn and in need of desperate repair since it looked as if only a good storm would destroy it. To the right it looked like there were the remains of some kind of other building and they had to guess it was a barn. The ground was scattered with charred, black pieces of wood and only a few posts actually remained standing. Then in weed infested field, just on the edge was a iron fence and inside the enclosed ground was a head stone.

Gabrielle gently tugged on Torqueo's reins and tried to dismount without falling off.

The two Amazons also dismounted and took their horses' reins.

The bard swallowed against the lump in her throat. She merely signalled her friends to follow her to the right side of the worn house where there was a thick wood post. They each tied their horses' reins to the post by using the metal ring that still was anchored in it.

Ephiny rested a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Are you going inside?"

"Yes," whispered the bard. "Wait here." Her gaze flickered between the two Amazons.

"Are you sure?" questioned Solari.

The bard nodded and said nothing else as she walked off.

Ephiny's hand fell from Gabrielle's shoulder and she sighed deeply.

Solari turned around and stared at the remanence of the barn and she tried to figure out how Gabrielle and her family had been taken by the raiders. "Do you know how it happened?"

Ephiny shook her head. "Some of it." She folded her arms around her chest and walked past Diana so she could get a clear view of the field. "I believe that's her father's grave."

Solari came to Ephiny's side and stared at the white headstone several hundred paces away. "It's been well cared for."

Ephiny chewed on her lower lip as she stared at the grave. "Probably by the town." She then turned her head when she heard footsteps on the porch. She spotted her girlfriend coming down the steps and coming around to the side of the house.
Immediately her eyes rested on the small stuffed animal of a sheep in Gabrielle's right hand.

Gabrielle stared at the sheep as she approached her friends. She lifted her head when she stopped in front of them. "It was my sister's… she slept with it every night." She swallowed and murmured, "His name is Lammy." With her free left hand, she gently patted the dirty and dust off the sheep. "About the only thing left inside."

When Gabrielle lifted her head, Solari took in how red and watery Gabrielle's eyes were. She bit back from saying anything knowing it'd only further upset the princess.

The princess cleared her throat and nodded at the grave in the distance. "I'll be right back." She lowered her right hand with Lammy still carefully being held. Gabrielle had never walked so slowly in her life as if her life had come to a stop. Her eyes only centred on the headstone as the Greek letters every so gradually came into focus and she was able to read them. Yet Gabrielle refused to read them because she knew as soon as she did she would break down, she had to get through the gate first.

Gradually the iron fence squeaked in protest at being opened after so long. It released and swung open to the newcomer and remained open as Gabrielle stepped past.

The bard wrapped her arms over her chest with Lammy between her bosom. Her eyes burned even more as she tried to read the chiselled letters of her father's name. After reading it, her mind numbed and she fell to her knees at the foot of her father's grave.

Ephiny took several steps but Solari's grip on her arm stopped her.

"Let her be, Ephiny." Solari gently squeezed. "She has to do this on her own… or she'll never let her past go."

Ephiny closed her eyes and fought against her tears. She tried to jerk her arm free but Solari wouldn't let her go.

Instead Solari pulled Ephiny back and enveloped her in a hug.

Ephiny was tense at first but gradually loosened up and hugged her best friend back.

"She'll be okay," promised Solari as she rubbed her friend's back.

Ephiny held tightly to Solari as she tried to calm her furious need to help Gabrielle. She knew Solari was right, Gabrielle did need to work this out on her own and Ephiny couldn't baby her anymore. When she broke away from Solari, she realized a newcomer was approaching them, an older man.

Solari sensed the tension in her best friend so she turned and spotted the man coming towards them.

The man was of average height with peppered hair and bushy eyebrows. He was rather nicely dressed, clean cut, and seemed to hold an air of authority about him. "Excuse me, I'm the constable here." He had a curious look as he studied the two Amazons. "Several townspeople came to me saying one of Herodotus's daughters has returned."
Ephiny swallowed and pushed away her emotions. "Yes, Gabrielle is here."

The constable's gaze shifted past the Amazon and went to the young woman in Herodotus's grave. "Yes... it is her." His focus returned to the two Amazons. "And you two are...?"

"I am Ephiny." The Amazon held out her hand.

The constable briskly shook the Amazon's hand then took Solari's offered one next.

"I'm Solari."

The constable nodded and stated, "I'm Constable Rasmus." He paused as he considered the two women's attire. "I was curious, where are you two from?"

Solari slightly grinned at the question. "We're from the Macedonian Amazon Nation."

"Amazon?" repeated the constable.

"Yes," answered Ephiny, "we're Amazons."

The constable was quiet for awhile then he again glanced at the kneeling bard for off in the distance. "I need to speak with Gabrielle when she... has some time." He gazed back at the Amazons. "It's rather important that she does."

"Of course," agreed Ephiny. "I assume she knows where your town hall is?"

"Yes, it hasn't changed." Constable Rasmus dipped his head. "Thank you and good day." He turned without another word and quietly left them.

Ephiny and Solari turned around and Gabrielle had already stepped out of the grave. She crossed the distance slowly to her friends and made sure to wipe the tear stains away from her face. Her heart was aching but tried to calm her pain with each step she took.

Ephiny instantly wrapped her girlfriend into a strong embrace.

Gabrielle returned the hug, rather grateful for it. When she pulled back, she gently toyed with Lammy between her hands and stared at it.

"The constable was here," mentioned Ephiny.

The princess stopped toy ing with the sheep and peered up. "Constable Rasmus?"

Solari nodded her head. "He wants to speak to you."

Gabrielle's head bobbed a few times and she walked over to her stallion. She pulled open a flap of her saddlebag and carefully put Lammy inside for later. "We'll walk over there."
Ephiny and Solari waited for the bard to accompany them. They walked across town, Gabrielle in the lead, and in a few minutes they were approaching the large steps of the town hall. Together they climbed the steps and entered the large building, which looked fairly new. It was assumed that the town hall had been rebuilt after its destruction from the raid several years back. Gabrielle realized it was the same setup and when she entered the lobby, a young man behind a desk straightened up at their arrival.

"Good afternoon," greeted the man.

"Hi," greeted the princess. "I'm here to speak with the constable. He requested me to see him."

The young man nodded and stood up from his chair. He stepped around the wood counter and ordered, "Follow me, please." He waved them down to the left hallway and led them to a heavy wood door that was partially open. He rapped on the door as he pushed it open. "Constable, there are some ladies that wish to speak with you."

Constable Rasmus lifted his head from his work and he smiled. "Please come in."

The young man stepped back and opened the door wider for the Amazons. When they were inside, he stepped out and made sure to close the door all the way.

Rasmus stood up from his chair and came around his desk. "I'm so happy to see you, Gabrielle." He stepped up to her and brought her in to a hug.

"You as well, constable." Gabrielle pulled back from the embrace and offered a weak smile. "How have you been?"

"Things are looking better," admitted the constable. "Sit down." He held out his hands to the four chairs before his desk. He went back behind his desk and sat down. "Tell me what has happened, Gabrielle. I am so relieved to see you've returned... that you're safe."

The bard swallowed and tried to gain control of her emotions. She wasn't about to break down in front of the constable of Potidaea when she needed to remain strong. "I've been through much," she generally said as she took a seat between her Amazons.

"What of your mother and sister?" questioned the constable.

Gabrielle shook her head. "Mom died this past winter."

Rasmus bowed his head and shook it. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle." He peered up, his eyes soft and watery. "What of your sister?"

"I'm... not sure," admitted the bard.

Rasmus sighed as he leaned back against his chair. "We all assumed you, Hecuba, and Lila were taken into slavery like many of the other women."

"We were," confirmed Gabrielle.
"How did you make it out?" The constable now sat forward, completely intrigued by what Gabrielle's story could be.

The bard licked her lips as she debated how much to tell the constable. She knew he was a trustworthy man because of what her father always told her. Constable Rasmus was the first constable in Potidaea's time that actually brought order to the village and helped it thrive. "The raiders sold us to a slaver by the name of Hecht. He trained us for a year then we were taken to the slave market in Tricca." She hesitated in the middle of her story and she urged herself to continue. "Mom and I were sold to the same owner but Lila was sold to somebody else."

"Who was the man?" inquired the constable.

Gabrielle shook her head and replied, "A diplomat by the name of Michulus and we were with him for several moons." Her memories jumped back to her time with Michulus and instantly Perdicus's face filtered into her head. "Constable, did you ever know a young man by the name of Perdicus?"

"I do," confirmed the constable. "He was taken near the end of the raid." He shook his head. "It was kind of strange… it was a late night attack… both his folks were killed too."

Gabrielle nodded. "That's what he said."

"You know him?" asked the amazed constable.

"I knew him," corrected the princess. She laced her hands tightly together in her lap. "He was one of Michulus's slaves too but he was killed by a mob against Michulus."

"Obviously you survived," concluded the constable.

"Yes, sir. Mom and I escaped with the help of Michulus's wife and we went to Michulus's father, Cornelio."

Constable Rasmus opened his mouth then closed it as his thick eyebrows formed into one. "You're a branded slave then."

Gabrielle dipped her head. "Yes, sir."

The constable sighed and leaned back into his chair with a heavy weight on him. "I'm so sorry, Gabrielle."

"Despite everything… I've been fortunate too. Cornelio has been a father to me and he's sending me to the Academy of Performing Bards."

Constable Rasmus was astounded at the news, his eyes wide like there was a god before him. "By the gods, I'm so happy." He then considered the two Amazons travelling with the bard and wondered how they fit into everything. "And your
friends?" He looked between them then back at Gabrielle.

The young slave squeezed and unsqueezed her hands as she debated whether to tell the truth. She knew it was her choice and she had to make the best one for the safety of her Nation. "They are my friends," she started out with and held a hand out to Solari. "This is Solari and that's Ephiny."

The constable bowed his head to both of the Amazons then focused on Gabrielle again.

Gabrielle breathed deeply and quietly said, "I'm also their Amazon Princess."

Constable Rasmus was taken aback and yet again his expression broke into awe. He cleared his throat and straightened up more in his chair. "You have been through much, Gabrielle… changed much too, I can see."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I suppose you're right, constable." She then went a little worried as she stated, "Please keep this to yourself too, sir. It's rather imperative that nobody knows of my brand or my title as Amazon Princess."

The constable considered the request then nodded his head. "Of course, Gabrielle. I understand your concerns." He smiled now and he noted it helped settle the young woman's fears. "I'm glad you've arrived here when you have."

Gabrielle tilted her head and could tell the constable was getting more business like. "Is something wrong then?"

"Not at all," assured the constable. "However the time on your family's property was running short." He suddenly stood up and walked around his desk. The three young women followed him with their eyes as he went to the far right wall where the wall had open cubby holes. Inside each small box were scrolls carefully rolled up and tied with thongs. The constable scanned over them until he was in the 'H' section where he retrieved a scroll. As he approached his desk again, he unrolled the scroll. "The time on your father's property would expire in less than two years."

Gabrielle was a little confused and gently asked, "The time?"

"Yes," Constable Rasmus sat down and gently rested the open scroll on his desk. "The deed to your father's land," he clarified. "Since he has passed away it automatically goes to his son, which he has none so then it goes to his wife."

Solari exchange a quick glance at Ephiny and Ephiny gave a hidden shrug.

"In that case," continued the constable, "you're the next heir, Gabrielle."

The bard remained briefly silent because she was stunned. "What have happened to his property if none of us were here to claim it?"

The constable peered up from the scroll after scanning over it. "After five years, I would have to sell it to the highest bidder in an auction. We'd naturally assume that nobody was alive in his family or could own the property." He paused in thought as a
slight problem occurred to him. "However I am not sure I can even give you the deed." He sadly studied the confused bard.

Ephiny quickly realized why he may have to refute the title from his girlfriend. She shook her head and stated, "Because of her brand."

The constable nodded his head. "According to law it is illegal for slaves to own land."

"You can't do that," protested Solari. "That's her father's land and they've been through enough."

"Solari," warned the princess in a gentle tone. "It's okay."

"I know, Solari," relented the constable. He sighed and stared at the deed, especially at the bottom where Herodotus's signature still bled into the parchment. He started to chew on his bottom lip as he debated what to do and how to handle this. He'd known Herodotus for years and always took time to visit him at the grave. Herodotus had been one of the constable's first confidants when he'd arrived in Potidaea and Herodotus's death had been incredibly hard on Rasmus. He'd always wished there was something he could have done to help Herodotus and his family but there never was anything he could have done.

Yet as Constable Rasmus lifted his head and met the eyes of Herodotus's oldest daughter, he realized he could still do something. Rasmus could make sure Herodotus's legacy in Potidaea continued by passing on his property to his daughter. He took a deep breath and nodded his head. "I will overlook your brand, Gabrielle."

"Thank you, Artemis," murmured the bard in relief. The tension in her depleted and her body shook some from being so relieved. "Thank you so much, constable."

"It's the least I can do after what's happened." Rasmus licked his lips and studied the deed more. "I will be honest, Gabrielle if the head of state comes to this area and checks records. He may find out how I've overlooked your brand. As we both know, there is a slavery list being constantly circulated and the government keeps it very updated thanks to the slavers."

"I know," agreed the princess, "thank you, constable." She clearly understood the risk that the constable was taking, it meant his job.

The constable nodded and he reached forward with his right hand. He plucked his quill out of its ink well. "Please sign below your father's signature."

Gabrielle rose up and accepted the quill from him. She bent her head forward and found an empty line already predrawn out under her father's name. There she signed her name then under the line she printed her name like her father had done so many years back. "Thank you again, constable."

The constable gave a smile then replaced his quill into its ink well. He then rolled the deed up and carried it back to its home. "Will you be staying now, Gabrielle?"

"I don't believe so, sir." Gabrielle sat back down between her friends. "I'm with the
"That's understandable." Constable Rasmus returned to his chair and studied the young princess. "I'd be pleased if you stopped in now and again with me. Check on the property and such."

"I will, of course." Gabrielle nodded and settled into her seat a little more. "Maybe later down the road I'll have the house repaired and the barn rebuilt in my father's name."

"I am sure he would be honoured, Gabrielle." The constable smiled at the girl's persistence to continue her father's legacy. He folded his hands in his lap and curiously studied the three Amazons. For the first time, he realized there were actually two feathers in Gabrielle's hair. He wondered what they meant but he knew it'd probably be a long explanation. "How do you like it with the Amazons?"

"It's wonderful," answered the princess. "I've learned a lot."

"I can imagine." The constable chuckled and admired Gabrielle for her achievements even though she's had bad fortune. "We've never had any Amazons enter here, which has always amazed me."

"Really?" inquired the bard. Her eyebrows knitted together and suddenly all of Ambassador Majorie's lesson rushed to mind. "How has the harbour done?"

"It's expanded much since last you were here," proudly admitted the constable. "The port continues to grow and the fishing industry here has improved much. My work with the harbour has greatly improved the income of the town."

"You think Potidaea is on its way to being a port town?"

"Yes but I think the agriculture is just as important." The constable smiled in consideration of the growth of Potidaea for the past three years. "We actually plan to build a larger town wall because of the increase of population."

"That's excellent to hear," agreed the princess. She then considered a little longer and sat up more in her chair.

The constable noted some kind of light in the young woman's eyes and he wondered what she had in mind.

"You said the Amazon Nation has never been here?" probed the bard.

"Not at all." The constable's eyes curiously narrowed and he grinned. "Are you proposing something, princess?"

The bard chuckled and asked, "Perhaps I could interest Potidaea in a economical pact."

Ephiny's eyes instantly widened at her girlfriend's idea. "Gabrielle, you can't-"
"Ephiny," cut in the bard. "I am the princess." She raised a warning eyebrow at her girlfriend in hopes Ephiny would let her work her magic as princess, bard, and apprentice diplomat.

"Of course, my princess." Ephiny bowed her head and relented.

Gabrielle turned back to the constable.

The constable was quietly drumming his fingers on the desk. "What does the Nation have to offer?"

The bard stood up from her chair and walked around in the room as she considered. She came up along side the constable's desk and asked, "Does Potidaea still import most of their olive oil?"

"Yes we do from the surrounding villages." The constable shook his head. "Unfortunately the harbour lends very land for any olive groves… between that, the herding, and farms. So we import much of our olive oil from the villages of Pydna and Dium across the bay."

Gabrielle chewed on her lower lip as she debated how to handle this possible pact with her hometown. "In the Nation we have warehouses stocked full of olive oil." She now started pacing around in the constable's office. "Perhaps we can make a pact for trade between olive oil and fish."

The constable slowly smiled at the idea. "The Amazon Nation doesn't have much in the way of fish?"

Solari huffed. "I don't think I've ever had fish for dinner."

The constable quietly laughed at the Amazon's remark. "How is the olive oil in the Nation?" He looked between the princess and the two Amazons.

"Excellent," agreed Ephiny, "we strain our oil three times over to make sure it's pure."

The constable smiled at that and nodded his head.

"How's the seafood here?" gently teased Solari.

The constable chuckled. "It is excellent. The fishermen bring in loads of perch, bass, tuna, and some halibut. Then in the summer seasons they sail further out into the Thracian sea to haul in loads of prawn, squid, and eel."

Gabrielle's nose crinkled at the mention of eel and squid. "How about oysters?"

"Yes," agreed the constable, "we've just expanded into dredging out oysters thanks to the help of Scione village at the end of the peninsula." He leaned back in his chair. "On occasions the fishermen bring in turtle and caviar."

"I'm sure those and the oysters are expensive on the market."
The constable nodded at Ephiny's reasoning. "Yes, that is why Potidaea has done so well. We are becoming quite known for our oysters in the bay."

Gabrielle chuckled and smiled at how prosperous her town had become. "But you still have to import oil…?"

Constable Rasmus grinned at the Amazon Princess. "Yes, I am afraid so." He tilted his head as his grin lengthened. "Perhaps the Amazon Nation can assist us."

"Perhaps," teased back the princess. She came back over and took her seat again. "We could offer roughly two wagons of oil, constable for an exchange of two wagons of seafood."

The constable curiously studied the young bard and considered the offer. "How refined is your olive oil?"

"We have two types," explained Ephiny, "there's regular oil that's not as refined then we have virgin oil. The virgin is pressed more and filtered more."

Constable Rasmus remained quiet as he thought about it. He focused on the bard. "What kind of seafood?"

"Whatever is in season," answered the princess. "Maybe in rare cases some oysters."

Rasmus chuckled at the deceive princess. "Two wagons of virgin oil and one wagon of regular."

"Constable, what would Potidaea do with two wagons of virgin? Two regular and one virgin," countered the bard.

Rasmus narrowed his eyes as he considered the new offer. "Half and half, Gabrielle."

Princess Gabrielle remained stern as she debated how her council would react. "Only if we get five bushels of oysters."

Constable Rasmus heartedly laughed and smiled at the bard. "I will require a tour of your olive groves and your mills before I can sign the pact."

"Of course," agreed the bard but her lips slightly puckered in concern. "How many times a year will we make this exchange?"

"Once a season," suggested Solari.

"Not in the winter months," reminded Ephiny, "too dangerous."

"Plus we need our own oil for the winter time," reminded the princess.

"May I suggest in the early spring and the mid fall," cut in the constable. "That would sufficient to get us through the winter months."

Gabrielle nodded her head in agreement. "That should work."
The constable smiled at that and leaned back into his chair. "And are you certain, princess that we can make these arrangements with your Nation?"

"I believe so," replied the princess. "It will have to be approved by the council before it is signed." She tilted her head. "You will need to speak to the council here…?"

The constable nodded his head. "Yes, if they agree to the general terms then they leave it in my hands to assess the contract. And I would prefer to see these groves and mills before the contract is produced."

Gabrielle's mind raced with random thoughts on the situation. She finally smiled and said, "We are headed to Amphipolis so we will be coming back this way. We can stop back here and we can accompany you to the Nation. I know our ambassador would be grateful to assist you and show you around the Nation."

"I would like that," agreed the constable. "I will speak to the council and get their approval by the time you return."

"Great." The bard brightened at the prospect of having a pact with her hometown and her Nation. She also knew it would be great fortune to bring seafood into the Nation's diet. "I believe we'll be back here in two days…?" She looked to Ephiny for confirmation.

Ephiny mentally calculated the ride to Amphipolis, the time there, and the time back to Potidaea. "It should be about two days… we'll probably be here late afternoon."

"I will be ready then," agreed the constable. He then suddenly stood up and held out his hand.

Princess Gabrielle didn't hesitate and rose up. She clasped Constable Rasmus's larger hand and give a strong hand shake to show her pledge. "Thank you, constable."

"Thank you, princess." Rasmus warmly smiled then released her hand. "Will you stay the night?"

"No," replied the bard, "I would like to get halfway to Amphipolis tomorrow."

"Then I recommend you stay in Stigiera for the evening. There's a wonderful inn by the port… a friend of mine runs it so just mention to him I sent you."

Gabrielle smiled at his offer. "Thank you, sir… we will." She gave a faint signal to her friends to get up and they promptly did so. "We will see you in a couple of days then, constable."

"Guaranteed," promised Rasmus. He came around his desk and led the women to the door. "Be safe on your journey, Gabrielle."

"I will, sir." Gabrielle paused and faced the constable. Without another thought, she embraced him in a warm hug. "Thank you again, constable," she sincerely whispered.
"Anytime, Gabrielle." Rasmus ended the hug and happily watched the Amazons leave his office. After they were out, he closed the door gingerly and started to think to himself all the changes Herodotus's daughter had been through. He was astounded beyond words.

Meanwhile, the three Amazons returned to their horses by Gabrielle's rundown home. Ephiny and Solari mounted their horses but Gabrielle took a quiet minute to send a prayer to her father as well as her mother. She then untied Torqueo's reins and got up into his saddle. She then led the group out of town knowing she needed to put distance between her and her home because it was still too painful for her. She was still able to see her, her family, and Xena riding on horseback trying to escape from the raiders in the fields. It was engrained in her memory forever.

The group rode on for another several candlemarks and entered the well-known sea port town of Stigiera. It was almost the halfway marker between Amphipolis and Potidaea but a little due east than needed to be a midway point. However Gabrielle felt the desire to sleep in a bed tonight and she figured so did her friends. When they entered the busy town, they dismounted and knitted together tightly so they wouldn't lose each other. On the eastern side of the town, they came into the port area and discovered the tavern inn that the constable had spoken about. It was the Port Inn and none too busy for the Amazons’ taste.

After they stabled their horses in a nearby stable, they climbed the steps and went in with their saddlebags on their shoulders. As soon as they stepped inside, the loud clatter and talk died instantly and all eyes rested on them.

Gabrielle was in the front and she felt a faint flush crawl up her neck. She subconsciously adjusted the staff in her left hand, which eased her apprehension. She never had so many people visually inspect her from top to bottom. She tried to ignore them as she continued her journey up to the bar where she saw the innkeeper.

Solari and Ephiny remained tense and their hands itched close to their backs. They were prepared to draw their swords if any man decided to even leave their seats. Luckily nothing happened as they went up to the innkeeper.

Gabrielle noticed a warm smile on the innkeeper's face. "Good evening."

"Good evening," greeted back the innkeeper. "How are you, ladies?"

"Quite well." Gabrielle settled her saddlebag on a stool in front of the bar. "Do you have a room with two beds?"

"I do, mate." The innkeeper finished drying a wood mug and settled it under the bar. He flung the dirty towel over his shoulder and asked, "Just one?"

"Yes, please." Gabrielle was unbuckling her saddlebag flap on one side. "We were recommended to come here."

The innkeeper perked up at the news. "By who, mate?"

The princess chuckled as she fished around in her dinar pouch. "Constable Rasmus
"I'll be damned," bellowed the innkeeper with a brisk laugh. "I haven't seen his ugly mug here in ages. How the Hades is he?"

The bard grinned and countered out seven dinars until she'd hear the price. "Fairly well actually."

"That's great." The innkeeper then seemed to realize he hadn't named his price. "Oh that'll be five dinars, mate."

"Here you are." Gabrielle gave him the five and as she put the other two coins away she heard him talking.

"Go up 'em stairs and it be the third door on the right, mate."

"Thank you." Princess Gabrielle just finished strapping her saddlebag flap over and hefted the saddlebag. She then guided her friends upstairs.

The innkeeper picked up another wet mug out of his sink and started drying it. He shook his head with a grin as he watched the three young women go upstairs.

After the Amazons dropped their saddlebags into the room, they all agreed to a much needed dinner. They didn't hesitate to hurry back downstairs and find themselves a table that was offset from most of the male population in the tavern. For awhile, many of the men watched them with leering stares but one by one they gave up trying to intimidate the young women.

The dinner was rather good and the Amazons were well spoiled by seafood dinners. Solari had hummed all the way through the dinner since it was her first experience having tuna. Ephiny had the same while Gabrielle tried the halibut fish and they all had cider to drink. With fully bellies, they decided to call it a night so they retired into their room with the decision to explore the port area tomorrow morning.

When the sun crested in the east it peeked through the window on the east side of the room. The light slowly crept along on the bedroom floor and crawled up the side of Ephiny and Gabrielle's bed. It then streamed directly into Ephiny's face and gradually awoke the Amazon.

Ephiny was first up and she took several but quiet minutes to wake her girlfriend.

Gabrielle whimpered into a sweet morning kiss. She smiled and nuzzled her face into Ephiny's neck. "You should move into my hut so I can wake up all the time like that."

The older Amazon chuckled and pressed a kiss into Gabrielle's forehead. "Or you could move into mine."

The bard snickered and murmured, "It'd look bad if the princess moved."

"Rrrright," teased Ephiny. She then let her hands trail down her girlfriend's arms and onto her stomach. "You were snoring last night."
"I was not." Gabrielle's eyes suddenly opened and they were glinting with mischief. She felt a shiver ripple up her back when she saw how dark and rich Ephiny's eyes were.

"You were incredibly loud," persisted the Amazon.

"You're such a terrible liar," chided the bard, "Give it up."

Ephiny softly laughed and her right hand snaked across the short space between her and Gabrielle. Her hand gently pressed against the bard's stomach. "I'm sure Solari heard you too."

"Get off it, Eph."

The princess rolled her eyes and tried to act unaffected despite she was annoyed.

"You snore."

"I do not."

"Yes you do."

"No I do not."

"Yes you do, Gabrielle."

The bard clenched her teeth and growled, "I do not snore." She was about to try and push Ephiny to tease her but her idea was totally lost on her. She suddenly yelped in protest when Ephiny started to tickle her side. "Eph! No! no!"

Ephiny sat up and leaned over to get better access to her girlfriend's sides. She mercifully tickled Gabrielle.

The small bard dropped her head back and started to scream and laugh. "Ephiny! Oh gods, stop!"

Solari suddenly shot up and when her fuzzy vision focused on the playful pair, she yelled, "I am up!" She then shot a dangerous look to Ephiny. "That was a rotten way to get me up, Ephiny. I can take her snoring at night but not her screaming."

Gabrielle blinked when she realized she had truly been snoring.

Ephiny saw the dumbfounded look on her girlfriend's face and she fell onto her back in a stitch of laughter.

"I do not snore!" yelled the furious bard.

Solari rolled her eyes and flopped back into her pillow. "And Artemis has no tits," she muttered.

Gabrielle fumed and folded her arms over her chest as a pout covered her expression.
"I didn't know Artemis didn't have any tits."

Solari laughed, sat up, grabbed her pillow and threw it at the princess.

Gabrielle was smacked in the face and she sent a dirty look to her friend. "That's it, I'm going to get ready." She threw her covers off and hopped out of bed then went into the washroom.

Ephiny lifted her head and caught the glint in her best friend's eyes. "Nice one, Solari."

Solari fashionably brushed back her hair. "I was good huh?" She winked and rolled out of bed too.

The three Amazon took about a candlemark and half to get ready and eat breakfast then they dropped off their saddlebags with their horses. Gabrielle also picked up her pouch of dinars, tied it to her side, and headed out of the stables with her staff in her right hand. She joined her friends at the doorway of the stables and together they went to the market that wasn't too far away. The market was extremely busy and smelled heavily of salt and fish to the point it mind as well been a perfume sold in Stageria.

"You know," started the bard, "I could use some new scrolls."

"There's a parchment stand just ahead." Solari pointed to a stand about a hundred paces away.

"Let's go," agreed Ephiny.

As soon as they were close enough, Gabrielle quickly started looking over the scrolls and pieces of loose parchments. She also realized she needed some more ink too. So she picked out about five scrolls and a small bottle of ink for when she got back to the Nation. She then approached the owner of the stand, a smile on her face.

"Good mornin'," offered the owner, an older woman. "That be seven dinars."

"Seven dinars?" Gabrielle gaped and shook her head. "I paid five dinars for a bed room last night."

The stand owner put her hands on her hips and eyed the young woman. "Six dinars."

"Four," protested the bard.

The owner dramatically exhaled and dropped her hands from her sides. "Five… nottin' less."

"Five then." Gabrielle smiled then paid the woman the money.

The stand keeper bent forward and held out her hand to take the dinars.

As the bard also leaned over the stand to hand the money, her eyes automatically travelled overhead of the stand keeper. Something instantly caught Gabrielle's eye and
she couldn't help but stare at it. She tore her gaze away and released the coins into the woman's hand. "What is that journal up there on the shelf?"

The woman was putting her money away as she turned around to figure out what journal the bard had in mind. She pointed up to the soft leather bound journal on the top shelf in the centre. "That one?"

"Yes," replied the Amazon Princess.

"That ain't for sale," refused the stand keeper. She faced the young woman again, her hands returned to her hips.

Gabrielle was slightly confused and decided to probe more. "Why isn't it?" She sensed Ephiny besides her trying to get the scrolls from her. So she took a second to hand them over to her.

Ephiny had a large pouch bag with her so she put Gabrielle's items away for her.

"It's uh pirate's journal," explained the stand keeper. "Uh female pirate."

The small bard's eyes widened and she stared up at the journal. "A female pirate?"

"Yes," answered the stand keeper, "I'm ain't sure 'er name but whoever wrote it was uh female." She glanced up at the leather journal then back at the Gabrielle. "Another one of thuh shop keepers 'ere had it and I bought it from 'im."

"May I look at it?" persisted the princess.

The stand keeper shook her head.

Solari glanced over at her best friend and had a confused look.

Ephiny was also perplexed why her girlfriend was so unrelenting to have the pirate journal.

"How much did you pay for it?" Gabrielle was hoping by going another route she could get the woman to give into her.

The stand keeper eyed the young woman and replied, "Seven dinars."

"I'll give you nine for it," offered the bard.

The stand keeper faintly grinned and decided she might be able to get some good money from this girl after all. "Sixteen dinars," countered the stand keeper.

Gabrielle smiled when she knew she'd baited the stand keeper into selling. "I'll give you fourteen that's double its value."

The shop keeper didn't say anything and considered the price. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at the Amazon Princess however she turned around and stood up on her tip toes.
The bard gave a private prayer to Artemis as she pulled out fourteen dinars from her pouch. She couldn't figure out why she had to have this journal but something made her want it, no she needed it.

The stand keeper held out the journal as she received the money in another hand.

"Thank you," replied the bard and she tightly held onto the journal.

"Don't lose it, girl." She pointed a finger at Gabrielle. "That female pirate had uh good story in there."

The princess merely nodded. "Thanks again."

The stand keeper nodded back then went down to the other end of her table where she had new customers.

Gabrielle and her friends quietly left the stand and continued through the market.

"Why'd you have to have that journal?"

The bard shook her head as her right hand smoothed over the soft leather of the journal. "I'm not sure." She looked at Solari and added, "Just something told me to get it."

Solari still had a curious and confused expression but she went back to focusing on the market and people around them.

"Want me to tuck it away?"

Gabrielle shook her head at Ephiny's suggestion. "Thanks though." She gazed up from the journal and studied the market. "Either of you need to stop for anything?"

"I don't think so," replied Solari.

"Eph?"

The older Amazon shook her head. "I'm good." She looked between her two friends and suggested, "We should get back to the stable and head out of here."

Gabrielle dipped her head briefly in thought but she had to agree. "You're right… let's head back."

The three Amazons slipped past a few more people then were able to turn back around. As they weaved through the crowded market place, Gabrielle's mind skipped back to the Nation. She wondered how everybody was even though she knew things were probably just fine. Her thoughts then went out to Eponin and without realizing it, a smile crept along her face when she recalled all her lessons. One particular lesson of an Amazon warrior came to mind about how a true warrior could focus and unfocus various noises like a filter.
Gabrielle tried to recall the different aspects of the lesson and decided the market would be a perfect place to test it. So gradually the bard listened to all the various noises and voices in the market places. She tried to figure out which noise was and filtered them out of all the voices in the market place. She first picked up on the sounds of barrels rolling over gravel. The next noise was the distinct sound of horse hoof beats. Then a sharp cloth snap caught her ear from the overhead clothes on a string out to dry from somebody's home. Then a very faint but distinct sound of tapping and rapping of metal and it made Gabrielle stop walking.

The two Amazons realized they'd lost Gabrielle and they turned around to find her a few paces back.

"What's wrong?" questioned Ephiny.

"I just thought of something," murmured the bard. Her eyebrows were knitted together as she listened to the rapping and tapping of metal more carefully. She tried to pinpoint its location like Eponin had taught her. "This way." She suddenly hurried off to her left.

Ephiny and Solari chased after the princess and were worried about what was going on now.

Gabrielle slipped past several people but she remained focused on the metal tapping as it grew louder. Just ahead to the left on the corner of the two streets was the noise's origin. And Gabrielle came to a dead stop on the opposite side of an open smithing shop.

Ephiny came to a quick stop behind her girlfriend; she wasn't breathing heavy but a little rasped. "What is it, Gabrielle?"

"Look." The princess pointed across to the black smith's shop.

"It's a smithing shop," observed Solari, her voice filled with confusion.

"Yes but look at the black smith." Gabrielle turned her head to Ephiny and Solari, a smug look on her face.

Ephiny blinked twice and muttered in awe, "A female black smith."

"Sweet Artemis," rasped Solari. "How did you know?"

Gabrielle chuckled and replied, "I didn't… I was just hoping." She clutched her pirate journal a little more then decided to make her away across the street. When she stepped into the smithing hut, she was instantly greeted by the female blacksmith, who had her back to the three Amazons.

"I don't work for free." The blacksmith was hunched over an open brick oven where she pushed hot coals around. As she turned around to face her possible customers, she spoke. "So don't…." She lost her words when she realized her customers were three young female warriors.
Solari smirked. "You say that to all your customers?"

The blacksmith shook her head and pulled her gloves off her hands. She tossed them on the ledge by her fire kelm then curiously studied the three women. "How can I help you three?"

Gabrielle wasn't sure how to approach the topic but she neared the blacksmith. "Have you been doing this work for some time?"

"Yes," replied the smith, "my father taught me and I took his business when I was twenty-one. Why?"

The princess cleared her throat and tried to gain some courage. She could tell this woman was rather tough and probably from her experiences from being a female blacksmith. "My friends and I are from the Macedonian Amazon Nation."

The smith's sharp black eyes narrowed and she judged them to be true Amazons or not. She had to admit that they had fine armour and the hilts that slightly protruded over the two other Amazon's shoulders were well-crafted. "I don't do mass production," she shot back and started to turn away.

"Wait," cut in Gabrielle, "give me a chance."

The blacksmith exhaled audibly and turned back to the princess. "I don't have any interest in doing large production work for one group."

"That's not what I'm asking," refuted the bard. She tried to look calm, sincere, as well as promising without lending to too much.

"What is it you want?" The blacksmith folded her arms over her chest, which was clad by a dirty black apron.

"Let's start over again." Gabrielle held out her hand. "I'm Gabrielle."

The blacksmith was uncertain as she stared at the young Amazon. She finally relented and took the Amazon's arm in a powerful shake. Despite the blacksmith's short and petite form, she was rather intimidating and deemed respect. "I'm Andra."

Gabrielle held her hand out to her girlfriend. "This is Ephiny." She then motioned to Solari. "And this is Solari." She lowered her hand back to her side and continued to speak. "The reason I came in here is because in my Nation we're looking for a female blacksmith. And I'm-"

"No," cut off Andra, "there's no way." She waved her hand and turned back to her kelm. She picked up her gloves.

"We need a blacksmith," challenged the princess, "somebody with the knowledge and skill."

Andra was shaking her head as she jerked on her gloves. "Sorry, Gabrielle but I'm not some Amazonian female lookin' to join the fight against the male race." She turned
around and pointed to the front of her open shop. "There's the exit." She then started to walk away.

Gabrielle hurried down the long metal table to keep up with the blacksmith. "Please, Andra we could really use a blacksmith."

"And I could use a few more customers and dinars," shot back the blacksmith. "I said no… what part didn't you catch?" Andra faced the bard again. "The 'n' or the 'o'?"

The princess grumbled when the blacksmith turned her back to her again. She just resisted from hitting the metal table because she knew Ambassador Majorie would be disappointed in her. She had to tell herself she would win Andra over and now she just had to do it. "Please, Andra listen to me."

"No," growled the blacksmith, "I've heard enough so leave." She didn't wait for a response and thrashed open the black curtain where she disappeared behind.

Gabrielle mentally counted to five to settle her temper then she called, "How's your business here anyway, Andra?"

Suddenly the blacksmith reappeared but this time her eyes burned hotly as her own embers in her kelm. "Get out of here," she warned in a dangerous voice.

Ephiny and Solari hurried over to their friend's side. They knew Gabrielle had thrown wood into the fire by bringing up the lack of business in the smith's shop.

"My father started this business over twenty years ago and I intend to continue his legacy." Andra's chest rose up and down heavily and her eyes were flashing dangerously. "Business is fine."

Gabrielle's lips thinned and she held up her hands defensively. She should have known better than to pick on the lack of customers in the smithing shop. "I'm sorry, Andra it's just…." She glanced over at the blacksmith next door, whom had a constant flow of customers and a lot of armoury either hanging about or laying on his metal table.

Andra followed her gaze to the next door smith and that depressed her anger. She shook her head and again walked away but went to the other end of her hut. "Look…." She spun around with a small but heavy anvil in her hands. She hefted it onto the metal table and gazed down at the Amazons. "I admit business isn't strong."

Gabrielle gradually came closer as she spoke. "I know and I'm offering you a chance at something better… at least what I think is better."

Andra shook her head and rested her hands on the anvil. "I'm not going to be some barbarian in leathers running around with a band of tribal women."

Solaris automatic response was to snort at the blacksmith's ignorant perception.

Gabrielle caught the blacksmith's annoyance at Solari and she whispered, "Solari." Then she returned her focus to the blacksmith. "It's funny you say that because that's
what I sort of thought Amazons were too."

"Oh sweet Artemis," moaned Solari from her spot at the other end of the shop.

"Just ignore her," interjected the princess.

Andra decided to do so and rested her full attention on the bard. "Alright… tell me what are Amazons."

Gabrielle stepped closer to the blacksmith but remained a certain distance even though the metal table separated them. "The Amazons are a Nation of women that are bonded together through one belief."

"And what's that?" persist Andra.

"That women are not inferior to men." Gabrielle rested her left hand on the table while her right held tightly to the pirate journal. "Over time this bond has intertwined us into a family." She shook her head. "We're by no means… barbarians as you put it." A slow smile had grown on Gabrielle's face. "We're a unified Nation of family that believes in a cause."

Andra sighed and dipped her head forward as she absorbed the princess's words. When she lifted her head, her eyes were much calmer, almost friendlier. "And what could the Amazons offer me?"

"For one thing, a lot of work," teased the bard yet she went serious. "A home, a full stomach each day, protection, friends… and family."

Andra licked her lips and straightened up. "I don't fight."

"You don't have to," assured the princess, "but you would have to learn how to fight incase you needed to protect yourself."

The blacksmith lowered her head and started to shake it. "I need to think about it," she murmured then she lifted her head. "I know it would beat staying here." She directed at her next door competitor.

"But you don't want to lose your father's business," concluded the princess.

"Exactly." Andra sighed and tapped her anvil a few times. "Is there a smithing shop there… in the Nation?"

"No, there have been plans to build one but our government requires a blacksmith first."

Now it dawned on Andra why Gabrielle was so persistent and she had to admire Gabrielle for her effort. She suddenly grabbed her small anvil and carried it to the other end of the table. "Will you be here for awhile?" She bent forward then her anvil slipped onto the ground under the table.

"Actually no… we were headed out now." Gabrielle came back down to her friends
and the blacksmith. "But we will be passing by here again tomorrow."

The blacksmith crossed her arms over her chest and tried to decide. "If you're really that interested then stop back here when you're passing by." She dropped her arms from her chest. "Maybe I'll have an answer for you then." Then Andra disappeared behind the black curtain without saying so much as a word of goodbye.

Ephiny come up to her girlfriend and whispered, "Come on… you did what you could."

Gabrielle was frowning but she dropped her head and silently left the blacksmith shop.

Andra finished her drink from her water skin then she came back out to find the Amazons gone. She looked beyond her shop into the busy street, she just made out their forms in the crowd, and it made her sigh.

The Amazons collected their horses and after getting out of town, they broke into a full gallop headed on the north road. They rode hard and long without stopping because they knew it'd only take three candlemarks to make it to Amphipolis. The road to Amphipolis winded and turned but it closed in to the well known town in the northern providence. And when the group was close, they slowed their horses into a trot then eventually into a walk as the gates came into view.

Gabrielle inhaled deeply to calm her nerves and continued forward on the road. Her mind quickly flashed the directions to Cyrene's tavern and she guided her friends through the large town. When Cyrene's tavern was just ahead, Gabrielle stopped and dismounted from her horse. The thought about stabling the horses crossed her mind but then she realized there was a stable now in front of Cyrene's tavern when there never had been originally.

"Take our horses in there?" suggested Solari.

"Yeah." Gabrielle went to the front of the small stable and went in to find five open stalls. She took one and her friends took their own.

"You think we'll stay the night?" called Solari.

"I hope so," answered the bard, "as long as Cyrene's here."

Ephiny had her mare situated but not untacked incase they couldn't stay the night. "I'm sure she's here."

Gabrielle brushed her hands off on her skirt, grabbed her staff from the side of the stall, and came out. "I hope so." She noted Solari was out of her horse's stall so she quietly left.

Ephiny followed out and Solari was last.

The princess climbed the steps of the tavern and decided not to knock since she figured nobody would hear her. She pushed the door open and went in to find the
tavern dead silent and nobody around. The tables were clean, the chairs perfectly aligned, and the floor rather clean. So she knew somebody was still at least running the tavern she just hoped it was Cyrene and that just maybe Xena was here.

Her stomach knotted at the thought of seeing Xena and her knees grew weaker. But Gabrielle pressed on and wove through the tables until she got to the small bar. "Hello?" she called out.

Ephiny and Solari remained at the door and took a few seconds to study the tavern.

Cyrene lifted her head and paused in the middle of cutting up a few carrots on her kitchen counter. She heard the young voice calling out again and she was almost positive she recognized it. She dropped her knife and wiped her hands on her apron as she hurried out of the door into the tavern. She came to a complete stop in the doorway when she saw who was on the other side of the bar. "Gab… Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle's eyes suddenly stung and she nodded. "It's me, Cyrene."

"Oh my gods," rasped Cyrene, "it can't be… oh my gods." She hastily rounded the bar and immediately pulled the young woman into a fierce hug as if Gabrielle would disappear from her sight.

Gabrielle managed to set her staff against the bar in time so she could fully hug Xena's mother back. She felt her body tremble with happiness and her eyes stung with pain. She dug her face into Cyrene's neck and held tighter to the woman that was always a second mother to her.

"By the gods," murmured Cyrene. She placed a kiss to Gabrielle's temple and continued to hug her. Her emotions mixed with happiness and sadness, which caused her to begin to cry.

Gabrielle bit her lip hard and muffled a faint whimper as she cried harder in the woman's arms. Her eyes were squeezed shut tightly but it didn't seem to stop the tears. "Oh gods… it's so good to see you, Cyrene," she rasped.

Cyrene pulled back but didn't break the embrace. She reached up with her right hand and wiped away Gabrielle's tears. "Oh gods please… it's still mom, Gabrielle." Her words only seemed to bring more tears to the young bard. Cyrene also couldn't resist her happy tears and she tried to wipe hers away briefly.

Gabrielle sniffed a few times and tried to blink out a few tears. "Is… is Xe… is she…?"

Cyrene understood the unfinished question and she closed her eyes as the loss of her daughter brought back pain and memories. "No," she murmured, "she's… she's not here." She then pulled Gabrielle back in knowing Gabrielle needed the hug as much as she did.

Gabrielle had her eyes closed so incredibly tightly so she could try to shut out the pain. Yet her heart screamed in pain and her body trembled with anger against her life.
Cyrene could sense Gabrielle's frustration and pain so she rubbed Gabrielle's back soothingly and whispered, "It'll be okay, sweetie." Her arms tightened even more. "I promise… it'll be okay."

After about a couple of candlemarks, Cyrene found herself sitting down to a warm dinner with Gabrielle, her two friends, and Toris. She'd decided to keep the tavern closed for the night so that she could spend time with them.

The reunion had been hard at first especially in finding out Xena wasn't in Amphipolis or anywhere to be found. Toris had shown up not long after Gabrielle's arrival and he welcomed her happily back to Amphipolis and the tavern. Cyrene told them all to catch up while she finished up dinner quickly.

The friends and family now all sat around a large round table and idly caught up with each other. Right now, Gabrielle was relaying the rest of her story since her capture in Potidaea.

"Right now I'm with the Amazon Nation until Ephiny and I start back up at the Academy."

"Gods," breathed Toris, "a lot has happened in three years for you."

Gabrielle nodded at him.

Cyrene was just shaking her head because she was so amazed. "You're now the Amazon Princess?"

"Yes, mom." Gabrielle softly smiled and crossed her legs under the table. "If I'm lucky I'll be the queen someday."

Cyrene chuckled and looked at the two more quiet Amazons. "You two must be terrified of that day."

Ephiny snickered and Solari outright laughed.

"Hey, hey," cut in Gabrielle, "I'm trying to be become a decent queen."

Solari rolled her eyes but the jab in her side from Ephiny kept her from making a comment.

"Gabrielle is doing well," admitted Ephiny, "better than many I can speak about."

"Thank you." Gabrielle smiled proudly.

Under the table, Solari kicked her best friend for saying anything because of the rules of training. Solari knew Eponin would have been quite displeased in Ephiny for giving any type of praise that wasn't due yet. Ephiny pretended to have not noticed and fully ignored Solari as she kept to the conversation at the table.
Gabrielle sat up some in her chair and tried to work up some courage. She licked her lips and brushed back a few wild strands of her hair. "Cyrene, what happened… to Xena?"

The tavern owner swallowed and nodded because she knew this was coming. "A lot, sweetie." Suddenly her son's hand covered hers in comfort and gave her strength to continue with Xena's story. "After you were gone… taken," she corrected, "Xena started to close up to everybody."

"Except to that horse," sadly muttered Toris.

"Argo," supplied Cyrene as she glanced at her twenty-four year old son.

"Argo?" muttered the bard as if she recognized the name.

"She's a mare," explained Cyrene, "Argo was Potestas's golden mare."

It fell into place for Gabrielle and her face unsquinted. "I remember that mare now… Potestas and Xena were riding her when the raiders were hunting us."

Cyrene mutely nodded then went back to the story. "Xena spent a year training to…"

Gabrielle tilted her head to the side. "To what, mom?"

The tavern owner sighed and shook her head; her eyes burned yet she resisted from crying. "To prepare to find you when everybody thought you were dead."

The princess's head bent forward some and she breathed heavily a few times. She had to know what happened to her best friend and now she realized her disappearance would have torn Xena apart. "What happened then?" she whispered when her mind came back to the present.

Cyrene squeezed her son's hand for more support before continuing. "About twelve moons after you were taken, Xena came to me and said she was leaving to find you. I tried to make her stay but of course you know Xena… when she has her mind made up that's all there is for her." She paused so she could try to swallow down the lump in her throat. "So I agreed and she packed her things, left and Lyceus went with her."

"Oh no," rasped the bard, "He didn't, did he?" She glanced between Cyrene and Toris.

Toris merely nodded his confirmation.

"I guess he thought he could protect his big sister," mumbled Cyrene.

Gabrielle was shaking her head and she tried to ignore her turning stomach. "Where did they go?" She waited for Cyrene to pick up the story but Cyrene seemed to have too much trouble.

Toris had noticed it so he jumped into the conversation. "Xena and Ly somehow managed to find the raiders that attack Potidaea and joined the band. It's a little confusing from there what happened but my guess is that they learned where you were
taken and realized they couldn't get to you."

The small bard shook her head. "They wouldn't have been able to… not with how protected Hecht's compound was." She then stopped in consideration. "We weren't even there… we were sold by then."

Cyrene swallowed away her upset and picked up from where Toris ended. "Xena returned home about less than a moon's cycle."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows when she realized Cyrene hadn't at all mentioned Lyceus. Then it also occurred to her that she hadn't seen Lyceus today, heard about him until now, and nobody spoke about him until now. It dawned on Gabrielle and she slumped back into her chair, her eyes closed and she murmured, "Lyceus is dead." When she finally opened her burning eyes, she saw how upset Cyrene was and Toris was barely able to control his emotions. "Oh gods," she whispered in agony.

Ephiny was beside Gabrielle and she didn't wait to pull her girlfriend into her arms.

The princess buried her face into Ephiny's chest and she let her painful tears out for Lyceus. Lyceus had been the only boy in her life that had been her brother and now he was lost. His death had been a result of her disappearance and Lyceus's attempt to help find her. Gabrielle had never known how many things went wrong that day she was taken but now everything was falling into place and heavily mounting on her.

Ephiny kissed the top of Gabrielle's head and brought her lips close to Gabrielle's ear. "It's okay, Gabrielle," she murmured.

The bard merely shook her head in Ephiny's embrace. None of what had happened was okay- it never would be for Gabrielle. Gabrielle finally pulled back from Ephiny's comfort when she felt she had better control. She wiped her tears away and pushed her hair back as she looked back to Toris and Cyrene. "Where's Xena now?"

Cyrene's eyes were red and dark as she braced herself to tell the rest. She didn't know everything about Xena's journey after leaving Amphipolis but she'd heard plenty since being a tavern owner. People could talk and they loved to talk in taverns or other public places. "After she left here she took control of a ship in one of the port towns south-east of here." She paused as she collected her thoughts and tried to make sense of countless rumours. "There were rumours of a female captain that sailed the high seas and that she stole money." Cyrene dipped her head and continued about the rumours. "She was tall, dark, and eyes as blue as the waters she sailed upon. She was also known for being ruthless." Her head came back up. "Merchants were fearful of her and her men."

Gabrielle didn't believe the story, there wasn't anyway for her best friend to turn into this cold-blooded killer.

"For a long time, those were the only rumours we heard," spoke Cyrene. "Then after so many moons of heartless, dark stories a regular customer of mine had returned from the Stageria market. He'd heard a story at an inn near the port about her. She and her men sailed into Roman waters. I guess they took on more than they could handle and somehow they were caught by the Romans." Cyrene hesitated in the middle of the
story, she was trying to take a few calming breaths. "The Romans captured her and her ship then whoever wasn't killed was nailed to a cross along a beachside to warn all those that crossed Rome."

Gabrielle was shaking her head and her head bent forward. She repeated to herself that they were merely stories and not the truth, just rumours and none of it happened. "It couldn't have been her," she painfully whispered as her head came up.

Cyrene saw the desperation in Gabrielle's eyes, the pleading and even Cyrene hadn't quite grasped the stories either. She didn't want to believe her daughter had turned into some monster yet in her heart she knew how it happened, why it happened.

"Gabrielle," gently spoke Toris, "it was Xena." He closed his eyes against the floating images of his sister fighting and killing. He looked back at Gabrielle. "Xena was capable of it. She spent over a year training herself to fight." He slumped back into his chair and broke the eye contact with the bard. "None of us want to believe it but wherever there is smoke there is fire."

Gabrielle dropped her head back and closed her eyes against another onslaught of emotions. "She's... she's dead then." Her head lowered back to meet Cyrene and Toris's gaze. "Isn't she?"

"There haven't been anymore stories since that one," simply answered Toris.

Gabrielle felt her breathing stop and her stomach pitched. She suddenly pushed up from her chair and rushed out of the tavern's front door.

Ephiny started to get up.

"Let me talk to her," protested Cyrene, her right hand up. When Ephiny nodded, she got up and quietly went out the open door. When she came out onto the dark porch, she saw Gabrielle's form hunched over the side of the railing and the sound of drying heaving was heard. Cyrene sighed and chastise herself for such a bad dinner topic. She carefully came up behind the Amazon Princess and gently rested a hand on her midback.

Gabrielle wiped away at her mouth and shook her head as she walked away. Her stomach was settling and very empty now but her body shook hard. "It can't be, Cyrene."

The tavern owner led her adopted daughter to a bench on the other side of the porch. She sat down while Gabrielle hunched forward. "I tell myself that too... each day."

"Why?" whimpered the bard, her head shaking. "Why couldn't she have stayed here?" She furiously raked her hands through her blond hair. "Why?" she hotly murmured again.

"Gabrielle," quietly started Cyrene, "you were everything to her." She took a moment to soothingly rub the bard's back. "I think when she lost you she felt as if she had nothing left."
The princess was still shaking her head and her hooded eyes were staring beyond the porch to the quiet town. "What could she have possibly been thinking? And why did she let it get that bad?"

"She didn't have much of a choice," whispered the mother. "She was driven to it."

Gabrielle looked up, her face constructed into a very perplexed look. "What you mean?"

Cyrene shook her head and looked away from Gabrielle. "Xena lost you, then her brother, I… I banished her from here. At that point, I'm sure she felt there was nothing for her."

"Oh gods," murmured the princess. "I can't image the guilt she felt." Gabrielle furiously brushed back annoying, loose locks of hair. "She would have faulted herself for my disappearance and Lyceus's… disappointing you."

"She was angry," mentioned Cyrene, "very angry." She wiped her sweaty palms on her dress. "I've never seen her that angry."

Gabrielle's mind jumped back to the day when she'd been hurt by that young boy Dani. She could still clearly recall how furious her best friend had been when she found out Gabrielle had not only been ostracized but also hurt. That was the only time Gabrielle ever had a glimpse into Xena's very dark and consuming anger. It'd scared her then and it still scared her now, it subconsciously made her shiver there on the bench. "She couldn't control her anger when it got to a point."

Cyrene was faintly nodding but also wondering where her daughter had picked up such a temper. Cyrene always had a plentiful amount of patience and forgiveness yet when it came to her family, she was unmistakably protective. Maybe that played into Xena's reaction to the lost of Gabrielle along with everything else in between.

The bard swallowed and her throat burned from the bile leftover. After a sigh, she got up and quietly said, "I need to get some water."

Cyrene quietly understood so she followed the young woman into the tavern. "There's plenty in the kitchen."

"Thank you," murmured the bard and she passed by the table of her friends.

Cyrene took her seat beside her son and everybody gave her worried looks. "She's okay," she promised yet her eyes were dull with concern.

Gabrielle came back out after about a minute, her mouth now clean and her stomach actually settling. She came over to her Amazons but didn't take a seat. "I think I'm going upstairs for the night."

Ephiny nodded and got up. "I'll join you."

"You three did stable your horses?" questioned the tavern owner.
"Yes," answered Solari, "untacked and fed."

Cyrene faintly smiled and nodded. "Get some rest, girls… I know it's been a long journey here." She then pushed out of her chair and went to Gabrielle. She gave the bard a warm hug then assured to her to get to bed. After the three Amazons were upstairs, she turned to her son, her head shaking. "I've made so many mistakes."

Toris sighed and stood up, he pushed his chair in while speaking. "You couldn't have known Gabrielle was still alive, mother."

Cyrene rested her hands on the back of her chair. "I shouldn't have given up hope." She was staring at the table as she continued to talk. "Because of my ignorance I lost Xena and Lyceus."

Toris frowned and came closer to his mother; he put a hand on her shoulder. "Mother, we may have lost them but Gabrielle has returned." He shook his head. "Neither Xena or Lyceus wouldn't want us to overlook that."

Cyrene sighed but she straightened up, her hands fall from the chair. "I know and I'm so happy she has returned." Then she walked away while mumbling, "When will things returned normal again?"

Toris ran a hand through his short black hair. He knew to leave his mother alone for the night so he quietly left the inn to return to his home. He would stop by the next morning to check in on everybody.

Upstairs, the Amazons were changing into their nightshifts to get ready for bed. Gabrielle was bent next to her saddlebags and fishing around for her night shift. As she did so, she came across first Lammy and next was the pirate journal. She then realized she had yet to look at the journal since she'd bought it.

The Amazon Princess carefully withdrew the leather journal from the saddlebag and carried it over to the small table where there was a candle burning. She pulled out a chair, sat, and lowered the journal onto the table. When her right hand glided across the top of the smooth leather, she felt some kind of charge.

Gabrielle's hands began to shake as she turned over the cover and her eyes focused on the distinct handwriting on the first page. Gabrielle didn't read it as her mind processed the very distinct handwriting; it was so distinct that images snapped in her mind. "By… the gods," she breathed as her fingertips traced down the rough parchment so that she could feel the actually indents of the scribing. "It's… it can't be….

Ephiny had just stepped out of the washroom and heard her girlfriend's words. "What's wrong?" She caught sight of the pirate journal on the table under the candlelight.

Gabrielle's head snapped up, her eyes wide and fully of surprise. "Cyrene said Xena took command of a ship and attacked merchants. Xena was a pirate… a female pirate."
For a moment Ephiny was purely confused but then it struck her from a blind side. "Sweet Artemis." She raced over to Gabrielle.

The princess had jumped up from her chair- one hand held the pirate journal and the other the candlestick. Her hands trembled and shook like leaves in the wind as she showed Ephiny the journal. "It's Xena's… it's Xena's journal."

Solari just came out of the washroom and caught the tail end of the conversation. "That journal is Xena's?" She hurried over to the pair and peered down at the journal. "How can you be sure?"

"I know Xena's handwriting anywhere," whispered the bard. She then looked up from the pirate journal and hastily said, "Wait I know how to prove it." She carefully closed up the journal and rushed to the door.

The Amazons hesitated for a second but chased after the princess out of the room.

Gabrielle tried to be quiet as she hurried down the hallway and she carefully pushed open the door to Xena's room. She hadn't been in here yet and when she stepped in, she was struck by memories. She refused to let them touch her emotions as she hurried across the room to the small desk. She put the journal down with the candlestick next to it then she frantically threw open the drawers on the desk.

Ephiny and Solari came in and neared the anxious bard.

"What you looking for?" questioned Ephiny.

"Xena had written some stuff," muttered Gabrielle. She found two empty drawers and was going to the bottom one. "Come on, Xena please leave something behind." She pulled open the drawer and several scrolls banged against the drawer in response. Gabrielle quickly hauled them all out and poured them out on the desk. "Help me."

The two Amazons came on either side of Gabrielle and unrolled the scrolls one by one.

Gabrielle opened the journal again and glanced at the scrolls as the Amazons opened them. She hastily compared them but all of them were written by somebody else. She didn't even bother glancing at the titles of the unknown scrolls because she was too determined to prove that this was Xena's journal.

"Wait, wait," announced Ephiny. She put a scroll underneath the journal and neatened it out more. "I think this is hers."

Gabrielle bent forward more and carefully compared the scrolls.

"There's her signature," confirmed Solari, her right index finger at the bottom left of the scroll.

As Gabrielle compared the scroll and journal, Ephiny took a moment to read over Xena's scroll. It only took a few words for Ephiny to realize it was a personal scroll because clearly written on the scroll were stanzas of poetry.
"It is her journal," murmured the shaking bard, "It's Xena's journal." She straightened up as the proof of the discovery hit her.

Ephiny had heard her girlfriend but she was still captivated by the poem that Xena had written so long ago. Ephiny thoroughly enjoyed poetry and this poem touched every emotion inside of Ephiny. When she pulled back from the poem, she just quickly glanced over it as a whole then it struck her that it wasn't just a poem but a song. "Gabrielle," she whispered, "read this scroll.

Gabrielle grabbed the candlestick and brought the candle closer to the scroll. She wrapped her fingers around the edges of parchment and lifted the scroll closer to the candlelight. She read the title of the song then continued down the song's stanzas and as she read tears slowly rolled down her cheeks. Her tears fell from her cheeks and dove down until it was caught by the parchment. The parchment hungrily absorbed the tears and the last line in the last stanza slowly blurred out to only leave the barely visible words: what was mine.

Section Three-B
Part 6: Xena's Fourth Year

Xena's head was bent forward and her hands covered her right knee, there was no pain. Slowly her hands caressed all around her knee as if she expected the pain to suddenly shatter her again like it had when she was put on the cross. Yet no pain exploded in her knee as she grazed her knee with her hands then her fingertips touched the top of knee high boots she wore. She'd never worn such a thing and it struck her just as odd as her now healed legs.

Gradually Xena lifted her head and held out her arms only to realize she now wore black leather gauntlets. Her eyes trailed up her arms and she had leather arm bracers on too. The palms of her hand flatly pressed against her leather covered stomach and she gazed down at the leather skirt mixed with golden chain mail. Then as if born from instinct, her right hand rested across her body and her fingers curled around her golden sword hilt. The wind blew strongly and her deep purple cape came to life and protectively wrapped around her body.

Xena finally took in her new surroundings as the wind continued to whip by her. She turned her head to the left and stared at all the thatch huts but there was nobody in this village; she was alone. And as her head rotated, a wooden dais now came into her view that hadn't been there earlier. Xena went stiff when her eyes settled upon the single figure that sat in a gigantic wood chair on top of the dais.

Experimentally, Xena took a cautious step and she found her knees didn't force her to limp. With more confidence, Xena became stoic and arrogant as if she was a ruler; she coolly approached the lone figure on the dais. When she came to the base of the five
steps of the dais, she stopped and stared up at the person. Xena instantly knew it was a female and probably a warrior by the sword hilt behind her head. However Xena couldn't make out her face since it was covered by a wood mask. Her breath then held when the female warrior rose up from her thrown and proudly stood before Xena.

Xena didn't move, she was held in place by the warrior's presence and her raw strength. Xena admired the warrior's muscular form and could see the taut muscles in her arms, bare stomach, and shaped legs. When her eyes travelled back up to the warrior's covered face, she could just make out the eyes behind the mask.

With perfect grace, the warrior slowly descended the steps of the dais to meet Xena at the bottom.

Xena took one step back when the warrior stopped on the last step. She tried harder to meet the eyes of the warrior but she couldn't get past the mask that stood between them.

Suddenly the wind gusted again and blew the warrior's blond hair and colourful straw around her covered face. When the wind calmed, the warrior lifted her small hands and pressed them to the sides of her mask.

Xena's breath caught in her chest as piercing forest green eyes gazed upon her.

The warrior descended the last step and her right hand lifted and pressed against Xena's cheek. "What was mine," she murmured in a possessive yet loving voice.

Xena lost her strength to her emotions and she suddenly fell to her knees before the warrior. The warmth of the hand on her cheek spread through her face, down her neck, and touched her heart only to claim her soul.

The warrior closed in the final distance as her left hand travelled to Xena's back. Her right hand now shifted to the back of Xena's head and pushed Xena's head forward.

Xena rested the side of her head against the warrior's muscular but warm stomach. She'd never felt so many emotions strike her at once as she was taken into this warrior's protective embrace. Her eyes tightly closed yet the tears broke free and rolled down her face. "Gabrielle," she whimpered.

"Ssssh," whispered the warrior, "we can never be separated."

Xena embraced the warrior, her arms tightly clenching to the smaller warrior. Her tears grew stronger and her darkest emotions fought against her awaken heart. "Gabrielle," she repeated and her voice held so much need.

"Ssssh," assured the warrior again, "I am here. You will always be mine, Xena." She then lowered her head and pressed her warm lips against Xena's temple.

Xena shut out her dark emotions until suddenly the body in her arms went cold. The warm stomach where her face pressed against was now cold leather and she quickly lifted her head. Her eyes went dark and raged ravaged her heart and soul again.
"I will always be apart of your destiny, Xena."

Xena was instantly on her feet and backing away as her right hand instinctively went to her sword at her side. Her fingers never met the hilt and she looked to her side, her sword was gone and so were her leathers. Instead she found herself in tattered, dirty cloth much like what she'd worn on the cross. Her enraged face jerked up and her gaze rested on one of her greatest enemies.

"Caesar," she growled, his name reeking of hatred.

Julius Caesar viciously smiled at Xena and held out his arms. He tauntingly whispered, "Welcome to your destiny, Xena."

Xena suddenly realized her surroundings were again different. Her head turned left and right frantically as she took in the huge shape of the stone complex that was lined with thousands and thousands of empty stone seats. She was in the middle of a sand ring as if she was on display of some great show.

"You can't escape your destiny, Xena," called Caesar in his arrogant tone. He then laughed so loud that it echoed through the sand ring and vibrated in Xena's ears. He then faded away from sight with his laughter still echoing.

Xena was frozen with anger and hatred. Her eyes burned bright with rage and her blood hotly pulsed in her veins.

Then suddenly a husky and unfamiliar female voice had boomed throughout the entire stone structure. "Your soul will be mineee!"

Xena abruptly shot up in her small bed and threw her hot blanket off her boiling body. She growled in frustration as she wiped the sweat off her forehead. Then with annoyance, she forcefully raked her fingers through her messy midnight hair.

For a moment, she kept her face bent forward and her breathing started to settle down to normal again. Slowly, she lifted her head and got up out of her bed so she could collect her boots. But first, she collected the wood stick by her bed and used it to help her stand up, her knees barely able to help her. When she was standing her breathing was faintly ragged again but she ignored it. Instead she limped over to her boots and shoved her feet into them. She then grabbed her Chinese broadsword that was still propped up near her bed.

Xena considered getting her leather hat but decided not to as she pushed out of her small yurt. When she stepped out, she was surrounded by the smell of fire and floating in the breeze were the tastes of battle. She gazed about the small camp and saw her thirty men were settled down either outside sleeping or in their yurts.

As Xena limped through the camp, she kept her sword in one hand and her walking cane in her right hand. She finally came out of the camp and onto a crest of a small hill where she found a large rock to sit on for a moment. She was still breathing fairly heavy and her dreams tried to flood her mind. She shook her head in attempt to rid of them but the images still flashed through her head.
Xena growled and dropped her cane onto the ground with her sword on top of it. She dropped her face into her hands and willed her dream to leave her vision. Finally the images started to fade out and her blurry vision focused on the broadsword that glinted at her from the ground. Xena bent forward and ran her fingertips down the blade, a wicked smile growing longer on her face as her fingertips travelled further down the blade. Her sword had been her greatest comfort and only comfort since she'd left Greece moons and moons ago.

Not long ago it had been Xena's twentieth birthday and Xena had celebrated the best way she knew how, by conquest. She'd rained down on a small Chin town like a fierce merciless storm and left nothing in her wake except for corpses and charred homes. She hadn't lost any of her warriors that day and the spoils from the town were plentiful not to mention the message she sent out struck the Chin kingdoms hard.

Within a few days, Xena had received a message from another raider in the north, who was interested in joining her. Just the thought of his name made her feral grin return- Borias. His name sounded as wild as her and she was quite enticed to meet him tomorrow. Xena had set out to take anybody that went against her whether she antagonized them or not. Her anger and hatred thirsted for power and greatness, she planned to fulfil her hungry, dark desires because it was all she had left in her life. All that she ever knew was gone and ripped from her heart and that'd left hungry space for something else, her anger had quickly filled that void now.

Xena ran her hand through her dishevelled hair again. She breathed heavily as she lifted her head and stared up at the night sky. Her vision instantly homed in on a very familiar constellation that was attached to hard emotions. She narrowed her hollow eyes at the warrior constellation.

"I've grown into the darkness," she murmured, "a million emotions wrapped around my mind." Xena took a deep breath and when she spoke again, her voice was low but more sing-song. "I'm no closer to you than yesterday and my world is fading away. Why can't I find you?"

Xena leaned forward, her arms now rested against her knees but she continued to quietly sing. "Where are you now? How can this be fate? I can't wait, I can't. We've been stolen and twisted. I can't resist it, I can't. Can I go on… without you?"

Xena's eyes slowly closed and as she sung her voice made a slow crescendo. "I still see you in my dreams. Your name breathing from my lips as we continue our last kiss… but I'm no closer to you. Will you ever find me?" She paused and let her eyes flutter open. "Where are you now? How can this be fate? I can't wait, I can't. We've been stolen and twisted. I can't resist, I can't. Can I go on… without you?"

Xena shook her head and gazed below at her broadsword. She reached down to the hilt as she sung, "One more awakening in my anger, as I lose sight of this, but I still see you… in my dreams, forever tangled in the night, my lips slipping from yours… slipping from yours. How do I find you?"

Xena now held her broadsword in front of her face and for a brief instant, she pleasantly smiled at it. The stars and moon reflected off the shiny surface and glowed against Xena's soft yet rigid face. "Where are you now? How can this be fate? I can't
wait, I can't. We've been stolen and twisted. I can't resist, I can't. Can I go on… without you?"

Xena lifted her left hand and at first gently ran the palm of her hand down the blade. "Where are you now? How can this be our fate? I can't wait… I can't wait. We've been stolen and twisted. I can't resist, I can't resist it." Xena licked her lips as she tilted her head some and now pressed her palm hard against the blade. "If only I could find what once was mine, if only…" She bared her teeth when the sword began to rip against her skin, the blood trickling out between the open skin. "I would, I would give it all." Xena's blood quickly trailed down the hypnotic silver blade. Xena breathed deeply then quietly sung, "To find… what was mine." She then pulled her bleeding hand away and picked up her walking stick.

The warlord gritted her teeth and forced her injured knees to lift her up. She straightened up to her full six intimidating feet and gave a brisk spin of her broadsword before sheathing it at her side. She glared at the warrior constellation and muttered, "To vengeance." She then smirked, dipped her head, and limped back to her dark camp.

The winter in northern Chin continued to freeze for several months after the twelfth moon. The snow heavy but not icy and the wind swirled in great lengths and strengths. The two warlords had joined forces and gradually conquered the northern lands of the Chin Kingdom. After they'd captured five villages, they were headed closer and closer to the Great Wall of Chin set on the outskirts of the Chin Kingdom. It was this wall that Xena despised because she knew the ruler, Ming Tzu, had completed to block out the Hsiung Nu tribes north of Chin. The Great Wall represented the power of not only the Chin Dynasty but of Ming Tzu himself.

However, right now Xena paid no attention to the Great Wall as she rode on her golden mare.

Argo huffed and puffed as she pressed harder against the brisk air.

"Yah, girl!" Xena spurred her horse harder then she withdrew her broadsword from her side. She waved her sword a few times in the air over her head as she came closer to her enemies. "Kill them all!" she yelled out to her men behind her.

Borias extracted his sword, his other hand wrapped up in the horse's reins, and he savagely grinned. When he was close enough, he attacked one of his enemies on horseback.

Xena lead her band of warriors around the retreating horsemen of Ming Tzu's army. She and her men encircled them then attacked them with Borias and his men's help. It wasn't long before Ming Tzu's soldiers were all killed except for two, who'd fallen to foot and off their horses.

Xena urged Argo over to them and she growled at them when they pleaded in a foreign language. Without any remorse, Xena ran her sword through one of them and a satisfied smile creased her lips when he fell from her blade. Her cold eyes then
flickered to the other pleading soldier and she raised her sword to strike.

"Xena, we don't slaughter them!"

The warlord paused in the middle of her attack. Her dark glare fell upon her partner. "I'm telling you, Borias the only way to deal with these scum is through terror."

Borias's slow and sly grin appeared on his face again. "And if we kill them all, who's left to be terrified?"

Xena huffed and thoughtfully peered down at the fearful soldier. She bared her teeth at him and bent forward closer to him, her sword's blade tipped his head up to hers. "Tell Ming what happens to his pathetic soldiers when he sends them against Xena and Borias."

The soldier took a step back, tripped and fell square on his butt.

Xena laughed as the Chin soldier scurried up and ran away. She rotated some in her saddle and gazed at her partner. "Borias, I'm taking the dead."

Borias raised an eyebrow as he sheathed his sword. "The dead?"

The warlord smirked and stated, "I'm going to put them to work." She then glanced over at one of her warriors. "Chuang, you're with me." Her attention then flickered to the rest of the band of raiders. "The rest of you, get back to camp with Borias." She then signalled for Chuang to assist her.

Xena and Chuang took several candlemarks to round up and drag over fifty dead Ming soldiers. Then it only took them half of a candlemark to decapitate them all and spear each head with a short pike. They then rode the short distance to the Great Wall and proudly displayed the speared heads.

The warlord was atop of Argo, her back to the Great Wall, and her eyes gazing about the lands of Chin. She scanned it and the scent of death from the battle filled her. Her ruthless grin eased across her dark features. "This will convince Ming to talk more than all of Borias' diplomacy. We sit out here in the middle of nowhere while all the riches of Chin awaits us."

Chuang half smiled and his head bobbed; in his right hand he held the last headed pike. "Both families of Chin are very powerful, liege."

The warlord huffed and took a quiet second to straighten out the reins in her hands. "That's what makes it so perfect."

Chuang curiously stared at the female warrior and wondered what she meant. "Borias wants to form an alliance with one family first before he moves."

"Let him," muttered the warlord. She held out her right hand. "He's a fool if he thinks diplomacy will get us anything." Her hand now wrapped around the pike and she had a smug expression as the dead face greeted her. "They will form an alliance between each other if Borias waits too long."
"Do you believe that?" persisted Chuang. "The Ming and Lao have been at odds for centuries."

Xena raised an eyebrow at the warrior. "Nothing brings two powers together faster than an outside threat." She then heaved the pike up and aimed at empty space on the ground. "I say… kill them all!" She rammed the headed pike into the hard ground.

Chuang laughed and nodded his agreement.

"Let's go," growled the warlord and she turned Argo around. "Yah!" She sent her mare into a full gallop for the camp. She sensed Chuang directly behind her and when camp came into her view, she felt a sense of pride fill her. Her men were moving about and readying everything: fire pits dug out, yurts constructed, and fresh game was being skinned near a large fire.

As Xena rode into the camp, her warriors each bowed their head to her as she passed. She merely remained still, vision forward, and her back rigid. She deemed respect from her men and the first few that hadn't obeyed her she'd slitted their throat in demonstration. All the respect she'd earn was derived from either fear or her abilities as a warrior, even a crimpled warrior.

The warlord halted her mare by the corral then quietly dismounted. The attendant at the corral rushed over to take Xena's golden mare but only after Xena retrieved her sword and walking stick. She eyed the young corral attendant then nodded at him before she walked off. She decided first she'd speak with Borias, she was almost sure they'd heard from Ming Tzu by now. When she entered his yurt, she found him sitting at his table and seeming to rest for a moment.

"Xena," greeted Borias in his usual drawn out voice. "Have fun with your dead?"

"Loads." Xena grinned and took a few steps more into his yurt. "News yet?"

Borias finally stood up and folded his arms over his chest. "Ming Tzu wishes to speak to us tonight." His vision went past Xena and out of the opening of the yurt. "That is him now."

Xena had already heard the cling clang of Ming Tzu's soldiers. She side stepped a few and bared her teeth at the soldier that entered.

Borias carefully watched the soldier that was checking over the yurt.

After the soldier left, Xena walked over to Borias and hissed, "Did you see what he was wearing? Pure silk and he's just a lackey." She deeply laughed before saying, "I'm telling you, Borias these people are ripe."

Borias's expression darkened and his eyes narrowed at his partner. "Quiet, Xena."

The warlord's fingers wrapped around her sword hilt but she wouldn't draw. She knew she still needed him and in a lot of ways his outright disrespect thrilled her at times. She merely smirked but her head whipped around when Ming Tzu stepped into the
yurt with a small boy and three soldiers.

"My humble yurt is unworthy of your presence, Ming Tzu." Borias then bowed to the king.

Ming Tzu bowed while saying, "Not at all, Borias." When he straightened up, he held out his hand to the young boy. "This is my son, Ming T’ien. As sole heir to my kingdom, I am teaching him to rule. He’s here to learn how to deal with thieves."

Xena's interest homed in on the son and she sneered at him. Her chest shook with a silent laugh when he flinched in fear.

"Insults are not the best way to begin negotiations, Ming Tzu."

Ming Tzu slipped his hands into his blue sleeves. "You misunderstand. I have the greatest respect for thieves. Every man born to wealth has a good thief amongst his ancestors somewhere." He then bent his head to his son. "Remember that, Ming T’ien."

The boy only blinked at his father then gazed at the two thieves before him.

Ming Tzu then returned his focus to the reason for being in this disgraceful camp. He stepped up closer to the warlords. "Your offer sounds simple enough. You raid Lao's region and I remain neutral."

Borias easily smiled at that. "And in return, you receive one-third of our loot."

Xena blinked and suddenly her face was full of anger.

"Half," stated Ming Tzu.

"No deal," spat Xena, her eyes locked on the king.

"This woman is in charge?"

Xena side stepped the table in front of her and came closer to the king but the nearby guards made her stop. "I am in charge of half of these men."

"But your offer," quickly cut in Borias. He shot a warning glare to his partner in hopes it'd silence her.

"It is not an offer." Ming Tzu ignored Xena and focused on Borias. "It is a statement of fact. If you want my cooperation, you will give me half of everything you steal."

Borias inhaled deeply while muttering, "Half huh?"

Xena raised a challenging eyebrow at her partner. "You're not going to pay this pig half." She then growled at Ming Tzu, "I'm not paying you half."

Ming Tzu refrained from getting angry and neutral stated, "I'm sorry to have wasted your time, Borias. Clearly your… friend is not interested in doing business." Then
with that, he turned and left with one of his guards while two remained by the son.

Borias growled and rushed out of the yurt after the ruler.

Xena ran her tongue along the front of her teeth. She then focused her attention on the small boy. Her lips curled into a predator smile and hungry darkness shined in her eyes at him.

Ming T'ien stepped back once then again and quickly left with the remaining guards.

The warlord huffed.

"He's gone!" Borias stormed into the yurt, his fiery anger focused on Xena.

"Because I called him a name?" challenged Xena, "Then he's too soft."

Borias fisted his hands as he stood before the crumpled warlord. "You don't understand these people. No matter what, you always have to let them save face."

Xena rolled her eyes and limped around the warlord. "Saving his ugly mug wasn't exactly what I had in mind." She turned around and faced him again. She held out her chest high as she stated, "Besides, what kind of deal was that, huh? We do all the dirty work and he snorts up half." Then for added affect, Xena snorted like a pig, which only caused Borias to lose his angry expression.

Borias then waved her off and shifted away. "You're a fool sometimes, Xena. Whatever deal I would have made with him, I would have taken to Lao and make it a better one."

Xena's arched eyebrow appeared and she neared her partner. "What do we need either one of them for?" she murmured softly to him. "When Ming sent his soldiers after us, we defeated them."

Borias considered it while he moved into Xena's personal space. "We held our own." His hands instinctively went to the other warlord's hips. "But what if Ming and Lao were to ally against us?"

Xena's wicked smile slowly spread over her lips again. "Then we'll kill them all," she murmured.

Borias' throaty laughed erupted from him then his lips met Xena's.

Xena returned the rough kiss for a brief moment then she pushed him away. "Not until you get me Chin," she huskily reminded then without another she limped out of the yurt.

Borias seethed for a second then yelled out, "You'll be at my feet before then, Xena."

The warlord had just taken ten paces from the yurt's opening. She glanced back over her shoulder at her partner and merely smirked.
Borias just hated that arrogant face Xena shot at him. He wiped it from his vision and went about finding some kind of release from today's battle.

Xena, however, returned to her yurt so she'd have time alone to control her raging, dark emotions that Ming evoked in her. It was rare times such as this that Xena tried to gain control of herself as if some scrap of hope in her still remained in her. It would only last a second but for one second something not so dark shined far below within her.

The following day, the warlords inspected their camp and warriors to assess their situation. Xena had lost twenty men while Borias had double that amount. The rest of Xena's sixty warriors were either partially wounded or just exhausted. She felt rather satisfied in their performance yet she never gave them a scrap of praise for their efforts. In her mind, her only praise was bringing them wealth and another fight and that was all she was willing to give them.

By late that afternoon, Borias was summoned by one of his men and told that the ruler of Lao was approaching. He'd hastily gathered himself and when he marched out of his yurt, he spotted Xena riding in on her golden mare. He noted she stopped just on the edge of camp where Chuang was patrolling the area.

"Lao approaches."

Xena's head was twisted around, her cold blue eyes locked on the shaping form of the lord of Lao. "So he does." Her head faintly tilted because of her curious musings; she noted Lao was shorter than she expected. Interesting. Without thinking anymore of it, she dismounted from Argo and started for a limped walk to Borias and where Lao was meeting him.

Borias was bowing as Lao approached. "Borias extends the sincerest welcome to the head of the House of Lao."

The petite ruler removed her fur hood as her head bowed.

Xena stiffened and paused in the middle of her step. "His wife," she muttered in conclusion.

Chuang was directly behind Xena and he too was faintly shocked that Lao's wife was standing in for him. Yet he continued to follow Xena to the meeting.

Lao's wife gently smiled at Borias but from the corner of her eye she saw Xena coming in earshot. "I am Lao Ma, wife of the Great Lao. Please forgive my husband for sending his insignificant wife to handle such difficult affairs of state, but he is very ill."

Borias gave his best smile, teeth shining. "Welcome to our camp, Lao Ma."

Lao Ma offered a half smile back. "I know you are a great warrior, Borias. But I've also heard that you are a man of honour." She then turned her head to Xena and Chuang when they joined them. "You must be Xena."
Xena straightened up to her six full feet and bore a smirked smile. "Oh, you've heard of me?"

Lao Ma tilted her head and softly replied, "Yes, they say you're a dangerous woman."

"Well, they're right." Xena kept her smirk until Lao Ma's attention returned to Borias. She quickly handed off her reins to Chuang so he would take care of Argo.

"You have nothing to fear, Lao Ma. We will negotiate with honour and with fairness. I hope that we will find common ground on which to stand." Borias kept his back straight, his chin out, and he was as formal as a warlord could be.

Lao Ma merely dipped her head in acceptance. Then she followed Borias through the camp towards his yurt, where it was setup for a three person dinner. She suspected Xena was their other guest and she was right.

The three leaders all quietly sat around the table. Xena's vision was hawk-eyed on Lao Ma the entire dinner but her interest was on Borias's words. She was not about to agree to any contract that withdrew from her and her men's success. She wasn't here for peace.

"I apologize for this simple dwelling."

Lao Ma gently smiled at the warlord. "It's an honour. I accept any hospitality you can spare."

"What we talk about tonight will benefit us both."

Lao Ma paused in the collection of her food. She softly stated, "Yes, it is an agreement that will make my husband most happy."

Xena huffed silently as she wondered exactly why her husband wasn't here. Lao Ma probably had Lao killed, stuffed like a prize on her wall, and nobody is the wiser in the ignorant Lao kingdom. She had a half grin though at the amusing thought of Lao Ma stuffing her husband just to control his kingdom. Even Xena had to admit that would be quite cunning. As her eyes lifted from her plate of food, she stared at Lao Ma and assessed her once more. Yes, Lao Ma does look that cunning enough to do such a thing. But why would she anyway?

As the dinner conversation continued between Lao Ma and Borias, Xena decided only to carefully listen to them. Borias's ideas were very upfront and notable but Xena would never agree to the terms. She did not like how Borias so easily responded to Lao Ma's demands and ideas. Borias was losing sight of their original goal, Xena concluded and she felt herself seething at how Lao Ma seemed to control him. She didn't sign up to be Borias's partner to lose her control over him. And this tiny woman was not about to take her control away. Not tonight, not anymore.

Later that night, after the dinner had ended, Xena was relaxing in her yurt and on her bed. She sat on the edge of the side, her head bent forward, and she glazed eyes were fixed on her ivy dagger rolling between her hands. Was it late enough yet? She debated a few times with herself. Lao Ma was most likely asleep by now so she lifted
herself up with her dagger in one hand and her stick in the other.

The warlord slipped out of her tent and silently slipped through the small camp to the other end. As she approached the back of Lao Ma's yurt, she still debated the consequences this could bring if she failed or succeeded. She only smirked and decided to go ahead with her attack.

Carefully and silently, Xena slipped through the back of the yurt and her dagger was in front of her. Xena's sharp eyes honed on her small target under the furs and she readied her dagger. "I don't know if you people pray to the gods, but if you don't, now would be a great time to start." Just as she lifted her dagger, she had Lao Ma's almost pitch black ones piercing through her. Without knowing what happened, Xena found herself lifted into the air and thrown out of the front door of the yurt, straw landing all around her. She quickly tried to recover by getting up but Lao Ma's almost invisible form was in front of her and she couldn't move.

Lao Ma quickly disarmed Xena and the dagger was gone from sight. She then bent forward to Xena and whispered into her ear, "Fill yourself with desire and see only illusion, empty yourself of desire and understand the mystery of things."

Xena was too stunned to understand what was told to her but her memory kept it. As soon as she realized Borias was towering over her, she peeked up.

"What happened?" he growled hotly.

"I'm sorry, Borias. I'll be leaving immediately. I don't think an alliance would be appropriate now." Lao Ma turned and hurried into her tent to collect her things. She knew her men would be ready at her word so she did not hesitate to get her things then leave the camp.

Borias's temper was burning hotter than a fire. He hissed at Xena when she got up from the ground. "It's over, Xena. You have until sunrise to get out of this camp with your men. After that, I'll attack you."

Xena turned her head to the side; she knew Chuang was beside her, awaken by the commotion. "Ready the men, Chuang." She then gazed back at her now ex-partner. "I will attack you if you come near me or my men." Without another word, she turned and limped back to her yurt.

Borias's dark stare went colder but for some reason he had a chilled smile. If it was one thing he could count on, it was Xena's persistence and he was calculating her step by step.

Xena and her men broke camp within three candlemarks, just before sunrise. They marched north for about three candlemarks to put some distance between her and Borias but not too much. After setting up a temporary camp, Chuang had returned to Xena's side.

"What is the plan?"

Xena had her arms across her fur covered chest and she was staring into the fire in
front of her. "We need more supplies, don't we?"

"Yes."

"And we don't exactly have the man power for a raid," muttered Xena.

"What do you suggest then?" persisted the second in command.

"A prince's ransom," mumbled Xena, her face now glowing from the flickers of the fire. She grinned at her commander. "Round up a few able men. They ride with me in half a candlemark."

"Aye." Chuang nodded then hurried off.

"Time to bring these happy families together."

Xena and her fifteen men rode at a gallop through the Great Wall and into the Chin Kingdom that was a quarter of a day's ride typically. When they came to the outskirts of the palace of Chin, Xena came to a halt with her men and looked at them. "Sun Ce?"

The warrior urged his horse around his men and joined Xena's side. "Yes?"

"You are with me." Xena glanced back at the other fourteen men. "Wait here." After receiving nods from her men, she spurred Argo into a trot with Sun Ce behind her. "We are headed to the west wing."

Sun Ce had a brief confused expression then he realized Xena's intent. "The child?" he called.

"Yes." Xena enjoyed Sun Ce's smirk momentarily then she saw the west wing of the palace. She withdrew her sword and urged her mare into a full gallop. She twirled her sword and brought it down when they came in contact with the paper thin wall. Xena quickly took out the nearest guard while two other's raced in to protect Ming Tzu's young son.

Sun Ce fought one guard while Xena was quickly dismounting.

Xena knocked the third guard's sword from his hand. She then finished him with a pinch to his neck. She bent forward and murmured, "I've just cut off the flow of blood to your brain. You'll be dead in a two breaths."

The soldier choked and asked, "What do you want to know?"

The warlord nodded at Sun Ce, who went to grab Ming T'ien.

"Nothing, I'm just letting you know how long you have left so you can enjoy it." Xena walked away from the dying soldier and went back to Argo. After Sun Ce had the boy on his horse, she turned Argo around and rode off. This should stir up both dynasties Xena figured; she was counting on it. She decided her first stop would be Borias's camp because she knew even if he was slightly honourable, he was still money.
hungry. And it wasn't long before she arrived in his camp where they were instantly greeted by an angry Borias.

"You're insane!" bellowed Borias when Xena told him what she'd done.

Xena calmed Argo with a tug of the reins then she focussed on her ex-partner. "And you're scared. Why is that?"

Borias ignored the question. "You'll have Ming and Lao breathing down my neck. They'll think I had something to do with this."

"Ming and Lao together?" innocently inquired Xena but her glowing features deceived her.

Borias glowered at her. "Nothing brings royal houses together faster than kidnapped heirs."

Xena chuckled and her voice became amused. "If I'm dealing with both of them, then I'm doubling my demands."

Borias half heard her musings but he was scanning all of Xena's men to see the child but he didn't see him. He quickly brought his focus back to Xena. "Where is the child?"

Xena chuckled and glanced back at Sun Ce. "Sun Ce, he thinks I'm going to tell him."

Sun Ce showed a toothy grin at his commander.

The warlord looked back at Borias and stated, "What I will do, however, is cut you in on the deal if you set up the exchange. We meet in your yurt in the plains north of the Great Wall. Ming brings me fifty of his best horses and twenty-five… no, fifty bags of gold. And I give him his boy. For your part, you get five percent." She briefly enjoyed the darkening look on Borias's face but she quickly added, "Oh, and that's not an offer… it's a statement of fact." Then without another word, she signalled her men to leave with her.

Borias laughed when Xena and her men were far away. "And you'll be dead, Xena. That's just a fact."

Xena and her men returned to their camp just before sunset. The warlord was quite content with her plans and when she came into camp, she tossed Ming T'ien to Chuang.

Chuang took the silent boy into the main part of camp.

Xena however took her mare to the corral for the evening. Her men followed behind as well. After taking care of Argo, she slowly walked back to her camp with a growing grin. She found Ming T'ien being watched by Chuang by a large fire where food was being cook on a spit. She nodded at Chuang to take a break and she would watch the boy.
Xena sat on a large stone and stared at the silent, standing child. "Your father is a foolish man, Ming T'ien." She received no response, not even a facial response. "Hopefully you will not grow up as foolish," she murmured. She reached down to her boot and extracted her hidden dagger. Her mate to her dagger she'd lost to Lao Ma; her favourite set at that since her childhood. She twirled her dagger between her long fingers while studying the silent boy. She read him as he read her, neither sure who would become darker in the future.

"The best way to stop an enemy, Ming T'ien is to be ahead of them. Then when you have them, kill them." The warlord gave her dagger one last good spin then stopped it with her blade out. "And make sure to mark all your enemies." Suddenly she jumped forward and grabbed the boy, who for the first time started to struggle against his captor.

Xena was much stronger and held the thrashing child tight as she smashed is small hand onto her leg with her free hand. She then gritted her teeth as she brought her dagger down towards the top of his hand. "This'll get you screaming, Ming T'ien," she promised.

Suddenly the camp was filled with a loud vibrating cry from the small boy. Each warrior in the camp merely ignored it and continued their work.

Five days after the kidnapping. Xena was contacted by one of Borias's men and her ransom was ready at his camp. Xena didn't hesitate to gather a few of her men and the boy too. She rode south to Borias's camp just north of the Great Wall as she told him. As she approached the camp, she already saw Ming Tzu and his men were there waiting for her. Her body naturally sparked with excitement at her job well done. When she entered the camp, she dismounted with her men following her. However in all her excitement, she didn't notice that Borias's men weren't minding their own business but really standing near the exchange group.

Ming Tzu's dark expression rested on the female warlord, his temper just in check. He watched her scan through the goods that she'd demanded but finally he spoke up. "The boy?"

Xena pulled back from her quick inventory of the gold. "You got a smart kid. Course, he got a whole lot smarter when he was with me." Xena briefly took in the angry look on Ming Tzu's face. "He's on the third packhorse out there under some skins."

Ming Tzu didn't hesitate to hurry off to the horse to seek out his son.

Xena smiled broadly at Borias for a moment then said, "Well that was a thing of beauty." She started to turn around until her world suddenly went black from a hard blow to the back of her head.

Ming Tzu held tight to his son as he watched Borias's men surround Xena's five men. However Ming T'ien pulled away from his father, rejecting any affection and comfort. He actually watched Borias's men make quick work of Xena's solders then he peered across at Borias.

Borias came up to the Chin ruler and direct at the unconscious Xena. "As promised."
Ming Tzu dipped his head in acknowledgement. "Good. You take the gold and horses. I get the woman."

Borias's smile suddenly appeared. "Agreed." And with that, he had his men assisted Ming Tzu with locking Xena up in a carted cage. It was Borias who locked the cage and after doing so, he whispered, "You're going to die, Xena ... and that's a statement of fact." The only response he received was a low moan. After a pat of the cage door, he walked off.

Xena sucked in a heavy breath of air and her throat caught on something. She quickly coughed up a piece of dirty straw onto the cold floor that she was curled up on. She opened her sore eyes and gazed about the dark, dirty, and smelly room she'd been locked in. After another deep breath, she slowly lifted herself up as best as she could without her stick to support her. She held onto the chain that was connected to the wall and her right ankle.

The warlord scanned the dark dungeon she'd been thrown into about two days ago she estimated. Her body was incredibly sore from being thrown around, beaten, and a few whippings. She figured it wouldn't be long before she met her death by this ruler. What she couldn't imagine was how he planned to kill her. For some odd reason, she actually looked forward to it.

She lifted her left arm and stared at the thin cuts that covered her arm. She'd heard Ming Tzu last night order the executioner to stop her sentence, which was lingchi or the Death of a Thousand Cuts. She could only imagine what Ming Tzu had in store for her otherwise if it wasn't the common practices. She certainly knew it wouldn't be the honourable death of jiaoxing, which would be strangulation with a piece of cloth. That execution was only done to those who deserved honour and no defacing in the afterlife.

Just then, her musing was cut off by her heavy cell door opening and the executioner entering.

The executioner said nothing as usual and he held out a pair of thick wrist chains that had shackles on either end. He knew the woman would give him no trouble so he easily shackled her wrists together. Then he disconnected the shackle from her ankle and after he finished, two guards entered.

Xena knew she was to leave so she started for the door where the guards waited. She sensed the executioner directly behind her. She could only imagine what Ming Tzu had in store for her death. After stepping out of the dungeon, she was momentarily blinded by the sunlight that she hadn't seen in so long. Her sore eyes ached even harder and she felt too exposed, especially her slashed arm. Just ahead was another cage cart like last time and the door was opened. She limped towards it and the two guards shoved her into it then locked her in.

"Good morning, Xena." The Chin ruler smiled down from his horse. He then signalled his appearing men to head out onto the road.
Not far off, Xena could hear dogs breathing heavily and an occasional howl. Her mind quickly raced and she realized what was planned for her. She would be the hunt and Ming Tzu would execute her death. She dropped her head against the cage and she forced herself to scheme some plan to save herself now that she had a fighting chance. There had to be some way to escape and seek her revenge later.

Suddenly the cage jerked to a stop and she shifted to the door. She gazed about the thick woods and she knew she was very far away from any town or civilization. But then something caught her attention down the road, it was a familiar group: Lao Ma.

"Welcome, Lao Ma," greeted the ruler. He offered a smile at Lao's wife. "I hope you don't mind us hunting so close to Lao territory, but the terrain here is perfect."

Lao Ma slipped from her caravan and stepped up to dismounting ruler. "Perfect for what?" She bowed and received a bow back in return.

Ming Tzu held out his hand to the warlord. "Her. The woman who succeeded in doing what a hundred diplomats could not do." He lowered his hand and finished. "Make an alliance between our two kingdoms."

Lao Ma thoughtfully studied broken down warlord then turn back to Ming Tzu. "You plan to hunt her?"

"Yes. We're going to enjoy this, aren't we, Ming T'ien?"

The son said nothing and did nothing. He merely stared as always.

Lao Ma suddenly smiled at the young boy. She bent down to the boy's height as she reached into her shen-i dress and pulled out a silk piece of cloth. "I brought something for you, Ming T'ien." She held out the gift. "I made it myself."

Ming T'ien takes the gift but immediately throws it to the ground in disgrace.

Lao Ma lost her half hearted smile and rises back up.

Xena lifted an eyebrow at the display and she was caught with that expression when Lao Ma looked at her.

"A beaten, half-dead cripple doesn't sound very sporting, Ming Tzu."

"No," quietly agreed the ruler. "But it will be entertaining."

Lao Ma merely nodded and took a few steps back. "I must go. Enjoy your entertainment." After a quick glance at the prisoner, she disappeared into her caravan and was escorted out by her soldiers.

After Lao's wife was far off, Ming Tzu turned to his son. "You could have at least looked at her gift. Let me see…"

Xena curiously watched as the ruler picked up the cloth and carefully opened it.
"Ah, she knows my nickname for you." He held out the cloth with the green dragon symbol embroidered on the silk. Ming Tzu tucked it away in his shen-i and faced his soldiers. "Remove her."

Xena fell to the cold ground and she stared up at Ming Tzu but he said nothing. She knew though so she gathered herself as best as she could and started at a running limp into the woods.

Ming Tzu turned and watched her hurriedly limp into the forest. He knew it'd be easy to hunt her down and kill her so letting her have a head start was worth his wild.

Xena raced as fast as she could, her mind was even faster with ideas. Maybe she could make it to some town? Or find a hiding spot in the woods. Then there were always the trees. Her head dropped back as she limped along. She knew with her handicapped knee she couldn't jump into the trees. She growled in frustration and quickly snatched up a thick branch for added support and maybe protection later.

The warlord wasn't watching her steps because her attention was suddenly taken by the nearness of the dog howls. She tripped over a branch and landed face first into a pile of leaves that blew up over her. She growled and pushed herself up but halfway she sensed somebody before her. She stared at the hand in front of her.

"Come with me if you wish your freedom."

Xena stared into Lao Ma's soft brown eyes and she actually considered the offer. She didn't know why she accepted and she could only reason it was because her only chance. She took the woman's hand and was helped up the rest of the way. Then there was a horse before her. She couldn't understand how she didn't notice Lao Ma on the horse sooner yet right now she was more concerned about the nearing hounds.

"Come on." Lao Ma swiftly mounted the small horse and helped Xena get up behind. It wasn't a long ride to Lao Ma's palace and when they came to the grand front doors, they hastily dismounted. An attendant took the horse and Lao Ma rushed Xena into the palace.

As they weaved through the palace, Xena asked, "Why are you doing this?"

Lao Mao didn't reply yet until they came into a large bathing room. She faced Xena. "I have been blessed, or cursed, with the ability to see into the souls of others. You don't know it yet Xena, but you are a remarkable woman capable of greatness." She stopped for a deep breath then looked about the room. "Quick. We must plan before he arrives."

Xena was briefly confused but then the dogs came to mind. Her scent, she almost forgot. When she looked back at Lao Ma, she saw the small woman adoring a colourful robe.

Lao Ma paused in the middle of her movement towards Xena when she heard somebody coming. She hastily looked about the room and pointed at the large filled stone tub. "Get in. Hurry."
Xena was so confused but she didn't hesitate as she climbed into the tub.

"Deep breath." Lao Ma then shoved Xena under the water.

Lao Ma sat on the tub's edge as the heavy wood doors swung open. "Lord," she greeted.

"Lao Ma, my hounds have followed Xena's trail here," Ming Tzu signalled his men to search the room while he continued to speak to Lao Ma.

"They're probably hungry." Lao Mao shrugged and crossed her legs. Her expression was firm and calm.

"When I arranged your marriage to Lao, I expected you to show more loyalty to me."

Lao Ma tilted her head then stated, "I was a courtesan, and you sold me. You expected loyalty?"

Ming Tzu was silent for a moment as his right hand shifted to rest on his son's mid back. "You're a strange woman, Lao Ma. Soft and hard at the same time."

"Like water...." Lao Ma turned and peered into the pool of warm water. She saw a struggling Xena under the water. "Nothing is soft as water yet who can withstand the raging flood?" She then suddenly lowered her head into the water after a deep breath. She sought out Xena's lips and they met in an open kiss.

Xena sensed her lungs filling with air and her chest stopped burning. She stopped struggling under the water when Lao Ma quickly lifted her head up out of the water.

Lao Ma flung her wet hair around but used a nearby towel to dry it off. "Now, if you'll respect my privacy."

Ming Tzu stood perplexed for a moment. "You had better not be hiding her."

Lao Ma kept her calm expression. "My lord, I would never hide that which is yours."

The ruler paused then dipped his head in respect.

Lao Ma did the same and watched Ming Tzu, Ming T'ien, and the soldiers leave her quarters. After they shut the door, she heard Xena burst from the water with a sharp intake of air. She slipped off the rim of the stone tub and went over to a stack of towels that rested on a table. She carefully picked the top one off and quietly ordered, "Remove your clothes."

Xena raised an eyebrow then after a second she stared down at her tattered rags that covered just her private areas. First she ran her hands through her wet hair to brush it out of her face then she slowly slipped out of her rags. Her movement was slow and cautious because her body was so endlessly sore and beaten. When she was finished, she peered up to see soft brown eyes staring down at her.
"Relax," softly spoke Lao Ma.

Xena licked her lips as she set the tattered cloths onto the edge of the tub. She gradually sank back under the warm water, which soothed her aching body. Then it was the small but gentle hands that started needing her shoulders that made her mentally relax. For the first time in years, her mind wasn't racing and her guard was much more down.

Lao Ma remained silent and only studied the younger woman. While she worked Xena's shoulder muscles, she could only wonder how such a young woman had matured and blackened in such a short time. In many ways, it was beyond her wisdom and even her imagination about how Xena had become who she is. What she did know was that Xena was not meant to be this person. If it was one thing Lao Ma had faith in, it was her wisdom and her abilities to pass them onto the right people. So was this the right person? And even if Xena is the right person, is it the right time? That was a question beyond her seeing.

Xena's low moan slipped into the air and broke Lao Ma from her racing mind. She stopped the massage and took the bar of herbal soap from its dish near by. She lathered up her hands so she could wash Xena's hair first.

Xena took a moment to roll her head tightly, her spinal bones all cracked back into their places. Once she took a heavy breath, she leaned her head back some. For the first time, she noticed the pulsating burn in her left arm from the countless cuts that the Chin execution had done on her. The cuts were being cleaned by the warm water and that was a relief in Xena's mind.

Now Lao Ma was running her thin, small fingers through Xena's wet hair. She was going so slowly but so gently over Xena's head. She wasn't only washing Xena's hair but massaging her scalp from front to back and then on the sides.

For the first time, Xena closed her eyes. Her controlled mind was finally unleashed and her thoughts went wondering through everything. First a girl, then a rescuer, to a raider and pirate, now she is a warlord being bathed by her enemy. Yet there is still one constant inside of her and that has always been Gabrielle. She made have faded through time but she wasn't gone, never. Xena may be lost in her rage and anger but it was Gabrielle speaking to her in her dreams. No matter how dark and bloody her dreams became as she slaughter more people, Gabrielle was always at the end, waiting for her. What did scare Xena more than anything was the fact that when she saw herself at the end of the dream she was a monster.

And it has been that monster that had grown stronger in her and was coming to life. Xena was giving into her dark monster finding some kind of solace in the darkness because it offered her safety. But it was the power and control over this world she wanted more than anything so nobody could ever alter her life again. She would make it her destiny to control this world from Tartarus to Mount Olympus no matter who had to die in her wake.

"Stand up," whispered Lao Ma into Xena's ear.

Xena awakened from her trance to find she'd been completely bathed. She forced her
body to rise up from the warm water and she was quickly covered by a towel.

"Come."

Xena tilted her head a little but stepped out of the pool and followed the older woman. Her eyes naturally narrowed when she realized it seemed as if Lao Ma was almost floating over the floor. She knew it wasn't true and that it was most likely because of the large robe she wore. However Xena sensed some type of energy around Lao Ma ever since she'd met the woman. She didn't understand it but she wanted to understand it more than anything now.

The pair finally came into a bedroom, which Xena suspect was Lao Ma's. Lao Ma went to a large oriental closest where she gathered out some clothing that was clearly meant for Xena. She held out the clothing to Xena and nod her head to a screen meant for changing behind.

Xena, for the first time, bowed her head to Lao Ma as she accepted the shen-i dress but kept her other hand up to hold her towel around her body. She silently went behind the screen to change into her new attire.

Lao Ma, however, went back to her closet and inside there was a small shelf. There she had a jewellery box stored and she began searching for a set of earrings and a hair pin. By the time she discovered it, the warlord had emerged back from behind the screen.

Lao Ma had a faint smile at Xena in the smooth purple shen-i dress with golden seams. She turned her head to the right and held out her empty hand to a stool.

Xena glanced at it then back at Lao Ma. She raised an eyebrow yet said nothing as she gimped over to the stool. After sitting down, Lao Ma appeared in front of her with an earring dangling from her fingers. Xena kept her expression stone as Lao Ma bent over a little and carefully put the first earring in then the second. Next Lao Ma shifted behind her and began working on Xena's damp hair.

Within a few, the warlord's normally unruly hair was neatly twisted into a bun and held by a wood hair brooch. Then at the sides of her face were two long pieces of hair that framed her chiselled face.

Xena stood up and silently made her way to a full length mirror. She held her breath for a quick moment as she stared at her reflection.

Lao Ma was off to the side and she only watched as the warlord looked herself over.

Xena wasn't sure how long she stared at her reflection because she couldn't recall ever looking this nice. It had been a long time and it seemed to civilize something deep in her. As her finger tips ran across the rim of her sleeves, her head turned to Lao Ma.

Neither women said anything; they only studied each other for awhile. Yet it was Lao Ma that sensed the changes in Xena's attitude towards her. There was no more hatred energy attacking Lao Ma from Xena and it made Lao Ma soften to the younger woman.
Lao Ma came up to the younger woman and quietly said, "Let me show you around." Xena only nodded and then followed her out. She gave Xena the tour of the palace, starting from the east end and finishing in the west wing. When they entered the room, there was a bed in the middle of the tiny room and a human form in the centre of the bed.

Lao Ma brought Xena to the side of the bed and quietly stated, "My husband."

The warlord was taken aback but she made sure not to show it. She knew her questions about Lao Ma and Lao Tzu were about to be answered by this.

"I've heard that you keep him in a coma. I didn't believe it, but it's true."

Lao Ma bent forward over the bed. "Oh, yes. If he were actually dead, word would get out and his imbecile cousin would become king." She pulled back the sheets some from her husband while she spoke. "No, I make sure he stays alive, but in this half-conscious state."

Xena curiously watched as Lao Ma carefully pressed against Lao Tzu's throat and he moaned in response. She realized Lao Ma was using pressure points to keep him sedate.

Lao Ma then slowly started to bring back the sheets over his chest. "You understand pressure points, don't you?" After Xena's nod, she continued. "I make sure he's seen every once in a while in the garden. It helps to convince doubters."

"So you rule in his name," concluded the warlord. She had a half grin in pure amusement at Lao Ma's cleverness.

"The only way a woman could rule in the Kingdom of Chin. It's my gift to him. He was a vicious tyrant. I'm going to make him the most loved of rulers."

Xena's face twisted with confusion. "Don't you get sick of him getting all the credit for everything you do?"

Lao Ma finally looked up at Xena. "Not at all, as long as good is done." She then stepped around the young woman.

Xena turned and watched Lao Ma drift across the small room to a stand that held a book. She curiously followed the tiny woman and read over what she could in the book. "You write all your wisdom stuff, huh?"

Lao Ma continued writing what her wisdom was for today. "Yes… in his book."

Xena lifted an eyebrow. "You give him credit for that too?"

"This wisdom comes from the Heaven. What difference does it make who gets credit for it? Lao Ma or Lao Tzu?"

Xena opened her mouth but she had no true response so she remained silent. After
Lao Ma finished her writing, she finally had some type of response, which caused her to smirk. "Nothing seems to phase you… except that boy I kidnapped. Every time he ignores you that cuts deep."

Lao Ma remained still but then put the reed down in between the spin of the book. She slipped her hands into the sleeves of her robe. "I know it's foolish of me." Her head dipped a little as she started for the door. "Just because you give birth to them doesn't mean we own them."

The warlord was caught in her mid step at Lao Ma's confession. "He's your son?"

Lao Ma was in the doorway but she glanced back and only nodded. She then disappeared out of the room.

Xena stood shocked momentarily. She had not expected that what so ever because she'd never heard of any rumours of such. And as she thought about it, the more she realized she should have killed that little brat. He could become the heir of both kingdoms if he ever pressed to have the Chin Kingdom. Yet a piece of her knew too this was Lao Ma's son and killing the child would only chill her deeper. So for the first time, Xena felt a piece of remorse for somebody. She shook it away and wobbled out of the room after one last glance at the sleeping Lao Tzu.

The dark warlord narrowed her eyes at the vase on the table. Her breathing was laboured and not because of any type of exercises but merely because of her anger. Lao Ma had left her here over two candlemarks ago with over a dozen vases that she was meant to break without touching. Lao Ma only gave her a few wonderful pearls of wisdom on how to break the vases but Lao Ma's words sunk to the bottom of her mind.

Xena wanted her sword and she would make fast work of the vases in a flicker. Yet she was only left with her mind as Lao Ma told her. She wasn't sure why she'd agreed to these stupid lessons of Lao Ma's last night but it was too late. For some reason, she thought she could gain something useful from Lao Ma because she seemed like such an amazing women but Xena was starting to have her doubts now. All she could figure was Lao Ma's wisdom was turning into centaur crap as far as she was concerned.

Xena's anger suddenly erupted hotter than a volcano and she slammed her foot onto the vase. The vase spewed across the floor into millions of pieces and Xena felt some gratification of ridding of the vase.

"Would you kill a mosquito with an axe?"

The warlord turned in the direction of Lao Ma's soft voice but Lao Ma was suddenly at her side. It almost made her jump in response but she held her ground as slim fingers removed her hair pin.

"This is very beautiful." Lao Ma held up the hair brooch between them. She then signalled to a vase by the stack.
Xena's eyebrow arched higher than it ever had around Lao Ma. "That's good." She picked up a vase and shuffled over to the table to place it there.

Lao Ma suddenly had a half grin but it was gone. "That could be a very useful weapon if thrown at the right body part."

That's when Xena's eyebrow lowered and her curiosity came to life again just at the mention of weapon. "You could kill someone using a hair brooch?" She returned to Lao Ma's side.

Lao Ma tilted her head as she turned the hair brooch between her fingers. "If necessary but I don't like to kill."

Xena's ruthless grin appeared. "Everyone has their preferences. I happen to like a good kill."

Lao Ma's hand lowered with the hair pin and she stared at Xena in silence then finally stated, "You're so full of anger and hate."

Xena's grin went deeper and her cold eyes lit with hunger. "Everyone's gotta be full of something."

Lao Ma suddenly spun around with her right hand extending out in a blur.

The vase blew up into shards that cascaded over the table and scattered over the floor.

"Teach me to do that."

Lao Ma tilted her head at the warlord. "Well, try it."

Xena considered it then took a new vase and placed it on the table. She glowered at it and her teeth were growing tighter together.

Lao Ma let it go on for awhile then she finally informed Xena, "You're trying to attack the bottle with your will."

Xena growled lowly and looked at her developing mentor. "What else is there?"

"Exactly."

Xena straightened up to her full height. "What?"

Lao Ma stared at the vase then peered up at the young woman. "The entire world is driven by a will, blind and ruthless. In order to transcend the limitations of that world you need to stop willing… stop desiring… stop hating."

Xena let Lao Ma's words soak in her mind but they didn't mean anything to her, for now. She focussed back on the vase again in hopes for a second try at destroying it.

Lao Ma curiously watched even though she knew her pupil would not accomplish
something so simply. She knew it would be a long journey before Xena could ever destroy that vase let alone learn any of her other teachings. Yet she had faith and patience because she was that type of woman and she knew this was her destiny in Xena's life. Now she saw how much anger was raging inside of Xena so she broke Xena away from what she was doing.

"Heaven endures and the earth lasts a long time because they do not live for themselves."

Xena pulled away from her focus on the vase and faced her mentor.

"Therefore, she who would live a long time should live for others, serve others."

The warlord lifted an eyebrow and simply stated, "I could serve you if that's what you mean."

Lao Ma had a gentle smile as she closed in on Xena. She took Xena's hands into her own. "Of course you can." Her smile grew as Xena took a moment to stare at their hands together. "It's easy to serve someone you love. You feel it will make them love you more." When Xena looked back at her again, she continued speaking. "It's like a good business investment." Her head tilted to one side. "That's not what I'm talking about."

It was then that Xena realized what her mentor was purposing. Her eyes instantly darkened and her jaw tightened. "You mean that I should serve someone who hates me."

"More than that. You need to serve someone you hate, Ming Tzu."

The warlord suddenly pulled her hands free, her deep voice cut through her enemy's name. "Ming Tzu?"

"Yes, the man who had you hunted like an animal. He comes here tomorrow with his son."

Xena's upper lip slightly curled and she took a step back. "Serve Ming? I'd rather die."

Lao Ma dipped her head then drifted several steps away yet she stopped. She glanced back at the younger woman and quietly stated, "You've been a dead woman for a long time now, Xena. I offer you the chance to live." And with that, Lao Ma disappeared back into the palace.

Xena's earlier darken expression had faded and for a fleeting moment she felt remorse and it was clear over her face. She hardened again as she stared back at the vase on the table. She let out a low warcry and kicked the vase across the floor. After all the countless pieces stopped spinning and flying across the floor, Xena stood there heavily breathing and a deep growl shook her chest. She then looked across the balcony at the setting sun that was almost gone. She pulled herself together and limped over to the rail. She remained still and silent as she watched the sun disappear over the horizon and all that was left were the colourful rays of sunset.
Lao Ma though hadn't gone that far, she lurked in the open doorway to the balcony. She was deathly silent and she glowed from the surrounding firelight but it was Xena that glowed from the sunset. She was not sure how long she or Xena stood there for but it wasn't until everything was completely dark outside. All that was left was a waning moon just over the western horizon and unknown stars glistening high above.

Lao Ma quietly glided across the balcony and came up to the warlord's side. She said nothing.

Xena didn't acknowledge her even though she clearly knew Lao Ma was beside her.

"This is the most still I have seen you," she whispered.

The warlord did not response for awhile but then she dipped her head down towards Lao Ma and whispered back, "Anything is possible."

Lao Ma's lips gradually shaped one of the warmest smiles she'd felt in her entire lifetime. "That is the wisest thing you've spoken yet, Xena."

"Mmmmm." The warlord glanced across to the crescent moon.

"Follow me," softly ordered Lao Ma. She held out her hand.

Xena hesitated but she took the small hand. She then fell in step beside her mentor.

They went into the palace and headed for the east wing. They went into a room that branched off from the rest; Xena recalled it as being a meditation room. There was one mat in the centre of the room then others in a corner. The only thing that was in the room was a thin, long table that ran across one side of the room. That table held one entire length of white candles that were all lit.

"Sit." Lao Ma held her hand out to the mat.

The warlord anticipated what she was meant to do. She leaned forward first and took off her boots then she padded across the wood floor. She lowered herself down onto her legs but kept her back straight. From the corner of her eyes, she watched Lao Ma unroll a mat beside her and kneel down next to her.

Lao Ma curiously studied Xena for a moment but she faintly smiled when Xena focussed on meditating. She too went into her meditation state, her eyes drifting shut.

Xena sighed and her body relaxed but only one hundredth of what she really could. She would never completely relax and never let her guard down. Yet it was her mind that wasn't in control for once and she thought about her life for the second time this year. Often she ignored her life and only focussed on her purpose, her mission. Today was the second day she'd considered her life's journey so far and it wasn't a pleasant consideration.

Her thoughts took her deeper and further inside of herself. Her past trickled back like a slow nose bleed and Xena was completely self absorb from any reality.
"Look what you've become, Xena."

Xena peered up at her mother and her face went pale at her mother's disapproving look.

"You're even covered in all the blood of those you've murdered," cried out Cyrene.

The warlord was merely a young teen again but she was a bloody, bruised, and wounded teen. As she looked down at herself, she realized she was coated in a thick layer of rich blood. Her golden chain mail wasn't even recognizable and her sword was too heavy for her to even hold. Her iron sword fell from her small hands and thundered against the wood floor.

"You're a killer… a murderer," whispered the horrified mother.

"I…"

Cyrene took one step back. "Wasn't your brother's death enough?" she cried.

Xena frantically shook her head. "Mother, I-"

"No… no…." Cyrene again took another step away from her daughter. "You're not my daughter… you're a monster… stay away." Then she suddenly went running and Xena chased after her.

"Mother!" screamed out Xena in desperation but she'd faded to black.

"Xeeeenaaaaaa!"

The teenaged warlord stopped and scanned around in the dark, black area she was surrounded by. "Gabrielle?" she whispered.

"Xenaaaaaaa!"

"Gabrielleeee!" Xena once again frantically began to run but she couldn't see where she was going if anywhere.

"Xeeeenaaaaaa!"

"Gabrielleeee!"

Then suddenly Xena's running came to a complete stop when she fell to the ground from tripping over something. She quickly rolled over frantically and her eyes went wider than the sun. "Ooo gods no!" She scrambled across the black ground and fell to her knees before Gabrielle's body. "Gabrielle?" she whimpered as she touched Gabrielle's motionless body. But as Xena touched Gabrielle's fragile body, Gabrielle's body became coated in blood from Xena's hands wherever she touched. "Gods no." She now madly wiped her hands on her knees, trying to rub off the blood but her hands only got redder with blood. Xena's cheeks burned from hot tears and she tried again to shake Gabrielle awake but she didn't stir and the blood on her only spread
across her body.

"Gabrielle, please wake up!" Xena hysterically shook her head while her tears mixed with her blood soaked cheeks. "Wake up!"

"Wake up, Xena… wake up."

The warlord suddenly jumped up from the mat she'd been kneeling on.

Lao Ma stared up at the shocked warlord and she knew Xena had been in a deep trance. She stood up and came closer to Xena.

Xena stepped back though and she sensed her cheeks were wet. She angrily wiped her cheeks dry.

Lao Ma dipped her head and took a step back in respect.

Xena's heavy breathing was the only thing that could be heard in the small room. She gritted her teeth against her remaining emotions then she was gone from the room.

Lao Ma lifted her head finally and she caught the last piecing of Xena's shadow disappearing down the hallway. She released a heavy sigh of worry then slowly knelt back down into her previous position. Maybe her thoughts could continue to take her on the right path of wisdom for Xena.

Xena kept her eyes shut. Her breathing had finally settled after about a quarter of a candlemark and her mind was much more under control. For once, she went back to her darker thoughts of conquest and power, which was an angry comfort to her. Her mentally plans and thoughts were finally broken by the almost silent footfall of Lao Ma. She sensed the small woman standing over her bed where she rested.

"Your thoughts are as dark as your past."

"If not darker," whispered the warlord. Her glooming blue eyes slowly opened and focused on Lao Ma.

"What is it that you want from life?"

Xena studied her mentor. She chewed on the question for several quiet moments. "Control," she simply supplied.

Lao Ma tilted her head. "Over yourself or the world?"

"I have control over myself now I want the known-world."

Lao Ma dipped her head a little. "I believe you have as much control over yourself as you do over this world, Xena."

The warlord suddenly grinned. "Possibly."

"And acceptance is control… possibly." Lao Ma said nothing else and disappeared out
of the bedroom.

Xena only closed her eyes again.

Lao Ma entered the dining room to find Xena carefully setting the table for tonight's dinner. She contained her small smile of pride. She knew this was hard for the warlord and she wasn't about to increase any tension. Last night had been troubling enough after the meditating. Tonight would be another trial for Xena.

The warlord looked up when she saw her mentor enter the room. She bowed her head in respect and received the same from Lao Ma.

"Everything is ready?" quietly asked Lao Ma.

"Yes." Xena glanced at the set table then back at the smaller woman. "When is he due here?"

"Any moment now." Lao Ma held out her hand to the open door that lead into the kitchen.

Xena understood and silently left the dining room.

Lao Ma also left the room to head to the north wing where Ming Tzu was expected to arrive.

The warlord was waiting in the kitchen until she heard Lao Ma's return. As she waited, her anger for Ming Tzu boiled to the top of her, so much that her teeth gritted together. She twisted her head to the left and stared at the row of knives that glistened in the firelight. Slowly she drifted over to the rack and her fingers gradually glided down the side of the blade as she considered her options.

Just then the front door of the dining room opened and closed. Xena's hand jumped away from the blade of one of the knives but she still stared at them. It would be so easy; almost too easy. She breathed heavily because Lao Ma's voice filtered into her mind and she recalled again why she was even trying this. Gradually her hand retreated from the knives and Xena stepped away from the counter. When she stepped into the dinning room with a pitch of water, she stopped mid step and stared at Ming Tzu and Ming T'ien.

"Welcome to my home. I wish only that it were worthy of your presence." Lao Ma lifted her head after bowing it. Now she glanced at Ming T'ien and gently said, "Welcome, Ming T'ien"

Ming T'ien merely ignored her as if she was nothing.

The warlord watched the display and she had to admit she really hated that boy more than Ming Tzu. She really couldn't understand why but maybe it had something to do with her emotions for Lao Ma.
"Please, sit." Lao Ma held out her hand to the table. After her guests sat, she did the same and signalled for Xena to pour the water.

Xena quietly went around the table and filled each person's glass. She then left to the kitchen to retrieve the food.

"How are affairs?"

Ming Tzu lowered his glass after a sip. "They are worsening."

Lao Ma tilted her head in curiosity.

Ming Tzu leaned to his left some when the servant began placing food on his plate. "Yes, the gold and horses I gave him for double-crossing that whore have made him too powerful." He straightened up when she was finished serving him then continued talking. "Borias is very dangerous. He's more dangerous than that witch, Xena. He's very clever. She was a stupid thug."

Lao Ma briefly peered up Xena and noticed she stood stiff, angry, and a knife in her right hand. She blinked and looked back at Ming Tzu with an emotionless face.

The warlord loosened her grip on her knife and forced herself to move away from Ming Tzu. As she approached Lao Ma, her body became calmer and her anger lessened with each step. She bent forward and slowly filled Lao Ma's plate.

When Xena finally made her last gimped step into the kitchen, the door closed. She growled then threw the knife across the kitchen. The knife sunk into the wall on the opposite side; that's where it stayed. She let out a lower growl before going to the wash tub to put the dirty plate into it.

For the rest of the meal, the warlord stood in a corner of the room but she made sure to stay out of Ming Tzu's sight. She knew if he paid any mind to her that it would not take him long to recognize her. She did carefully listen to the conversation between the two rulers, which she enjoyed thoroughly since it was inside information. Also she learned of Borias's whereabouts and what it may seem like he was planning to do to the Chin Kingdom.

After the dinner was over, Ming Tzu and Ming T'ien were escorted out by Lao Ma. Xena made quick work of cleaning up the dining room table and putting them into the kitchen for the real servants to clean. She wasn't about to clean up that mess. When she stepped back into the dining room, she found Lao Ma wanting for her. She quickly came up to the small woman.

"Alright, Lao Ma. I did the whole servant bit and it's accomplished nothing."

Lao Ma softly smiled and stated, "You're wrong. For a few candlemarks, you actually silenced your will. It's a beginning."

The warlord shook her head. "A beginning to what huh? I should have just slice that pig's throat."
Lao Ma took one step away but paused and quietly added, "To conquer others is to have power. To conquer yourself is to know the way." Then she left the room and Xena.

Xena twisted her head around and watched her mentor glide down the hallway. She slightly frowned but then there was a low growl deep in her throat. Yet she stopped herself and took a deep breath, very deep until her chest couldn't expand any longer. She let it out extremely slowly as if her anger dissipated with every bit of her release. Once she started breathing normally again, she made a slow walk for the outside patio that overlooked Lao Ma's gardens.

The warlord came to a stop before the same small table from yesterday. She'd tried so hard to break a vase with this unknown energy that Lao Ma controlled. Xena wanted that power more than anything because she knew it could aid her.

Xena's rich blue eyes shifted to the pile of vases near by her. She stared at them then back at the table. She shifted all her weight to her good leg and took to limping steps to the vases. She picked up one then set it on the table then after a few backwards steps, she tried again. This time, she truly tried to focus as her eyes closed gradually and her body started to relax. Her mind created a mental image of the still vase on the table.

Lao Ma remained still in the doorway to her patio. She patiently waited to see if Xena would be able to move the urn at all. She had her strong faith in Xena.

Xena was chewing on her lower lip a little bit. She stopped herself though. Her mind filled with Lao Ma's brief words....

Stop willing.

Stop desiring.

Stop hating.

Lao Ma stiffened from her relaxed position when the urn elevated off the table and hovered about a hand's height off the table. There was a slight smile creasing her lips.

The warlord kept breathing at a calm manner. She didn't dare open her eyes to see if she'd succeeded or not but she felt as if she had. In her mind, she could see the urn hovering over the table and for some reason, she felt it too.

Stop willing.

Stop desiring.

Stop hating.

Stop willing, stop desiring, stop hating.

Lao Ma's voice hummed in her mind repeatedly and it gave Xena the encouragement to go further. She wanted to break the vase apart. Slowly Xena tried to begin breaking
the vase in her mind yet the vase was strong, she could feel it.

Stop willing.

Stop desiring.

Stop hating.

Lao Ma's thin smile increased when she heard the urn starting to crack. She'd never expected Xena to accomplish this much in such a short time. Maybe her hopes were not so far from true.

Stop willing.

Stop desiring.

Stop hating... hating... hating... hating...

"Still, don't think what we had was meaningless."

Suddenly the urn crashed dropped and smashed into the table; a million pieces scattered all over.

Xena's hands fist ed up tightly, her shoulders suddenly tense now.

Lao Ma dipped her head a little but then she slowly crossed the short space between her and Xena.

The warlord's stormy blue eyes opened to Lao Ma and she couldn't say anything, her jaw too taut with anger.

Lao Ma had soft features, her eyes filled with understanding. "That was a start... not a step back," she whispered and her small soft hand touched Xena's right cheek.

For the first time, Xena leaned into Lao Ma's touch and it calmed Xena's anger.

"Years of anger... of pain... it takes time to soothe," reminded Lao Ma.

The warlord pulled away from Lao Ma's comforting touch and quietly stated, "Or it'll consume." She said nothing else as she slowly limped away from Lao Ma, headed back to the main room of the house.

Lao Ma wasn't so far behind, her gliding walk merely a shadow's length from Xena. When they reached the large open Central Room, Lao Ma clasped her hand with Xena's.

The warlord was momentarily furious until she turned around and saw how peaceful Lao Ma's features were.

Lao Ma put her hands on either side of Xena's cheeks and brought her face close to Xena's. "If you trust to open yourself, the pain will expel itself."
Xena searched her mentor's soft brown eyes and for the first time in years, her heart felt alive again. She closed in the distance and pressed her lips against Lao Ma's in a warm kiss. After she pulled back, she found her hand interlaced with one of Lao Ma's and Lao Ma was suddenly walking her across the room. Lao Ma led her into the master bedroom and she was signalled to lie down, which she did. After getting settled down, she finally realized the room was filled with a scent of jasmine incense.

Lao Ma shifted down to the end of the bed but still on Xena's side. She gently pulled up the bottom of Xena's shen-i dress and inspected Xena's crimped leg. She peered up at the warlord and softly spoke. "Relax."

Xena was breathing heavily but she calmed her body and mind.

Lao Ma focussed on the crimped leg; her eyes closed and her hands hovering just over the leg. Suddenly her mind filled with an image of Xena's leg yet Lao Ma knew she had to go deeper than that. Her image exploded into pieces then recollected into a new image of the internal workings of Xena's leg. Lao Ma followed along the image, her hands slowly gliding up Xena's leg but stopped on the warlord's knee. Lao Ma's image was hovering over the twisted bones of Xena's knee and she could see how the bones had been twisted into place but never healed properly.

The warlord sucked in her breath slightly when she sensed her knee's bones were mysteriously moving but it felt relieving. There was a momentary dull ache then it stopped.

Lao Ma finally opened her eyes and stepped back.

Xena could already feel the changes so she carefully swung her feet over the bedside. As she slowly stood up, she waited for her knee to give under her a little like it always would do but it didn't. Once she was fully up and her weight evenly split between her legs, her eyes met Lao Ma's and she suddenly had a true smile.

Lao Ma returned the smile and she took a step aside, her hand holding out towards the doorway.

It was in that instant that the warlord ran for the first time in over a year. She exploded through the door and through the other rooms until she was in the Central Room again. She came to a quick stop and took a quick moment to study her knee again but when she straightened up again there was Lao Ma by her side. Xena opened her mouth to say something, anything but Lao Ma stopped her with a hand over her lips.

Suddenly there was a burst of warm wind through the Central Room and they were floating in the air. Xena gazed about the room as she was lifted higher up from the floor and she focused on her mentor. Her hand broke from Lao Ma's and she went spinning across the room as Lao Ma did the same. They then met back in the centre of the room and embraced in a long but soft kiss. After they broke apart, Lao Ma moved to the opposite side of the room and she swung her arm towards Xena, which caused a light pink cloth appeared and fly across the room. It wrapped around Xena's body and spun the warlord back to Lao Ma.
Xena's soft features warmed with a smile when she came next to Lao Ma again. She then was suddenly unravelled and on the other side of the room once more. Just as she was about to come back to Lao Ma, her attention was broken.

There in the large doorway stood her ex-partner.

Xena's attention broke and her anger flourished once more. She dropped to the ground and she wasted no time in attacking Borias.

Lao Ma lowered to the ground and her heart saddened at the sight but she separated the two with a loud explosion from the wave of her hand. "Stop!"

Xena growled and hotly looked between Borias and Lao Ma. "What is he doing here?"

Lao Ma remained between them but she gazed at both as she spoke. "We're going to have peace in this land and the two of you are going to help bring about it."

The warlord's eyes darkened a few shades and she growled out, "You've got to be kidding."

Lao Ma let out a hefty sigh but then stated, "Tomorrow, Ming Tzu comes here to talk with Borias and me. We are going to include him in a three-way alliance."

Xena's anger grew stronger as she felt betrayed by Lao Ma. "If you think I'm playing servant girl to these two than you have another thing."

"Quiet," ordered Lao Ma. "I plan on informing Ming Tzu about your presence. He has to accept that."

Xena lifted an eyebrow because she knew Ming Tzu's true reaction to that information.

"You're going to help me run the Kingdom of Lao." After she noticed Xena's demeanour slightly less angry, she continued. "You'll be my Warrior Princess."

The warlord lifted her eyebrow at the new title yet the ring to it touched her somewhere.

Lao Ma finally sensed the tension between the two slightly calmer but it was still there. "Tomorrow," she spoke to Xena, "You ask for Ming's forgiveness." At Xena's protest, she held up her hand for silence. "Today, you are going to learn how to deal with Borias." She then turned to Borias. "Xena is capable of profound loyalty, Borias. She just doesn't know it yet." She now slipped her hands between the sleeves of her dress and quietly said, "I'm going to leave both of you alone. It serves you both your interest to get along. If you kill each other... so be it." With that, she glided out of the Central Room.

Xena and Borias stared at each other in silence.

Lao Ma heard the distant sound of footfall coming down the hallway. She'd been meditating for the past four candlemarks this evening and she had yet to hear any
fighting from Borias and Xena down in the Central Room. Now she knew this was
Xena seeking her out and she merely waited. Within two breathes, Xena slipped into
the mediation temple and silently took a seat beside her mentor.

"Warrior Princess?" murmured the warlord.

Lao Ma lost her focus on her meditation but she kept still and eyes closed. "I believe it
is fitting."

"Yes." Xena calmed her breathing and settled into a comfortable position. "Borias is
still alive." A gentle smirk touched her lips.

"I know," murmured the older woman.

The warlord finally closed her eyes. "Ming Tzu will never forgive me." She tilted her
head. "And he won't agree to a treaty."

"He will," persisted the hopefully Lao ruler.

"He wants the Lao kingdom too much to form a treaty." Xena paused then considered
Ming Tzu's desires and Lao Ma's dreams. "Sometimes you can't have peace without
some war first."

"Yet you would not know war without peace," softly reminded Lao Ma.

Xena said nothing for awhile. "What do you want with me?"

Lao Ma finally opened her eyes and Xena was staring back at her. "Simply your help
to bring peace."

"Why mine?" persisted the warlord, "Especially when I want Chin."

"Sometimes the best way to stop chaos is by using it."

"Using me, you mean," quickly corrected the warlord.

Lao Ma shook her head. "I have not forced you here and you are free to go at
anytime." She then turned her head away. "You are an intelligent and talented woman,
Xena. I find that I can rely on you."

Xena closed her eyes again as she turned her head. "Let's hope you're correct."

The two women went silent and began to meditate together in the small temple. Xena
was never sure when she'd decided that meditating was of any good but she'd come to
learn trying something once was always worth something. Earlier she'd seen Borias
out of the House of Lao to make sure he didn't do anything. She trusted him but only
to a certain level and for some reason she felt responsible for Lao Ma. Lao Ma had
welcomed her into her house and arms when Xena had tried to kill her and destroy
her. And maybe Lao Ma was right when she said that Xena was capable of strong
loyalty.
The following morning Lao Ma was true to her word about Ming Tzu arriving at the House of Lao and Borias was not far behind. Lao Ma welcomed them both into the house and led them into the Central Room. There waited Xena, calmer than normal but dark as ever in the face of her enemy.

"What is this?" first spoke Ming Tzu. His right hand rested behind his sand's mid-back.

Xena remained on one side of Lao Ma while Borias was on the other side. Her cold eyes burrowed into Ming Tzu.

"Xena is with the House of Lao." Lao Ma waited for Ming Tzu to protest but he did not because he waited for more information. So Lao Ma held out her hand to Xena to signal her.

Xena dipped her head a little. Her focus remained on Ming Tzu. "I seek your forgiveness, Ming Tzu."

Ming Tzu stiffened and his temper rose up. "You expect me to forgive the woman who kidnapped my son? Then, permit me to point out a detail that perhaps you missed. Xena belongs to me. She is my property."

Lao Ma quietly sighed. "Ming Tzu, I know a man of your wisdom wouldn't endanger an important treaty by holding a grudge."

Ming Tzu was now appalled. "To have the treaty I must forgive her? Then, I apologize for wasting your time." He then looked down at his son. "Ming T'ien, let us go."

Just as Ming Tzu was apart to depart, Xena's deep silky voice cut into the tense air. "Lao Ma, if I may make a suggestion. Ming Tzu is a man of great courage. I saw you should put me up as the stakes in a game of chance and see who wins."

Ming Tzu turned back to the group. "Excuse me, but I do not have to play such a game. You belong to me now." His angry brown eyes were focused on the warlord.

"I have a claim on Xena," cut in Borias, "I discovered her, so to speak."

Lao Ma picked up on Xena's idea now. "And I was fortune enough to save her."

Xena's ruthless grin appeared. "And I should say I belong to myself. It should be an interesting game." Without another word, Xena disappeared back into her room in the house.

Ming Tzu looked between Borias and Lao Ma. He was curious as to where the warlord went and why. Yet his questioning was quickly answered when she appeared again. In her hand was a satchel of something and he wasn't sure if he liked this idea anymore.

"Let's sit," announced Xena.

Lao Ma was the first to lower herself down and everybody followed her example.
Xena then opened the satchel and passed around small cups that had dice in them. As each person got their cup, they began to shake the dice around in the cup.

"This is ridiculous, gambling over this worthless whore. Why don't we throw something of value into the pot?"

Xena brightened up at the suggestion. "Alright, let's say the winder gets me and a body part from each of the losers."

Ming Tzu narrowed his eyes at the woman. "What do you mean?"

"A body part," repeated Xena. "Minimum bet is a hand."

Borias widely grinned. "I'm in."

"I don't want anyone's body part," declared Lao Ma.

"Then I'm sure we all pray that you win. What about you, Ming Tzu?" You got the jewels for this one?"

Ming Tzu was clearly offended but hotly stated, "Fine. All in one throw."

The four players all continued shaking their dice in the cups and looked between each other. And it was Xena who gave a light yell and brought her cup down as the other's did too. Slowly each player lifted their cup to reveal their three dice and there was a long dead silence.

Xena gave a gruff laugh and peered up. "I win… pay up." Her evil smile spread wide across her dark features.

Lao Ma's shook her head. "This is ridiculous."

Xena's sharp eyes locked on the Ming ruler. "I want a piece of him."

"You're crazy," quickly protested Ming Tzu.

Borias smirked at the ruler and teasingly questioned him. "Then you're not going to pay up?"

"Are you?" challenged Ming Tzu.

"Yes." Borias grinned at the other warlord. "I give you my heart."

Xena deeply laughed. "I accept." Her head snapped around towards Ming Tzu. "I'll settle for that from you too, Ming Tzu… your heart."

"That's it." Ming Tzu quickly stood up. "I'm getting out of here." He stepped around the group hastily and called for his son. "Ming T'ien, we're leaving this madhouse."

Xena, Borias, and Lao Ma were already on their feet. Xena was the quickest as she grabbed a near by sword she'd been eyeing all night. "Not until I collect my
And before Ming Tzu could escape, Xena was upon him and he hunched forward when a sharp pain sliced through his heart.

Quickly Ming Tzu's guards reacted by moving past Ming T'ien and charging Xena. Yet Borias stopped one while Xena killed the other.

Lao Ma was in disbelief about how everything was happening so fast however she quickly stepped in front of her son. When Borias and Xena faced her, she prepared herself to protect her only child.

Xena smirked at the boy and coldly sneered, "Now for the kid."

Lao Ma narrowed her eyes at the pair. "What are you doing?"

Xena took a step closer but paused. "Now we can wipe out the entire line." She pointed her sword at Ming T'ien. "Then it will just be the House of Lao. We can rule the whole Kingdom of Chin... together. You can do all your noble stuff and Borias and I will keep the peace. We'll have some laughs along the way." She then started moving for Ming T'ien.

Lao Ma moved so fast that Xena had no time to react. She sent a ball of energy flying at the warlord.

Xena yelled as she was thrown across the room by the invisible energy.

Borias was momentarily shocked but he came at Lao Ma.

Lao Ma didn't hesitate to send a ball of energy at him and send him crashing into the far wall. She then caught Xena moving again so she reacted by lifting her hands.

Xena suddenly floated in the air and went soaring to the next wall. She was repeatedly slammed against the wall then the invisible energy held her up by her throat until she went unconscious.

Finally Lao Ma released the warlord and she watched her crash into the floor with a loud bang.

There was a faint groan from Xena and blood started trickling from her nose and cornered of her lips.

Once Lao Ma was satisfied that the pair of warlords would not cause anymore trouble, she called for her guards. Three of them marched in and she directed them to take Borias and Xena. After they were gone, Lao Ma looked at Ming T'ien but the young princess said nothing to his mother. Lao Ma inwardly sighed and escorted the boy out of the room.

By that late evening, Xena found herself awakening to the clitter clatter of horse hooves and the taste of blood in her mouth. She gently moaned then opened her eyes, she found herself staring at an unconscious Borias. She then realize she was trapped in
a cage much like the one that Ming Tzu had put her in several days back. That forced her to get up and assess her situation.

Xena and Borias were certainly in a cage cart and being towed by four Lao soldiers and further ahead of them was Lao Ma on horseback. Lao Ma was glowing by the moonlight in a deep red cloak and she kept her back to them. Xena realized they'd just come out of the forest and she could make out the silhouette of Mount Tai Xing to her right. She could only guess that Lao Ma was actually returning them to their army since Borias had mention to her that their army was near the city of Yan Men.

Suddenly they came to a stop and the Lao soldiers lowered the cage to the snowy ground. And to Xena's amazement, three more Lao soldiers seem to materialize from behind the cage. The cage was opened and the noise caused Borias to stir and finally get up. The soldiers signalled them to crawl out of the cage, which they carefully did so they wouldn't cause the soldiers to attack them. Once they were out, the three Lao soldiers escorted them near Lao Ma.

Lao Ma was silent.

Xena and Borias remained silent.

Very slowly, Lao Ma turned her hooded head to the warlords. She stared at them for awhile before saying anything. Her eyes were dark yet the moon's light reflected her displeasure and sadness. "I will not say I am wrong," she quietly murmured to them, "as there is none such." She paused as her mind turned over the events of tonight. "It will take more than me to find your souls." She tilted her head at them. "This will unravel itself."

Lao Ma then straightened up to her fullest height. "Xena and Borias, you and your army are banished from the Chin Kingdom. You have exactly five days to move out of Chin either north of the Great Wall, south of the Chang Jiang River, or west of the Xiang River. If you dare return to the Chin lands, the House of Lao and the House of Ming will attack. And you will die." She stopped and stared at the pair before finally whispering, "Go."

Xena and Borias didn't move for a moment yet the faint stir of the soldiers encouraged them to leave. The two warlords remained silent and started walking. Borias knew the army was just over the crest of this hill and he didn't dare look back. Xena, however, she peered back after so long and she wasn't surprised this time when Lao Ma and her men were long gone.

"Now what?" taunted Borias.

Xena glared at her partner and grunted. "We go west."

"West?" questioned Borias.

"West," simply stated Xena. And when she came to the top of the hill to see the two tiny armies in the valley, her army, she smiled ruthlessly. "West," she murmured.

And true to Xena's word, the army was headed west by daybreak. Borias didn't bother
questioning was Xena had in mind because at this point he was fresh out of ideas. For now, he decided to go along until he discovered what his partner had in mind.

As the army travelled through Chin, Xena couldn't stop feeling as if she was being watched. She would use her sharp vision to scan their surroundings constantly yet she couldn't find the source. She figured Lao Ma had sent out scouts to follow them and make sure she and Borias left Chin. It wasn't until they crossed the Xiang River that the sensation slowly receded from her.

Right now, Xena was shifting in her saddle from the day's long ride. She just crossed the Xiang River about a candlemark ago. The army had been travelling for at least six candlemarks today and riding a horse that long could be exhausting. She then sensed Borias flanking her side now.

"So I assume we won't be travelling much longer."

Xena wasn't sure if that was a question or a statement; most likely a question. She slightly grinned at her partner and only supplied, "Not much longer." She looked ahead of herself. "We need to get a little west of Mount Jing."

"What is beyond there, Xena?" Borias had a tightened almost annoyed tone.

Xena licked her lips, her mysterious grin was back. "Women… lots of them."

Borias's eyes narrowed as he searched his knowledge of that area.

"Come on, Borias," taunted Xena. "Even you must have heard of the tribe of warrior women."

"The Amazons," whispered Borias as the candle of knowledge finally lit in his head. "You want the Amazon lands?"

"Why not?" Xena shrugged and her grin widen broadly. "It will be very easy."

"As I recall," interjected Borias, "the Amazons are in Greece. Not to mention they have two hundred women."

"Actually it is three hundred and fifty-six warriors in the particular tribe I'm interested in."

Borias did the numbers as he compared their army to the Amazon's. "Xena," he growled, "I'm not prepared to lose more soldiers." He continued to consider and his angry expression appeared. "We are not travelling across the known-world to Greece."

Xena remained silent as she swayed in her saddle. "Borias," she softly started, "you don't have much choice." Her slow wicked grin teased the corner of her lips. "I believe your army is becoming more my army."

Borias stared darkly at his partner. He knew she was right that Xena had better control over his portion of the army. It was quite possible his men would side with Xena over him. That put a small pain in his gut. "As you want… Warrior Princess," growled
Borias and he immediately pulled his horse's reins to slow down.

The Warrior Princess had a satisfied expression as she lead her army west towards the setting sun. She had plenty of time to consider her plan on taking over the Amazon Nation that rested just northeast of Greece. She wanted the Thrace Amazons. And as she worked out her plans, she began to realize it would be very simple to take over the Amazons from what research she'd done on the Amazon culture. Not only would it be simple to conquer them but she realized she'd have a chance to learn new skills and fighting techniques from them.

The warlords headed west for five days and only stopping a few candlemarks before sunset. It wasn't until that reached the lands of India that they slowed down. Xena and Borias decided that it would take at least another seven to eight days before they'd reach eastern Greece. And Xena had a peeked interest in India since it'd been rumoured that India could be quite mystical and usual.

The small army finally made camp just outside of the small town of Leh. The men were ordered to step up a temporary camp since the warlords had decided to stay for the next three days. Borias was busy making sure the men were doing just that and not slopping up anything. Xena, however, was down at the temporary corral and brushing down Argo in the last rays of daylight.

Argo gave a gentle whine of pleasure.

Xena faintly smiled but didn't stop her brushing. "So what you think, girl?"

The mare twisted her head to her master's direction. She whined again.

The warlord didn't look at her horse though. "I can walk normal again," she murmured. "Something huh?"

Argo stomped her right foot and gave a brisk nod. She then twisted her neck back then was able to nip at Xena's heavy fur coat she wore.

"Mmmm I know." The Warrior Princess stopped brushing and carefully placed the brush on her mare's back. She then easily removed her fur coat since the weather had exceptionally increased in temperature. "I guess I won't need that." She tossed the fur to the ground on a bright patch of grass. "So what you think of being an Amazon horse?"

The mare whined in laughter and shook her head.

"No?" Xena smirked. "Come on, girl. Think of all the apples you could get."

Argo let out this huge sigh as if she really debated the idea.

Xena was back to brushing and was coming up Argo's right side now. "Don't worry, girl. Unfortunately this is something I'll be doing alone."

Argo had already twisted her head around to her right side. She merely stared at her owner.
"No don't worry, Argo. You won't be in that corral for a season like last time."

The mare huffed in appreciation. Even after so long, she was still slightly bitter that her master had left her in a corral of other mares. All the while her master was off on the high seas without her. But after so many apples and brushings, she learned to let it go… for the most part.

"Well hows that, girl?" Xena had finished the brushing and was patting Argo's neck. "I'll bring an apple tonight."

Argo whined happily at the promise.

Xena's faint smile briefly flashed across her face. "I'll see you, girl." She gave one last pat, gathered up her coat, and quietly left the corral.

Argo trotted up to the edge of the corral and watched her owner disappear into the camp ahead. After a heavy sigh, she turned back to the corral where the rest of the horses were and she slowly joined them.

The Warrior Princess continued through the camp until she found her partner. She'd slung her heavy fur over her right shoulder as she approached Borias.

Borias already sensed Xena coming his way so he half turned in her direction. "Yes?"

"We'll need to change our camping equipment around while we're here."

The warlord folded his arms and slowly nodded. "Tents would suit better than these yurts," he slowly agreed.

"See that it gets done, Borias." Xena started to step away but Borias's quick hand latched onto her wrist.

Borias had a dark expression. "And what is wrong with you doing it, partner?" He wasn't enjoying the treatment of being a so-called second in command.

Xena rather enjoyed the reaction too. Her smug face was irritating her partner. "I'm too busy running my army." She jerked her arm free and casually walked off towards her yurt.

Borias's throat echoed with a deep growl. He suddenly spun around and kicked the nearest thing, which was a huge barrel of water. Several of the near by men peered up and either gave him a disappointed look or an amused one. Borias noticed them and snapped, "Get to work on this camp." He stomped off.

The Warrior Princess was slightly amused by the scene but she continued to her already made yurt. When she entered, she tossed her heavy coat onto her bed then tore off her sequenced cap. After getting it off, she ran her fingers through her rough hair. "Mmmm," she grumbled.

It wasn't long before she'd dug through her things and found an old brush of hers. She
took a moment to straighten her hair and untangle it. This time it was much easier to run her fingers through her soft hair. Sunset would be in less than a candlemark and she knew dinner wouldn't follow far behind. As she took a seat on her bed, she unsheathed her sword and in her other hand was her whet stone. She began the rhythmic movement and sound of running her whet stone up her sword's blade. This was her time to think and plot.

The following day the warlords had decided to take an adventure to the local town. The entire army never entered a town but only a certain portion as not to leave the camp abandoned. So Xena took the first band of her men into the town and she wasn't remotely surprised by the dark looks she received from the local people. It merely caused her to smirk.

After her men dispersed throughout the town, she began her own exploration of the village. The first thing she was interested in was any type of armoury or weapons shop. It was easy to find the small market however she lacked faith that there would be much of an armoury if at all. As Xena came to the near end of the market, she finally spotted a store front for a weapons shop much to her surprise. With a satisfied grin, she climbed the three steps and entered the store.

As soon as she entered, a dark skinned man greeted her with an expressionless face and monotone voice. "Welcome."

The warlord only nodded. Her head was dipped as glanced over the weapons that were displayed on the tables.

The store keep carefully monitored the warlord. He tilted his head slightly and slipped his hands behind his robe. "Is there anything you're looking for in particular?"

The Warrior Princess glanced at him then back at the weapons.

The shop keep refrained from sighing anymore because he'd grown accustomed to these types of customers. He watched as the female warrior came around to his table and she lifted her head to him. However her focus wasn't on him but past him so he partially turned and gazed at what caught her eye. "Aaah." Suddenly he had a thin smile. "You like this?" He reached up to collect the weapon that hung from the wall. "It is one of my rarest and most prized pieces."

The warlord stepped closer to the table. Her attention was completely captured by the sparkling weapon. "What is it?"

The shop keep held out the weapon to the warlord. "It's a native weapon to India." As Xena wrapped her long fingers around the weapon he finished speaking. "It's called a chakram."

Xena was dazzled by the sheer weightlessness of the round weapon and as she ran her thumb across the edges, she was amazed how it was so sharp. Finally she peered up at the store keep. "How does it work?"

"Well," started the keep, "it takes practice. It is thrown much like a disc at either your opponent or an object." He tilted his head a little. "If it hits your opponent it will
injure them if not kill them. If you aim for an object it could either cut through or bounce off then go into a different direction." He paused because he was studying the expression on the warrior's face. "It does take some time to master it; not only to throw it properly but to catch it when it returns to you."

The warlord held up the chakram and turned it before her eyes to examine every angle.

"It is made of steel," clarified the store keep, "and that is gold to bring out the designs."

"How much?" finally inquired the Warrior Princess.

The shop keeper typically didn't have his chakram up for sale. He'd had others in the past but none of them were as beautiful as this particular chakram or as well made as this. He chewed on his lower lip as he debated. He realized this female warrior wasn't about to take no for any answer so he started to work the numbers in his head. "One hundred fifty."

Xena lost her focus on the weapon and gazed at the man. She did the estimated conversion of money to dinars and instantly her face went dark.

The shop keeper didn't miss it and he coughed gently. "Although I could shave the price off some for you."

"I would say that's a wise idea," agreed the warlord. Xena reached into her side pouch and fished through it. Eventually she pulled out four gold coins and three nickel coins. "That should be at least a hundred and ten."

The shop keeper didn't hesitate to collect the money then he tucked it away. As he lifted his head, he began to speak too. "You should probably…" He trailed off when he didn't see the warlord anywhere in his shop now. "Get some help with it… first," he muttered. After a brief shake of his head, he disappeared into the back of his shop behind the curtain.

The Warrior Princess slipped through the crowd and started looking for a certain store. As she moved quickly, she also scanned each of the stands until she found the one she needed. After quickly making sure her new weapon was securely fastened to her side, she dove into the thicker portion of the crowd towards the stand she wanted. When she stepped up to it, she quickly discovered this was exactly what she needed for later.

Xena began picking through the clothes and tried to decide what would fit her right. She didn't need anything fashionable; just the plain and simple clothes. She first picked out a white peasant top that had three-quarter long sleeves. She then finally found a slightly worn ankle length skirt that would suit her. She took the items to the owner of the stand and held them out for the price judgement.

"That'll be ten, ma'am." The man folded his arms across his chest in hopes he'd show he wouldn't be intimated.
Xena grunted at the man's posture and she was faintly impressed. She decided not to argue with him so she pulled out the two coins and paid him. The stand owner smiled and said goodbye.

The warlord hastily filtered out of the crowd. She really didn't need anything else and if she did later she could come back. The army had another four days before they'd leave to finish their journey to Greece. Right now, Xena wanted to learn about her new toy because she could sense the excitement in the bottom of her stomach.

When she came into the stable that she'd left Argo, her mare greeted her happily. "Hi, girl," whispered the warlord. "Ready to go back?"

Argo bobbed her head while her master opened the gate.

"Come on." Xena lead her mare out and when she was far enough from the stable, she mounted. "Let's go, girl." She gave a gentle click between her lips.

The mare went into a fast walk towards the entrance of the village. It wasn't long before they arrived back at the camp and she was taken back to the corral.

After Xena stopped at her yurt to drop off her clothes, she made a fast beeline to the woods. Each of her strides got longer as she went deeper into the woods then she finally picked a spot. The perfect tree stood tall before her and Xena grinned.

The warlord took a few steps away from the tree and unfastened her chakram. She held the weapon before her eyes. "Let's see what you can do," she whispered. Xena took a stride back, pulled her arm far back, and then shot her arm forward hard.

The chakram was released from its owner and went into a blurring whistle at its target. It simply cut deep into the tree's trunk and was at a dead stop.

Xena nodded. "This will take awhile." She sighed and walked up to the chakram. She grabbed it and gave it a decent jerk but the weapon didn't come free. Xena was impressed by its strength but she gave it a harder tug and it came free. She took several paces back to her original spot however this time Xena took a more angled aim.

The chakram screamed towards the tree once more, hit it, and bounced off to come back at Xena.

The warlord wasn't quite prepared for its return but she tried to capture it in midair only to miss. Xena twisted her head around and saw the chakram buried in the smaller tree just behind her. Once she retrieved it, she tried the same manoeuvre again in hopes to time it better on catching the weapon.

As the chakram came on its return trip, Xena prepared herself and mentally calculated her catch. She reached for it and her fingers slipped around the weapon in midair. Yet suddenly her hand screamed in pain as the chakram's blade ran across the inside of her palm but Xena had caught it.

"Gods," hissed the Warrior Princess. She turned her hand over and in her balled up
fist that held the chakram was a small stream of blood running free. She quickly switched the chakram to her other hand then opened her injured hand. The chakram had neatly cut her palm exactly in the middle but it wasn't too deep.

Xena took a quick moment to wrap her hand by tearing a piece of cloth from her arm clothing. After getting it tied snugly, she continued her practice with the chakram. And her practice continued much the same way; Xena threw the chakram at the tree, it reflected off, and Xena caught it with as much pain as the first time. Yet the warlord didn't stop practicing with the weapon until late in the afternoon but the difference was by then she was starting to catch it without injury.

The Warrior Princess paused in her practice and gazed at the low western sun through the woods. She gave a heavy sigh and returned her focus to the well chipped up tree trunk. Xena smirked and threw her chakram one last time. When her chakram returned to her, she neatly caught it without hurting hand despite how sore her hand had become today. Xena held up her chakram and studied it for a moment. "You're going to become quite an asset," she murmured. Given some time, she would master her new weapon.

Xena slowly started back for the camp. She could feel her hunger already. As she went towards the camp, she decided it was more time to play so she tried to spin the chakram on her right finger tips. A couple of times she dropped it but after about six tries, she easily balanced the spinning chakram on her right index finger. She then tossed the chakram in the air and carefully caught it on its return.

When she entered the small food yurt, her men peered up at her then went back to their meals. Xena went to a fairly empty table and settled down. It wasn't less than a quarter of a candlemark when one of her men brought her a platter. She said nothing and merely began eating the food. But it wasn't long before her silence was disturbed by Borias. She barely acknowledged him when he sat down across from her.

"Find anything interesting in town?" prompted the warlord.

Xena lifted her head a little and stared at him. She said nothing then went back to her meal.

Borias's jaw tightened but he remained calm.

"Have you gotten the tents?" asked the Warrior Princess.

Borias stabbed his slice of chicken a little harder than needed. "Tomorrow," he supplied.

"I take it you found a merchant that'll buy the yurts?"

Borias finished chewing his mouthful of chicken. "I did."

"Good." Xena pushed her white rice around some then shovelled it up onto her fork. "See if you can't make a profit."

"I think I know that, Xena."
"I'm glad," tormented the warlord.

Borias took a long drink from his mug. After setting the mug back down, he asked, "Where are we headed to, Xena?"

"To Thrace."

"Near Mani?" he prompted. Xena nodded to him and he considered the location. "The Amazons are due north of there."

Xena nodded her agreement to his conclusion. "Tomorrow I want to send two men ahead to scoot up there."

"Manus and Mene?"

"Yes." Xena considered some more then added, "Send them at noon."

Borias remained quiet for awhile but he was thinking a lot. It wasn't til after he finished his dinner did he break the silence. "So do I get to hear the plans?"

The Warrior Princess grinned widely. "I never thought you'd ask."

The warlords remained longer in the yurt than anybody else. They worked out detailed plans after Xena explained her general ideas. This was one of the time that Borias now recalled why he'd partnered up with this woman. It was the reason why he continued to follow along her side. Xena's plans could always create an illusion of grandeur and not always if rarely did those plans come out right. It was Borias's logical mind that kept him on the ground at times. And now he was more concerned about his place in the army that was slowly becoming Xena's. This was never in his plans from the start.

After the talk, Xena finally left and went to her yurt. Borias, however, went into the camp and checked on the men. He knew later that Xena would do the same but right now was his shift to watch them. He was also working out how to take care of the yurts for the trade to get the tents. He figured he'd do half the camp tomorrow and the next day would convert the other half. He was actually amazed he was able to find a merchant in that small town that would trade with them. But he was ready for a change, a lot of changes.

The following days the camp was a busy place. Borias and several men took on the project of taking down certain yurts and trade them for tents. Xena took it upon herself to give her men some training that she and them needed. There were several sore men and a Xena was extremely invigorated by all the small scrimmages. Many of them were sore enough not to recover on the morning when they broke camp. The small army began their march north west. Home. To Greece.

"Manus, what is the report?"

The warrior that had been sent ahead of the army as a scout now focused on his leader. The army had just stopped marching when the sun was low in the west and just east of the small Greek town of Mani. "We found the Amazon Nation." After Mene's
agreement nod, he continued his report. "It is about a candlemark north of Mani in a heavily wooded area."

"Did you get an estimate of how large the nation is?" question Borias.

Manus looked at the other warlord. "Three hundred and fifty… maybe more."

Xena's faint grin grew because she wasn't off on her estimate about the nation. "Have you heard who the queen is of that nation?"

"We believe so," cut in Mene, "Queen Cyane."

"Cyane," murmured the Warrior Princess. She chewed on the name and liked the taste of it. She now folded her arms over her padded chest. "What of their defences?"

"We couldn't get too close." Manus looked to Mene for help.

"We did notice there was a patrol." Mene looked between the warlords, waiting for further questioning.

Borias quietly huffed at the information. "How large is the territory?"

"Several candlemarks walk in either direction from the looks of it."

Xena nodded at Mene's response. "Alright." She lowered her arms. "Borias or I will talk to either of you if we need anything else."

The two warriors nodded and as they were about to walk away, Xena's voice halted them.

"Manus, wait."

Manus stopped and faced his leader again.

Xena glanced at Borias and looked back at Manus. "I have another job for you," she stated after Mene was further away.

Manus mutely sighed but he dipped his head.

"I need you to head deeper into Greece. Go to all of the small warlord armies and you're looking for an army controlled by Bracis."

Manus tilted his head a little. He was now very curious as to his new mission.

"I want you to find two warriors. One goes by the name of Tracker and the other is Prostig." Xena paused in the middle of her thoughts but a slow grin crept along her face. "Tell them that the 'kid' needs them."

Manus didn't understand the last part but he wasn't about to ask. He nodded and headed off from them.
Borias turned his head to Xena. "Tracker and Prostig?"

"Old friends," merely supplied the Warrior Princess. "Let's finalize our plans." She started on her way to her tent with Borias beside her.

By the next morning, Borias was finishing up getting over twenty men battle ready. But then his attention was torn away from his duties when Xena neared him.

"My… Xena the slave," jabbed the warlord.

Xena lifted an eyebrow then took a second to push up her soft white sleeves up her arm. "Are the men ready?"

Borias didn't answer right away as he stared at Xena's new villager attire; dark brown skirt and white shirt. "Yes," he finally answered. "Everything is ready."

"Good." Xena tipped her head to one side a little. "Make sure you lead those Amazons back here."

"Xena, have some faith." Borias grinned and now faced his men. "Let's send out the invitation, boys."

Several of the men hooted and hollered since they knew they were about to fight a tribe of women. Some of the men even started whistling at the end but they started their slow march north.

Xena carefully watched her men leave with Borias but she sensed Chuang coming up to her side. "You remember what to do when you return?"

Chuang nodded.

"Go ahead and follow Borias and the men."

"Anything else?" probed the second in command.

Xena looked at him. "Make sure Borias does this right."

"Of course." Chuang dipped his head then silently walked off.

The warlord turned back in the direction of her tent and headed that way. She had a few last touch ups on her slave outfit so she could better fit the role.

Borias and the men stopped several hundred paces away from the Amazon Nation border. He waved for a few of his men to join his side. "Keep your wits about yourselves. These Amazons can be tricky." His men acknowledged him then he nodded ahead. "Let's go." Borias and four of his men approached the border and as soon as they came within fifty steps of the border, two masked Amazons dropped from the trees with their swords out.

"Don't think we don't know," hotly stated the Amazon on the right.
Borias's grin flashed at them. "We're looking for handouts."

The Amazon on the left lifted her sword, her tip pointed directly at Borias. "Leave. Now."

"We will attack," informed the right Amazon.

Borias's focus was suddenly broken away from them by another Amazon, whom was deeper in the woods and coming towards them. It was as if this Amazon had appeared from nowhere and it actually excited Borias.

When the new Amazon was in earshot, she called out, "What is your business here?" She stood taller than the other two and her strong gaze could be felt through the mask.

Borias smirked at the new Amazon. "I'm Borias."

The taller Amazon took a position between the two other Amazons. She reached up and pulled back her mask to reveal a young but strong woman. Her features seemed soft but her bright green eyes were extremely hard. "I am Cyane, Queen of the Thrace Amazons." She now rested her right hand on her sword hilt. "Now what is your business?" She knew there would be a fight shortly as she gazed past the few men and saw two handfuls of more warriors. It didn't require this many warriors to have any peaceful talks, she knew that.

"My army is slightly low on funds." Borias's on free hand went to his sword's hilt. "We've heard that Amazons are a big pay out from slavers."

Cyane's expression darkened. She started to step back just as Borias and his men moved forward. She unsheathed her sword while her two Amazon moved forward to stop her attackers. She twisted her head to the left and cupped her free hand over her mouth. As soon as she gave her birdcall, numerous Amazons dropped from the trees just behind her and all of them began to charging the enemy.

Borias gave a strong yell for his men to attack. He already drew out his sword and was immediately rushed by two Amazon warriors. He quickly deflected each of their blows with ease then countered back with a few fast swipes. He managed to kick the Amazon on the right away from him and catch the other off guard. Borias continued to fight them and finally had one down and the other was quickly on the way to losing to his blade.

Before he could be attacked again, he hastily rushed to the back part of the fight. There he found two of the men he was looking for. He gave them a quick nod of signal then he went back to the fight.

The two warriors glanced at each other and the first man, Lien, gave a yell for one of his buddies. His friend didn't hesitate to take out his opponent then began fighting Lien's enemy. This gave Lien a chance to step back and he flung off a small pack on his back. It was in moments that he removed a strongly woven net.

"Are we ready?" called the second warrior, Gelidus. He suddenly ducked when his enemy swiped at his head but he didn't need to recover as Lien ran his sword through
Lien twisted his sword free from the dead Amazon and looked at Gelidus. "Yes." He then twisted his head around to find Borias.

"There." Gelidus pointed to the warlord fighting a single Amazon.

Lien agreed so he started jogging towards Borias and the Amazon. Gelidus followed. Lien was coming up behind the Amazon, his net at the ready, and he was focused on his target. When he was close enough, he opened the net in mid stride then threw it perfectly over the Amazon.

The stunned Amazon didn't have anytime to recover. She was suddenly slammed to the ground by Gelidus's heavy weight but she didn't give in so easily. She began to kick at her attacker and her sword was starting to cut through the net. Then her grip was lost on her sword as somebody jerked it from her hands. Now the weight on her body got heavier as Lien helped Gelidus control her. The Amazon growled and screamed hotly in hopes of some help but that was short lived when suddenly her world went black.

Borias lifted his sword hilt up a bit after just hitting the woman on the head. He stood back up and stared down at the young Amazon. "Get her back to camp. Hurry up too."

Lien and Gelidus gathered her up and Lien helped get the girl up onto Gelidus's right shoulder. Gelidus was luckily large and strong enough to carry the small Amazon. The pair then hurried off from the battle and back to camp.

Borias had a free moment to gaze about the small battle. He was happy to see only a few of his men were wounded and about three of them were definitely dead. As he scanned the mass of warriors and Amazons, he finally saw the one Amazon he was looking for, Queen Cyane. He spun his sword once then started towards the queen.

Cyane immediately noted that Borias was coming for her. She took a daring chance at her opponent with a stomach stab and was able to catch him in the lower gut. Her victory was short lived when Borias stepped up to her.

"You won't win," stated the queen.

Borias smirked. "I didn't want to win... I just wanted a trophy or two."

Cyane growled and took a swing at her enemy.

Borias parred the attack and return his own attack. "She is quite cute actually. Small, sandy hair, and light brown eyes."

The Amazon Queen was trying to figure out what and who the warlord was talking about. Her mind raced.

"Well I am sure she'll be worth something on the market." Borias laughed some then lunged forward, catching Cyane off guard, and taking her to the ground. Borias lifted his sword to bring it down but Cyane's blade just barely stopped him. "We'll talk
again… soon.” Borias smiled, withdrew, and called for his men to retreat.

Queen Cyane flipped up onto her feet and watched their new enemy hurry off. Her mind still rushed to figure out who Borias was talking about earlier. She growled. Her thoughts were stopped dead when one of her heavily breathing Amazons came to her side. "How bad, stratègos?"

The stratègos sighed then silently sheathed her sword. "Not as bad as it could have been, my queen." She was staring towards the direction that the enemy had retreated to but now she looked at her queen. "Who was that?"

"His name was Borias."

"Borias," murmured the stratègos. She considered the name, she'd never heard of him.

"Have you heard from the polemarchos, Lyda?"

Lyda turned her gaze back to her queen. "No. She's checking on the situation." She paused in her talking. "Actually, she'll be needing me shortly."

Cyane merely nodded as Lyda excused herself. She finally put her sword away and started on the situation of assessing the fight's outcome. She was worried though because it was rare for warlords to ever attack them. She was extremely curious as to why this Borias was so interested in them.

"My queen," called a familiar voice.

Cyane stopped and waited for the polemarchos to come to her. "What's the word, Olivia?"

The tall Amazon took a heavy breath and took a moment to brush back her dark brown hair. "So far, just seven dead."

Cyane knew what that meant; plenty were injured and some more serious than others.

"We have thirteen Amazons being taken to the healer's hut."

The queen nodded but her focus was lost on the polemarchos when Lyda returned to the queen's side.

"There's a problem, my queen."

Cyane's body automatically trembled in worry. She knew her answer to her question would finally be answered now.

"We're missing an Amazon… she's been taken."

"Who?" quickly questioned Cyane.

"Alti's young apprentice… Yakut."
Cyane knew exactly who Yakut was and her heart dropped. Yakut had always been Cyane's adopted sister and she'd always fully supported Yakut's desire to become the next shaman in the tribe. "How did this happen?" she finally asked.

The stratégos let out a hefty sigh. "It sounds like it was planned, my queen. She was jumped from behind by two men then knocked unconscious by that warlord."

"Alright," quietly spoked the queen. "We'll work this out after we get the others taken care of. He obviously took her for a reason, she won't be killed. Let's get everything cleaned up. I want you both and Alti in my hut a candlemark before sunset."

"Yes, my queen," replied both Amazons. They dipped their heads and hurried off to help check the status of their warriors.

Cyane continued on her way to help her fellow warriors.

First she softly moaned, her head was filled by a splitting pain and her forehead pounded.

"Heeeey, wake up," whispered a strong voice.

She gradually opened her eyes, daring to know how much it would hurt. When her eyes finally focused, pair of hard blue eyes were staring back at her.

"Come on," urged the powerful voice. "Its okay."

She lifted her hand to her pounding head and her ears rang with the sound of clanking chain.

"What's your name?" asked the women.

"Yakut," murmured the small Amazon. "What's yours?"

"Xena," gently replied the larger woman. "Here."

Suddenly Yakut sensed a cool, wet cloth pressed against her forehead. She sighed in relief and slowly her senses started to come back to her. She recalled the battle against the warlord Borias. She'd been attacked from behind and captured, at least she sure she was. When she looked at the weight around her wrists, it was confirmed by the shackles locked on them. "Where are we?"

"In a tent in the warlord Borias's camp."

Yakut sighed and straightened up against the wood pole that she was propped against. "How'd you get here?"

Xena gave a drawn out sigh. "I was captured several moons ago."

The Amazon tried to calm down as she started to realize her situation.
Xena continued carefully pressing the cool cloth against different spots on the small woman's forehead. "What happened? You must be an Amazon."

"I am," confirmed Yakut. "Borias attacked our borders."

Xena nodded a couple of times. "I heard talk about it in the camp." She pulled the compress away and moved it down to Yakut's cheeks. "Borias and his men are desperate for money."

Yakut merely listened. Her head hurt too much to think of what to say.

"Well don't get comfortable… it won't be long before you're sold to a slaver."

Yakut faintly moaned at the woman's information. "Great." She closed her eyes and tried to relax. "Why haven't you been sold?"

Xena didn't respond quickly, instead she put the wet cloth back on Yakut's forehead. "Because they like to… keep me around."

The Amazon completely understood exactly what Xena was telling her. It made her stomach twist tightly. "Where are you from?"

"Amphipolis," answered the older woman.

"That's not too far from here… about five days ride or so."

"About," agreed Xena. "Why don't you get some rest? It'll help your head."

Yakut opened her eyes briefly to look at the woman. She faintly smiled and closed her eyes again.

Xena pulled the cloth away and put it on the ground between them. She then carefully sat back down beside the Amazon. A hidden grin pressed at her lips.

Queen Cyane leaned back in her chair again. Her head was beginning to hurt from all the talking.

"We need to attack them, my queen before they decide to disappear off with Yakut," quickly shot out the stratègos.

"Are you crazy?" hotly accused the head council member. "That could put Yakut in danger."

The polemarchos straightened up. "Well we can't afford a queen's ransom for her."

"And we can't afford to get another Amazon killed," contested the council member.

"Stop!" finally ordered the queen. She was beginning to regret inviting the head
council member, Talia, in coming to the meeting. She knew though that Talia had every right to be here and it was important. "Just stop bickering between each other. We have a young Amazon's life at hand."

"And I would like my apprentice back," deeply spoke a scratchy voice.

The three bickering Amazons turned their heads to the shaman of their tribe.


The queen gazed at their shaman. "And you will," she promised.

Alti dipped her head. "I have every faith that you will, my queen."

"Thank you," murmured Cyane. Her focused returned to the entire group. "Now is there a plan we can come up with that doesn't endanger Yakut's life so much?"

The stratègos cleared her throat and began to speak again in a calmer tone. "I've already sent out an Amazon to find the camp and asses the enemy."

The queen nodded her approval.

"What about an attack at night?" suggested the polemarchos.

"Perhaps less of an attack and more of a rescue?" suggested Alti.

Talia nodded her agreement to the shaman's idea. "I believe that would be a safer route to start with, my queen."

"Well let's start there." The queen finally relaxed in her chair. She was silent as her two army leaders were considering their options at hand.

The polemarchos looked at the stratègos and quietly asked, "Clio?"

Lyda nodded her agreement but said, "And Merta."

"What about those two Amazons?" cut in the head councillor.

The polemarchos looked at the group. "Clio and Merta are experts at being quiet, stalking, and using everything to their advantage. They're excellent warriors."

"You're suggesting we send them in to rescue Yakut?" inquired the queen.

"Yes," confirmed Commander Lyda. "They're the only two capable."

Queen Cyane considered the idea. She turned to Alti though. "Can you help?"

The shaman softly grinned, her dark eyes only focused on the queen. "I believe I can find something to assist Clio and Merta."

The Amazon Queen nodded. "We must act quickly though."
"Time is short," agreed Councillor Talia.

Cyane looked to her two commanders and directly told them, "Get Clio and Merta prepared. I want to hear from the scout before anything else happens though."

"Of course, my queen," agreed Commander Lyda. She noted the queen's gentle nod so she signalled her second in command to get up. Together they excused themselves to leave.

Councillor Talia knew too that the queen wished to speak to Alti alone. She stood, bowed her head to the queen, and silently left.

Queen Cyane waited for the hut door to close then her focus went directly to the shaman.

"Yes, my queen?"

Cyane studied Alti for a moment or two then finally said, "I want you to find out what you can about this enemy."

"It'll be done." Alti had a hidden grin, something very common for her that chilled many people in the tribe.

"I want to know everything you… see, Alti." Cyane had slightly lifted her eyebrow. If it was one thing she didn't underestimate it was Alti's powers as a shaman. "Report to me later."

"I will." Alti deep breathing filtered between them then finally she spoke again. "I would like my apprentice back, my queen."

"I know," agreed Cyane, "and you will."

"Very well." The shaman flashed a toothy smile then stood up.

Cyane carefully watched the shaman leave her hut. When Cyane was finally alone, she sank back in her chair and just breathed.

The shaman, however, made her way back to the small temple of their tribe. She ducked into it and already felt alive in her home. She had every intention in carrying out the queen's request to see the enemy. So quietly she ascended to three steps onto the temple alter floor where she picked up her caduceus staff that was set against the nearby wall. With her caduceus in her left hand, she walked to the alter in the middle of the floor that was before a gigantic statue of Artemis. She picked up a bowl full of dark substance and two fire stones beside it. She turned around and went close the edge of the steps then stopped. Once she sat down comfortably, she placed the bowl in front of her with the stones and then she carefully lowered her caduceus stick into her lap.

Alti took a deep breath while she picked up the stones. She quietly began to hum. She then struck the stones together and sparks flew into the bowl of the dark fungi
material. Immediately the fungi began to burn and the power plant's scent flowed up into Alti's face.

Now Alti's hum turned into a quiet song that only she could hear or understand. She closed her dark eyes and heavily breathed in the fungus. Slowly her mind went into a deep trance then she started to traverse the axis mundi and she entered the spirit world.

Instantly Alti was greeted by the guides of the spirit world, two serpents that slithered past in her vision. She then followed Borias's name in the realm, deeper and further she went and into Chin. Borias was a strong soul but a good soul too despite his blackened history. Alti had a hunger for good souls but more for pure souls. However this Borias interested her so she followed his soul further and wider.

Then Alti was slammed by a very dark soul. It was so dark that Alti lost her breath at the sheer beauty of the black soul. It was the soul she'd been seeking all her lifetime, it was a soul she must have, and would control. And when Alti looked deeper into this black soul, she was struck by a bright light of hope in the centre, which only made Alti laugh.

The shaman slowly phased out of the trance and the first whispered hungry word from her lips was, "Xena."

Alti didn't hesitate to get up, put her bowl back in its home and head out of the temple with her caduceus in hand. It wasn't long before she arrived back at Cyane's hut. When she knocked on the door, the queen called her in and she entered quietly.

"You have news?" inquired Cyane, who was sitting at her desk with a scroll in front of her.

"Yes, my queen." Alti neared the queen then stopped. "Yakut is safe."

Queen Cyane showed some relief but she remained silent.

The shaman's mind was working quickly now. "Borias is holding her and plans to sell her later. He will attack again later."

"I was afraid of that," muttered the queen.

"There's another too," Cyane quickly looked at her and Alti controlled her dark grin. "Another prisoner. Her name is Xena."

"Xena," echoed Cyane, a shake of her head.

Alti now shifted her hands to her hips. "She's been with the army for some time now. It seems she's of… use to them."

Cyane understand what the shaman was implying. "Well… this changes our plans a little."

"My queen, may I recommend not only do we rescue this Xena but we should
welcome her to the Nation."

The Amazon Queen curiously studied the shaman. "What did you see?"

"She has a strong will… that of an Amazon."

Queen Cyane's head tilted forward and she considered her options and the Nation's options. "Do you think she would join, Alti?"

"I know she would," whispered Alti.

"Alright. We will plan on it." Cyane stood up now as she spoke. "Was there anything else?"

"No, my queen." Alti's hands fell from her hips and she slowly followed the queen to the door. "I will work on something to assist Merta and Clio."

"Please," agreed the queen.

Alti dipped her head, opened the door, and left the queen alone.

Cyane briefly stood in the doorway, watching the dark shaman glide through the hallway. Her eyes naturally narrowed because of her thoughts about the shaman. She would be relieved the day that Alti retired and Yakut would take over as the shaman. It was an unspoken truce between her and Alti. Alti went her way, Cyane didn't question her, and Alti made sure never to cross the queen or Nation in the process.

Cyane closed her door once Alti was out of her vision. She went back to her desk and continued her report on today's events. Tomorrow she and Commander Lyda would have to speak before the council and with their plans. It wasn't something she was exactly looking forward to tomorrow.

"How do you feel?" softly spoke Xena.

Yakut lowered her hand from her forehead, which wasn't banging as hard as earlier. "A lot better."

"You think you can eat?"

The Amazon just realized that food had been brought into the tent earlier. She hadn't even heard anybody come inside to deliver it. "When did they come in?"

Xena slightly shrugged. "Half a candlemark ago."

Yakut nodded. She studied the food and realized it was better food than she expected it to be. "I think I can eat something." She straightened up against the post.

Xena picked up a red apple and passed it to the younger woman.
Yakut gently bit into it, worried that a hard bit would shake her head too much. "So you're from Amphipolis?"

"Yes."

Yakut peered up at the dark woman. "How'd you end up here?"

Xena gave a drawn out sigh to make it seem like her story was a hard one. "My village was attacked by Borias's band. They didn't cause much damage but they did manage to take plenty of villagers."

"Yourself included," decided the Amazon.

Xena slightly nodded and now she took a comfortable sitting position beside Yakut. "What's it like in the Amazon Nation?"

Yakut had already taken another bite from her apple. After swallowing her tidbit, she gazed at the older woman and decide she was very curious about the Amazon Nation. "It's really amazing."

Xena forced a smile on her face. "How's that?"

"Well… for a lot of reasons." Yakut peered over at the small wood tray. She deposited her apple core and picked up a bowl of some kind of broth. "Every Nation is like a family. We all care for each other and help each other."

"There's more than one Nation?" cut in the older woman.

The Amazon had a grin at the women's question. "Yes, there are several Nations throughout Greece." She took a spoonful of broth and continued her discussion. "My Nation is about three-hundred and fifty women… excluding the children."

Xena's features slightly tightened as she realized she'd completely forgotten there are some children in these Nations. How else would the Amazon legacy continue otherwise? She cleared her thoughts though and asked, "Is there a queen?"

"Yes… her name is Cyane."

Xena tilted her head a little. "Is there some… government system? Like Greece's?"

The Amazon paused in the middle of her eating. She never met somebody so curious about the Amazon Nation. In some ways, it was refreshing to see an outsider so interested instead of seeing them as some threat. "Well it is a little like Greece's system… but I think more like Rome's. We have what is called a council."

"Let me guess," cut in Xena, "the council balances the queen's power."

"Exactly," agreed Yakut. She took a moment to finish off her broth and as she put the bowl back, she spoke. "There's kind of different… departments in each Nation. There's the army, the council, the agriculture, the shaman and so on."
Now Xena's curiosity truly kicked in at the mention of a shaman. "A shaman? They deal with the spiritual world? I didn't think there were any here in Greece."

"There really aren't," agreed Yakut, "but we're Amazons... so we're different."

Xena quietly laughed at the joke.

"Actually," clarified the Amazon, "we are the only Nation that has a shaman. All the rest have a priestess."

Xena had already known that from doing her homework about Amazons. What she didn't know was that the Thrace Amazons had a shaman instead of a priestess. Now that sparked another question for her. "Do you still follow Artemis?"

"Very much so," answered the Amazon, "otherwise we would not be Amazons." Xena nodded at her so she continued her original explanation she was trying to start earlier. "The reason why we have a shaman is because of Gaul. Many, many seasons back a Germanic shaman from the Gaul region stumbled into our territory. Amazingly the shaman was a female but she was rather beaten and battered from a recent war between her tribe, the Teutones, and Rome. Rome defeated them just outside of Vercellae; her clansmen were dead and she was just mindlessly traveling without food or water... no supplies."

"Gods," murmured Xena.

"Eventually she came to our Nation and we took her in. At first, the queen at that time didn't think the shaman would live. The shaman refused to eat anything or drink anything but the priestess, at that time, went to the shaman. Nobody knows, not even to this day, what the priestess did but the shaman began to eat, drink and she healed."

Xena's expression was neutral but she was carefully listening to every detail.

"The shaman ended up staying in the Nation. She and the priestess worked side by side and they traded techniques, information, rituals... everything."

"So," cut in Xena, "the shaman now is really a... priestess-shaman?"

"Essentially yes... or a shaman-priestess." Yakut was remotely surprised when her joke caught a faint smile from Xena. "Today the shaman knows and does everything a shaman and priestess does." Yakut tilted her head some. "Funny enough I think there's been talk about changing the shaman's title to something else since the shaman is neither a priestess or a shaman."

"Maybe a shatess?"

Yakut broke into a smile at the mild joke. "Maybe."

"So how do you fit into the Nation?"

The Amazon already noticed the quick shift in the woman's attitudes between serious to joking. She sorta liked that easy distinction. "Well I have been there since I was
eight winters old. I began with schooling on what an Amazon is and how to be an
Amazon. I actually just completed all my training about three seasons ago." She fell
silent as she considered her current position in the Nation. "Now I am the next shaman
in line."

Xena was completely caught off guard but she made absolutely no indication to Yakut
that she was shocked. "That's how you know so much about the shaman."

Yakut slightly laughed and shrugged. "Not really. It is a common tale told throughout
the Nation about how we got our shaman."

Xena's focus was lost on the Amazon but her thoughts were very focused. She had
plans to keep but they always could be altered here and there. She contained her
wicked grin at realizing Borias had just captured the apprentice shaman of the Nation.
It was such a satisfying feeling knowing that she had plenty of time to win over this
future shaman and eventually use her.

"I think I like the sounds of this Nation," murmured Xena aloud.

The Amazon slightly smiled then gave a gentle laugh. "Most women have." Yakut
now studied her new found friend and she realized she and her Nation would need to
get Xena out of here as well. She reached over and lightly touched the older woman's
knee. "I'm sure you will too."

Xena's only reply was a soft smile but her emotions were extremely satisfying and
excited.

Suddenly the silence between them was broken by Chuang entrance into the tent.

"You, get up." His eyes pierced directly at Xena.

Xena gave a quiet sigh that only Yakut could detect. She slowly pushed up but
Chuang grabbed her arm and jerked her up to her feet. That made Xena hiss in anger
but Chuang retaliated with a slap to Xena's face.

Yakut was instantly on her feet but she was stopped by Chuang's sword that had been
with drawn faster than she could move.

"Don't even try," warned Chuang. "Sit."

The apprentice shaman stared at him but there was nothing she could do. For now.
Slowly she lowered herself back down but she kept her eye contact always with
Chuang.

Chuang sheathed his sword at his side then returned his focus to Xena. "Come on.
Borias wants you." He hauled her out of there and Xena wasn't making it easy either.
Chuang though made sure to drag Xena all the way to Borias's tent and when he was
in front of the entrance, he shoved Xena inside.

Xena stumbled in with perfection. When she was in the tent and Chuang followed her
in, she whipped around and bared her teeth at him.
Chuang smirked, folded his arms over his chest, and tilted his head to the side.

Xena returned his smirk, straightened up while Borias came into the tent.

"How goes it?" inquired Borias.

The Warrior Princess took a deep breath. "Excellent." She tipped her head to one side at her partner. "You actually managed to do a better job than I expected."

Borias rolled his eyes and he went over to his supplies. He pulled out a water skin. "Why is that?"

"That young Amazon is the next in line to be shaman of that village."

Borias stopped in the middle of his drinking. "Shaman? I thought it would have been a priestess."

"I thought so as well." Xena treaded across the tent and faced her partner again. "This'll work out well… better than I thought actually."

"It doesn't change the plans though?" inquired Chuang.

"Not at all," replied the warlord. She took the waterskin that Borias offered her. "Have we found any scouts?"

"Yes," answered Borias, "there are two Amazons that have been watching the camp."

"It did take awhile to find them," filled in Chuang.

Xena darkly smiled at that. "They are tricky."

"They are," seconded Chuang. "But we are figuring out their patterns."

"Don't bet on it." Xena corked the waterskin.

"They're likely to change them," informed Borias. He quickly caught the skin that was tossed back at him.

Xena stepped up to Borias.

Borias slowly grinned as she got closer.

"Just give me some time to work on this Amazon." The Warrior Princess stepped into Borias's space. "I would imagine that this Amazon will know what her Nation will plan."

"Most likely a rescue," whispered Borias.

"Most likely," murmured back Xena. She slipped her hands onto his belt.
Chuang curiously watched because he knew his leader better than most. He then grinned when Xena retrieved Borias's hidden dagger from his belt.

Xena turned around and walked away as she spun the dagger between her fingers. "Once I have this Amazon's trust, then we'll lighten the patrol… go from there."

Borias ran his tongue along the front row of his teeth. He watched his partner neatly slip the dagger between Xena's breasts. "Ready?"

"I am." Xena stepped out of the tent first but her partner was on her heels.

Borias quickly wrapped his right hand around Xena's neck. "Xeeena, this plan had better work."

Xena sharply rammed her left elbow into the warlord's stomach.

Borias growled and took advantage of the situation by jerking Xena's head back with her midnight hair.

Xena growled in warning but she had to play along to some degree.

"I don't liking wasting my time," hotly whispered Borias then he released her.

"Then leave with what little men you have," countered Xena. When Borias gave her his dark look, she could only smirk.

"Remember this little plan of yours wouldn't be working out if I wasn't here."

Xena considered it for a second. Somewhat he was right but she could easily make a few adjustments with Chuang and her plans would move just as smoothly. "Perhaps… perhaps not."

Borias controlled his temper. He knew it wasn't worth causing a scene in the middle of the camp. Instead he fell silent and continued escorting his partner back to the official slave tent. He gave a brief nod to the guards at the tent then he pushed Xena inside. His attention went directly to the young Amazon. "Nice to see you once again."

Yakut quickly climbed to her feet; her chains rattled in disagreement.

"I hope you're comfortable."

Yakut's expression darkened. "I know it won't last."

Borias smirked. "Not at all but you will have more company shortly."

The young Amazon understood what Borias was getting at and she didn't like it. "Queen Cyane will fight you."

"That's what I am hoping," smugly replied the warlord. His focus then went to Xena again. "Don't forget about tonight." He leaned his head in and absorbed her scent.
Xena closed her eyes and held her anger back, stilled her initial reaction.

"Til then," whispered Borias. He silently left the tent.

Yakut watched as all the tension receded the older woman when the warlord left them. "Does that happen…?"

"Pretty much every night," finished Xena.

The young apprentice lowered her gaze and hefty sigh left her. She hated not being able to do anything. It'd been trained in her for years to respond to danger and wrong. And this was a situation in which she wasn't able to do so.

"Sit down," gently instructed Xena, who sat down beside the Amazon too. "And tell me more about your Amazon Nation."

Yakut softly smiled at the woman's curiosity.

Cyane studied the morning sun that had crested over the east horizon about two candlemarks ago. She'd just stepped out of her hut and was taking a moment to absorb the new day. Each morning she would do this and it always seemed to fill her with hope again, especially at times like this. Now she was ready to confront the council with her plans.

The queen trekked through the busy village. She was headed directly for the council hut; breakfast would have to late til later. She entered the hut, went to the meeting room, and saw Councilor Talia was already there. Right after the queen sat the stratègos and polemarchos both came into the room. They silently took their positions flanking the queen from behind and stood tall.

"Good morning, my queen," whispered Commander Lyda.

Queen Cyane peered over her shoulder, a smile on her face. "Good morning, Lyda." She then twisted her head to the other side and was instantly greeted by the polemarchos.

"Good morning, my queen."

Cyane smiled at her second in command. "Good morning too, Olivia." When she turned back, she realized three councilors had arrived and sat down at their position around the table.

Councilor Talia waited for the last council member to arrive then she began the introductory to the meeting. "Councilors." She dipped her head at the four members. She then looked at Cyane. "My queen." Then lastly she gazed upon the stratègos and polemarchos. "Commanders." Once everybody acknowledged her back, she began her opening. "We have a problem with a new enemy. A warlord that goes by the name of Borias. Unfortunately he has taken one of our Amazons and plans to sell her into slavery we believe."
"Which Amazon?" quietly spoke up a councilor.

"The Amazon is the young shaman apprentice, Yakut." After a murmur of whispers between the council members, Talia continued. "The commanders have been working on strategy to rescue Yakut." She then looked directly at the queen. "Is there anything else you wish to add, my queen?"

"Yes," replied the Amazon Queen. "I spoke with Alti and asked her to see into Borias." She sighed and looked about the council. "It looks like we will not only be rescuing Yakut but also a young woman that's a slave."

Councilor Talia was shocked as were the commanders.

"Who is this slave?" spoke up a councilor.

Queen Cyane straightened up in her chair. "Her name is Xena." She listened as the name was echoed through the room by everybody. "It looks as if Borias and his men decided to keep her instead of selling her into slavery."

The quiet whispers died from the realization of what Cyane's words truly meant.

Suddenly Councilor Talia cut into the silence. "Commanders, is that a problem?"

"No it should not be," answered the stratègos. "We will only have to make a few adjustments."

"Understandable," agreed the head councilor. "My queen, is Alti assisting the Amazons that are on the rescue mission?"

"Yes." Queen Cyane straightened up a little more. "I have yet to hear the details but I believe she has something in mind."

"After the initial rescue, what are the plans to deal with Borias?" inquired a council member.

"My queen? Murmured Commander Lyda. The queen mutely signaled her authority for her to speak so she stepped up to the table. "Officer Olivia and I believe that a direct attack afterwards would be the best option."

"Are you currently working on a strategy for that?" Councilor Talia had her eyes burrowing into the stratègos.

"Of course. It is not finalized but we are close to it, councilor."

The head councilor shifted her focus to the queen. "I believe that will require a follow up meeting."

"I agree." The queen dipped her head.

"Are there any questions or concerns?" Councilor Talia gazed about her members,
"There is one thing I am curious about," started a councilor, "what will we do with this Xena?"

"I believe we will do as we have always done with refugees." The Amazon Queen leaned forward from her chair. "Offer her a place in the Nation or she may go freely."

"A wise choice." Councilor Talia smiled her agreement. "Any other concerns?" She studied everybody and when nobody broke the silence, she said, "Then the council rests for the day."

Everybody stood up at once and certain people grouped together while others hurried out of the room.

Cyane was sandwiched by her two commanders as she was trying to leave the hut.

"I believe we have our plans set for the attack after the rescue, my queen."

Cyane nodded at the stratêgos's words.

"Can we not bypass the council's word this time?" questioned the polemarchos.

The queen came to a dead stop near the door. She gave a warning look to both of her commanders but waited for Councilor Talia to exit the room. After she was gone, the queen slammed the door shut and her facial expression darkened very deeply. "We are not bypassing the council's word, commanders."

"But time is of the essence-"

"Stop," hotly ordered the queen. "Half the reason this council exists is so that two commanders like yourselves don't get this Nation in trouble."

"My queen, I believe the polemarchos and I know what we are doing."

Queen Cyane took a step closer to her first in command. "Lyda, you know better than anybody else that the Nation puts as much of their faith in the council as they do in the army. That council is run by the Nation and we will not break the Nation's faith in our ability to listen as much as act." She paused and looked between her commanders. "I will not make a dictatorship of this Nation… not even for a brief second in time. Don't ever forget that your position in this Nation is to serve and protect the Nation. Is that clear?"

"Of course, my queen." The stratêgos dipped her head in apology.

Officer Olivia bowed her head as well. "I am sorry, my queen."

The queen settled down and took a step back. "Now, organize your plans for the attack. I want them finalized by the high sun. Then we will have a meeting with the council to finish this."
"Right away," agreed the stratègos. "We will report to you by sun high."

"Good." Cyane opened the door and silently left the room.

The two commanders finally relaxed after all the tension the queen gave them.

"I think we picked a bad approach," softly spoke Olivia.

Lyda looked at her second in command. "I think so." She grabbed onto the open door. "Queen Cyane has never been the one to test."

The polemarchos sighed as she exited the room, the stratègos just behind her. "She does play by the books."

"And we know why that is." Commander Lyda was silent but she could tell her second in command was thinking.

The polemarchos opened the main door to leave the large hut. "If it wasn't for Cyane being queen… this Nation would be on a quick decline."

"Yes." Commander Lyda was already outside but she waited for Olivia. "She has saved this Nation."

Olivia sighed at her recollections of the days before Queen Cyane. They were anything but as light as they were today. She knew then that whatever routes that the queen chose it was for the best for the Nation. She wasn't going to contest that anymore and neither would the stratègos.

"When do you think they'll come?" Xena turned her head to the Amazon.

Yakut sighed and dropped her head against the post. "It's been two days… I doubt it won't be much longer."

Xena faintly smiled at her new found friend.

"Most likely at night… maybe even tonight," whispered the young Amazon. "Sweet Artemis, I hope so."

Xena had already instructed her men to back off from patrol and keep closer to camp. She'd instructed Borias and Chuang to make sure the men pretended to be lazy, bored, and not paying much mind to anything. She could only hope it would encourage her enemies to attack and take her and Yakut. Her excitement about her plans was growing stronger each day. She knew this would work and maybe even better than she expected.

"How much longer til sunset?" whispered Yakut.

"About another two candlemarks." Xena was sitting on the grassy ground; she'd already created a small indent in the grass from her constant sitting spot. "In another
candlemark we'll be fed."

Yakut grunted at the remark. "Nothing better than a slave's dinner."

Xena chuckled. "Well hopefully that won't be much longer."

"For either of us," murmured the apprentice shaman.

"What will happen to me... in the Nation?" inquired the older woman.

Yakut heavily sighed and she closed her eyes. "Most likely they'll let you stay in the Nation then you'll have the option of leaving or joining the Nation."

"What happens if I do join?"

Yakut slightly smiled. "Well... you start the training to become an Amazon."

"How long can that take?" Xena turned her head to her friend. "I can't imagine as long as it does for the children."

"No not at all. It can really vary between each woman. Some learn faster than others." Yakut paused and considered some of the outsiders that have come into the Nation. "Some women have taken up to twelve seasons to become trained while others only four seasons. Certain things like sword training can slow them down. It depends from woman to woman."

"That's interesting," whispered the older woman. "Is there a minimum time?"

Yakut quietly chuckled. "I take it you expect to be a faster learner?"

"I am, actually."

The apprentice shaman turned her head to her friend. "I see." She warmly smiled now. "Well then, it shouldn't take you more than four seasons to become an Amazon."

Xena mirrored the smile and suddenly her hunger for the Amazon Nation grew stronger. Not only would she soon control her enemy but it will be her enemy that has trained her with better abilities and skills. She couldn't have made a better plan than this.

Yakut dropped her head back against the pole and closed her eyes. "Time will tell, my friend."

"I believe so," whispered the older woman. She was about to relax but then she detected one of her men coming into the tent. Instantly she was on her feet and in a weak defense position.

"Borias wishes your... affections, Xena." Chuang smirked and grabbed the woman's nearest wrist. "It is close to dinner and his appetite is quite large."

Yakut was fully awake and aware of the man. She'd already squatted into a dangerous
position but she knew it was fruitless to do anything. What she was sure about was that she'd have this man in the next battle against this small army. She wanted more than anything to pay him back for Xena's own will. She carefully watched as her friend was hauled out of the hut.

Chuang walked directly behind Xena as he lead her to Borias's tent across the camp. "How goes it?" he quietly asked.

Xena contained her grin. "Excellent."

"The plan is working then?"

"Of course."

Chuang smirked. "I never doubted."

"I would hope not, Chuang."

The warrior's smirk grew at his leader's challenging words. He remained silent because they were near the tent. He directed Xena into it then stepped in himself.

Borias was wiping his blade clean after just sharpening it. He sheathed it then focused on his partner. "Anything new, Xeeena?"

The Warrior Princess folded her arms over her chest. "I think tonight will be it."

"How can you be sure?"

Xena watched as her partner put away his sharpening stone and rag. "Tomorrow will be too late. It'll be tonight."

"I hope so… I'm tired of being a sitting duck." Borias straightened up from putting his supplies away in his saddlebags. "After they take you and that Amazon, I'm going to back away from the Nation… work on recruiting more men."

Xena nodded her agreement. "I think it is time."

Borias grinned.

Xena though was still serious. She stepped up closer to her partner. "Listen to me, I want you to do one thing tonight."

"Go on."

"Partially pack the supplies. I have a feeling it'll save some time on the retreat tonight." The warlord walked away but she stopped and turned around. "Make sure the retreat isn't too quick."

"We already decided that," chided Borias. "You just worry about escaping with that Amazon, Xena. I will take care of the rest."
"Don't screw it up, Borias."

The warlord narrowed his eyes at his partner. "Don't get over zealous about these plans, Xena. In time's past you've gotten ahead and ruined everything."

Chuang was immediately annoyed and he stepped up to the pair, his hand on his sword hilt.

Xena held out her hand to him. "Stop." She glanced at him then back to Borias. As she lowered her hand to her side, she stepped up to Borias. "And that's simply because you've never listened to orders." She then stepped away from him, closer to Chuang. "See that you do this time or consider yourself one man army." She quickly walked out of the tent with Chuang on her heels. "I need to go to my tent."

Chuang merely nodded. He followed along side Xena until they were at her tent. He entered last and watched his leader go through things in tent.

"See that Argo is cared for, Chuang."

"Of course." Chuang dipped his head and lifted it back up. "And I'll see that your things are cared for as well."

"Do that." The warlord had knelt down in front of her small trunk. She was carefully picking through her items until she found one of the most important things to her. She pulled out her pair of matching daggers that she'd kept since childhood. It was time for her to use them again; it was time for them to protect her again. After a quick check of the blades, Xena quickly slipped the sheathed daggers into their new homes. One was in the inside of her right boot and the other in the inside of her left boot. But before she closed the lid of her trunk, she stared at her new weapon, her chakram, which she wished she could take. Finally she closed the lid and locked it tight.

The Warrior Princess stood up tall and slowly approached her second in command. "Borias may stray from our plans."

"I'll be sure he doesn't," interject Chuang.

Xena immediate reaction was a dark grin. "Good. I will be in contact."

"How long will this take?"

The warlord folded her arms over her soft white top. "Hopefully no longer than three seasons… maybe two."

"Then it begins," stated Chuang.

Xena's dark grin instantly appeared once more. "Then it begins."

Chuang's response was a deep chuckle.

"I do expect two new warriors to join the army." From Chuang's curious expression, Xena continued her explanation. "Their names are Tracker and Prostig and they're
some old friends of mine. I want them treated right as they will be quite valuable later to me." After her second in command nodded, Xena lowered her arms from her chest. Suddenly her eyes were a little darker than normal and her expression almost threatening. "I want my," she growled, "army in one piece when I return, Chuang. If Borias dares threaten any part of my plans, deal with him."

Chuang understood his leader's request so he nodded. "I will do so."

"Otherwise," added Xena, "consider your life forfeited. Is that clear?"

The second in command sensed a chill roll down his back but he held strong. "That's clear."

"Excellent." Xena lost her focus on him and she noted, through the opening in the tent door, that sunset was nearing. She needed to get back to that Amazon. "Let's go then."

Chuang fell into step behind his leader when they left the tent. He escorted her back to the tent and made sure to lower his angry gaze at the Amazon. "You don't have much longer, Amazon." He smirked. "Tomorrow." He then looked Xena up and down with a hungry look and left with a small laugh.

Xena was slightly baring her teeth at him when he left. Yet after he left, her shoulders slightly slumped and her attention went to the apprentice shaman. "I hope you're right about tonight."

Yakut was hoping so too but she held a strong front to her friend. "They'll be here." She watched as Xena sat down beside her.

The older woman looked at her new friend. "Did they bring anything?"

"Nothing," answered Yakut. "I suppose they expect the slaver to feed me tomorrow."

Xena huffed. "I suppose." She then lowered her head forward while she silently sat beside her friend.

"What was Amphipolis like?" quietly asked Yakut.

Xena finally peered over at the younger woman; struck a bit odd by Yakut's question. "Why?"

Yakut slightly shrugged but explained. "I was born and raised in the Nation. I never really… well grew up outside the Nation." Her lips pressed together tighter. "I guess I'm a little naïve to any society beyond my Nation."

Xena considered it for awhile and she realized what her friend was saying. "It was… nice," she quietly started. And then as Xena thought about her life in Amphipolis all of her memories flooded back to her.

"Did you have a family?"

Xena studied Yakut for a moment; it took her awhile to answer. "I did… two brothers
and my mother."

Yakut suddenly was confused. "What of your father?"

"I… don't know." Xena turned her head away. "He ran out on my mother right after my brother was born. Really only my mother has any idea what became of him… and she's never said."

Yakut chewed on her lower lip. She knew she was pulling up hard memories for Xena but she was still curious. "Were you married or anything before you were taken from Amphipolis?"

Xena quietly chuckled. "Not at all. No children either."

"What were you doing before everything happened?" Yakut was slightly bent closer to Xena. Her curiosity was peeking with every word Xena spoke.

Xena certainly noticed her young friend's interest. She wasn't going to overly lie when she knew she'd confuse her lies so she stuck to most of her truth. "I helped my mother in the tavern that she owns."

Yakut perked up at that information. "Tavern? I wouldn't have guessed." Yakut's expression was tightly woven together, her thoughts working hard. "Then you must have been close to your family… your mom."

Xena stared at the patch of green grass about four hands length away. "Yes… I was close to them."

The apprentice shaman could tell it was a hard topic for her friend but she had one last question. She wasn't becoming a shaman because she wasn't perceptive. "What's become of them, do you know?"

The older woman finally looked at Yakut again. Xena opened her mouth, her thoughts working hard to compound the truth a little but her answer fell dead. Suddenly there was an explosion of yelling throughout the camp.

Yakut was quickly on her feet as was Xena. Xena though, she was able to move and she went to the tent flaps. She was instantly stopped by the two guards that removed their swords.

"What is it?" called Yakut.

Xena only had a few seconds to figure out what was going on before the two guards would enforce their authority. She jumped back just as they were about to approach her. "By the gods," she whispered as her mind quickly processed what was going on out in the camp.

"What is it?" Yakut tried to take a step closer but her shackles denied her anymore room.

"Wolves."
"Wolves?" whispered Yakut, she was confused.

"At least fifty of them… attacking the camp."

Yakut suddenly had a wide grin on her face. "Alti," she murmured in a hopeful tone.

"Alti?" questioned Xena. Yakut had already explained to her that Alti was the current shaman but she couldn't understand how the wolves related.

The apprentice shaman's focus returned to Xena. "Alti sent them."

"They're coming," concluded Xena.

"The wolves are simply the distraction," whispered Yakut as she realized the planned trick her sisters must have formulated. She was about to add more but then there was yelling directly outside of their tent.

Xena tensed up when she heard the guards withdraw their swords. She felt every fiber in her body tell her to run out and join the fight just outside but she controlled her reaction. She stepped back a few paces until she was beside the Amazon yet her vision remained glued to the tent flap and the shadows moving across.

"In here," called a female's voice.

Yakut brightened when two Amazons rushed into the tent. "Clio, Merta." If it was one thing a shaman was required to do it was know every Amazon's face and name. It was one thing Yakut had down pat. The two Amazons instantly smiled to her.

"We don't have much time," spoke up Merta.

Clio reached to her side and unhooked a sheathed sword. "I believe you've been missing this, sister."

Yakut felt her life come back under some control when she received her sword back. "The both of us-"

"We know," cut in Merta. She looked at the woman beside Yakut. "You're Xena."

Xena's right eyebrow quickly arched.

"And we're getting you both out of here," clarified Clio. She then looked at her partner and nodded.

Merta quickly reached behind and was able to unhook a huge metal tool. "First we need to get these shackles off."

Xena stepped aside but she carefully watched too.

Merta carefully positioned the jaws of the tool around the last shackle bit closest to Yakut's ankle. She held onto the top arm and waited until Clio hand a grasp on the
lower handle. "One… two… three." Merta pushed down while Clio pushed up.

There was a loud snap and some chain flew across the tent.

Merta stepped back and took a moment to rehook the tool to her back.

"We'll have to get the smith to cut off the clamp, Yakut."

Yakut shook her head and smiled. "I don't care. I'm just glad to be getting out of here." She then looked at her new friend and quietly asked, "Are you ready?"

Xena faintly smirked and answered, "I was born ready."

Merta and Clio both quietly laughed but it was Merta who went serious first. "We need to get out of here." She looked at her partner. "Clio."

Clio took the hint and approached the back of the tent with her dagger appearing from her side. It was merely two blinks of an eye before she had the tent cut open in the back. "Let's go," she softly called. After everybody rushed out, she quickly followed them.

Merta was in the lead then followed Yakut, Xena, and Clio took up the rear. Merta though carefully guided them through the camp and away from the battle scene as much as possible. Yet they only were only so far when a warrior spotted them.

Merta, Yakut, and Clio prepared to put up a fight when the enemy called for some help from some of his nearby buddies. Xena however took a few steps away from them as if pretending to be too scared to fight yet she still stayed close.

There were four warriors and each Amazon fought one except Merta who took on two of them. Merta was skilled enough to take out one of her opponents right at the start of the fight. She then remained focused on her other attacker, whom was much more skilled.

Xena carefully watched the Amazons fight and she was quite impressed with their skills and talents with a sword. She recognized many of the moves but there were a few she was unfamiliar with, which interested her. Then Xena noticed that the warrior that Merta had earlier knocked out was climbing to his feet. When she realized his intent was to attack Yakut instead, she actually sensed a small amount of anger.

Xena quickly moved forward and she moved so fast that the warrior had no idea she was coming at him. Her warrior instinct immediately had her do a high kick and her kick sent his sword flying from his hands. She then slightly grinned when he turned to her and he had a shocked expression.

Yakut by then had almost finished her opponent but she was watching Xena from the corner of her sight.

Xena had already landed another kick to her opponent's chest. Now she was throwing a punch at his face.
The warrior stumbled backwards, slightly hunched, and greatly angered. He reached to his side and unsheathed a long dagger and he held the blade down. He straightened up and started for Xena again.

Xena took a few steps back to lead him on. When he was near enough, she tried her kick again but this time her enemy was ready. He ducked away then suddenly leapt forward. Xena was taken to the ground and he was on top of her. Xena quickly prepared to stop him even if it meant exposing some truth.

"No!" yelled Yakut. She'd just ran her blade through her enemy's chest and was making a quick dash for Xena.

Xena was lifting her hands up, her index and middle fingers pressed together and targeted at his neck. Then suddenly his neck was out of target, his weight from her body gone, and there was a loud feral scream. Xena didn't wait around to find out, she'd rolled away to her right, and popped up onto her feet. She then spun around to see what had happened to her enemy.

Yakut stopped dead in her tracks, several paces from Xena.

By this time, Merta and Clio had taken out their attackers and were also watching the grizzle scene.

"Sweet Artemis," breathed Clio.

There was another loud scream from the warrior that Xena had been fighting earlier. He was on the ground, rolling around, and being torn apart by a wild, hungry wolf. He screamed again when the wolf bit into his right arm and ferociously ripped off his skin and some muscle.

Merta looked at the others and called, "We need to move. Come on!"

Yakut neared Xena, lightly touched her, and ordered, "Come on."

Xena had never seen a wolf become so beastly but she was grateful at the same time. She started to hurriedly walk off with Yakut. But Xena stole one last glance back right as the wolf lifted its bloody muzzle from the warrior's ripped open chest. Xena was completely taken by the unusually bright red eyes the wolf reflected; it was as if it was possessed and it captured apart of Xena's hungry.

"We have to get out of this camp now." Clio was picking up the pace by running now.

"Why? Is there an attack about to happen?"

Merta glanced back at Xena and Yakut. "Yes. This camp is about to go up in fire."

Xena just controlled herself at hearing the news that her camp was about to be burned. She had to rely on Borias and Chuang on taking care of her army.

"I think it's already started," called Clio. She pointed directly ahead after they made it past a tent.
Xena gazed up as several flaming arrows went speeding through the air and arched down towards her camp. She almost growled because she wasn't prepared for such an attack. It was too late now though.

"Just up here," called Merta.

Clio saw the spot where she and Merta had entered the camp earlier. She felt relief wash over her. She was the first to approach the small opening in the dense woodland so she stopped and stood guard by it.

Merta ducked under the heavy brush and waited for the others to follow. When everybody was accounted for, she led the group deep into the forest to where she knew where the commanders and the queen would be waiting for them. Their arrival would mean to the start of the main attack on the camp.

They traveled deeper into the forest and it wasn't any longer than a sixth of a candlemark before they slowed down and approached a group of Amazons.

"Merta, Clio?" called an Amazon that was rushing up to them.

Merta brightened up at seeing the second in command. "Officer Olivia."

The polemarchos rushed up to the small group of women, her face was bright and relieved. "Everything went as planned?"

"Yes," answered Clio.

"Excellent." Officer Olivia called on a near by Amazon and instructed them to go to the stratègos with the news. After the Amazon rushed off, she turned back to the group and her focus went to the apprentice shaman. "I am please you're safe, Yakut."

"I am too. Thank you for the rescue." Yakut warmly smiled to the polemarchos.

"Of course." The second in command returned the smile then her focus went solely on the stranger amongst them. "And you must be Xena."

Xena dipped her head then lifted it again. "I am."

Officer Olivia stepped up to her and held out her arm. "I am the polemarchos… Officer Olivia."

Xena took the Amazon's arm and briskly shook. "Xena of Amphipolis."

"Amphipolis?" whispered Olivia as she released the woman's arm. "Along the coast."

"The same," agreed Xena.

The second in command nodded then returned her attention to Merta and Clio. "You two are to escort Yakut and Xena back to the Nation. See that they get to the healer's first. The stratègos orders."
"It'll be done," agreed Merta.

"Good." Officer Olivia took a step back. "I must go. Report to the stratègos and I later, Merta and Clio." She didn't wait for a reply and instead hurried back to the queen and stratègos.

"Alright." Merta took a heavy breath and looked at the group. "Ready to go home?" Her question was directed at Yakut.

The apprentice shaman smirked. "I was born ready."

Clio groaned.

Xena grunted at her friend's joke.

Merta shook her head and started walking off in the direction of the Nation. "Let's go." Everybody silently followed behind her.

It wasn't long before the group made their way into the quiet Nation. There weren't many Amazons left in the Nation but just enough to protect it incase of a surprise attack. The women trekked through the village and arrived at the steps of the large healer's hut. Everybody climbed up and followed Merta in. When everybody was inside, they were quickly greeted by a healer.

"Welcome back, Yakut."

Yakut smiled at the senior grade healer. "Thank you, Canisa."

"And I see we also rescued another." The healer studied Xena from head to toe.

"Canisa, this is Xena," introduced Clio.

Canisa stepped up to Xena, her arm extended.

Xena took the healer's offer and briskly shook her arm.

The senior healer stepped back and gazed back at the apprentice shaman. "Did they feed you well?"

Yakut smirked. "Like I was a pig."

Canisa grunted, turned around, and waved for Yakut to come with her. "Follow me. You too, Xena."

Merta and Clio watched the younger women go past them. They remained by the front door, knowing Canisa wouldn't be too long with them.

The senior healer led them into a small side room down a corridor. She directed for them to both go inside but she ordered Yakut to sit on the pallet. "It looks like you have a couple of cuts and scratches."
Yakut settled onto the small wood pallet. She watched as the healer went to a shelf full of bottles that either contained liquids, herbs, or powders. Things that Yakut was somewhat familiar with from her teachings with Alti.

"Let's see." The healer picked out a bottle that contained a clear liquid and then a clean cloth near by. She'd noticed earlier there was a deep cut on Yakut's right shoulder. She was more concerned about that than any of the others. "I need you to hold still while I do this, Yakut."

Yakut only nodded. She watched as the healer opened the bottle, put the cloth against it, and turn it over so that the cloth soaked in much of it. Then when Canisa put the cloth against her shoulder, the wound immediately screamed in protest. Yakut bit the inside of her mouth and closed her eyes.

"Sting?" quietly asked the healer.

"Yeah," murmured Yakut.

"Tell me when it doesn't sting as much." Canisa now carefully dabbed the wound with the wet cloth. She noticed the tense in Yakut's body was slowly easing. But she continued dabbing the wound or stopping and just pressing the cloth against the young woman's shoulder. "So where are you from, Xena?"

Xena slightly cleared her throat and replied, "Amphipolis."

"Oo yes. I know Amphipolis." Canisa finally set the cloth down and now inspected the wound. "What did you do there?"

"I helped my mother in a tavern."

The healer glanced over at Xena but then she returned to her inspection. She pulled back a little. "It may be getting infect, Yakut and it seems just deep enough to need stitches."

The apprentice shaman audibly groaned.

Xena actually grew curious so she neared them. She was just on Yakut's left side and peering over at the wound. "It should be sown up with a little salt."

Canisa had already moved back to the shelf unit and she stopped looking through her supplies. Instead, she turned her gaze to the newcomer of the village. After a brief silence that seemed longer than a candlemark, Canisa returned to seeking out her supplies on the shelves.

Yakut curiously stared at her friend.

Xena said nothing, she just licked her lips and took a step back when Canisa came back over.

Canisa had a needle, thin twine, and two pieces of salt in a bowl. She set the bowl
down on the pallet then took a moment to thread the needle. "Yakut hold up your right arm horizontally."

The apprentice shaman did as she was instructed.

"Xena, I will need your help in a moment." Canisa placed the threaded needle down beside Yakut's leg. She then quickly grounded the white salt in the mortar with the pestle until it was almost to a fine dust. "I will need you to hold the wound closed after I put the salt into the wound." 

Xena merely nodded.

Yakut though peered over at Xena after realizing Canisa was using salt. Yet Xena wasn't looking back at her and it made Yakut slightly suspicious. She would have to remember to question her friend later.

The senior healer had the salt carefully pushed into the wound. She was now picking up the threaded needle while Xena was moving closer to hold the wound closed. Canisa gently began sowing the wound together.

Yakut had her eyes closed and she was biting her lower lip. This was when she really appreciated being a warrior for the Nation. She'd decided a long time ago that the healer's hut was much worse than the battlefield.

Within several breathes, Canisa had the wound sown tight and she was trimming off the extra thread. "Now I will need you to come back later, Yakut."

"Wonderful," muttered the apprentice shaman.

The healer ignored the remark and continued her healer's rant. "Give it about seven days. Then I want to check it out. Hopefully it won't be much longer after that when I can remove the stitches for you." The healer took her supplies back to the shelving unit but she returned with a wrap. "I'm going to put this wrap on it and keep it on for the rest of night and tomorrow."

Yakut nodded her understanding.

"And I'm going to assume you didn't eat well or drink much while you were in that camp. So please get a good meal tonight and drink plenty of water."

"Of course," murmured Yakut. When Canisa completed the wrap, she slid off the pallet and she patted it for Xena. "Thank you, Canisa."

"You are welcome." Canisa watched as Xena sat down next on the pallet. After Xena was settled down, she stepped up closer. "Any symptoms or problems?"

"None," curtly replied Xena.

Canisa nodded. She picked up Xena's left wrist and pressed her index and middle finger into the pulse point. "You have a few scratches across your face I'd like to clean up." She released Xena's wrist. "Any lacerations anywhere?"
"Old one, yes."

Canisa lifted an eyebrow.

"My leg," informed Xena, "but it was clean by one of Borias's men."

The senior healer huffed. "Where?"

Xena somewhat lifted her right leg and drew up her skirt to her knees.

Canisa stepped back some then bent forward. "Oh yes." She gently ran her fingers down the new scab that was almost as tough as leather. She estimated it had to have been a dagger that caused this type of cut. She also figured it had to be roughly five days old. She nodded her approval then straightened up. "Anything else?"

"No… just a poor diet."

The healer had already factored that into her thinking. She silently went to the shelving unit and picked out a new cloth. She'd left her cleaning alcohol, from earlier, on the pallet. It was only a quick moment before she had the cloth wet and she was cleaning the small cuts on Xena's face and neck. "A villager huh?" she whispered.

Xena detected the healer's disbelief.

"You must of hung out around the healer's home a bit," criticized Canisa.

Xena bit her harsh words that almost flew from her lips. She only said, "Something like that."

The senior healer made a low sound. When she finished cleaning Xena's face, she put both clothes into a hamper to the right of the pallet. "You're both done now." She returned the cleaning alcohol to its home. "Make sure to get plenty of food, water, and rest tonight." She now guided them out of the room and back to Merta and Clio. "And don't forget to come back in seven days, Yakut."

"I won't, Canisa." The apprentice shaman offered a warm smile. "Thank you again."

"You're welcome and no more kid napping, please." The healer watched as the group left her hut but her attention was mainly on Xena. It was increasingly curious how Xena knew the technique to put salt into a wound to keep it sterile. It was general healers that understood that trick of the trade but there were some regular people that knew it too. Canisa though couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't something Xena just picked up on, rather it was something she learned for some purpose. Canisa made a mental note of it; she would discuss it with the master healer later when she came back from the attack on Borias's camp.

"I think I will head to my hut," decided Yakut to the group.

"Of course," agreed Merta. She then looked at Xena. "We'll show you to your guest hut."
"I'll stop by later, Xena," promised the apprentice shaman. And with that, she headed off to her hut at a slow pace.

"This way," instructed Clio. She and Merta lead the silent, tall woman through the quiet village. They finally approached a hut and they went inside. Clio stepped aside and let Merta take over.

Merta let Xena get inside and then she held her hand out to the bed in the middle of the room. "Your bed of course." Then she pointed off to her right. "That small room is the washroom with a chamber pot as well." She then lowered her hand to her side again. "There is a bathing hut near by. It's quite easy to pick out." She paused as she considered things. "I'll request that Yakut give you a tour of the village after dinner. Is there anything you need?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you." Xena offered a faint smile. "I appreciate everything."

"Well you're safe now," promised Merta. "And I'm sure the army will return with good news."

"I think so," agreed Xena.

Merta nodded her head then stepped back. "I would recommend get some rest. Yakut will be here later."

"I will. Thank you both again."

Clio already had the door open and quietly left.

Merta dipped her head for a moment then followed after Clio.

After the door close, Xena gazed over at her bed. It was small yet it was bigger than what she slept on in her army. She approached the bed then sat down on the edge. She was absolutely stunned by how soft it was under her. She couldn't ever recall a bed ever being as comfortable as this. It made her even more curious to see how the rest of the bed felt so she didn't hesitate to lay down.

The bed was extremely soft on her body. Xena released a heavy sigh and her eyes drooped a little. She then brought her hands up and tucked them under her head. After a brief stretch, she started to relax.

Yakut too was on her bed but she was sitting on the foot of her bed. She was bent forward and untying her boots slowly. She wanted her boots off more than anything right now after having them on for so many days straight. When she finally had them unlaced, she yanked them off, and threw them aside. She groaned with relief and stretched out her toes some.

After a little bit, Yakut finally slid off her bed and sought out her leather sandals that was somewhere near her bed. When she found them she slipped them on and didn't even bother to lace them at all. "I need to see Alti," she muttered to nobody but herself. She knew Alti would want to see her first thing and she didn't want her
teacher to be concerned any longer than she had to be.

Slowly Yakut made her way out of the hut and into the quiet village. Once she was outside she spotted Merta not far off and she knew something was up so she met up with Merta.

"Could you show Xena around later?"

The apprentice shaman smiled a little. "I will… might be a bit abbreviated."

"That's fine." Merta chuckled briefly. "I know you're both tired. I just figured you two seem to get a long."

"We do," quietly agreed Yakut. She knew they did for some strange reason and maybe it was because they were together for several days. "Thanks, Merta. Get some rest."

"I will. Have a good evening, Yakut."

Yakut offered a smile then headed off. "Goodnight." She finally arrived at her destination, Artemis's temple. She quietly entered it and once inside she heard nobody, saw nobody. She gazed about for a moment then approached the giant statue of Artemis that was front and centre of the temple. She'd always admired the statue; she admired Artemis however she'd come to realize that she'd been taught very little of Artemis. Over the couple of seasons of her teaching, she'd come to discover that Alti's main strength was in shamanism and not so much priesthood. And in many ways that seemed to bother Yakut.

The apprentice shaman kneeled down on the step of the alter and she dipped her head. For a little while, she hummed a very common tune that any shaman would at the start of typical rituals. Finally her humming washed out from the air and only her breathing could be heard. Her thoughts, however, were much louder in her mind as she thanked Artemis for protecting her at Borias's camp and bringing her home safely.

"I see you've returned safely," whispered a scratchy voice directly behind Yakut.

Yakut controlled her initial reaction to jump up. She opened her eyes and slowly stood up. When she faced Alti, she half smiled. "I have." She bowed to her teacher then straightened up again. "Thank you for the help."

"You are welcome." Alti's dark smile suddenly appeared. "I couldn't lose my legacy."

The apprentice dipped her head. "I'm in debt."

Alti's smile widened but she took a step closer. She stretched out her right arm and with her fingertips she lifted her student's head. "You can repay me back by telling me about our new arrival."

Yakut inwardly chuckled and nodded. Once Alti removed her touch, she began to talk about Xena. "She seems to have quite a spirit… I am sure you know."

"I do."
"She says she's from Amphipolis."

Alti folded her arms across her chest; her light fur coat shifted with her movements. "Go on."

"She seemed very interested in the Nation… the Amazons." Yakut shifted her weight to her right side. "I think she will stay once she sees everything. She could become valuable to the Nation."

"I can imagine," quietly stated the shaman. "I would like to meet her… soon."

"Of course." Yakut paused in her thoughts then spoke again. "I need to give her a quick tour of the Nation. We will stop in."

Alti's dark smile reappeared. "I'd appreciate it, Yakut." She then stepped back, slightly to one side. "I know you must be exhausted."

"I am," agreed Yakut.

"Make sure to rest tomorrow. We will continue the following day."

"Thank you, shaman." Yakut dipped her head once more. "'Til later tonight."

Alti watched her apprentice head for the door. "Goodnight, Yakut."

Yakut had the door open but she gazed back at the shaman. "Goodnight, Alti." She then quietly left and decided she'd go to Xena's hut next. When she arrived at the hut, she knocked on it.

Xena quickly sat up in her bed and habitually started looking for her closest weapon. Then her memories flooded back to her and her vision focused on the door when the knocking came in again. "Come in," she called.

Yakut carefully entered and tiredly smiled at her friend. "Sleeping huh?"

"Yeah." Xena glanced about at the bed then back at Yakut. "I didn't realize I fell asleep."

Yakut faintly grinned as she approached her friend. "That'll happen on these beds." She pushed her closest hand into the foot of the bed. "I think half the reason why some women join the Nation is for the beds."

"I can believe it," mildly agreed the villager. She slipped off the bed and took a moment to stretch.

The apprentice shaman lifted the two blankets and exposed the bed cushion. "Most beds are made out of straw or feathers if you're wealthy." She found what she was looking for on the bed cushion; it was a set of five small wood buttons. She unhooked three of them, opened the cushion and directed for Xena to look inside of it. "We stuff ours with wool."
Xena's right eyebrow slowly lifted up. She hadn't thought of that idea but it made complete sense to use wool. Not only was it soft but it would retain heat especially useful for the winter time. "It must take a lot of wool."

"Yes it does actually." Yakut carefully buttoned the cushion back up. "Roughly six sheep's worth of wool." She peered up at Xena. "For a single cushion. For the doubles, at least twelve. And the cushions must be restuffed once every four seasons to keep them soft."

Slowly Xena started to grin. "I take it only the queen has a double though."

Yakut chuckled while she put the blankets back over. "Not just the queen." She softly smiled at her friend. "Any couples do."

Xena was about to ask what couples were then she suddenly realized what Yakut meant. She contained her minor shock of realization. "I take it the pillows are wool too?" She glanced over at them.

"Mostly wool yes but some feathers too." Yakut took a quick glance of the hut then returned her focus to Xena. "Are you comfortable here?"

"I am."

"Good. I thought you might be hungry. We could eat then I'd like to give you a brief tour of the village." Yakut paused in consideration. "As much as I can with it being dark."

Xena slowly started to smile at Yakut's humor. "That's fine, Yakut."

"Let's start with a tour of the food hut." Yakut offered a smile and got one in return. She went to the door, opened it, and let Xena out first. She then led the way to the food hut and was for an instant, she caught herself staring at Xena. She was beginning to see exactly the strength that seemed to follow off of the supposed villager. Yakut wasn't sure what was so different about Xena but there was something there. She knew in time she would have it figured out. "Here is the food hut."

Xena had decided it was since it was one of the few huts that had any light glowing out of its windows. She followed Yakut in and when she smelled food, she felt her stomach growl in happiness. She caught Yakut's knowing grin but she pretended to ignore it.

"This way," softly spoke Yakut. She approached the entrance of a small alcove in the food hut. "Good evening," she called to the approaching Amazon.

"Yakut, why it's great to see you bake safely."

The young shaman smiled at the cook. "Thank you." She held her hand out to her friend. "Teah, I'd like you to meet Xena."

Teah warmly smiled to the new comer.
"Xena is from Amphipolis."

"An-hipolis," repeated Teah. "I haven't been there in years. Welcome to the Nation."

"Thank you, Teah." Xena dipped her head.

"I'm sure you're both hungry." Teah focused on Xena again though. "Are you particular about anything?"

"Not especially," answered Xena.

"Wonderful." Teah smiled. "The usual, Yakut?"

The apprentice shaman nodded. "Please." She watched as Teah disappeared back into the kitchen. "Teah is an amazing cook. She can do anything with anything."

Xena returned the small grin that Yakut was showing her. She turned her head away when Teah returned with two plates.

"Here you are." Teah gave one to Xena and the other to Yakut. She then gave them flatware to use. "Enjoy, ladies."

"Thank you, Teah." Yakut then made her way through the quiet hut and went to a bench.

Xena realized they were the only two in the entire hut. She figured everybody was still at the battle against her army. She retained her amused smile at the thought. Instead, she sat down and became comfortable. She only needed a moment to realize that the meal would be a good one, better than any of her ones in the army. In front of her were her most favorite: chicken, white rice, a small side salad, and of course bread.

The villager then peered across at what was on Yakut's plate, which was different. There was a small strip of salmon then a large salad that was covered by peanuts. That in turn made her extremely curious as to why Yakut's meal was different over hers.

"Why the different meal?"

The apprentice shaman briefly tried to understand what Xena was asking then she realized what she'd meant. "Well this is the diet that a two-spirit eats."

"Two-spirit?"

Yakut grinned at Xena's confusion and curiosity. "A two-spirit is basically a very powerful shaman. It takes so many seasons to become one… if it is even possible."

"Possible? Why wouldn't it be?"

"Some shaman's spirits are not… strong enough to become a two-spirit." Yakut's lips pressed tightly together. "They are extremely rare but every shaman usually goes through the training to see if they are one."
"What are the various things you have to do?"

"Well other than this diet. There are certain things in the spirit world I must try to accomplish. If I cannot then that'll show I am not a two-spirit."

Xena slightly grinned. "Do you think you are?"

Yakut quietly chuckled and shrugged. "It is too early to tell really."

"Hmmm. Xena's grin slipped away as she decided to start eating her dinner.

The two friends remain quiet while they slowly ate. They both were extremely worn out from their past couple of days endeavor. Yakut was looking forward to relaxing tomorrow but she could only wonder how many candle-marks that would last before the queen would want to see her. She also figured that Xena would be very busy with discussing things with the queen. If it was one thing about Queen Cyane, it was that she was extremely thorough and precise and Yakut admired that.

After they ate, they returned their dishes to Teah then left the quiet food hut.

When Yakut stepped outside next to Xena, she said, "Normally it is pretty loud and busy in there when everybody is around."

"Hmmm. Guess with this battle...." Xena trailed off in after thought.

"The army should return soon actually." The apprentice shaman considered that realization. "We better hurry long before they do because when they show up there's more chaos here than in the battle."

The villager actually laughed full heartedly at Yakut's joke. "Lead the way."

Yakut nodded then started the tour with right where they were standing. "Of course this is the food hut but if you...." She turned around and stepped backwards and Xena followed her. "If you look at this portion of the village you'll see that this is all of the various departments in the Nation." Yakut pointed far off to her left. "That is mainly the entire army department... training fields, stables, smith hut, armory, and so on." Yakut then pointed directly ahead. "This portion is more like administration such as the council office, the queen's office, the healer's, the emissary's office, the food hut, and so on." Finally she pointed far off to her right. "That section of the Nation is really the agricultural area with the farms, gardens, livestock, and granaries."

Xena now spun around as Yakut did the same.

"All of this part of the Nation is housing plus the bathhouse, which is centered in the middle of the housing." Yakut grinned. "Naturally."

Xena smirked back.

Yakut then turned a little to her left and dropped her arms back to her side. "Then at the center of the entire Nation is the temple of Artemis."
Xena remained silent while she stared at the well fire-lit temple. She realized that it was the tallest building in the Nation. The temple was the center piece of the Nation.

"I will show you a little bit of administration area because I suspect you'll be there tomorrow," Yakut started on her way past the food hut and towards the administration portion of the village. After a little bit, she finally came to a stop in front of a large building. "This is the administration building, which includes offices for every council member, the queen, and the emissary. Also there is the council meeting room here too."

Xena only nodded then Yakut started back towards the housing area of the village.

"It's a bit pointless to show you much more since its night right now. I'm sure somebody will tour you around tomorrow to give you a better idea." Yakut then glanced over at her friend. "However we have to stop in the temple. Alti has requested to see you."

The villager's reaction was to raise an eyebrow. She felt a small charge of worry yet she was quite curious about the shaman's own curiosity in meeting her. When they arrived at the temple doors, Yakut opened it for her and she entered first.

The apprentice shaman silently closed the one of the two heavy wood doors. She shifted to Xena's side but was scanning the candle lit temple for her teacher. Her eyes then finally rested on the door tucked up on the left side of the alter floor. She faintly smiled when it opened and her mentor stepped out.

Alti stepped down from the alter floor and glided down the aisle between the kneeling pads. Her dark smile grew as she came closer to the pair.

Yakut also noticed that her teacher's full focus rested on Xena only. She also couldn't help sensing that Alti was charged with energy by Xena's mere presence. This sent a brutal chill down the young woman's back.

"I am the shaman of the Nation. Alti."

Xena's head was tilted to one side but she didn't hesitate to dip her head in respect. She rarely showed her own respect but for some reason this shaman required it. When she lifted her head again, she was caught by Alti's dark yet glowing eyes. "I'm Xena of Amphipolis."

"I know." Alti's dark smile suddenly appeared at Xena's confused expression. "I am a shaman," she reminded.

"Of course," agreed Xena.

Alti slipped her hands between the folds of her light leather coat. "Do you plan to stay long?"

Xena partially grin. "That depends."

"I see," murmured the shaman. "Well I am sure the queen would like it if you did."
She then had her knowing smirk on her face. "I would like that."

The villager partially bowed her head again for her answer.

Alti then looked at her student. "Thank you for bringing Xena by, Yakut."

Yakut mimicked her friend's earlier action. When she looked up at the shaman again, she said, "It's the least I could do considering your support in saving us."

"Yes," cut in Xena, "thank you."

Alti was smiling at the pair. "I would never hesitate to protect a kin or…." She gazed upon Xena. "One in need of help." She then quickly lost her smile. "You two should rest. I would imagine it was a trying experience."

"It was," softly agree Yakut. "Goodnight, master and thank you again."

Xena also dipped her in thanks then she started for the door with Yakut.

The apprentice shaman was already out the door with Xena on her heels but she heard Alti calling back to Xena.

"Be sure to stop by tomorrow, Xena. I would like to know more."

The villager merely gazed back and after a brief nod, she silently exited the temple.

Alti's dark smile returned but it went more dangerous than normal. In her lowest voice she whispered, "You will be mine."

Xena was walking towards her hut. She'd just said goodnight to Yakut and now she was feeling pretty exhausted. She realized that an extremely soft bed was awaiting her and that seemed to make her sleepier. Just as she made it to her hut's door, she thought she heard a loud trumpet of noise coming from the gates. That forced her to turn around and she noticed a gentle glow in the direction of the gates that was marching into the village. She knew then that the Amazon army had returned from battle with her army. That made her knowing grin form and she kept from chuckling as she entered her hut. She decided her plan was beyond sleeping with the enemy, it was living with the enemy. Her enemy would train her, teach her, and eventually fund her beyond her wildest dreams.

It wasn't until the mid morning that Xena awoke by the tapping on her door. She'd quickly sat up, pushed her distorted hair back, and straightened out her brown skirt after standing up. When she opened the door, there were two Amazons waiting for her. She recognized Yakut but not the Amazon behind her yet she let them into the hut.

Yakut softly smiled at the fact her friend had been sleeping so well. "A good night's rest?"

"Very," murmured Xena in a scratchy voice.
Yakut nodded. "I'm sorry to wake you up." She partially turned and held out her hand to the stranger. "Xena, this is Thaddea. Thaddea is in the army department, specifically under the weapons master. She is a junior grade weapons master."

Thaddea stepped forward and held out her arm. "Soon to be a senior grade." Suddenly she smiled.

Xena grinned at the Amazon's tenacity. "Nice to meet you."

"You as well," agreed the junior weapons master. "And welcome to the Nation."

The villager bowed her head.

"Thaddea will be your guide today. She will be showing you around the village."
Yakut paused but a brief sigh escaped her. "I will be stuck in a meeting most of the day."

"Meeting?" questioned Xena.

"Yes." The apprentice shaman folded her arms over her chest. "I have to account for myself from when I was kidnapped until I was brought back here." After Xena nodded, Yakut took a faint step back. "Thaddea and I will let you get ready. Thaddea will be waiting outside for you. Hopefully I will see you later this evening." She then turned and simultaneously signaled for Thaddea to follow her out.

"Good luck today, Yakut," called Xena.

The apprentice shaman glanced back at her friend and smiled.

Xena, for once, actually smiled back then she turned away. As she went into the washroom, she heard the hut door close. It wasn't long before she was cleaned up and ready to begin her day. When she met Thaddea outside of the hut, the first thing she learned was that she would meet the queen this morning. The queen's office was their first stop.

When they were at the administration hut, Thaddea led Xena inside and took her to the queen's office. Thaddea knocked and after the queen's order to enter, she opened the door but stepped aside.

Xena understood to enter first and once she was inside, Thaddea stepped back out and closed the door.

Xena stared down at the sitting queen behind the large oak desk. She put her hands behind her back and acted calm even though she was faintly nervous. She didn't even understand why she was nervous at all.

Finally the queen finished writing in a scroll and lifted her head. Her rich green eyes locked on Xena and she stood up. Slowly she came around her desk then she held out her arm to the younger woman. Welcome to my Nation, Xena."

Xena took the queen's arm and briskly shook it.
After the shake, the queen put her hands behind her back and remained standing before the outsider. "I am Queen Cyane."

Cyane, Xena repeated in her head. She rolled the name over in her mind, tasted it, and hungered for it again. "Thank you for everything, Queen Cyane."

Cyane offered a partial smile. "Any friendly outsiders are welcome to our Nation. And we take it upon ourselves to help any that require help."

"So I have been lucky enough to experience. I am grateful and in debt."

Cyane shook her head. "There is no debt. Besides I have a feeling you were an asset to my young apprentice shaman."

"I believe she was more my asset though."

"Perhaps." Cyane tilted her head a bit. "Regardless, Yakut is particular about her friends. It seems as if she's selected you as one of the few."

"I see," whispered the villager.

The queen suddenly turned around and went behind her desk. She sat down then spoke again. "You are welcome here as long as you see fit. You may return to Amphipolis or you are welcomed to join my Nation."

Xena's interest perked up at the insight about the offer. "Joining the Nation?"

"Yes," replied Cyane, "become an Amazon." She noted the instant curiosity that the woman had for joining. "There have been many, like you, that have stayed in the Nation then eventually joined for various reasons."

"Such as?"

Cyane's lips pulled with a warm smile. "Opportunity, a new life, new experiences, a better way of life, and in some cases to even escape a previous life." Her faint smile grew more. "I believe it is what makes this Nation so diverse."

Xena considered Yakut's story about the priestess and shaman and how that's reshaped the Nation today. She couldn't argue with Cyane's wise words. "I believe so."

"Well you have sufficient time to decide your choice. You have options, Xena." The queen then heard Thaddea opening the door once more. "Thaddea will be showing you around the Nation. It will give you a better understanding what this Nation is and who an Amazon is. It will undoubtedly help in your future decision."

"It will," agreed Xena. "Thank you."

Queen Cyane smiled then nodded at Thaddea.

Xena understood and quietly left with her guide behind her. When they were outside
of the hut, she asked, "Where to first?"

"Well we will start where you started last night." Thaddea suddenly grinned. "The food hut."

Xena grinned back and her stomach quietly growled in agreement. It wasn't long before the pair were in the food hut and feasting on eggs, fruit, and bread for the morning. Afterwards, Thaddea began the long tour around the Nation and she first started with the easy part. The housing.

Thaddea took Xena to the bathing hut where she showed Xena how everything worked there. Xena noticed much of it was burrowed from Roman concepts of a large bathing pool in the middle of the enclosed hut. Then there were a few rooms that had sitting space but the rooms were filled with steam. Those were the essential steam rooms of the bathing hut.

Thaddea explained to Xena how each Amazon must conduct themselves in the bathing house. When an Amazon first entered the main entrance there was a changing room. There they could drop off their clean clothes, if any, then change, pick up a clean towel, and then would go into the bathing pool. Afterwards, the Amazon had the choice of returning to the changing room to dry off and get clothed or they could enter a steam room.

After Thaddea showed and explained everything, Xena grew quite interested in what provided the water for the bathing house. Thaddea went into the basic explanation that an underground water supply was directed into the village many lifetimes ago from the Nestus River. The water flow was directed past the agricultural department of the village then rerouted to the bathing house. The backside of the bathing house then had a gigantic internal fireplace that warmed the water for the bathing pool and the steam was emitted through the steam rooms.

Finally, Xena and Thaddea were trekking across the village towards the army sector of the Nation. Xena determined it was quite a large chunk of the Nation, which she actually admired. She was extremely intrigued to learn the in's and out's of the Amazon army. This was the part of the tour that she made the most mental notes.

"The army really has two commanders. It's between the queen and the stratègos but essentially it is the stratègos that runs the army."

Xena slowly grinned. "And the queen runs the stratègos."

Thaddea laughed and nodded. "That's pretty much how it goes. The stratègos really advises the queen how to fight the battles. The queen can also leave it in the stratègos's hands to fight the battles if she wishes to do so. It depends on the situation and the queen… also the stratègos."

"Had the queen and the stratègos ever disagreed?"

Thaddea's first response was a sigh. "Thankfully not in my lifetime, no but it does happen."
"I take it the council intervenes then?"

The Amazon briefly gazed at the outsider. When she turned her head away, she nodded. "In an extreme case, yes." She came to a halt in front of a fair size hut that seemed like an office. "The stratègos is Commander Lyda. We'll see if she's in or not." Taking a step ahead, Thaddea gently knocked on the door and when heard an order to enter, she did so.

Xena followed her in and her gaze rested upon a fiery redhead woman behind a desk.

Thaddea took a spot slightly forward of Xena and her hands went behind her back, her back ridged. "Commander Lyda."

The stratègos lowered her quill then stood up to her amazing height. "Thaddea."

"I'm showing our visitor around the Nation. This is Xena."

Commander Lyda was able to reach across her desk to shake arms with Xena.

Xena figured Lyda had to be at least match Xena's height and maybe even slightly taller. "Thank you for the rescue last night," politely spoke the villager.

The stratègos faintly smiled and nodded her head. "The rescue was done by my two best warriors." Then suddenly she had an amused grin. "The attack was done by me however."

Xena returned the grin because of the joke. "I take it the battle was a success?"

"Yes." Commander Lyda held out her right hand to her scroll on her desk. "Finishing up the report as a matter of fact." Then her grin went very distant, her more serious manner back. "I take it the queen has offered you to stay or leave the Nation…?"

"Yes she has," agreed Xena.

"Well if you wish to stay in the Nation, I am always in need of another warrior."

Xena contained her knowing grin. "I shall consider it, commander."

The stratègos merely dipped her head. She changed her focus to Thaddea. "Be sure to show Xena around the army grounds."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Sorry to make this short." Commander Lyda offered another smile. "I need to finish up here."

"Of course. Thank you again." Xena turned as Thaddea did but this time Xena left last.

Thaddea suddenly grinned at the younger woman. "If I did the tour that the stratègos had in mind, we'd never make it out of the army grounds until next season."
Xena quietly laughed but said nothing. Instead she followed behind Thaddea as the long day tour continued. The tour didn't come to a final stop until they were at the temple of the Nation centered in the village. Thaddea spoke about how Artemis was the focus of the Amazon religion and any other god was disregarded. She then went into the ancient tale about how the shaman joined the village and the priestess and shaman merged into today's new shaman. But what Thaddea had to say after this was what caught Xena's attention more than anything else.

"This shaman… Alti seems to be almost separate from the rest of the Nation."

Xena tore away from the temple and stared at the Amazon.

Thaddea stopped staring at the temple and now looked at the outsider. "It's hard to explain but all of our past priestess and shamans were tied into the village. They were an… extension of the Nation almost. Alti though…." She shook her head and her expression darkened. "Alti is something else… something that no Amazon is comfortable with."

The villager slowly lifted her right eyebrow. "Something evil?"

"Maybe so," whispered Thaddea. "Queen Cyane tries to keep peace with Alti because she knows the Nation must have some figure for the religion. I think though if she had a chance to rid of Alti she would take it."

"That would cause quite a stir," murmured Xena.

The Amazon grunted. "It would but I don't think the Nation would mind so much as long as there's a replacement."

Suddenly Yakut's name sprung to life in Xena's mind.

"The queen and many of the Amazons believe that Alti has strayed too far into the ways of a shaman."

Xena now folded her arms over her chest as she considered what Thaddea was saying. "She's been disregarding Artemis."

"Sadly, yes." Thaddea shook her head, seeming to shake off the thoughts in her mind. "Well I think I've shown you everything. Is there anything else you need to know?"

Xena had a thin smile. "No, I think you covered it pretty well, Thaddea. Thank you."

"It was a pleasure." The Amazon twisted around and gauged the sun. "I'd say it'll be about another candlemark or so before dinner." She focused back on Xena. "Might I suggest taking some time to take advantage of the bathing hut."

The villager's wide grin spread across her face at the suggestion. "That is a suggestion."

Thaddea chuckled and gently touched the woman's arm. "Enjoy. I will see you later.
"Bye, Thaddea." Xena briefly watched the Amazon walk off then she herself headed for her hut.

Xena took a few moments to relax in her hut. Then she decided she liked Thaddea's suggestion about the bathing hut. So gathered herself and left the hut for the bathing hut. Xena didn't spend much time at the bathing hut but just enough to clean herself and get dried off. Once she was back in her attire, she estimated it would be close to dinner time. She'd started her short trip to the food hut where she found many other Amazons gathering. She didn't recognize any of them but then she heard her name being called by a familiar voice.

Yakut had a warm smile as she cut into the food line next to her friend. "How'd your day go?"

Xena unknowingly had a smile at seeing her friend. "It went well. I have a good lay of the Nation."

"I'm sure you do." The apprentice shaman had a teasing grin. "Thaddea can do a thorough job."

"That she does," agreed the villager. "How'd everything go for you?"

Yakut sighed, her shoulders slightly slumped now. "It was grueling but not as bad as it could have been. I had to recite my report three times over."

Xena lifted an eyebrow.

"One to the queen, one to the stratègos, and one to the council."

Xena's face slightly wrinkled at the prospect at having to answer to three different people. She certainly enjoyed only answering to herself in her army.

"Tomorrow," continued Yakut, "I return to my lessons with Alti." She took several steps ahead with Xena as the line shifted forward.

"When do you become shaman?" pried Xena.

Yakut slightly shook her head but she didn't answer until she unbuttoned her light weight hide jacket. "It's hard to say. I will be done training long before it'll be time for Alti to retire."

"Then why the rush to get you trained?"

The apprentice shaman shook her head. "I'm not sure, honestly. The queen instructed Alti to begin training for a new shaman so here I am."

"How were you even selected?"

The Amazon took a deep breath as she went into her explanation. "Whoever wishes to
become a shaman, when the opening occurs, may try. I was one of eight that applied for the position. Every Amazon is tested harshly to see if they can be a true shaman. When it is finally narrowed down to one then that Amazon becomes an apprentice."

"What can the testing entail?"

"From very simple things such as stating who the Amazons worship to extremely hard things like memorizing every Amazon's name and face."

Xena suddenly grinned at the mental image of a younger Yakut going through every Amazon to know their name.

"One thing is for sure though; the shaman has to be as good of a public speaker as the queen does."


The apprentice shaman sighed yet she smirked up at her friend. "Politics and faith."

The pair finally made it to the head of the line and they received their meal for the night. They then found a seat beside Thaddea, whom been ahead of them. The small group quietly ate until near the end when Thaddea broke the silence first.

"You two are coming to the celebration tonight, right?"

Xena paused in finishing her meal.

Yakut let out a quiet but audible groan. "I forgot about that."

"Come on," interjected Thaddea, "you two have to be there after saving your butts."

"There goes my early bed time," grumbled the apprentice shaman.

Thaddea glared across the table at Yakut. "You can go to bed early tomorrow night, Yakut."

Yakut said nothing and merely filled her mouth with fish not to say anything.

Thaddea quickly looked at next prey. "You're bringing her with you, Xena."

The outsider inwardly sighed yet she turned her head to Yakut next to her.

Yakut had been slowly chewing on her food so her mouth was still too full. She just looked away from her friend.

Xena chuckled then smiled at Thaddea. "I will. Promise."

Suddenly there was a loud groan from Yakut.

Then Xena almost jumped from her seat on the bench when Yakut banged their knees together. However true to Xena's word, Yakut and Xena were following Thaddea to
the celebration in the army grounds. When they arrived, there was a gigantic bond fire in the center of the celebration area. There were many Amazons dancing around the fire and doing some ritual dance that Xena wasn't familiar with at all. The rest of the Amazons were mingling around or watching the dance but everybody generally seemed to be bunched up into social groups. That was particularly evident when Xena spotted the stratègos standing beside the polemarchos and queen.

"Lets find something to drink then sit down," suggested Thaddea. She led them to a large table where they were serving mugs of wine. Everybody picked up a mug then they were finally able to find an open log just outside the ritual dance circle.

Xena was squished between both Amazons, her space slightly invaded yet she tried to ignore it. She took a long drink of the wine and was actually stunned to realize how sweet it was.

"Good huh?" teased Thaddea.

Xena partially grinned then nodded. She then looked to Yakut. "What is the dance they're doing?"

"It's a dance to Artemis to thank her for a successful battle. It's called the victoria dance." Yakut lifted her mug and took a quick drink then when the mug was back in her lap, she quietly added, "It's a beautiful dance really."

The villager returned her attention to the dancers and watched them go around the fire. She admired every Amazon's movement and flow with the dance; she had to agree with Yakut. She was about to ask another question but then a flickering shadow seemed to fall over them.

Yakut peered up and it seemed as if a mask suddenly fell over her features. "Shaman." She quickly stood up and bowed to her teacher.

"Yakut."

Yakut straightened back up and noticed that her teacher had on her entire shaman attire. The large antlers seemed to make Alti even taller than she normal was on her own. "Are you speaking tonight?"

"I am but I have a request."

The apprentice shaman nodded even though she already knew what Alti would ask of her.

"I would like you to do the opening, Yakut. You need the practice."

"Of course, shaman." Yakut bent down and lowered her mug to next to Xena. "When is it?"

Alti glanced over at the dancing Amazons then back at her student. "After this dance. The queen and the stratègos are on the other side… they're waiting for you."
Yakut swallowed. "I'll go over now."

"Good. Thank you, Yakut." Alti's head slowly rotated as she watched her apprentice hurry across the celebration grounds. When she was sure that Yakut was out of earshot, she glimpsed down at the outsider. "Is there room?"

"Of course."

Thaddea quickly understood what Alti wished and she made no hesitation to tap Xena's leg in farewell then she got up to leave.

Alti became comfortable in her spot next to Xena. She felt some excitement flow over her just from the mere presence of Xena near her. "Has Yakut told you what a shaman is?"

"More or less," answered Xena. She wasn't looking at Alti and instead she stared across at the fire and dancers.

"A shaman can have very great powers or very weak ones." Alti bent forward, her elbows resting on her knees. "I am the first shaman in this Nation to have great powers."

Xena turned her head and lifted an eyebrow.

Alti offered a dark grin. "Why do you think this Nation fears me?"

Xena bit her inner lip from saying some smart remark about how big Alti's antler hat was related to everybody's fears. Instead she remained quiet and listening.

The shaman turned her head away. She too was quiet for awhile and when Xena turned her head away then did she quietly whispered, "I know who you really are, Xena… Warrior Princess." When Xena's head quickly shot around, Alti smiled ruthlessly then suddenly stood up and walked off.

Xena's body was tense but her eyes were locked on the dark shaman. As Alti started around the fire, she gazed back at Xena with a knowing, dark grin. Xena's natural reaction was her eyes narrowing and all of her defenses heightened. She wasn't fearful that the shaman had found her out but instead she was highly curious as to what Alti would want from her. She knew for a fact that Alti would want something otherwise Alti would have already exposed her to the queen. She decided this would prove very interesting and maybe useful.

Suddenly Yakut's normally gentle voice boomed through the celebration and quieted all of the Amazons. Yakut stood proud on a small dais that rose above the fire pit. She waited for every Amazon to bow to her briefly then she began her opening speech.

Xena was fairly impressed at Yakut's ability to speak in public. She knew it wasn't any easy task to speak among so many and on short notice. After Yakut was finished, she noticed that Thaddea took her seat back at Xena's side.

"She's amazing, isn't she?"
"Yakut?" Xena dimly smiled. "She is."

Thaddea was going to ask about Alti but didn't when Alti herself appeared on the dais. Instead she paid attention to Alti's flowing words about the battle against Borias and the army's continued success. When the entire presentation was finished, Thaddea leaned closer to Xena and quietly asked, "What did Alti have to say?"

"Nothing much beyond the fact she was hoping I would stay in the Nation," lied Xena.

"And have you thought about it?"

Xena nodded. "I have thought about it… but I haven't decided."

Thaddea slowly nodded. "It's a tough choice." Her lips were sealed together in thought. "Do you have family left in Amphipolis?"

The villager's head dropped slightly but when she looked up again, she replied, "No."

Thaddea's heart dropped for the young woman. "That is sometimes the final factor in an outsider's choice to become an Amazon." Her head tilted a little. "They realize they can have a family here… a new one or better one."

A faint sigh escaped Xena. "I kind of thought so."

Thaddea patted Xena's closest knee. "Just some thoughts."

"Thank you," whispered Xena. Her attention though was drawn to Yakut when Yakut arrived back.

"Nice job, Yakut," complimented Thaddea.

Yakut groaned as she flopped back in her spot on Xena's right side. "Thanks. I was a little nervous."

The villager gave a warm smile to Yakut and whispered, "I couldn't even tell."

The apprentice shaman started to blush and Xena barely picked it out because of the fire's red glow. "Thank you," she shyly responded.

Yakut's reaction only made Xena smile and as Xena thought about Yakut's reaction more, it seemed to warm her. There was something in Yakut's mannerism that reminded her so much of Gabrielle, maybe too much. It made her want to get closer to Yakut as much as want to destroy Yakut and Xena didn't like those feelings at all.

The small group of friends remained on the log for another half of a candlemark. They occasionally spoke but for the most part Xena and Yakut were fairly tired and warned down. Yakut was especially tired because of her thoughts about continuing classes with Alti tomorrow. If it was one thing about Alti's classes, it was that they were mentally draining.
So after some more consideration about her long week ahead, Yakut rose up from her
seat. "I think I may head off, you two."

Xena stretched her legs out then stood up. "I think I'll follow you."

Thaddea just shook her head and laughed. "And I'm the older one."

Yakut grunted at her friend. "Enjoy it, Thaddea."

Thaddea laughed at the apprentice shaman. "Goodnight, Yakut." She then smiled up
at Xena. "Goodnight, my friend."

"Goodnight, Thaddea."

Xena and Yakut left Thaddea and their mugs by the log and they were slowly trekking
back to the huts. They were both very silent yet there was some unknown tension
between them. It was Yakut that revealed the unexplainable tension.

"What did you and Alti talk about?"

The villager shrugged. "She was asking if I was staying in the Nation long."

The apprentice shaman said nothing. She just processed the information and
compared it to what she saw when she was watching the pair talk from a distance.
And she knew for a fact what Xena was telling her wasn't adding up to what she saw.
"She didn't say anything… that she shouldn't have?"

Xena didn't look at Yakut while she spoke. Her eyes affixed to the huts far ahead.
"Not really. She was just asking if I'd stay and whether I wanted to be an Amazon."
She paused and licked her lips. "She just knew that I'd lost my family. It kinda…
surprised me."

"I see," whispered Yakut. She studied her feet moving over the gravel, her mind more
focused then her vision. "Alti likes to… surprise people I've come to notice."

The villager let out a soft chuckle. "I gather so." She and Yakut then came to a sudden
stop on the outskirts of the housing huts.

"Listen Xena, please be careful with Alti." Yakut had her right hand gently grasping
her friend's left bicep. "I have not spoken this to anybody but I will tell you this...."
Yakut stopped and searched Xena's distant eyes. "Alti is evil… very evil. The type of
evil that there's no going back from."

Xena remained cool and relaxed her expression neutral. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because of what I know… because of what I see and even been taught." Yakut
stepped closer to her friend, squeezed her arm, and whispered, "I know she is evil."
Finally she released her hold but her concerned green eyes remained locked on Xena.
"Be careful."

After a moment, Xena nodded her agreement then whispered, "I will be."
"Thank you." Yakut took a step back, away from Xena's space. "I must get some rest. Sleep well tonight, Xena."

"You too, Yakut." The villager watched her young shaman friend head off towards her hut. Xena shook her head then turned in the direction of her guest hut. When she arrived inside, she was taken aback by the tall presence waiting for her in the hut. She wasn't surprised thought who it was waiting. "Alti," she darkly greeted.

The shaman's wide grin suddenly appeared and she waved her left hand.

Suddenly all the candles in the hut lit up and revealed them both to each other.

"I thought we could talk," explained the shaman.

Xena smirked and walked around the shaman until she was close to the washroom door. "And I'm sure you have plenty to say." She then disappeared into the washroom.

"As much as you have to tell me, Xeeena."

The villager dried her face off after washing it then she placed the towel back beside the washbasin. She came out of the washroom and held out her hand to the two chairs by the small table next to the fireplace. "Perhaps we should sit."

"I think so." The shaman took a chair beside the younger woman.

Xena tilted her head and asked, "How did you know?"

"I am a shaman," reminded Alti. "I traced your spirit's trail so far in this lifetime." Her eyes were suddenly growing from a dark brown into a black. "I see you have recently returned from Chin."

"I see you have recently returned from Chin."

"Suddenly her grin lit her face. "From an unsuccessful campaign."

"No campaign is completely unsuccessful." This caused Alti to laugh and Xena's annoyance slightly peeked.

"Your campaigns could do with help… especially minus your partner, Borias."

The warlord's hungry darkness completely resurfaced at this point. "I need him, for now." Her amused expression appeared. "Besides, I rather keep my enemies close to me so I can watch them better."

"Then kill them easier," whispered Alti. She then suddenly stood up and glided across the room, she went to the window. "And now you plan to take this Amazon Nation by becoming it?"

"Something along those lines."

The dark shaman spun around and leaned against the windowsill. "You won't succeed, Xena."
"And how do you see that, shaman?" Xena was casually leaned back in her chair, legs crossed, and a smirk on her face.

"Cyane is too powerful for you." The shaman slowly approached Xena again. "You cannot defeat her… alone."

"Then what do you suggest?"

Alti stood tall over the warlord, staring down at her. "That you'll need my help."

Xena's right eyebrow instantly arched. "I am curious… what do you have against Cyane?"

"Nothing," simply stated the shaman. "She's simply a wrinkle in my plans."

The Warrior Princess considered the shaman's words and the perspectives she'd been told from her friends. Her eyes were glazed over in thoughts and ideas. "And what do you offer me, Alti?"

"Everything," whispered Alti. She stepped forward then crouched down to Xena's level. "You want to know what these Amazons are. I know who your friend Lao Ma is; her powers come from denial, from self-sacrifice, from the Light. That's not for people like you and me. I want to tap into the heart of darkness, the sheer naked will behind all cravings, hatred, and violence. I will become the face of death, destroying not only a person's body but their soul." Alti suddenly grabbed Xena's hands from her lap and clutched them tightly. "Help me, and I'll make you the Destroyer of Nations."

A powerful charge surged through Xena's hands, up her arms, and exploded within her body. The energy was so strong and her dark hunger ravaged it. She suddenly felt the addiction to want that same energy over and over again and it was the taste of power through fear. "I think we can work that out," whispered the power hungry warlord.

Xena and Alti continued to speak for awhile longer. Then Alti started for the hut's door and with the utmost satisfied thoughts in her mind for the future.

Yakut was halfway across the housing hut. Her fast march was taking her directly for Xena's hut because something in the pit of her stomach told her things were off balance now. She had Xena's hut in her view but she came to a dead stop when the door swung open. Her stomach dropped and that sensation made her quickly duck behind another hut, her head poking around the corner.

The apprentice shaman's heart beat wildly when Alti's tall form drifted out of Xena's hut. Her stomach pitched at all the racing thoughts in her mind. She watched as Alti started away from Xena's hut then for some reason Alti stopped in her tracks.

Yakut hunched down deeper but Alti's head turned in her direction. Yakut quickly knew what was happening and her right hand slid in between her leather coat. Her hand covered her racing heart and she quickly whispered a few words of incantation. Her heartbeat suddenly stopped dead.
Alti didn't move for several of her heartbeats then she quickly spun off in her previous direction. Her walk was brisk.

Yakut quickly whispered the incantation in reverse with the last of her breath. Suddenly her heart pounded loudly in her chest and it would take awhile for it to slow down. She stood up slowly, her left hand rested on the corner of the hut she'd been against. She now stared across the distance to Xena's hut and she wondered whether she should approach Xena about what Alti wanted. After considering it, Yakut shook her head and slowly walked back to her hut. Her mind though was racing faster than her earlier pulse; she was fearful of what rested a head.

The leaves on all the trees had long turned and were almost finished falling to the ground. It'd been half of a moon's cycle since Xena of Amphipolis had arrived in the Amazon Nation. Yesterday had been one of the biggest ceremonies for the Amazon Nation as they welcomed a new Amazon to their Nation.

Xena had been standing between the shaman and Queen Cyane, her head slightly dipped down.

Queen Cyane was looking over her Nation of followers and her voice broadcasted profoundly. "By the sun's rise, we will have welcomed a new Amazon to our Nation, Xena." She then faced Xena. "Xena, you have been given a place among the Amazon Nation. Before Artemis, do you promise to protect and aide the Amazon Nation?"

Xena bowed her head deeper but proudly announced, "I swear before Artemis that I will serve my Nation will all of my strength."

Cyane felt a thin smile touch her lips and she signaled Alti.

The shaman turned to her right and carefully picked up the bronze colored feather that rested in Yakut's cupped hands. She then turned towards the Nation and she held up the bronze feather towards the skies. "Artemis, Xena has come to us and joins your Nation of honored female worries. Bless her spirit and let her become one with you." She then lowered the feather and brought it just above Xena's bent head.

The queen then reached up and clasped the feather as well. "Artemis, Xena has taken the caste of Amazon. She has promised to serve your Nation with all of her strength and honor that you so desire. Please guide her always even through the darkest moments." Cyane then faintly nodded to Alti. She released the feather then gathered a lock of hair on the left side of Xena's bent head.

Alti had already brought the feather down beside the lock of hair. She'd extracted a thin strip of leather from her jacket pocket. She first threaded the leather cord through the stem of the feather then neatly tied the feather to the lock of hair.

Xena felt them release her hair and suddenly there was a new weight. She straightened up to her full height.

The shaman faced the Amazons. Queen Cyane faced her Amazons. Then together,
they called out, "Welcome Xena to our Nation!"

There was a sudden loud up roar as every Amazon welcomed their new fellow Amazon.

Cyane grasped Xena's right shoulder and whispered, "Join your Nation, Xena."

Xena smiled, nodded, and then quietly turned around to leave the dais. As she passed by Yakut, she winked to the apprentice shaman.

Yakut offered a proud smile as her friend went by.

Last night's event of Amazon caste had worn Xena out and she'd woken up tired this morning. She'd just come out of the washroom and was going over to her bed. On the foot of her bed, she'd laid out her new leathers that the Nation had provided with her upon taking her Amazon caste. She had to admit she actually liked the attire and was surprised she had any choice at all. She'd also been given a few night shifts, twenty dinars, and moved to a permanent hut that was now hers.

Xena stared at her attire and tried to imagine being a warlord wearing this outfit, she was slightly amused. Her Amazon attire consisted of a dark brown skirt that many of the Amazons wore. Then at the top of the skirt was a thick leather belt with various bronze designs attached to it. Her top was separate and would leave her stomach exposed but the top was a glossy, smooth leather with a wave design that started at the sides and waved out to the front. Finally she had sturdy boots, two pairs of matching design gauntlets, and one arm band. Luckily, she was also given a warm leather coat that was so long it stopped just at her ankles but it was sufficiently warm with wool lining.

Xena finally shifted out of her thoughts about the Amazon Nation and started getting ready for her day. She was due at the weapons master's hut a candlemark after sunrise. After hastily putting her leathers on, she then grabbed her coat that was hanging off the back of her desk chair. She went first to the Mess Hut to have a fast breakfast and she noticed while she was eating that many Amazons were studying her as they passed her. She knew they were all memorizing her body since it was more clearly exposed and complimented by her outfit unlike the earlier peasant clothes.

"My, don't we look good in that?" teased a familiar voice.

Xena arched an eyebrow at her friend. "Thaddea."

Thaddea softly laughed and sat down beside the young woman. "I see you're getting plenty of looks too."

"Mmmm," mildly agreed the Amazon.

Thaddea patted Xena's closest leg. "It'll stop… sometime."

"Not if they're smart," cut in a deep voice.

Both Xena and Thaddea turned their heads to the newcomer.
Thaddea instantly smiled warmly. "Good morning, Syrinx."

Syrinx smiled back and took a seat from across the pair. "How are you two?"

"I'm good," answered Thaddea.

Xena nodded her head.

Syrinx smirked at the new Amazon. "Still waking up?"

Xena grunted and finally a grin appeared. "Still recovering too."

Syrinx laughed. "I can imagine."

Xena had met Syrinx many days ago and had come to really like Syrinx for her sarcastic humor. Syrinx was also a little bold, having introduced herself to Xena without needing anybody else to do so.

"So are you ready for your big day?" inquired Syrinx. "It won't be like growing crops."

"Hmmm." Xena slightly grinned at her new friend. "How different can it be to swing a sword from swinging a reaper?"

Thaddea and Syrinx looked at each other and stared.

"I think you will find out, Xena," teased Thaddea.

The new Amazon shrugged. "I'm sure."

"Have you met the weapons master?" inquired Syrinx.

"No actually. Thaddea and I tried to catch her but... we didn't."

Syrinx chuckled but before she spoke, she finished eating her eggs. "You'll love the weapons master."

Xena had finished her meal and was about to get up but she hesitated. "Who is the weapons master?"

Thaddea studied her friend then answered, "An old horse by the name of Yalenda."

She then suddenly smirked. "If you're lucky, she'll let me train you some."

The new Amazon huffed and finally got up from her spot. "I guess we will see."

"Good luck, Xena," offered Syrinx.

"I'm sure I'll see you there." Thaddea smiled then watched Xena head off.

Syrinx was shaking her head. "She's going to get whipped today. I can tell."
Thaddea quietly laughed then grinned. "And I think it's only because Yalenda and Xena's personalities won't mix."

Syrinx nodded. "Exactly."

Xena quickly trekked down to the weapons master's office and found herself knocking on the door. When she was called in, she found herself standing before a much older woman.

Yalenda did not greet Xena at all, instead she continued with her scrollwork.

Xena remained silent because she knew the weapons master knew of her presence. She figured it already had to be her first test or evaluation from the weapons master.

Yalenda finally finished her scrollwork because she'd set it aside. She lifted her head and stared at the new Amazon. "You're Xena."

Xena only nodded her head.

The weapons master rose up from her chair and as she did so, she made a clear visual inspection of Xena's body. "You must have worked hard on your farm back in Amphipolis."

Xena only arched an eyebrow at the other Amazon. She decided silence in this case would be best until Yalenda actually asked something instead of stating things.

Yalenda came around the oak desk and quietly studied her new student. Her head bobbed a little then she said, "Have you ever used any weapons?"

Xena's eyebrow by this time had lowered but her grin however was in place. "I know a little bit about the sword."

"Interesting." Yalenda started to walk behind Xena but continued to speak. "Where did you learn anything?"

"I had two brothers," answered Xena.

Yalenda chuckled when she came to Xena's other side. "I see." She stopped and her hands went behind her back. "Familiar with a staff?"

"Not particularly," answered the Amazon.

"Then we will start there."

Xena chest slightly puffed up but she held her silence. She wasn't exactly interested in learning the staff but she wasn't in any position to decline.

"Let's begin then." Yalenda turned, opened the door to her office hut, and walked out.

Xena quietly left and followed her new teacher.
Yalenda marched across the grounds until she came to another hut. She went in with Xena on her heels.

When Xena entered it, she quickly realized it was an armory and well stocked one too. Her head was twisting every which way as she did a rough inventory of all the weapons these Amazons had on hand. She was amazed to see pretty much every typical weapon known in these regions right here in this armory. She noted there were predominantly swords, staffs, daggers, and bows and arrows. There were also a decent collection of axes, chobos, broad swords, sais, short swords, maces, and whips.

Yalenda immediately went to the assortment of staffs and ran her hand down several of them until she came to a stop on one particular one. "This one," she murmured and pulled it out of the rack. She gave it a quick spin then she rammed it into the sandy floor in front of Xena. She measured its height against Xena's height and decided it was perfect. She nodded. "This way."

The weapons master and new Amazon trekked across the grounds again and went to an empty sparring field. The one just adjacent from theirs was loaded with young teen Amazons in training with staffs.

Xena had briefly watched them in amusement until her teacher caught her attention again.

"Let's see just how fluent you are," stated the weapons master.

Xena inwardly sighed at the weapons master because she knew she was more fluent than ten Amazons put together. She knew these next few moons would be long as she pretended to be an inadequate fighter.

Xena took a heavy breath after just taking a quick moment to tie her hair back. She stepped back twice, next to her teacher, and she stared for a moment at her straw stuff opponent.

Yalenda had her arms crossed over her chest. "I want all of the straw out of that dummy by sunset." She glanced over to her left and stared at the low sun in the horizon. "I'd say you have about half of a candlemark before it gets dark." She grinned. "Don't waste it."

The new Amazon gritted her teeth then suddenly struck out at the dummy with her spinning staff.

Yalenda however moved away from her student and went to the edge of the sparring field. She'd been working with Xena all day after deciding that Xena didn't need much defense training but more offensive training. She'd merely skimmed over defense and jumped right the offensive attacks. It was now almost the end of the day and she figured this last beating up of the dummy would prove interesting. She stood motionless and carefully watched Xena continually beat at the dummy. Yet it wasn't long before she sensed the presence of somebody coming up to her side.
"How is she making out?"

Yalenda turned her head to the queen. "Well."

"You think she'll make a decent warrior?"

The weapons master nodded.

Cyane mimicked Yalenda's composure and studied Xena's various offensive techniques on the dummy. "When did she start this?"

"Only a few moments ago." Yalenda was quiet but she was considering Xena's training today. "She has a good defensive background… almost too good."

"What you mean?" Cyane looked at the weapons master.

"For a villager… she knows a lot."

The queen's head tilted to one side slightly. She didn't have anything to say at first because of somebody else's earlier observations she'd heard. This morning Lena, the master healer, had shown up at her office requesting to have Xena spend some time at the healer's hut. Lena went on repeat the same story that her senior grade healer, Canisa, had told her about Xena and Yakut's injury.

Cyane now found these two observations incredibly curious. She wondered if Xena had previous knowledge and experience about healing and fighting that she was failing to mention, or if it just so happened to be a knack. After some consideration, she studied the weapons master again. "Lena has requested that Xena spend some time in the healer's hut."

Yalenda quickly looked at the queen. "And that is because…?"

"Xena may have a hidden talent with healing."

Yalenda's eyes slightly narrowed and she gazed across at Xena. "Perhaps she's more than just a villager as she tells us."

"Perhaps," quietly agreed the queen.

Then both of the Amazon's attention was caught when Xena managed the dissect the dummy into six pieces. First the arms and legs were thrown apart in different directions on the ground, the body was at Xena's feet, and the head was all that was attached the wood post.

Yalenda said nothing, didn't look at the queen, and only marched off to her student.

"Perhaps," murmured the now worried queen. She turned on her heels and headed back into the main portion of the village. Her stomach felt unsettling while she'd been thinking about Xena and her advanced skills for a villager. She was walking so fast that she didn't even greet any of the Amazons that she passed. She didn't slow down until she appeared at the temple. She quickly entered it and the dark temple glowed
with firelight.

Cyane realized she hadn't been in the temple in half of a moon because she'd been so busy. She certainly hadn't been in the temple in several moons at evening and she hadn't realized how dark it was inside without the sunlight. She shook it off and hurried down the aisle way to the tall figure that awaited her.

Alti bowed her head. "My queen."

"Shaman." The queen's eyes then flickered to the right when the shaman apprentice came out of the side door with her coat in arm.

"My queen," happily greeted Yakut.

"Yakut." Cyane's smile finally appeared.

"Is there anything I can assist you with, Queen Cyane?" asked the shaman.

Cyane's gaze returned to Alti. "I was actually looking for Yakut."

Yakut was surprised but she refrained from outwardly showing it.

"Are you free, Yakut?"

"I believe so." Yakut turned to her teacher.

Alti slowly nodded then said, "We are done for the day."

Cyane saw Yakut was about to question her so she cut off the apprentice shaman first. "I need you to accompany me to my office."

"Of course, my queen."

The Amazon Queen looked at the shaman and offered a smile. "I will see you this evening in the dining hut."

Alti didn't return with a response and only dipped her head.

Cyane turned and departed down the aisle.

Yakut whispered a good evening to her teacher then followed after the queen. When she got out of the temple, she approached the waiting queen. "What is this about?" she softly asked.

"We will discuss it when we get to my office," strictly answered the queen.

The apprentice shaman could only imagine what the queen was so concerned about and she knew it was something. She could tell by the energy vibrating off the queen and see it by how tense she was too. But Yakut was silent and she threw on her soft hide coat as she felt the chill in the cooling air this evening.
When they came to the administration hut, they went in the main entrance and went down to Cyane's office. Yakut was in first and Cyane came in last. After the queen closed the door, she strolled over to her desk, turned around, and leaned against it. Her attention was directly on Yakut. "What do you know about Xena?"

Yakut opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. Yet nothing came forth and she felt stuck, even caught.

"Yakut, if you know something that I don't then you need to tell me." Cyane had her hands on the edge of her desk and slightly leaning against them in support. "I have some concerns."

Yakut licked her lips then carefully questioned, "May I ask what those are?"

The queen mulled over the request but she knew that Yakut was extremely trustworthy. "I am sure you recall your wound that you suffered on your shoulder?"

"Yes," answered the confused Amazon.

"Well Lena reported to me the story about how Xena knew to use salt in your wound."

Yakut's expression was growing tighter and tighter with confusion as the queen spoke.

"I was just at the sparring field, asking Yalenda about Xena's progress. She told me she was surprised to find out that Xena had a strong defensive background."

"She seems quite… skilled," softly spoke Yakut.

"Maybe too skilled," offered the queen. She now straightened up some, her arms folded over her chest. "It only took her a quarter of a candlemark to tear apart the sparring dummy."

Yakut had a surprised expression in response. "That takes most Amazons half of a moon to do."

"I know." Cyane tilted her head to one side. "Is there something I'm missing, Yakut?"

The apprentice shaman's head was down and shaking. "I'm not ever sure myself, my queen."

Cyane sighed and stood up from her desk's edge. She crossed the distance over to the young Amazon and touched her shoulders. "Listen Yakut, I'm here to protect this Nation… your Nation, my Nation." She paused and tilted her head. "Apart of being shaman is that you must do the same and in the process you could lose friends."

Yakut sighed and lifted her head. She studied the queen's soft eyes and the gentle squeeze on her shoulders finally helped her make a decision. "I think I saw something."

Cyane nodded, removed her hands from the apprentice shaman's shoulders, and remained silent.
"Awhile ago, before Xena became an Amazon, you recall the night we celebrated the battle against Borias?"

"Yes, go on."

Yakut sighed and slipped her hands into her coat's pockets. "When I gave the opening speech to the Nation during the celebration, I noticed Alti was talking to Xena. So later that night, after the celebration, I asked Xena what Alti was talking to her about and she basically told me that Alti was curious about whether she was staying in the Nation or not."

"Did you believe that?"

Yakut slightly shrugged. "At first, I sort of did but what changed my mind was what happened later that night."

"Which was?" prompted the Amazon Queen.

"Well about half of a candlemark when I returned to my hut, I suddenly had a bad feeling about something… particularly with Xena. I quickly left my hut and headed to hers; just before I arrived there I spotted Alti leaving her hut."

Cyane suddenly had a dark look. "Did Alti see you?"

"She almost… detected me, yes."

"Do you know what they talked about?"

"I have no idea," confessed Yakut. "I never asked Alti or Xena."

"Hmmmm." The queen's head dipped and she strolled back to her desk again. "Have you noticed anything since?"

"Not really, my queen." The apprentice shaman shifted her weight back and forth between her feet after feeling her legs lightly ache at her. "They may have spoken since then but I haven't seen or heard them do so."

"Do you speak to Xena about Alti?"

"Not since the night of celebration."

Cyane's lips pressed neatly together.

Yakut's hands slipped out of her pockets and she took a partial step forward. "My queen, if I may ask, did Alti ever do a vision on Xena?"

The queen's focus returned to the young Amazon. "Yes, when you two were in Borias's camp."

"Did Alti tell you anything unusually?"
"Not particularly." Cyane went through her memories. "However she did press to have me offer Xena a place as an Amazon."

Yakut folded her arms over her chest as she considered that new information. "I wonder why," she murmured.

"Are you thinking she wanted Xena to join the Nation for a reason?"

"Most likely, yes," agreed the young apprentice shaman. "If it is one thing I've come to see about Alti, it's that she does everything to her own benefit."

Cyane tilted her head to one side. She said nothing as she realized Yakut was still thinking about something. Yet as Cyane reconsidered what little Alti did tell her about Xena from the vision it made her stomach drop. "Yakut?"

The apprentice shaman broke from her deep thoughts and returned her attention to the queen.

"Have you ever done a vision?"

Yakut held her breath for a moment. "No, my queen." She shook her head as her hands fell to her side. "I've… crossed over to the spirit world with Alti's help but never on my own. And she hasn't taught me how to trace a soul but she's told me about it." She paused and studied the queen's grinning features. "Wait… my queen, I can't-"

"You can." The Amazon Queen straightened up tall to her imposing height and neared the young Amazon. When she stood before the small Amazon, she grabbed her arms in a tightening hold. "And you will, Yakut."

"But… I haven't been shown how to… I can't, my queen. It's impossible-"

"To say no," finished the queen. "You will have help though."

Yakut's head tilted to one side in utter confusion then she realized. "Ino?" she whispered.

"Yes, Ino will help you. She's not so old that she can't remember."

"No… she isn't," softly agreed the apprentice shaman. "Ino is sharper than a sword."

"She is." Cyane gave a good squeeze to Yakut's shoulder. "I need you to help me, Yakut. As you know I trust Alti as far as I can throw her."

Yakut softly grunted at the queen's joke.

"I can trust you and I do. I will speak to Ino about helping you and teaching you how to crossover alone."

Yakut took a deep breath in hopes to bring up her courage and confidence. "Yes, my
queen." She gazed directly into the Queen Cyane's rich green eyes. "I will do it."

"Good. I want to know everything about Xena… starting from birth."

"Yes, my queen." Yakut dipped her head, lifted it, and turned to head for the door.

Cyane had a faint smile behind her lips at the apprentice's dedication. "Thank you, Yakut."

Yakut's hand was on the wood handle but she turned back to her queen. "And thank you, my queen… for trusting me." And with that, Yakut silently left the queen's office.

The Amazon Queen felt a sense of security wash over her now that she knew she'd finally find out who Xena was and what secrets she may carry with her. There was something about this woman that plagued Cyane and even just the name haunted her worries.

Xena's eyes slightly narrowed when she saw the tall, dark figure just ahead between two trees. Her hands instinctively fisted up but she walked ahead down the trail that weaved through the thick forest. She quietly approached the dark figure and stood to the left of them. "Why out here?" She turned her head to the right.

"The queen is beginning to suspect," whispered Alti's deep voice.

Xena slightly smirked and turned her head away. "Let them talk."

"Only so much," agreed the shaman. "Have you contacted Borias?"

"No." The Amazon folded her arms across her chest but she didn't bother to look at the shaman. Instead she continued to study the surrounding woods in the early evening. "But I need to leave here to check them."

"I believe it would be best." Alti slightly smirked. "It seems your partner may move on if you do not show."

"Hmmmmm. There's nothing new," half joked the warlord. "He'd only be moving onto Hades after leaving."

Alti had an amused grin at the woman's threat. "Have you thought out the fact that keeping this Nation may serve more purpose than destroying it?"

The warlord's right eyebrow arched up. "I cannot imagine how."

"Artemis would make a very powerful enemy should you follow through."

"The goddess?" Xena felt a low laugh filter up her throat. "Since when did she become involved with her Amazons?"

"There is always a first and you may encourage that, Xeeena."
Xena smirked at the shaman now. "Do not tell me the shaman is scared of the gods?"

Altí's expression went darker and she stepped up to the Amazon. "I do not fear them and I am not stupid. I just find the best time and ways to strike."

Xena's amused expression spread across and she crossed her arms over her chest. "What do you suggest then?"

"Have you ever thought of being Queen Xena?"

The warlord's eyebrow again rose up and her wide grin grew.

The winter season blew into the village over several days and a moon's cycle. The Amazon grounds were frozen solid and the Amazon farmers went back to their seeds and flocks of animals. The Thrace Nation had been relatively quiet through the winter just as it always was each cycle. Yet it was only seven days before the big Winter Solstice festival and the Nation was busy preparing for it. The festival was so well known in the Thrace state that many surrounding villages would come to the Nation for the festival. The Solstice festival had become an excellent source of income for the Nation during the quiet winter season.

It'd also been two moon cycles since Xena had joined the Nation. Her progression through the Amazon training had been relatively impressive, as Yalenda described to the queen. The queen had been informed that Xena would be ready to take on the Amazon Judgment in the mid-spring since Xena would be receiving her Amazon sword this winter.

With such information, Cyane grew more worried about Xena. She luckily hadn't heard any more reports that her and Altí were communicating. Her hope was simply that Xena had a natural gift for fighting but then she'd hoped the same for Xena's medical knowledge. The new Amazon was also a part-time apprentice healer under Lena's discretion. It seemed as if Xena knew many things and quite possibly many more that Cyane wasn't aware of just yet.

Her only hope rested completely on one young Amazon, Yakut. The young apprentice shaman was working with Ino on how to crossover to the spirit world. It was something that Yakut and Ino did alone at nights in hopes that Altí would not catch. The queen had every faith that Ino could teach Yakut what she needed to know to crossover. And as the queen gazed out of her small window off to the left of her desk, she realized it was dark out and that made her think about Yakut being at Ino's hut.

"You must learn to relax, Yakut," ordered the old Amazon.

The apprentice shaman sighed and nodded to her teacher. "I know… and I am trying."

"Stop trying." Ino was sitting in front of Yakut on the floor. "Just do it."

Yakut only sighed again because she was becoming frustrated with herself. For a moon's cycle, she'd been trying to learn how to relax her mind so she could crossover
but it was so hard. She'd learned how to relax her body completely, which was truly only a third of the battle because it was much harder to control one's mind. "Isn't there another way to crossover? Or to see?"

Ino gave her own sigh now. She stared at the young Amazon and her old mind sped through all of her knowledge of shamanism. It had been more seasons than she cared to count since she'd practiced her shamanism when Alti took over her position in the temple. Finally Ino came across an old lesson that her teacher had once told her more than showed her. "There is one thing," whispered Ino.

Yakut opened her eyes and peered up at the retired shaman. "What's that?"

Ino's expression grew sad and she shook her head. "Its not possible though."

Yakut reflected Ino's expression. "Why?"

Ino shook her head once more then whispered, "You must be a two-spirit."

Yakut's head tilted to one side. "What is it?"

"A two-spirit has the ability to touch any subject and instantly trace their soul."

"Sweet Artemis," murmured the young Amazon. "You mean they can skip over all of… this?" Yakut held out her hands to the small rug between them where there was the black fungi burning between them.

"Yes," answered Ino. "There has only been one two-spirit I've ever known."

"Who?" quietly asked the curious Amazon.

Ino took a deep breath. "My teacher has been the only two-spirit I've ever known." She then went silent as she considered her young student's trouble with calming her mind.

Yakut could tell Ino was busy considering the problem. So instead, she closed her eyes and tried to continue concentrating.

Ino returned her focus to Yakut and slightly smiled at Yakut's determination. She breathed in heavily and slowly released her breath. She then gently whispered, "Think about your favorite place to go, Yakut. Somewhere beautiful and peaceful."

Yakut didn't open her eyes but she carefully listened to Ino. Her mind quickly raced through her memories until she came to an old but solid memory of a trip of hers to the coast in southern Thrace. A smile seemed to ease across her face.

Ino could tell that Yakut had the image in her mind. So she continued softly speaking. "Now recall how beautiful it was and how it smelled. Remember how you felt while you were there. What sounds could you hear?" She fell silent for a few breathes as she waited for Yakut to get the imagery. "Keep imaging yourself there again. Now, chant with me."
Yakut's chest rose up and she drew in the scent of the fungi. She began chanting with Ino in a quiet hum. Suddenly Yakut sensed she was leaving her body, almost like floating and then she traversed the axis mundi within half of a breath. When she entered the spirit world, she immediately sensed Ino's spirit beside her but just as she expected the guides of the spirit world to greet her, she was surprised. Instead of the two great serpents of the realm, there was a bright rich green lizard creature that had wings, which flew through her vision.

Yakut, not expecting such a display, suddenly lost her concentration and she was thrown out of the spirit world and across the axis mundi faster than a lightning strike. Her eyes flew open and her stomach suddenly pitched from the suddenly change of events. Yakut popped up onto her feet and made a run for Ino's washroom.

Ino had carefully returned to her body but when she opened her eyes, she quickly got up. She followed after Yakut into the washroom where she heard the distinct sound of throwing up.

The young apprentice was on her knees but was praying to the wood god instead of Artemis. Her head slightly hung over the chamber pot and her eyes closed.

Ino gingerly touched her student's mid-back. She sighed and wondered what happened; they were so close.

Yakut was dry heaving for a moment then she finally sensed her stomach calm down. She pushed herself up to her feet despite her legs shook under her weight. She then reached over to the pitch on the counter. With a large draw of water, Yakut rinsed out her mouth and spit it out in the chamber pot.

Ino watched as the apprentice put the pitch back then she finally asked, "Better?"

"I think so," whispered Yakut. She brushed back a few chaotic strands of dirty blond hair. She frowned at her teacher. "I'm sorry, Ino."

"It happens," assured the retired shaman. "Be glad you had a chamber pot."

The young Amazon gave a curious look.

Ino slightly grinned then made her confession. "That happened to me in the temple the first time I traversed but I didn't have time to make it to the chamber pot."

"Oh gods," murmured Yakut, a partial smile on her face.

Ino then went slightly serious. "What forced you out of the spirit world?"

Yakut sharply grunted and shook her head. "More like threw me out," she corrected. "It was strange…." Yakut shook her head and walked out of the small washroom, feeling too cramped.

Ino came out behind her and sat down in her original spot.

Yakut though went over to the nearby window and leaned on the windowsill. "I don't
know what it was, Ino." She turned her head to her teacher.

The old shaman tilted her head to one side. "Describe it to me."

"It was some… creature," Yakut shook her head then stared out the window. "It reminded me of a lizard but… much larger… maybe even larger than the temple."

Ino stared at Yakut. Her eyebrows tightly knitted together and she waited for Yakut to continue.

"It had wings though… teeth that had to be as large as me." Yakut laughed at her own description.

Ino's eyebrows unfurrowed and instead her eyes lit up with astonishment. "Sweet Artemis."

Yakut quickly turned her head to the older Amazon.

"It can't be," whispered Ino. She shook her head and focused back on Yakut. "Come sit by me."

The young apprentice pushed herself off of the sill and approached her mentor. When she was comfortable sitting next to Ino, she heard the explanation she'd been wanting.

"What you saw was a dragon."

"A… dragon?" murmured Yakut. "What…?"

"I know," Ino reached over, resting her hand on the Amazon's nearest knee. "I am sure Alti has taught you that when you enter the spirit world that it is the two serpents that welcome you and guide you."

"Yes, and I didn't see them."

"I know… you saw the dragon instead."

"What does that mean?" whispered Yakut.

Ino didn't quickly answer but it seemed as if she was searching Yakut's eyes. She couldn't be sure yet whether it was true or not. She'd been told what the dragon meant but she was too concerned it was a fluke event for Yakut. Yet she could only hope it was anything but a fluke and that the dragon was Yakut's guide. "I'm not completely sure," replied Ino, "but it doesn't mean anything bad."

"Why didn't I see the serpents?"

"I'm not sure," answered the shaman.

Yakut stared at her shaman in slightly disbelief. She knew that Ino had to know what it meant and she was holding back from telling her. She couldn't understand why but she knew she couldn't question her mentor's intentions. She only hoped in time it
would reveal itself to her.

"You may not see the dragon next time, Yakut." Ino squeezed the Amazon's knee then withdrew her hand. "The serpents may show next time."

"What if they don't? What if it's the dragon next time?"

"Then don't fear it… the dragon is your guide." Ino gave her student a warm smile. "I promise."

Yakut slowly nodded her head.

Ino took a steady breath to settle herself. "I think that's enough for tonight though."

"Thank you," quickly responded the worn out apprentice.

Ino softly laughed and her smile appeared. "Get some rest tonight, Yakut. We will work on this next time. We made a lot of headway though now that you can traverse on your own."

The apprentice shaman smiled happily then she stood up. "Thank you, Ino."

"You're welcome, Yakut. Rest well tonight."

"You too, Ino." Yakut offered one last smile then she made her way out of the hut.

Yet Ino quickly called, "Yakut?"

Yakut was part of the way out of the door but she stopped and turned back to her teacher.

"What color dragon was it?"

The Amazon tilted her head to one side but she answered, "Green."

Ino nodded then said, "Goodnight."

Yakut paused for a moment. "Goodnight too, Ino." She then silently left.

After the door closed, Ino stared at the fumes of the fungi wafting in the air in front of her. "What are you planning, Artemis? Why have you sent your green dragon to Yakut?" She shook her head, leaned forward some, and covered the bowl of burning fungi with the lid to snuff it out. "Time will tell, I suppose."

Yakut trekked across the quiet, dark village. Her hut was on the opposite side of the hut quarters from Ino's. Just as she made her way around the Bathing Hut, she almost ran directly into a taller Amazon. She stepped back and gazed up at the tall Amazon. "I'm sorry."

Xena offered a warm smile at her friend.
Yakut laughed at herself when she realized who she almost bumped into. "Hi."

The older Amazon's smile went into a grin. "Hi too."

"I haven't seen you in awhile."

Xena nodded. "We've both been really busy."

"I know." The apprentice shaman sighed deeply. "Alti has really been… running me hard."

Xena chuckled and slipped her hands into her wool, leather jacket's pockets. "I've noticed. You've been coming to the Dining Hut pretty late."

"Yeeeah." Yakut softly smiled. "How's training?"

"Really good," answered Xena. She then warmly smiled and nodded her head off to the right. "Let's go to my hut. Have some free time?"

Yakut considered and decided she hadn't visited with Xena in quite some time. She smiled and nodded.

Xena lead them to her hut and she entered first. After her friend came in, she closed the door and took her ankle-long jacket off. "Have a seat." She held out her hand to the several empty chairs by the round table.

"Thanks." Yakut strolled across the hut and took a comfortable position on the wood chair. "So training is going well?"

"Yeah, really well," confessed the new Amazon.

"Learning much?"

Xena was by a small yet tall dresser where she hung her coat on a hook inside of it. After she closed the door, she turned around and studied her friend from across the hut. "Yeah, I am." She then picked up one of the three lit candles on top of her dresser and went around the room to light the other candles that hung on the walls. "How are classes with Alti?"

"Very tiring and time consuming."

Xena's head was bobbing back and forth. "What are you learning?"

"Well right now I'm just finishing up the history of both shamanism and priesthood."

"Ah." Xena had all the candles lit and the hut was much brighter compared to earlier. She returned the candle back to its home and went to join her friend at the table. "The training hasn't been… physically wearing but just more… mentally tiring."

"There's a lot to remember… until it becomes second nature."
Xena nodded her agreement. "It's starting to become second nature."

Yakut had a lopsided grin. "Its rubbing off then."

The Amazon rolled her eyes but her witty smile was in place. "I think it is."

The apprentice shaman chuckled quietly and leaned back into the chair comfortably. "I need to get back to my training. I'll be out of shape before I know it."

Xena had a curious look as she considered what Yakut told her. "You haven't been at training at all?"

"I haven't been for… two moon cycles. I've been so busy with Alti and learning shamanism." Yakut shook her head some. "I'm surprised Yalena hasn't said anything to Alti… or Commander Lyda for that matter."

Xena's head tilted to one side. "You think any of them will?"

"Could." Yakut shrugged. "Hades… I may say something to Yalena just so I can get a break from Alti." Yakut's joke drew out a deep laugh from Xena, which made Yakut smile. "I actually miss training."

"We should trade then," teased the Amazon.

The apprentice shaman forced a small laugh up despite just the idea of Xena and Alti spending together made her stomach drop. "I wouldn't wish spending time with Alti on anybody."

Xena's eyebrow instinctively arched to some degree yet she said nothing.

Yakut sensed the small amount of tension that Alti's name brought between them. She quickly tried to change the subject. "Have you been on patrol yet?"

"I don't think I'm allowed until I get my Amazon sword."

"That's right," agreed the apprentice shaman. "When will you try for it? Next fall?"

Xena suddenly grin. "This spring."

Yakut sat up some, her expression fully surprised. "Sweet Artemis, are you serious?"

"Yes." Xena smirked.

"This this spring?" asked the skeptic Amazon.

Xena sighed but she crossed one leg over the other before she replied. "This spring."

"You… must be doing well in training." Yakut finally sat back in her chair. She couldn't believe what she was hearing but it validated the queen's suspicions. "I didn't… realize…."
Xena shrugged and simply said, "It comes naturally."

"I would say," teased Yakut. "I'm impressed."

The older Amazon slightly dipped her head in appreciation. "I've always been training at the Healer's Hut."

"Really?" Yakut was clearly interested. "Since?"

"About a moon ago."

"I didn't know that either." The apprentice shaman sighed in annoyance. "I'm out of the loop."

"I would say," Xena gently bantered. "Lena seemed surprised the night we went to the Healer's Hut and I said to add salt to your wound."

Yakut's head bobbed for a moment. "She must have," she mumbled. "How is it?"

"It's really good... I've learned plenty. It's a good... skill to have."

"It is," agreed Yakut.

Xena was quiet as she watched how Yakut tried to suppress a yawn. That made her faintly smile and she stood up quickly.

Yakut peered up with partially tired eyes.

"I think it's time for you to get some rest," stated the Amazon.

The apprentice shaman didn't realize she was that transparent with her weariness. "I think so," she relented.

Xena held out her hand to her friend.

Yakut smiled and clasped Xena's larger hand. Just as her skin made contact with Xena's, her mind exploded with a flash of images.

The tall, well armored man tilted his head to one side. "Goodbye, Xena." He turned but gave one last order to the soldier that now held a large mallet. "Break her legs." He then walked off, with another prestigious looking man at his side.

Xena dropped her head back until it hit the back of the wood cross. A brutal scream erupted from her lips when the soldier's mallet viciously collided with her shins.

"Yakut?" Xena quickly released her friend's hand and grabbed her shoulders. She was surprised by the extremely painful expression on Yakut's face.

The apprentice shaman suddenly took a rasping breath as the image dissipated from her vision. "Gods," she breathed.
"Are you okay?"

Yakut shook her head in hopes it'd rid of images and feelings that coursed through her body. "Yeah… yeah I think so." She quickly rid of her previous expression as she could only imagine what it looked like. "I'm sorry."

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure." Yakut's mind quickly worked to find an excuse to tell her friend. She slightly twisted to her right and touched her side. "I just felt… some kind of pain."

The taller Amazon tilted to her left and peered down at her friend's side. "I can look…?"

"No… no it's okay." Yakut straightened up some and offered a smile. "It's okay now." She sensed Xena squeezing her shoulders then finally letting go. "Thank you though."

Xena nodded her welcome. "I think you do need some rest."

"Yes." Yakut now started to move her legs but when she started moving her legs screamed with a dull ache. For a quick moment, she had a partial limp but quickly covered it up.

Xena had noted the brief limp and she was confused as to why. But when her friend was walking normal after another two steps she figured it couldn't have been all that serious. Yet Xena made sure to walk Yakut to the door just incase.

Yakut said goodnight to her friend then left the hut. She continued her short journey through the huts to hers. She still sensed a faint dull ache in her shins and she still didn't understand what had happened back there. All she wanted to do right now was get back to her hut, into her bed, and sleep it off. And when she did make it back to her hut, it wasn't long before Yakut collapsed in her bed and went fitfully to sleep.

By the early morning, Yakut dragged herself out of bed and greeted the morning happily. As she got ready, she considered what happened last night and not just at Xena's but at Ino's too. She began to wonder if somehow those two events weren't connected. She decided to let it go for now because the only person she could really ask about would be Ino. Her next class with Ino wasn't until the following night so it would have to wait until then.

After getting dressed and ready, Yakut went to the Dining Hut and picked up some fruit to go with her. She then made the short beeline to the Temple and when she came inside Alti was waiting for her.

"Good morning, Alti."

"Good morning." Alti offered a faint smile. "How was your night last night?"

Yakut nodded her head. "Quiet." She then returned the smile. "Yours?"

"The same." The shaman stood on the alter while Yakut was on the ground floor. She
held out her hand to the right where there was a door to her office. "We'll start with a
test this morning."

Yakut groaned some and dropped her head. "What a way to start the day."

"I thought you would enjoy that," tormented the teacher.

Yakut sighed, came up the steps, and headed for the door. Yet when she got to the
door, she had difficulty getting the door open since her hands were filled by an apple
and an orange. Somehow she managed to maneuver her apple into her left hand,
which already held the orange so now she could get to the door handle.

"I can get it, Yakut," offered Alti.

But just as Yakut's palm touched the door handle, her hand was covered by Alti's
hand.

Suddenly Yakut stiffened up and her mind was flooded by a set of racing images until
it settled onto a very still one.

"And what do you offer me, Alti?"

"Everything," whispered Alti. She stepped forward then crouched down to Xena's
level, who was sitting. "You want to know what these Amazons are. I know who your
friend Lao Ma is; her powers come from denial, from self-sacrifice, from the Light.
That's not for people like you and me. I want to tap into the heart of darkness, the
sheer naked will behind all cravings, hatred, and violence. I will become the face of
death, destroying not only a person's body but their soul." Alti suddenly grabbed
Xena's hands from her lap and clutched them tightly. "Help me, and I'll make you the
Destroyer of Nations."

A powerful charge surged through Xena's hands, up her arms, and exploded within
her body. The energy was so strong and her dark hunger ravaged it. She suddenly felt
the addiction to want that same energy over and over again and it was the taste of
power through fear. "I think we can work that out," whispered the power hungry
Amazon.

"Yakut?" called a deep growl of a voice. Alti had just pulled back her hand from
Yakut's.

The apprentice shaman inhaled sharply but she tried to quickly recover by opening the
door. "I'm sorry."

Alti had her hands on her hips as she wondered what was wrong with the young
Amazon.

Yakut grabbed her apple from her other hand and as she walked into the office, she
felt the remnants of the consuming dark power that was from the vision. She tried to
shake it off as she took her seat in front of Alti's desk.

The dark shaman walked around her desk and picked up a scroll. "You may work at
my desk. I will give you around a candlemark to complete the test. Let me know if you finish sooner."

Yakut tipped her head in understanding. She then watched her teacher leave the room and that finally gave Yakut the chance to let out a deep sigh. "By Artemis… what is happening to me?" She forced herself to stand up, go around the desk, sit down, and she placed her fruit on the desk. She picked up the scroll, unrolled it in front of herself, and she merely stared at it blankly.

The apprentice shaman tried to push aside what she experienced earlier because she had to deal with this test right now. She took a steady breath to calm her nerves then she reached forward to pick up the quill out of the inkwell. "Here goes," she muttered.

"Have a seat, Xena."

Xena nodded to the stratège and took a chair directly in front of the stratège's desk.

"Did Yalenda tell you why I asked you here?"

"No, ma'am." The Amazon leaned back in her chair and found she very interested to why Commander Lyda wanted to speak to her.

"Yalenda tells me about your fast progress with training. She seems to think you'll be ready to receive your sword in the spring."

Xena nodded again. "That's what she tells me too."

"I'm sure Yalenda also explained to you that after you've mastered the sword that you go through the Amazon Judgment." Commander Lyda remained comfortable behind her desk and her focus solely on the Amazon.

"Yes, she did actually."

"Excellent." The stratège smiled suddenly. "How are you at riding?"

Xena now had a curious expression but she was grinning from ear to ear. "I grew up with horses in my village."

"That's what I expected." Commander Lyda grinned. "I have an opening that will need filling soon."

The Amazon's expression grew quite interested at hearing the stratège's words.

"The Thrace Nation has a small cavalry but it isn't well organized or trained. Neither I nor Officer Olivia have had time to work with the cavalry." The stratège fell silent for a second as she leaned back in her chair. "We don't have a cavalry commander… an ilarchès." Yet again the stratège went quiet but she started to grin faintly. "Would you be interested in being the ilarchès?"
Xena made no visual reaction yet she was stunned. This Nation hardly knew her yet they'd taken her in, accepted her to that Nation, fed her, trained her, and now the commander of the army wanted her to run the cavalry. She had never planned on any of this and it seemed to be happening too quickly. However she knew if she didn't accept the honor and position then it would throw up suspicions within the Nation. "I would be honored, stratègos."

Commander Lyda suddenly smiled. "I knew I would hear that. I have heard many good things about you, Xena. I have a feeling you will not fail me or the Nation."

Xena said nothing but did bow her head a bit.

"I will inform the polemarchos, the queen, and Yalenda of your decision. We will have to go before the council to meet approval but I highly doubt that will be a problem."

The Amazon shifted in her seat a little then asked, "I suppose this will wait until after I have gone through the Amazon Judgment?"

"Yes, it will have to wait until then however Yalenda can begin training you now."

Commander Lyda tilted her head in one direction. "Have you much experience with commanding or managing people?"

Xena quietly sighed and shook her head. "Not particularly."

"Then we shall give you some experience. Despite this is a bit untraditional, I will be recommending to Officer Olivia that you take some patrol duty."

"Before I receive my sword?" questioned the surprised Amazon.

"Yes," answered the stratègos, "I believe it'll give you plenty of experience to work with the others." Then suddenly, she stood up from her chair. "However I would say Yalenda will need to teach you about the trees before patrol duty can begin."

Xena stood up in response. "The trees?"

Commander Lyda chuckled and held out her arm. "You will see."

The Amazon stepped forward and took the stratègos's well chiseled forearm.

"Welcome to the army."

Xena offered a warm smile. "Thank you, stratègos."

Commander Lyda released her future cavalry commander's arm and proudly added, "I look forward to working with you."

"As am I." Xena dipped her head then headed for the door.

The stratègos watched Xena quietly leave. She sighed in relief at hearing Xena's agreement to take the position of the ilarchès. She'd been searching high and low for
an ilarchès seeing as the cavalry was in poor condition. No Amazon had met up to her standards, until Xena showed up in the Nation.

But as there were major changes happening for Xena there were also major changes for another young Amazon. By that early evening, Yakut was finished with her teacher and she was rushing across the Nation to Ino's hut. Her worries and fears were making her walk into an almost run.

Yakut banged her fist against Ino's hut door.

Within a few seconds, a worried Ino had the door open and before she could say anything, Yakut blurted so many things out.

"I don't know what's happening. Something is wrong with me. I can see things. When I touch. I don't know. Ino, I need-"

"Stop," cut in the old Amazon. She held up her right hand for silence. "Stop and breathe for a second, Yakut."

The apprentice shaman did stop and took several deep breaths to calm down. Her mentor was right, she was over reacting and there would be answers.

"Okay, first come inside." Ino stepped back and let the young Amazon in her hut. "Now please sit down." She directed to the spare chair beside her desk. While Yakut went over to it, she closed the hut door then she went to take her desk chair. "Now slowly tell me what's happened."

"I'm not sure," first confessed the apprentice shaman. "I had to come to see you."

"Okay." Ino gave an assuring smile. "Now tell me."

"Last night after I left here, I bumped into Xena and we went to her hut to talk for awhile, to catch up."

Ino nodded and whispered, "Go on."

"I didn't stay long but Xena finally told me to go because I looked tired. So she reached down to offer her hand to help me up. When we clasped hands, I suddenly had a… vision or image rush to me."

Ino now had that same concerned look that Yakut did earlier. "What of?"

"I'm not exactly sure," confessed Yakut. "But… it started out with this soldier… some military commander I think."

"What did he look like?"

"He was as tall as Xena. Dark, short brown hair… clean cut. But it was his inform that… stood out more than anything." Yakut shook her head as she considered it. "He wore mahogany brown leathers but over that he had a heavy… gold armor and a cape. His buckle was in the shape a large lion head."
Ino's eyes glazed over and she whispered, "Roman."

"Roman?" murmured Yakut. "He must have been… he was important though."

Ino suddenly focused back on her student. "What else?"

"In the vision, he said goodbye to Xena then told a soldier near by to break her legs."

"Break her legs?"

The apprentice shaman nodded her head. "Xena was tied up onto a wooden cross. The soldier swung a hammer at her shins and the vision ended with her screaming."

"Sweet Artemis," whispered Ino in awe.

Yakut shook her head. "And stranger still was I felt the pain in my legs too… nowhere as strong but it was there."

Ino listened carefully but her vision fell to the space between them as she considered what Yakut was telling her. She couldn't believe it but it was true, it was the only answer.

The apprentice shaman became concerned about why her mentor was so quiet. She bit her lips but then asked, "What is it, Ino?"

The retired shaman started shaking her head as she looked back at Yakut. "I can't be but… it's the only explanation to why you had a vision merely by touching Xena."

"Why?" gently questioned the young Amazon.

"You're a two-spirit, Yakut."

Yakut sat back some and shook her head. "No… I can't be."

Ino leaned forward and gathered Yakut's hands into her own. "It's the only explanation, Yakut and it explains why you saw the green dragon when you crossed over."

"But… how can it be me? Why?"

The retired shaman just sighed and squeezed the young woman's hands. "There is no explanation why some shamans are two-spirit and some are not."

Yakut was in complete disbelief but she knew too that Ino was right. "What… what does this mean?"

"It means we have to rethink everything," answered Ino. "You're destined, Yakut."

"Destined? For what?"
Ino started to smile. "For greatness."

Yakut's head fell forward as everything washed over her. Her eyes closed tightly and her two visions within the past day flashed through her mind again. The vision of Xena and Alti's meeting repeated twice in her mind as she wondered what everything meant. She knew now that Xena and Alti had a pact and Xena's intentions were anything but to help the Nation. Then why did Yakut feel so much goodness and hope for Xena?

As she lifted her head to meet Ino's gaze, she knew she couldn't speak about her second vision… yet. She had too many questions and not enough answers before she could expose Xena. And there was something else lurking in the shadows of it all, something about Xena that told Yakut that maybe Xena wasn't this ugly monster. It was Alti who would do anything to bring it out in Xena. Yakut felt her body tense with anger towards Alti and she knew she'd have to do something to stop this, to stop Alti.

Section Four A

Part 7: Gabrielle's Fifth Year

The wooden mask slightly flickered back the candlelight, which were placed around in the room. The thinly screened but dark eyes stared directly at its owner.

"I'm so proud of you," murmured Gabrielle as she slipped behind her girlfriend.

Ephiny's lips creased into a warm smile. She continued to study her new mask as she held it up before her. "I can't believe it."

The princess slid her arms around Ephiny's waist and lowered her chin down onto Ephiny's shoulder. "Why?" She shifted her head to place a gentle kiss to Ephiny's neck but returned her chin to its home. "I had every faith."

"I know," quietly agreed the Amazon. She faintly shook her head. "I just… it means I'm a real Amazon now."

Gabrielle squeezed her girlfriend's waist just some. "You always have been… with or without a mask."

Ephiny lowered her mask and held onto it with one hand - the mask now at her side. She turned in Gabrielle's arms; a smile on her face. "Thank you." With her free hand, she touched her girlfriend's cheek and leaned in for a soft kiss.

The small bard returned the depth of the kiss and pulled back with a faint moan of
enjoyment. Her glazed eyes fluttered open, a smile on her face.

"We should get some rest." Ephiny glanced over at their beds, which they'd conveniently pushed together last week when they arrived back at the Academy.

Gabrielle sighed while she shifted her hands to Ephiny's hips now. "You're right. Classes will be early."

"Like always," reminded the Amazon. Ephiny started for her small wood closet so she could tuck her Amazon mask away.

The princess, however, went to her closest to change into her nightshift.

Ephiny was already set for bed, having thrown it on when they first got back from dinner this evening. If it was one thing she always tired of quickly it was the peasant attire she had to wear while at the Academy. She decided she much preferred her Amazon leathers over the itchy material that peasants wore.

Gabrielle had her nightshift on and was quickly hanging up her blue top and long brown skirt for tomorrow. She hurried as it was too cold to remain out of bed long when in a nightshift.

Ephiny though went around the room and began blowing out the candles except for two of them. When she came to Gabrielle's side of the room, she smiled at her girlfriend as she watched her climb into bed. Once Gabrielle was in the bed, Ephiny blew out the candle set on the windowsill and she made her way to the bed.

Gabrielle scooted over to let the Amazon crawl in with her. She then sensed strong, warm arms pull her back over some. "You know what I was thinking about?"

"Hmmm?" murmured the Amazon.

"I was thinking about how proud of you I was when you returned from your Amazon Judgment that day."

Ephiny smiled. "I was pretty proud of myself too," she lightly bantered.

Gabrielle sighed and lightly slapped her girlfriend's thigh. "I'm serious."

The young Amazon smiled more and nuzzled Gabrielle with her nose. "Thank you," she murmured after pulling back some. "It won't be long 'til you try out for your sword."

Gabrielle sucked in a heavy breath then slowly released it. "I know." She rolled onto
her back now and her girlfriend shifted in closer. "I do that in the beginning of the spring."

"After the first budding of flowers."

The princess was deeply considering the trial that would face her once she graduated from the Academy. It caused her to shiver.

Ephiny instantly sensed it. She already had her arm around Gabrielle's waist but she now put her right leg over top of Gabrielle's. "You'll past it with flying feathers." But her joke was slightly lost on her girlfriend. So she gently squeezed Gabrielle's lower torso to show support. "Come on, you'll pass it, Gabrielle."

"What happens if I don't?" countered the bard.

"Then Eponin will continue to train you until you're prepared."

"But…." Gabrielle turned her head to the right. "Then everybody in the Nation knows I failed."

"No, everybody knows you're not ready yet." Ephiny lifted her hand and gently touched Gabrielle's cheek. "Some of the best warriors in the Nation didn't pass the first time. Nor would you be the first or the last." She paused, leaned in, and placed a soft kiss to Gabrielle's temple. "If that even happens and I think you'll pass it easily."

"Why?" quietly asked Gabrielle.

Ephiny smiled again. "I think you're a natural with the staff. You learned very quickly this past summer."

"I got off to a slow start," admitted the bard.

The Amazon somewhat shrugged. "That doesn't surprise me. I think Eponin had the challenge of breaking through your slave training."

Gabrielle was silent for awhile as she considered what Ephiny told her. She had to admit that Ephiny did have a point about Eponin needing to almost retrain Gabrielle's line of thinking since her days with Hecht.

"And you've learned a lot this past summer too. Not just in staff training but with Ambassador Majorie and taking charge of recording the Nation's history.

"Anybody could have done it," brushed off the bard.
"You think so?" opposed the Amazon, "So that's why so many other Amazons have done it too?"

Gabrielle turned her head to her girlfriend and offered a glare even though she knew Ephiny couldn't see her expression.

Yet Ephiny knew it was there and she smirked. "Give yourself a chance, love," she whispered and leaned in for a soft kiss.

Gabrielle turned onto her side without breaking the kiss, her hand lightly touching Ephiny's cheek. After the kiss, she murmured, "Thank you."

"Thank you too," offered back the Amazon. "We should get some rest."

"I know." Gabrielle quickly placed a kiss to Ephiny's forehead then snuggled in closer to Ephiny's embrace. She closed her eyes and her breathing didn't take long to slow down.

Ephiny touched her forehead against her girlfriend's and she wasn't far behind in falling asleep.

When the sun touched over the horizon, the two Amazons woke up and prepared for another day of classes at the Academy. After they got ready, they stepped into the main part of the dorm where the Orion was sitting on the foot of his bed.

"Good morning," greeted Gabrielle, she stepped up to him.

Orion smiled as he stood up. "Good morning." He then smiled to Ephiny, who was coming out of the bedroom last. "Good morning, Ephiny."

The Amazon smiled brightly at the young man. "Morning, Orion."

"Where are Twickenham and Stallonus?"

"They already went to breakfast, they couldn't wait," teased Orion.

"But you waited," stated the princess.

Orion nodded his head. "I waited for you two."

Ephiny smiled at his politeness then she came up behind her girlfriend. She lifted the heavy wool and leather coat from her arm and held it open. Her girlfriend didn't hesitate to put it on with her help.
"Thank you," whispered Gabrielle.

Ephiny merely squeezed Gabrielle's shoulder in response.

"I'm starving," announced the bard.

Ephiny rolled her eyes and walked past the Amazon Princess.

Orion shook his head and said, "There's a surprise." He then held up his arm.

Gabrielle looked down to the door where Ephiny stood with the door open. She saw the smirk expression of Ephiny's face. So she quickly took Orion's arm and walked down the aisle between the beds until she came to the door where Ephiny stood. "At least somebody knows how to be polite these days."

The Amazon shrugged and watched as the pair walked past a little more. She quickly took her opening and her right hand shot out to pinch Gabrielle's butt.

Gabrielle's head quickly shot around but she didn't have a chance to say anything because of Orion.

"How did you sleep?" asked Orion.

The princess flashed a smile and replied, "Pretty well. You?"


Ephiny however just rolled her eyes and followed behind.

When the group entered the mess hall, they were waved down by Twickenham, Stallonus, and Euripides. First they went over to say good morning to them then they went to get their breakfasts. When they returned, their table quickly came to life with all the chatter and clanking.

"So tell us about the Amazons, Gabrielle," cut in Stallonus.

The princess relented from groaning because she was somewhat happy to be away from the Nation despite she loved it there. "Its different," she mildly teased.

"What do the… the f-f-feathers in your h-h-h-hair mean?" To ensure his question was understood, Twickenham pointed to them.

Gabrielle knew which feathers were in question.
"They mean something in particular, don't they?" inquired Orion.

The Amazon Princess slowly nodded her head. "They each mean something different."

"I noticed Ephiny has the same colorful one as you do," pointed out Euripides. "It must state that you're Amazons."

Ephiny smiled at the young man's interpretation.

"My gold feather means I'm of the royal line," explained Gabrielle.

"And the blue feather?" questioned Orion.

Gabrielle shyly laughed and she spotted the huge smirk on her girlfriend's face. "Welllll… that one is a bit more complicated."

"Ooo we do have time for a brief story, Gabrielle." Euripides wickedly smiled.

The bard gave her best sigh but she could never deny a story. "Okay." She grinned when all the boys scooted closer so they wouldn't miss a single word.

"The blue feather stands for excellence in diplomacy." Gabrielle paused as her friends' expression grew with understanding but interest. "While I was in the Nation this summer I was being taught how to be a reasonable diplomat by the head of Diplomatic Affairs and Relations. Her name is Ambassador Majorie. On certain nights the ambassador would sit down to give me lessons on how….

"By sweet Artemis, princess," breathed Ambassador Majorie. "Repeat to me again what you have promised?"

Gabrielle fidgeted some with her staff in her hand but she kept her eyes on the ambassador. "An economical pact of fair trade, we give Potidaea a wagon and half of regular oil and wagon and a half of extra virgin. In return the Nation receives two wagons of seafood."

The ambassador studied the princess and she also considered the terms that the princess offered. "What kind of seafood?"

The young Amazon felt a small sense of relief since the ambassador was showing interest. "A mix really between perch, bass, tuna, halibut, prawn, squid, eel, turtle, caviar…." She paused and revealed a faint grin. "And hopefully some oysters."
Ambassador Majorie blinked. "Oysters?"

Gabrielle refrained from chuckling. "Yes, ambassador. The constable promised a few bushels of oysters."

The ambassador stared at her young student. "Perhaps this pact could serve the Nation well."

The princess flashed a smile and her relief was clearly evident now. "Do you think it'll pass council?"

"Only with my support," affirmed the ambassador.

Gabrielle looked away for a second and glanced about the ambassador's office. She then gazed back at the ambassador, who sat at her desk. "Ambassador, I do have one favor?"

Majorie curiously studied Gabrielle. "Go on, princess."

Gabrielle shyly smiled and licked her lips. "Well Constable Rasmus said he'd agree to the pact if he could tour the groves."

"Understandable."

After Gabrielle cleared her throat she very quietly added, "He's actually here now for the tour."

The ambassador suddenly sprung up from her chair at her office desk. "Princess Gabrielle!"

The young Amazon took a faint step back from the ambassador. She dipped her head momentarily then lifted it again.

Majorie settled down and chastised herself for reacting as she did. She sighed then came around the desk to stand before her student. "I apologize, princess." She felt calmer when Gabrielle looked up at her again. She was about to ask Gabrielle something but she was cut off.

"I did as you taught me. I gave him one of the finer huts so that he's fully accommodated. There's also a guard near his hut to assist him with anything."

Majorie was slightly stunned but she was also very proud. "Did he say when he wished to see the groves?"
"Tomorrow."

The ambassador remained quiet as her thoughts ran through her head. "Well then that gives us the afternoon today to write out a rough pact." She then began to grin. "And you, princess, will be hosting the constable since this was all your idea."

Gabrielle's mouth opened, she said nothing, she closed her mouth, and she nodded her head.

The corner of Majorie's mouth curled up into a deep, lopsided grin. "May the queen have mercy on your imprudence and approve of the pact."

The princess's head slouched some as she considered how hastily and presumptive she acted with the constable and pact.

Majorie started to walk back behind her desk again. Despite she was being hard on Gabrielle she was also quite secretly proud of her student. Gabrielle may have acted imprudently yet she acted unlike most would have not on such an excellent opportunity. "Now then, let's rough out this pact, shall we? Where should we begin, princess?"

"Wow," whispered Twickenham.

"You really pissed that ambassador off huh?" teased Stallonus.

Orion elbowed him.

"I highly doubt that," declared Euripides.

"Well I was lucky because Constable Rasmus was very happy with groves. To further encourage him, I gave him an entire tour of the Nation. He was quite content that we could make a pact."

"How did the negotiations go with the council and queen?"

Gabrielle let out a huge breath at Orion's question. "Well I was really lucky. The constable decided to waver and he decided he'd give two wagons of seafood for two wagons of extra virgin oil."

"That was the final pact?"

"Pretty much," confirmed the princess.

"Did the q-q-queen get on your c-c-case?"
Gabrielle slumped some with a groan muffled between her lips.

Ephiny patted her girlfriend's back lightly. "She got an ear full."

"You got your feathers shredded," teased Stallonus.

The bard straightened up again and went into story mode again. "After the constable left the Nation with an escort for Potidaea, the queen spoke with me."

Vara smiled as the princess approached the Administration Hut that she always stood guard. "Good afternoon, princess."

Gabrielle sighed and stopped next to the guard. "I wish it was."

Vara lost her smile. "Troubles, my princess?"

"More like I am in trouble."

Vara couldn't resist her amused expression. "I heard."


"Of course not, my princess. Gossip moves faster than Artemis herself."

The princess laughed now as she ran her fingers through her sunny hair. "I believe it."

"It particularly moves fast when it involves a beautiful princess."

The younger Amazon's cheeks rosed over, which made her dip her head down.

Vara smirked but she decided best to change the topic. "Do not fear the queen or her… anger."

"Easier said."

The guard shrugged then quietly added, "The queen is great but even she knows when to bow."

Gabrielle was confused and trying to process the guard's statement.

Vara touched the princess's shoulder. "Just stay calm while in there, my princess."

"I will," whispered Gabrielle. She moved closer to the door. "Thanks, Vara."
Vara smiled brightly when the princess remembered her name. "Good luck, my princess."

The princess rolled her eyes and entered the hut.

Vara sent a silent prayer to Artemis for the princess's sake.

Gabrielle strolled through the corridor until she reached the queen's office door. She knocked on the wood door and when she heard the queen's voice, she entered. "My queen." She bowed her head.

"Have a seat, princess." The queen set aside her scroll and put her quill in its inkwell. When her eyes were level with the princess's, she began her lecture. "Despite the excellent pact produced between Potidaea and the Nation it has come to light your incompetence in handling it."

"My queen...." Gabrielle held her tongue fast when Queen Melosa held up a hand.

"Listen, princess and listen well." The queen held the princess's gaze strongly. "I understand that you have been receiving nightly lessons from the ambassador. Despite the fact you are receiving such lessons and knowledge does not acquire you to be an ambassador or emissary for this Nation. You currently hold no authority to make any pacts or promises of the like for this Nation." Melosa stopped and saw that the bard was intently listening. "You may be the princess of this Nation but that does not give you authority. Your title as princess is merely an image at this current moment, nothing more."

Gabrielle broke the gaze for a second, her eyes lowering but she looked up again.

"You may not always have Ambassador Majorie there to save your feathers. I will expect you to better conduct yourself in the future, princess." Queen Melosa leaned forward some. "Or can you not honor your gold feather, princess?"

The feather in question seemed to come to life and fall forward, against Gabrielle's cheek. The bard, without thought, brushed it back behind her ear again then she nodded her head. "I honor my gold feather, my queen." She held her eyes still with the queen's. "Always."

"Very well. See that your actions do not repeat."

"They will not," promised the bard.

"You're excused, princess." Queen Melosa watched the young Amazon rise up and
silently slipped out of her office. She let out a huge sigh and returned to her scrollwork. It wasn't but a quarter of a candlemark when there was a knock at her door. With an even bigger sigh, she called, "Come in." She was remotely surprised when Ambassador Majorie strolled into her office. "Majorie," she greeted.

"My queen." The ambassador bowed her head then asked, "May I sit?"

"I take it this must be an in depth visit?" Melosa held her hand out to a chair before her, recently vacated by the princess.

"Yes, well I believe we have something to discuss." The ambassador took her seat.

Melosa took a deep breath and leaned back into her chair, forgetting her work. "What is the problem, Majorie?"

"You're being too hard on Gabrielle. Neither I nor the council agree to your harshness with her."

The queen considered the ambassador's words. "I do not believe I am. She broke protocol, Majorie and you know this… so does the council."

"I don't argue that, nobody does. However the fact remains that the princess just brought us two things that the Nation has been lacking since the Nation was established."

Melosa's eyes narrowed.

Majorie noted the stiffness of the queen so she pressed her point harder. "We now will have a seasonal supply of seafood and something to do with the extra barrels of oil sitting around in the stock huts." She leaned forward. "Second she brought us a smith through her bardic skills." She suddenly shot her right arm out and pointed off in that general direction. "The army is praising her for finding a female smith." She dropped her arm to the chair. "And the latest word on every Amazon's lips is the princess's name."

"The princess is no hero," barked the queen.

Majorie's eyes darkened and she rose up. She grabbed the edge of the desk and leaned over the queen. "Melosa, do not deny the princess's success. You certainly haven't denied her of her mistakes." She leaned forward just slightly more so that her eyes were perfectly level with the stubborn queen. "If you do not recognize her for her success then the Nation certainly will without you." She straightened up, stomped out of the office, and slammed the door behind.
The ambassador hotly walked out of the Administration Hut but she gave a curt nod to the guard.

Vara intently watched the ambassador proudly walk off. She slightly grinned because earlier she’d seen Ambassador Majorie stalk into the hut with a mission on hand. She'd never seen the ambassador so enraged before but Vara pretty well figured it out. Her grin spread wider at the thought of Ambassador Majorie confronting the queen about Princess Gabrielle. She’d already heard the thick and heavy gossip about the queen's refusal to honor the princess's success with the pact and needed smith. Now she had great new gossip about the ambassador's confrontation with the queen.

Stallonus laughed and hooted some. "That's great! The ambassador ripped her a new as-

"Stallonus," warned Orion.

"That's amazing," whispered Twickenham. "What happened after t-t-that?"

Gabrielle smiled some.

Ephiny touched her girlfriend's arm to keep her silent for a moment. "Maybe we should head to class while Gabrielle tells the rest."

"Yes, that would be quite wise, Ephiny." Euripides rose up with his empty plate. The others followed him.

Once the group of friends finished getting rid of their plates, they started into the Great Hall and towards their classroom. Gabrielle picked up with the last of her story of the blue feather.

"I can't believe this." The Amazon Princess was awe struck as she watched the Nation celebrate. They were celebrating her.

"Why?" insisted Solari, "You helped the Nation."

The bard shook her head and faced her friend. "Yes… I didn't save the Nation."

Eponin came up behind her student. "You must understand, princess that helping the Nation is in some way saving the Nation." She smiled at the confused look on the princess's face. "Without any help, the Nation would stop being progressive. You have brought honor and success to the Nation just as you have to yourself."

The bard sighed and shook her head. She stared at the various Amazons all dressed up and dancing around the fire. "I also broke the rules."
"Perhaps," murmured the weapons master, "but learning from your mistakes is just as honorable, princess."

Gabrielle returned her focus to her mentor. She faintly smiled. "Thank you, Eponin."

"You are welcome, Gabrielle." Eponin signaled to the crowd of Amazons with her mug. "Enjoy it, princess. We always celebrate when honor and success is given to the Nation."

Gabrielle's crispy green eyes finally settled on a familiar figure that materialized out of the depths of the crowd. Suddenly a smile lightened her face.

Ephiny closed in on her girlfriend. "Hi."

The princess took Ephiny's hands into hers. "Hi."

Solari shifted away from the couple and went to Eponin's side.

Ephiny stole a warm kiss from Gabrielle then she quietly asked, "Would you like to dance?"

The princess groaned and replied, "Remember what happened last time."

Eponin smirked and piped in, "Time to dance, princess."

"Eponin," growled the princess.

"That's Master Eponin," tormented the weapons master.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes.

Ephiny was about to ask again but she stopped when she heard the music settle. She gazed over her right shoulder at the dais, the queen had risen. "Come on." She climbed down to her knees with Gabrielle while Solari and Eponin followed suit.

Queen Melosa stepped to the edge of the dais once her Nation kneeled before her, except for one. Her eyes fell on that one. "Ambassador Majorie!" Her voice rang through the celebration grounds.

The ambassador dipped her head in respect then weeded through the kneeling Amazons. She then climbed the dais next to the queen.

Melosa quietly cleared her throat and called out, "Up here, Princess Gabrielle!"
The princess sucked in sharp breath. She stood up and made her way to the dais. She stepped up and slipped between the queen and ambassador. She held still despite she felt the nervousness rip through her body.

Queen Melosa remained facing the Nation. "Tonight we celebrate for many reasons. First we must honor our princess for bringing success to the Nation." She then signaled to the ambassador.

Majorie smiled at that Nation and mentally pulled her speech from her memory. "Princess Gabrielle has honored the Nation with two great successes. The princess has brought us a fine smith and created a powerful economical pact between our Nation and Potidaea. May the Nation thrive from such honors." She now faced the princess just as the queen did the same. "I can only hope the seafood will be as amazing as the smithing work, princess."

Gabrielle realized it was a joke and she grinned. She heard a low dim of laughter throughout the Nation.

Majorie now revealed a blue feather and a thin piece of leather. With the queen's help, she neatly tied the feather nearby the other two but a little further back so it wouldn't be in the way. Then she and the queen faced the Nation once more.

Queen Melosa took a deep breath. "Now, my Amazons honor our princess as she has honored us!"

The crowd of Amazons all cheered in report.

Majorie bent towards the princess and whispered, "Join your Nation, Gabrielle."

The bard peered up at her mentor and smiled. "Thank you."

Majorie nodded and held a stern look but her eyes were soft. She then nodded to the queen and followed behind the princess.

Queen Melosa straightened up fully and waited for the Amazons to settle down again. "Priestess Narkissa!"

The priestess did not hesitate to appear from the shadows of the celebration. She glided through the kneeling, silent Amazons and ascended the dais. "My queen," she murmured.

The queen scanned the crowd until she found her target. "Master Eponin."
The weapons master rose up and sought out her charge in the crowd, it was distinct charge too. She wrapped her fingers around the bowing woman's arm.

"Up here, Andra!"

Master Eponin escorted Andra to the dais then let her step up to the queen and priestess. She then stepped away and knelt.

Andra never liked being the center of attention. Now she wasn't sure what she was getting herself into when she took Gabrielle's offer. In her head, she repeated that this had to be a good choice because she certainly wasn't surviving alone.

The queen licked her lips some then called out, "Our second reason for this celebration." She held her hand out to the smith. "Before the sun is overhead we will have welcomed a new member to the Amazon Nation, Andra." She signaled to Narkissa.

The priestess took the signal and faced the smith. "Andra, you have been honored with a caste to become an Amazon. Before Artemis, do you promise to protect and aide the Amazon Nation?"

Andra's mouth was dry but she summoned all of her strength before this great Nation. "I swear before Artemis that I will serve my Nation with my strength and skills."

Melosa sensed the sincerity in the newcomer's words. She signaled the priestess finally.

Priestess Narkissa revealed a bronze feather that shined vibrant colors. She cupped the feather between her hands lifted far above Andra's head.

Now the queen reached up and held the bronze feather over the blacksmith's head.

The priestess took a deep breath then called out, "Artemis, Andra has come to us and joins your Nation of honored female warriors. Bless her spirit and let her become one with you."

Queen Melosa now dropped her head back and searched the dark skies. "Artemis, Andra has taken the caste of Amazon. She has promise to serve your Nation with all her strength and honor that you so desire. Please guide her always even through the darkest moments."

Now the pair carefully began tying the reflective, colorful feather into place. When they finally had the feather secured they released Andra's hair and she sensed the new weight.
Together Narkissa and Melosa turned back to the Nation and announced, "Welcome Andra to our Nation!"

Automatically the crowd roared their approval with yells and obscure words.

Melosa felt a faint smile tug at her lips. She could actually see that the Nation was excited to welcome a blacksmith into an already versatile Nation. She bent to her side some and uttered, "Join your Nation, Andra."

The blacksmith held her breath as she gazed up at the queen. "Thank you." She received a brief smile then she went down the steps of the dais. When she made it to the bottom, she was instantly greeted and welcomed into the Nation, her new home.

Gabrielle couldn't refuse as she pushed through some of the Amazons. She approached Andra and she couldn't hold back her smile. "Welcome, Andra."

Andra was relieved to see a familiar face yet without notice she was suddenly in a hug with Gabrielle. She somewhat laughed and hugged the young woman back. "Thank you." When the hug ended she had a huge smirk on her face. "So does this mean I have to call you 'my princess'?"

The princess laughed and grasped her friend's arm. "Please don't."

"I wasn't planning to," bantered the smith.

"That's sooo cool," whispered Stallonus.

Gabrielle quietly laughed as she leaned back in her desk chair. "It was luck." She now realized that many of the other classmates had gathered around to listen to the tail end of her tale.

"It wasn't," cut in Ephiny, "it was skill."

The princess rolled her eyes at her girlfriend. "It was luck I found her."

Ephiny shook her head at Gabrielle's lack of faith.

Orion twisted his head around when he saw the teacher come into the room. "Uh oh." He nodded at the teacher. "We better sit."

"You will tell us more?"

Gabrielle smiled at Euripides. "I promise." She then watched her friends as well as the
other student disperse to their seats. Ephiny took her seat next to her.

"You'll be the top student."

The bard did a double-take.

"You will be." Ephiny now grinned. "Didn't you see how the other students came over to listen? They didn't even hear the story from the start."

The princess shook her head and had not time to say anything as the teacher began class.

The rest of the day dragged on through the classes and then later it was time for homework followed by dinner. By the time the pair was back in their room after dinner, Gabrielle felt something amiss. She couldn't decide whether she was tired or if it was something else. As she sat at her desk, she stared blankly at the half written scroll. Off to her right she spotted the pirate's journal, Xena's journal.

The bard stretched her hand out and her fingertips grazed over the leather bound journal. It was no thin journal but one that was quite alive, especially in Gabrielle's waking and sleeping mind. She'd read over the journal more than she could count yet the entries never seemed to change. It was the same heartache, the same anger… the same lust for revenge. Yet between it all Gabrielle picked out pieces of hope that Xena secretly clung to, each and every day.

Slowly Gabrielle tore her eyes away from the journal. She took a sidelong view of her girlfriend, who was at her desk on the opposite side of the room. She now got up and went to the door but she paused. "I'm going to go for a walk."

Ephiny stopped scribing. She studied her girlfriend for a quiet moment. "Okay. I'll see you in a bit."

The princess nodded then silently left other than the door creak.

Ephiny stared at the closed door and she debated whether to follow. She sighed and decided it was best for her girlfriend to have some alone time. She tried to go back to her writing.

The bard entered the cool fall evening. She debated whether to run back in for her cloak but she decided against it. She would be warm enough between her top and long skirt. Slowly she made her trek across the grounds and found her way into the gardens. It'd become one of her favorite places recently.

Gabrielle followed the stone bath until she came to the empty bench. She settled down
into it and pulled her legs up to sit cross legged. With a heavy sigh, she lifted her eyes to the heavens and watched the stars.

"It's a bear, Gabrielle."

"I still do not see this bear, Xena." The young girl laughed and patted her friend's stomach in sympathy. "I think you should be the bard some day."

The teenager groaned and turned her head to Gabrielle. "Why is it so hard for you to see this bear?" Xena lifted her arm straight up and tried to trace her bear out. "See it?"

"Xena, we went over this the last two moon cycles." The girl now giggled. "Every moon you bring up this bear." She turned her head to Xena too. "It's a ladle."

Xena's arm flopped back down onto the blanket that they shared out in the middle of the field. "Why do you have to be so stubborn?"

Gabrielle's mouth popped open and she shot up onto her side, staring down at Xena. "Me! You're the one that brings up this silly bear all the time."

"It's not silly," protested the older girl.

"Well it's not my fault you're imagining stars up there."

Xena suddenly had an offended look. "You're rotten, Bri."

Gabrielle grinned now.

"That's it!" Xena quickly vaulted upward and attacked her prey with fast moving fingers.

Gabrielle went on her back and began kicking and squealing. "No! No! Noooo! Gods no, Xena!" Hysterical laughter erupted from her. "Nooo! Stop!"

Xena relished the onslaught. "My bear is not silly!" Her sea blue eyes twinkled brighter than the stars.

"Okay, okay! Your bear isn't silly!"

Satisfied that she won, Xena stopped and lay back down.

"Well...." Gabrielle finally started to catch her breath again. "At least we do agree on one thing."
Xena looked at her friend, her arched eyebrow made the question.

"We both see that warrior up there."

Together the pair lifted their eyes to the sky and focused on the outline of the mighty warrior with his sword raised.

Gabrielle's memory drifted away yet she was still staring at that amazing warrior in the night sky. Instinctively her right hand lifted and her hand curled around the feather necklace. Her thumb rubbed up and down the feather in a habitual ritual.

Gradually the bard scanned the stars until she came upon the ladle. She tried desperately to find that bear Xena always tried to show her. Yet she still couldn't find Xena's bear… in all these years she still had yet to find it. She could only wonder when she'd discover it if ever.

Suddenly Gabrielle's head jerked to the right when the stones shifted under somebody's weight. She sadly smiled when her girlfriend appeared from the shadows and joined her on the bench.

Ephiny was silent and she mimicked Gabrielle's study of the stars. "Beautiful, aren't they?"

The bard only moved her head in agreement.

Ephiny relaxed back into the bench. She noted how Gabrielle clung to her necklace that Xena had given her many seasons back. She felt an ache fill her. "You really miss her, don't you?"

Gabrielle licked her lips before whispering, "More than anything else." She bit her lower lip, her head drooping down. "Now she's probably gone."

The Amazon touched her girlfriend's closest knee. "You don't know that, Gabrielle."

"Ooo gods, Ephiny," whimpered the bard, who lifted her head up. "There's absolutely no hope that she's alive." Her lower lip quivered against her quaking emotions. "And by Hades himself I doubt I'll even see her in the afterlife." She dropped her gaze. "She'll be in Tartarus and I'll be in the Elysian Fields."

"Don't give in, Gabrielle." Ephiny clasped her girlfriend's shoulder. "You have no idea what has happened or what could happen."

"I've read her journal, Ephiny… over and over." Gabrielle kept shaking her head. "There's no way she'd ever made it." She choked on her next thoughts but she forced
them out. "I didn't tell you this but...." Her eyes met Ephiny's. "She found Lila... my sister."

Ephiny's face fell from the news. Never once had Gabrielle told her and she hated that Gabrielle had carried that weight alone for so long. "Where is she?"

"I don't know... Xena's journal doesn't say." Gabrielle bit her lip. "Her last entry was about how everything was going well but she was waiting for this Roman Nobleman to find her." She was silent as she ran that last journal entry through her mind. "She was infatuated with him."

Ephiny silently studied the other Amazon.

"She was consumed by the power he had... could have. Her last moon cycle of entries were often about him, about the power."

The older Amazon considered the bard's word, she digested them then finally something came to mind. "She was changing course."

The princess curiously looked at Ephiny.

"She wanted control, Gabrielle... control over her life, her future and she knew she could only do that through power."

"Power is found through knowledge," murmured the bard.

"And fear," added Ephiny, her eyes filled with sadness.

Gabrielle shook her head. "It's not true, Ephiny." She knew exactly what her girlfriend was getting at now. "Xena could never become... become a monster."

"Not on purpose," whispered Ephiny, "but from certain events... it could rearrange anybody."

The small blond licked her lips and her eyes lowered to the ground.

"Lila must have been captured."

Gabrielle's had snapped up. "She's probably dead." She laughed bitterly and her hands started to fist up.

"You don't know this, Gabrielle," hotly reminded Ephiny. "Besides that everybody knows killing a slave is a waste of money."
Despite the ugliness of Ephiny's words they were also true. Any good slave was a live one that could do the work. It was only when a slave could not perform their duties did they become appealing to kill. If it was one thing Hecht taught her it was that survival in the slave world would be saw through making herself worth keeping alive. She'd always kept her head down and worked as hard as she could and it'd kept her alive.

"I hope you're right," finally spoke up Gabrielle.

"Don't give in so easy, Gabrielle." Ephiny reached over and clasped her hand with Gabrielle's. "In time you will be queen of a powerful Nation. When you have that power you can utilize it… to help you."

The bard hadn't considered this at all. She curiously studied Ephiny for some answers. "I could seek out my sister then?"

Slowly Ephiny nodded. "You'll have power, influence, and people outside the Nation will help. It is possible."

"I hope you're right."

The Amazon squeezed the princess's hand. "I am." She was relieved to see the faint smile on Gabrielle's face. "We should go get some rest."

The bard had to agree; it was getting late. She stood up and it felt good to stretch her legs out long. She didn't break her hand contact with Ephiny and instead laced their fingers together.

Quietly the pair strolled through the silver garden and went back to the dorm. When they were curled up in bed and in each others arms it wasn't long before they drifted asleep. For once after so many moon cycles, Gabrielle was finally able to rest well. Ephiny's words had stirred a lot of her hope again, something to hold onto again.

Gradually the late summer leaves turned into the fall leaves, they were beginning to break from their branches and glide to the receding grass below. The sun had moved further across the sky and the days were becoming shorter and shorter. The fall breezes were coming alive and bringing a cold chill at night time.

The classes at the Academy continued to be rigorous and much of the students' time was spent doing work or preparing for testing. Yet for Gabrielle, Ephiny, and their friends it was their third term but their final season, they held the place of junior. It wouldn't be until after the Winter Solstice that they would be a senex and preparing for graduation. However by mid-fall through the term, the junior class was given a new rule that would be instilled for the future and a requirement to graduate. In every
student's senex term it'd been decided that they must enter into a program where they would gain first hand experience at being bards. The Academy believed it would be an excellent way to weed out the true bard from the unaccomplished ones and give each aspiring bard the true taste of what it was like to be a bard.

The program required each student to go every fortnight to one of the selected handful of taverns, inns, and theaters in Athens to perform before an audience. The student would do it for free unless it so happened that a patron truly felt to give them money however it was free for the establishment's owner. In turn, the student was waved from having to attend one class of their choice. The new program was known as the Internus program and each student was labeled as an Internus Poietes, which Gabrielle had found quite suiting since they were intern bards or poets.

At first there were many rebukes about the program and objective of the program but only because many students were nervous. Despite many aspired as bards or poets there were only a few that could decently perform before an unknown audience. Even Gabrielle had to admit she was nervous about the idea of performing in front of an audience yet she would meet the challenge. In the end, Gabrielle understood the program's intent and she agreed with the idea. And it was something she tried not to worry so much about until it came closer, when she entered into her senex term.

Right now though she was more concerned as to why Feodoras had come to the dorm tonight. The last time he had done this at the same time last fall, it wasn't good news.

Ephiny trailed behind her girlfriend, out of the room and into the boys' portion of the dorm.

Gabrielle was before Feodoras and asking what was going on.

"You have visitors," replied the grounds keeper.

Ephiny was curious.

"They're here to see you too, Ephiny."

The two Amazons exchanged looks and they had to only guess once.

"I will show you to them," started Feodoras, "but you can't visit too long as it is getting late."

"Of course," replied Gabrielle.

"I'll get our coats," murmured Ephiny.
The grounds keeper turned around and went back out of the dorm.

The bard grabbed her coat from Ephiny and hurried out to follow Feodoras. Feodoras led her and Ephiny across the grounds and into the main Academy building where their classes were held. He showed them into a warm room where there was a small fire going in the fireplace for them. He slightly smiled when Ephiny and Gabrielle automatically lit up at seeing their visitors.

"I will leave you to visit but I'll be back shortly."

"Thank you, Feodoras." Gabrielle offered a smile before the man closed the door on his way out. She then turned to smile at her surprise visitors.

"We didn't know you were coming," spoke up Ephiny.

"That was the idea, sister." Eponin grinned from ear to ear.

Ephiny laughed and scooped up her friend into a hug.

Solari was all smiles and happily gave the princess a warm hug. "It's good to see you, Gabrielle."

"It's great to see you," murmured the bard. "How are you?"

"Well." Solari brushed back a piece of hair.

Gabrielle's attention flickered over to the quiet figure next to her. "Andra."

"Gabrielle." The blacksmith had her hands behind her back.

"I didn't…..."

The blacksmith shrugged despite her heavy coat hid most of the shrug.

The princess shook her head but she was smiling. She stepped up to the smith and hugged her tightly. "Thank you for coming."

Ephiny now realized she hadn't said hi to the other quiet figure to Eponin's left. "Gryta, how are you?"

The historian had a thin smile. "I'm great."

Ephiny stepped up and hugged her. "Thank you for coming out here."
Gabrielle now made her way over to Eponin and Gryta. She happily greeted and hugged them each. When she stepped away, she saw Ephiny was finishing her short conversation with Solari. "Let's sit." She held her hand out to the sofa and sofa chairs that went around the fireplace.

The group made themselves comfortable wherever they felt they could go. Once everybody was settled down, they all started talking at once about everything including the Nation, the latest gossip, the Academy, and other recent news. Everybody was enjoying the conversation, especially the latest and greatest gossip in the Nation.

Suddenly all the Amazons laughed together and Solari barked out, "See, Gabrielle? You're still the main gossip topic in the Nation and you're not even there!"

The women all laughed together except for Gabrielle, who was merely shaking her head and sinking in her seat.

"To be honest, Solari," cut in Gabrielle, "I think its you who heads this G Force."

The group all cheered with laughter and Solari flushed red; she'd been completely caught.

"I don't admit to a thing."

"But your cheeks certain say enough," pointed out the weapons master.

There was a round of snickers.

"I'm really surprised you four came," spoke up Gabrielle.

"It was really Eponin's idea," pointed out Solari.

Gryta leaned forward in her seat some so she could have a clear view of Solari. "And you just came to collect on more gossip about the princess."

Solari shot an offended look at the other Amazon. "I am so insulted. The princess is one of my closest friends."

"Yes, keep your friends close but your gossip even closer," teased Eponin.

The women hooted again in laughter.

"You have to admit that the trouble Gabrielle stirred up with Andra and the pact with Potidaea was the best ever!"
Ephiny was grinning at Solari's absolute fascination with gossip. "I think you stirred up the trouble, Solari."

"Wait!" Solari held up an index finger. "I heard some of the really good stuff from a very good source."

"Who might that be?" probed Eponin.

"The little shadow by the Administration Hut."

Everybody had confused looks and tried to figure out who Solari was referring to.

"Wait." Gabrielle perked up as it struck her. "You mean Vara?"

"Yyyeeesss!" Solari laughed. "That girl hears it all… she has some of the biggest ears." She put her hands up to cover her ears. "She has like… elephant ears."

"Like you know what an elephant looks like," snorted Eponin.

"I've seen them in a circus once," proudly stated Solari.

"You are a circus," jibed the historian.

Solari glared at Gryta. "You have a mean streak… I never saw that coming."

The historian wickedly grinned.

Gabrielle sighed despite she was enjoying all the bantering. She now looked to the silent blacksmith. "How are you taking to the Nation?"

Everybody's eyes fell on her.

Andra cleared her throat and shifted uneasily in her chair. "It's taking some time."

"I understand," started the princess, "it took me some time too."

Solari rolled her eyes.

"Especially with certain," Gabrielle decided to emphasis her point again, "certain Amazons." Her eyes rested on Solari.

The young Amazon snorted.
Andra was grinning but she went serious as her focus returned to Gabrielle. "It will take me some time to get use to it all. I lived alone for much of my life after my father died. To switch over to this it's...."

"It's not easy," finished the weapons master.

The blacksmith nodded her head. "But everybody has been really great and helpful."

"I'm glad to hear that." The Amazon Princess smiled at the consideration that her Amazons were showing the blacksmith. Then a thought occurred to her and she peered over at Eponin to her far right. "How goes it with the smith hut?"

"Well actually." Eponin's eyes lit up at the topic. "I have worked out a proposal that I will give to the council some time this winter. If it is approved then the Nation will untie the funds to build the smith hut this spring."

"That's great," breathed the bard. "How long will it take to build the hut?"

"Not long at all," confessed Eponin. "What will take more time is getting all the pieces for the forge. Once we have that installed then the rest will be easy... the hut built around the forge." Eponin glanced over at the blacksmith. "Two moon cycles?"

"Around there... maybe two to three," agreed Andra. She looked at the princess now. "What will take time is getting all the pieces for the smithy. The building will be the easy part."

"Did you bring all your tools?"

The blacksmith looked at the historian then replied, "Yes. Everything is being stored in the armory until the smithy is built."

"How long have you been forging for?" Ephiny's head faintly tilted to one side.

Andra seriously considered the amount of time, her eyes hazed over. "I began learning when I was about ten summers old."


The blacksmith faintly smiled at the princess's astonishment.

"You found a good one," piped in Solari, her grin directed at the princess.

"Nothing but the best," proudly stated the bard.
There was a low din of chuckles around the room. Then before anybody could begin another conversation there was a low knock at the door and Feodoras poked his head in.

"It's about time, Gabrielle and Ephiny." The grounds keeper then slipped back out and waited for them to disperse.

"You weren't headed back to the Nation now or…?" Gabrielle looked between the four friends. She stood up and everybody else rose up too.

Eponin shook her head. "We're going to stay at an inn in Athens for a few nights."

"How much time did you take away?" Ephiny was actually impressed the queen would let them all go for so long.

"About seven days," answered Eponin. "I needed a break."

Ephiny's eyes narrowed at Solari. "And what's your excuse?" She shot a grin at her friend. "You went with Gabrielle and me this past summer."

Solari shrugged. "I'm the queen's favorite."

Simultaneously everybody rolled their eyes.

Solari then slinked up to the princess and put her arm around her. "I'll really be the future queen's favorite."

The bard laughed but started walking to the door with her friends. "Yeah you always will be, Solari."

"I knew it!" Solari looked back at the group and stuck her tongue out.

Ephiny laughed but turned to her sister. "She's full of it."

The weapons master shrugged yet she didn't hide her grin. "Something she's eating."

Ephiny leaned closer and whispered, "Or somebody?"

"I so heard that, Ephiny!" yelled Solari.

"Sssssh!" ordered the princess. Gabrielle had her hand on the door handle but she was shooting a dangerous look at her friend. "It's late."

Solari cringed. "I'm sorry." Yet she could tell Gabrielle relented with a cute smile.
When the women got out of the Academy building, they found Feodoras waiting for them. Feodoras joined them on the trek to the stables.

"We will come by tomorrow to let you know where we're staying," informed the weapons master.

Both girlfriends moved their heads in agreement.

When they came to the front of the stables, they stopped and faced one another except Feodoras, who stood a few paces away.

"We'll see you tomorrow," promised Eponin.

The group exchanged hugs and goodbyes for the night then groundskeeper came over to them.

"I'll escort you four out." He then looked at the two students. "You two will be fine going back to the dorm?"

"Yes, sir," replied the slave.

Feodoras nodded. "Goodnight then, ladies."

"Goodnight, Feodoras and thank you." Gabrielle grabbed Ephiny's closest wrist.

"Thanks, Feodoras," called Ephiny as she was hauled away.

The two Amazons hastily made their way back to their dorm and quietly slipped through as the boys were all asleep. When they got into their room, they found it almost dark except for the one candle. Ephiny carefully picked up the candle and lit several others around the room to help.

Gabrielle had slipped out of her cloak and was putting it into the dresser closest. "I can't believe they're here."

"I can't either." Ephiny also slipped out of her cloak and tucked it away. "Did you know?"

"Not at all." The bard had a bright smile. "That means we have our two days off with them."

Ephiny laughed at her girlfriend's excitement. "Yes we do… after classes tomorrow."
"What should we all do?"

The Amazon shrugged as she continued to pull out her nightshift. "We'll find things to do in Athens."

The princess head was bobbing but she was quickly thinking over the things they could do. "I'm surprised that Andra came too."

Ephiny glanced over at Gabrielle, who was also getting into her nightshift. "Why you say that?"

"I don't know." The bard shrugged, which helped the nightshift settle into place. "I just didn't expect to see her."

Ephiny had a faint grin. "Come on, we need to get to bed."

"I'm just going to run to the pot," mentioned the princess. She quietly opened the door and snuck out into the main portion of the dorm.

Ephiny though climbed into bed after blowing out half the candles. She melted into the cool bed but it quickly warmed for her. She then heard her girlfriend come back in then slip under the sheets. "Tired?"

Gabrielle stifled a yawn while she nodded. "Very."

"Get your homework done?"

"Yeah thank the gods." Gabrielle snuggled into her girlfriend. "I'm not very good at poetry."

The aspiring poet quietly laughed. "Just ask if you need help."

"I'm making it," promised Gabrielle.

The older Amazon couldn't resist her grin. "Sleep well."

"You too, Eph." Gabrielle leaned in for a quick kiss before they both dozed off.

By the time Helio's started his chariot ride across the sky; the students were up and bustling in the Academy. Both Ephiny and Gabrielle could barely wait for their classes to end so that they could see their friends. Gabrielle found it increasingly hard to focus in her classes as she thought about her friends only being a half of a candlemark ride away in Athens.
When the classes came to an end, the girlfriends hurried back to their dorm. They barely even took a moment to say hi to the boys as they breezed past them into their room.

Orion and Stallonus exchanged curious looks.

"What was that?" muttered Stallonus; he was twisted around at his desk.

"I'm not sure." Orion glanced at the closed door to the girls' room. "I guess they have plans tonight."

"D-d-didn't you hear?" Twickenham looked between his two friends, who were shaking their heads. "Their f-f-friends came t-t-to vi-i-isit."

"From the Amazon Nation?" Stallonus was suddenly flooded by excitement.

Twickenham furiously nodded his head.

"By the gods!" Stallonus popped up from his chair and began beating on the girls' door. "Gabrielle!"

Gabrielle rushed to the door and threw it open. "What's wrong?"

Stallonus suddenly shied away with a step back. His cheeks were somewhat red when he realized he'd never seen so much of Gabrielle's body.

The bard realized what he was being shy about so she glanced down at her outfit. She wore her brown skirt, tall brown boots, and her green halter top. She cleared her throat and lifted her gaze to the young man. "Yes, Stall?"

Orion quickly cut in to save his friend. "We just heard that your friends from the Amazons came last night."

The princess smiled. "They did… late last night. We're going to see them in Athens."

"How long are they staying?" Stallonus finally recovered yet his cheeks still flushed.

"For a few days."

"Do we g-g-get t-t-to meeet them?"

Gabrielle smiled across to Twickenham. "If you guys would like to." She glanced over her shoulder to Ephiny back in the room. "What you think, Eph?"
The Amazon came over to her girlfriend's side and looked at her other friends. "Sure, guys. Maybe tomorrow since we'll all have off?"

Stallonus had the largest smile out of everybody. "I can't wait! Are they all dressed like Amazons?"

Gabrielle chuckled before responding. "Yes, Stall."

"Where are they staying in Athens?"

Gabrielle now shifted her attention to Orion. "We're not sure. They'll be here soon to meet up with us."

"Can we meet them really quick?" pressed Stallonus.

Gabrielle laughed but she heard Ephiny groaning behind her. "I would say yes but I think we're going to be in a rush, Stall." She noted the sad expression on his face. "I promise you'll meet them tomorrow. They'll probably want a tour of the Academy."

"Sweet," murmured Stallonus.

"Actually we need to go," reminded Ephiny. She went back into the room and picked up their cloaks plus Gabrielle's small pouch. What nobody did notice was that Ephiny had carefully wrapped her sword up in the cloaks.

Gabrielle stepped into the main portion of the dorm as Ephiny went around her. "We'll see you guys later tonight."

"Have fun." Orion offered a smile.

"We will." Gabrielle went over to him and gave a feather kiss to his cheek. "Have a goodnight too."

Orion's smile widened. "We will."

The princess also gave Stallonus a kiss on the cheek as well as Twickenham as she was headed out. She held the door open for Ephiny then waved bye to the boys.

Ephiny eyed her girlfriend as she hurried down the steps. "They'll probably be at the gates."

Together the pair rushed across the grounds to the stables, in record time tacked their horses up, and walked to the gates with their horses in tow.
Feodoras stood at the gates with two soldiers that were the hired guards for the Academy. "I see you two finally showed up. They've been waiting." He directed to the four mounted women on the outside of the grounds.

"We're sorry," apologized the bard.

"No rush," offered Eponin from up on her horse.

Feodoras pulled out a scroll from inside his cloak along with a quill. "When will you two be back tonight so the guards know?"

The bard looked to her girlfriend for an answer. "Moon high?"

"No later," agreed Ephiny.

Feodoras scribed it in scroll then rolled it up. "Be safe then." He then peered up at the four armed women. "But then again…" He chuckled. "Get moving before it gets any later. Helios will be setting in about a candlemark, enough time to make it to Athens."

"Of course." Gabrielle stepped through the gates then mounted Torqueo.

Ephiny followed her girlfriend's example.

"Bye, ladies." The grounds keeper smiled then headed back into the Academy.

The group of Amazons turned their horses in the right direction and started off at a walk down the road. Once they were far down the road, Ephiny called for everybody to stop.

"What is it?" questioned Gabrielle.

Ephiny shot a wicked grin. "Take your cloak and satchel." She held them out.

The bard grabbed them and decided to just put them on. She then intently watched as Ephiny revealed her sheathed sword under her own cloak that rested in her lap.

The weapons master was one big grin and shaking her head.

Ephiny lifted her sword and stated, "Never leave home without it." She reached behind and hooked it into place.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes yet as she looked to her friends, they all were armed. "I feel like I'm traveling with an army."
Solari laughed and teased, "You forgot your staff."

"I do have my wits, you know." The princess gave her friend a challenging look.

"True," agreed Eponin. "Those lips of yours are a weapon."

"I bet they are, aren't they, Eph?" shot Solari.

Ephiny directed a dark glare at her friend.

Solari smirked and shot back, "That's for last night."

"Okay, let's go." The weapons master decided she had enough of the bantering and hurried the group along.

The six Amazons continued their journey to Athens and it wasn't long before they entered through the city walls. And no matter how many times Gabrielle came to the city, she was always entranced by it all. She loved the city but more than anything she wanted to see Corinth soon.

They all agreed at once that they needed to eat, which Eponin had been prepared for. Earlier in the day Eponin, Solari, Andra, and Gryta had done some scooting around the city and found a place for dinner later. So they took a slow ride through Athens until they were on the south-west side of the city. The crowds kept them at a slow walk but they eventually found themselves at a small stable

The Amazons untacked their horses, stabled them, and paid the stable boy to care for them and feed them. The group then went into the busy tavern called the Fishhead. When they entered it, the tavern was packed with customers but Eponin managed to find a large, round table in a corner.

Gabrielle took a seat, her back to the crowd but she noticed Eponin took the seat that let her see everything in the tavern. She found that curious but as she thought about it she now understood why.

Ephiny sat next to Gabrielle, her hand brushing over the bard's bare knee.

The princess flashed a smile at her girlfriend.

Andra was the one that hadn't sat down yet. She did hang her cloak on the back of her chair then looked at everybody. "I'll get us a barmaid and drinks."

Solari sprung up. "I'll help. What's everybody want?"
"Port," voted the weapons master.

"Cider for Gabrielle and I."

Solari looked at the historian now. "Gryta?"

Gryta seemed to be debating. "Port, thanks."

"Okay we'll be back." Solari hurried off with Andra ahead of her.

Gabrielle felt herself relax and a content feeling washing over her. "I was surprised by everybody coming." She then glanced at Andra, who was at the bar. "Especially Andra."

Eponin leaned back in her chair until it touched the wall behind her. "It was actually her idea to come."

"Really?" The bard was now double shocked.

"Yes," Eponin's eyes flickered between Andra's back and Gabrielle. "One day I was in the office talking to Hali and Calandra while Andra was there. Hali mentioned that I should take a break." She stopped and shrugged. "After Hali and Calandra left my office, Andra suggested that it'd be good to see you and Ephiny."

The princess was still stunned.

The weapons master's lips spread into a grin. "Why so surprised, princess?"

The slave shifted out of her shocked features. "I just… I didn't think she thought much of me."

Ephiny was curiously studying her girlfriend.

The weapons master shrugged again. "I think she sees you as a little sister. She said she's never had any siblings."

"Huh," murmured the princess. She said nothing else as Solari and Andra came back to the table.

The blacksmith came to Gabrielle first and served her drink first.

Gabrielle peered up. "Thank you."
Andra paused and smiled. "You're welcome."

Then it was the first time that Gabrielle realized the fact that Andra had deep blue eyes. She stiffened some as those eyes reminded her of somebody else.

"Are you okay, Gabrielle?" Andra touched the bard's shoulder.

The princess shook it off. "Yeah, yeah… sorry." She turned away.

The blacksmith let it go and served Ephiny her drink next.

Solari had given Gryta and Eponin their drinks but she started for the bar again. "I got ours, Andra."

"Thanks, Solari." The blacksmith decided to take her seat.

Gabrielle took a long sip of her warm cider then after putting the mug down, she toyed with the handle. She leveled her eyes with her historian. "How goes the research?"

"Well, my princess." Gryta had a broad smile suddenly. "We're up to fifty scrolls now."

"At that rate you'll have to submit an approval for a scroll house," teased Ephiny.

The bard huffed. "Could you hear the response now?"

Gryta laughed. "Maybe when your hut and mine are popping at the seams with scrolls then they'll build us one, princess."

"You're probably right."

"Well maybe by that time you'll be the queen," suggested Andra.

"A lot of good that does with the council." The weapons master snorted. "Sometimes going back to a monarchy system would be easier."

"But not safer," pointed out the bard.

Slowly Eponin agreed. "I do like the republic government but at times it seems so slow."

The barmaid then appeared by the table and smiled at all the women. "Welcome, ladies."
Solari had shown up too and handed the blacksmith her drink. She then took her seat.

"Tonight our fresh fish is sea bass with feta, wrasse with feta and oil, and tuna with a thyme and grape sauce. Everything is served with vegetables, which are asparagus and beans." The barmaid then stood patiently and took each Amazon's order then quietly left to put their orders in.

"I can't believe you got wrasse," spoke up Solari.

Eponin grinned. "I've never tried it."

"It sounds good though," commented Gabrielle.

"I'm just excited to get fish."

"You've never had it huh?" Ephiny relaxed back in her chair with her cider.

Solari shook her head. "This'll be my first meal."

"That's why I picked this place," mentioned the weapons master.

Solari gave the weapons master an appreciative look.

"So how go classes?" Eponin shot a teasing grin at the two students.

"Really good," replied Gabrielle.

"We did just find out about this new program we have to do." Ephiny let out a dramatic sigh.

Gabrielle swatted her girlfriend. "It's not that bad."

"What you have to do?" Andra took a sip of her port but kept her interest focused on the pair.

"Weeeellll...." Gabrielle questioned her girlfriend but Ephiny shrugged back. She sighed but went into the explanation about the program. By the time she explained it all, the other Amazons were smirking at the two students.

"What?" barked Ephiny.

"You hate getting up in front of people, Ephiny."

Ephiny glowered at her sister.
"I'm not much better," admitted the princess. "It'll be good for us both." Her left hand slipped under the table and squeezed Ephiny's knee. "Besides." She shrugged while her right hand curled around her mug. "I know I'll have to get in front of the Nation later down the road."

"Lucky you!" teased Solari. "I couldn't do it."

"You're good with words and capturing people's attention," murmured Ephiny to the princess.

The young bard wasn't as confident but she could only hope she would be. "Time will tell."

Ephiny now covered her right hand over Gabrielle's under the table. She gave a gentle squeeze to emphasize her support.

"When will you graduate?" The historian leaned forward as she was so curious.

"Some time this coming spring." Gabrielle's head dipped as she considered it more. "They haven't said when just yet."

"I want to come to see," stated Solari. She held up her mug in honor.

"Here, here!" Eponin tapped her mug against Solari's. "To see my sister graduate will be an honor."

"Yes, I wouldn't miss it for the world." Andra held up her mug.

The historian sighed then held up her mug. "What the Hades!"

The group laughed at Gryta.

"To the princess and Ephiny's graduation!" cheered the four Amazons and they knocked mugs together.

After Solari took a long drink, she grinned at the princess. "Then you'll be taking over as princess."

The bard dared a challenging look. "I thought I was."

"Yes but you don't have any of the duties." Solari shot a dangerous grin.

The princess now eyed the weapons master.
Eponin merely shrugged as if she didn't know what Solari was talking about. Yet under the table she quickly kicked Solari hard.

Solari's head whipped around to Eponin.

The weapons master narrowed her eyes.

"I've really heard some good things too," mentioned the blacksmith. She noted Gabrielle's confusion. "About you, I meant. The Nation seems to really approve of you."

Eponin restrained from groaning and sinking in her chair. She heard Solari snickering beside her. She made a mental note to have a discussion with Andra about refraining from the praises.

Yet Andra did take notice of the weapon master's annoyance. She didn't really care as she admired Gabrielle very much. "As a matter of fact the Nation seems fairly excited for you to be the queen later."

Gabrielle sat there rather shocked.

Gryta was the next closest to Andra and she hastily kicked her now.

The blacksmith pretended like she didn't feel a thing. She may be an Amazon but by no means did she understand all the traditions so she could play dumb. She'd heard about the system of never praising the princess for her actions or who she was until it was later, which she didn't agree with.

"Just remember you have to earn it," spoke up Eponin, her eyes fell on the small princess. "The Nation won't respect you otherwise, princess."

"I understand," muttered the slave.

Ephiny had been biting the inside of her mouth the entire time. She was split between agreeing with Andra and following Amazon traditions. She could remember the times when she was never allowed to praise Terreis, which was hard on her then. Now it so happened she was dating the current princess and she was often in a dangerous position.

Gabrielle could tell that the topic needed to be change and quickly. She cleared her throat and said, "By the way, some of our friends from the Academy wanted to meet everybody."
Ephiny felt her body loosen up when the topic switched around.

"Who's that?" interjected Solari.

"We've been friends with them since we started at the Academy."

Ephiny nodded her agreement. "Orion, Stallonus, Twickenham, and Euripides."

"We'd mentioned that we'd probably be giving you four a tour of the Academy tomorrow and that you could meet them then."

Eponin scanned everybody's faces and saw nobody disagreeing. "Sounds good to me."

"Gods… Stallonus will be excited."

Gabrielle laughed at Ephiny's statement. "He will be." After a content sigh, she shot her next question at the weapons master. "How is the Nation doing?"

The weapons master's head bobbed for a bit. "Well… really well."

"I was wondering, when will Maired be taking the priestess's position?"

Eponin didn't really have an answer so she shrugged. "It's in the air right now."

"But I think the army has selected a possible successor for the stratègos," informed the historian.

The princess and Ephiny's attention instantly shot up at the news.

"Really?" Ephiny leaned over the table some as if getting closer would help her hear better. "Who is that?"

Gabrielle was toying with her mug but she was centered on Gryta.

"What's her name?" Gryta looked to Eponin for help.

"Kaylee," simply supplied the weapons master.

The historian grinned as she looked back at the Academy students. "That's it. Kaylee is her name."

"I don't recognize the name," muttered Ephiny.

"She's from the Thessaly Nation actually." Eponin cleared her throat then took a drink
"She just arrived after you two left for the Academy," further added Solari. "She's pretty hot too for her age."

Eponin groaned while everybody else laughed at Solari.

"How old is she?"

Eponin tasted the last of her port as it washed down her throat. "I believe about forty winters old… give or take."

"Well how old is Commander Kalonice?" The blacksmith had an odd expression. "She can't be that old."

"She is actually," started Eponin, "she's pushing fifty-five or maybe more. She's been the stratègos for about fifteen springs. It'll be hard to match let alone out do Commander Kalonice."

"She is an excellent stratègos," agreed Gryta.

"So who is this Kaylee?" interrupted the princess. "I mean is she well known in the Thessaly Nation?" She then fixed her eyes on Solari. "Solari?"

"What?" barked the young Amazon.

"You know all the gossip." There was a huge smirk on Ephiny's face.

Solari sighed, rolled her eyes, and then she straightened up. "Well from what I've heard-" She was cut off by everybody laughing at her. She waited for a few heartbeats for everybody to settle down.

"Go on." The princess still couldn't suppress one last snicker.

Solari proudly cleared her throat. "Well I heard that Melosa actually recruited her from the Thessaly Nation."

"Wait, who's the queen in that Nation?"

Solari looked at Eponin for help. "Antiope?"

Eponin only nodded.

"Queen Antiope," repeated Solari when she turned her head back to Gabrielle. "Who
actually happens to be Queen Hippolyta's sister."

"Wow," murmured the bard, her eyes wide. "Which Nation is Queen Hippolyta's?"

"The Epirus Nation," quietly mentioned Ephiny.

Solari nodded her agreement. "But wait, this keeps getting better. I heard that Kaylee was trained by the best Amazon warrior ever."

Eponin was now curious, her chair's front legs slamming into the floor. "Who?"

"Penthesilea."

The weapons master's eyes darkened into a black. "You're joking."

Solari held up her hands. "Never." She lowered her hands to the table again. "But I'm just telling you gossip… who knows if it's true."

"No." Eponin leaned her chair back with her mug in her lap. "I've heard that Penthesilea is in the Thessaly Nation… Queen Hippolyta sent her to protect her sister."

"So it could be true that Kaylee was trained by Penthesilea. That's what I hear." Solari gazed at everybody. "Supposedly it was Queen Melosa that went to the Thessaly Nation and recruited her."

"How'd the queen hear about her?"

Solari shrugged at Gryta. "You know how word travels in the Nations."

"The queen did go on a trip back in the summer," muttered the princess. "That's what it must have been about."

"Most likely," agreed Ephiny.

The group then went quiet when the barmaid arrived. She quickly handed out four of the plates, which she'd balanced two on her arms very carefully. She then hurried back to the bar to pick up the other two meals and slid them in front of their owners.

"Anything else, ladies? More drinks?"

"I need more." Eponin held up her mug and handed it over.

"Me too." Solari held hers out.
The barmaid took it but gazed at the weapons master. "Port?" After Eponin nodded, she looked at Solari. "Cider?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The barmaid double checked to see if anybody else wanted anything then she hurried off.

Gabrielle picked up her fork but didn't touch her meal yet. "So this Kaylee must be good if the queen went all the way to Thessaly to recruit her?"

"Must be," readily agreed Solari.

The princess now realized nobody was touching their dinners. At first she couldn't understand why then she moved her fork into the food and that was when the other Amazons picked up their forks. Gabrielle just contained a grin at realizing she'd had complete control over that situation and the Amazons did that out of respect. "I can't wait to meet her then."

"What's she look like?" inquired Ephiny.

Solari was busy taking her first bite of sea bass. She softly moaned then it hit her that Ephiny had asked her a question. She shyly laughed. "Sorry." She had a lopsided grin when Ephiny chuckled at her. "She's like... Gabrielle and Andra's height... maybe a hair taller or so." Solari thoughtfully considered Kaylee's physical appearance. "She has about shoulder length straight hair. Its red too... but not like fire red."

The bard perked up. "Auburn?"

"Yeah, exactly. And her eyes are sorta a grayish to blue shade."

"It sounds like you got a real good look, Solari." The blacksmith finished her comment with a snicker.

"Haha! Don't start acting like Gryta."

The historian snorted and went back to her meal.

"She has broad shoulders... chiseled features, she really carries herself well."

Ephiny thoughtfully chewed on her tuna and really enjoyed the smoked flavor mixed with the cheese. After she took a sip of her cider, she asked her sister, "What you think of her, Eponin?"
The weapons master didn't reply as the barmaid came up and gave her the refilled mug. "Thank you," she murmured then retuned her eyes to Ephiny. "I don't know yet. I've only briefly met her. She's already going through some rigorous tryouts with the polemarchos I hear."

"You'll be working with her a lot if she becomes the stratègos." The blacksmith lifted a dark eyebrow at the weapons master.

Gabrielle caught Andra's look and for a heartbeat it caught her off guard. She quickly dropped her head and picked at her tuna.

"I know," murmured the weapons master. "We'll see if she can make the cut even."

"Anybody else trying out besides her?"

Eponin considered Ephiny's question then nodded. "I think there are two others trying out for stratègos."

"Hmph." Ephiny went back to her meal.

"I guess time will tell," mumbled the bard between her food.

Then the Amazons all went silent as they enjoyed their meal. By the time dinner was over the barmaid appeared and took their clean plates. She stood there, plates in one hand and her other hand on her hip. "Dessert?"

The group exchanged looks.

"What's the dessert?" spoke up the princess.

The barmaid smiled at the small blond. "A fennel tart that is honey-caramelized."

"Mmmmm." The distinct noise came from the blacksmith. "I'll have that myself."

Gabrielle let out a soft giggle and she nodded at the barmaid. "Me too."

"I don't think I can handle anymore." Gryta leaned deep into her chair, her hands on her full belly.

"One for me," piped in Solari.

"Me too," chimed in Ephiny.

The barmaid's gaze settled on the weapons master.
Eponin's lips puckered as she tried to fake her debate.

Ephiny smirked. "Come on, sister."

The weapons master let out this huge sigh. "Okay."

Gabrielle's lips twisted into a smile when Eponin grinned at the idea of dessert.

"I'll be back shortly." The barmaid reminded herself that five of the six wanted dessert.

"So where to next, princess?"

Gabrielle tapped her fingers on the table but she didn't reply to Eponin.

"The market?" asked Ephiny. She caught the excitement flowing off her girlfriend now. "The market then."

Solari groaned. "Always those damn markets. You're like a fly to shit with a market, princess."

The bard opened her mouth to rebuke the comparison.

Eponin got the drop on it by reaching out just as Solari took a drink of her cider. She tipped the mug up higher and the cider went pouring over Solari's lower face.

Solari sputtered the cider away and wiped her face off after slamming the mug down. "Eponin!"

"That was the princess you just insulted," chided the weapons master.

Solari had a frown but Eponin succeeded her. After she settled down, she looked at the princess. "I apologize, princess."

"It's okay, Solari." The bard offered a smile to help the situation.

Eponin approved of it and leaned her chair back again. "We'll go to the market then."

Solari sighed and somewhat slumped in her chair. She knew at times her mouth could move faster than her thoughts and that always irritated her when it happened. She'd decided long ago, when Ephiny and Gabrielle began dating, that she seemed to pick the wrong things to say and the wrong times to say them.
Gabrielle noticed her friend's internal upset. She would make sure later to talk to Solari to settle her down. She looked to Andra. "How goes your training?"

The blacksmith shifted out her thoughts when Gabrielle's question came at her. "Fairly well. My father had trained me some with a sword when I was young. I haven't forgotten any of it."

"So you've chosen the sword?"

Andra nodded at the princess. "It'll be my primary weapon."

"The princess's primary weapon is the staff."

The blacksmith looked from Gryta to the princess again. "Really?"

Slowly the slave nodded her head. "I don't believe in killing."

Andra quietly admired the young woman more. "How old are you, princess?"

"I'll be seventeen this spring."

The blacksmith tilted her head. "I wish I was as wise as you when I was at that age. It may have saved me a lot of heartache."

The weapons master had finished her swig of port. She'd been carefully listening since Andra was showing a habit of praising the princess. "The princess has been through hard times, Andra. She's had to grow up quickly."

The bard now studied the stoic weapons master.

Andra though was staring at the princess but then the princess looked to her. She turned her gaze away. "The training goes well, princess." She hastily stated to detour the topic back. "I will be happy when I am to go for my Amazon Judgment."

"When will it be?"

"Too early to tell yet, princess." The smith rested back against her chair.

Just then the barmaid returned with the desserts. She passed them out and gave everybody clean forks to eat with. She then disappeared into the bustling crowd at the tavern.

"Ooo wow," murmured the bard. She let the sweet tart swirl around her tongue. "This is really good."
"Mmmhmmm." Andra had a satisfied grin.

Eponin was very delighted she'd gotten the dessert but she didn't let anybody know it. With hooded eyes, she peered over at Gryta. "Want a try?"

Gryta couldn't resist. She took the weapons master's fork and pierced a tidbit. Once her tongue wrapped around the delicate morsel she groaned from how amazing it was. "By Artemis." She gave Eponin's fork back and straightened up in her chair, her neck craned high.

Gabrielle was curious as to what the historian was about to do.

Within a flash, Gryta bolted from her chair and tracked down their barmaid. When she came back to her seat, everybody was grinning at her. "What?" She glowered at them all. "I'm not full anymore."

The Amazon Princess laughed and covered her mouth to stifle it better.

The Amazons finished their desserts and waited for Gryta to eat hers. Afterwards, they all stood up and Eponin sought out the barmaid. She paid her along with a tip then followed her friends out of the tavern.

"To the market?" asked the excited slave.

Eponin couldn't resist her smile. "Yes, my princess." She touched the bard's shoulder. "You and Ephiny lead."

Ephiny had a lopsided smile as her excited girlfriend grabbed her hand and started the Amazon procession to the market.

Eponin shifted closer to Solari and Gryta. "Keep your wits about yourself."

Andra heard the weapons master's advice so she shifted closer to the princess. Her hand shifted under her cloak and rested on the hilt of her generic sword. She didn't like the fact that Gabrielle wasn't armed with anything.

Finally the group shifted into the well torch lit market where it was still fairly busy even at night.

"Athens never sleeps."

Gabrielle peered up at Ephiny when she whispered that to her. "I think you're right, Eph."
The first stop they made was at a clothes stand. Gabrielle was quite interested in finding something more to add to her slim wardrobe. She'd only had her long brown skirt with blue top, and her short brown skirt with her green halter top. She couldn't forget her two Amazon attires but both were reserved for when she was in the Nation.

"What you looking for exactly?" Ephiny shifted closer to her girlfriend.

"I'm not sure. At least another top to go with my long skirt."

Ephiny nodded her head and helped sift through all the articles of clothing. She came upon a simple white blouse, which was much like the blue on Gabrielle already had. "This?"

The bard had something in her hand and set it down. She stepped back for a better image of it. "Yeah, I like that." She carefully took it from Ephiny and held it against herself.

"That's ten dinars there, beautiful." The merchant now came in for the attack on his customer.

"Ten dinars!" Gabrielle dropped her jaw for emphasis. "By the gods." She threw it back on the stack of tops. "No thanks."

The merchant picked up the top. "Okay, okay… eight dinars."

The princess crossed her arms over her chest. "Two dinars."

The merchant was the one to give the outrageous look. "Hades, girl… this is a fine piece of woven shirt."

Andra had pulled away from her exploring of the clothes. She'd picked up on the bartering between the merchant and the princess. She came closer to the princess but stayed behind her. She pulled her cloak open a little and revealed her sword.

The merchant couldn't ignore seeing the glinting sword that the older woman behind Gabrielle had. He saw her lift it out of her sheath some then when he looked at her face, he went a little pale. "Perhaps we can reach an agreement at five dinars. That's half off."

The bard had caught the sudden change and followed his eyes. She twisted around and saw the blacksmith quickly pulling her cloak forward again. She furrowed her eyebrows and turned back to the merchant. "Four dinars."
Eponin hadn't missed a beat of it. She could only wonder if the princess would later confront the blacksmith or not. She decided to let it go and see what unfolded otherwise she'd handle it on her own later.

"Okay, okay… four dinars." The vendor happily took the money then handed over the shirt.

"Thank you." Gabrielle folded up the shirt then tucked it into her pouch at her side. She also put the tiny bag of dinars back in her satchel too.

The friends then continued on their way through the market. It wasn't long before they happened upon what was a familiar sight for Andra. Eponin and Gryta both decided they had to stop there. So everybody made a beeline across the market and went to the blacksmith's stand.

Andra also followed underneath the tent and she sensed Ephiny and Gabrielle just behind. She saw the blacksmith was a bulky man with a shaved head, only pants on and his leather apron on. She intently watched him finish with upsetting the metal in his hands before he would move into the punching technique.

Ephiny, Solari, and Eponin all moved about in the smithy, finding the various weapons quite unique and beautiful.

Gabrielle stopped in front of a table of daggers. She ran her hands across them. "He does nice craftsmanship," she muttered to herself.

Andra came closer to the blacksmith and watched him place the metal back into the forge. "How long you've been forging?"

The burly blacksmith looked up to the small woman. "Fifteen seasons now."

The female blacksmith nodded. "You have nice work."

"Thank you." He pulled out the metal that was in the last stages of shaping into a sword. "Where you from?" He could easily tell she wasn't from Athens.

"Stagira," simply replied the Amazon.

"Nice area I've heard." The blacksmith set his hot metal onto the anvil. He picked up his hammer.

Gabrielle had finished looking at everything but she knew her friends would be longer. So she unknowingly slipped out of the tent and went into the busy street but waited just nearby the flap.
Andra smiled at the other blacksmith. "Yeah, thanks. I'll keep that in mind. If you'll excuse me." She shifted past and went out of the tent after seeing the princess left.

Eponin, from a side glance, saw what was happening so she repositioned herself closer to the entrance but never stepped out. She tilted her head a little to listen better.

"Not much for weapons huh?"

Gabrielle quickly rotated her head to Andra as the new Amazon came out. "Not really."

Andra moved closer to the princess. "It's a last defence," she agreed.

"Or a quick way to intimidate?" The bard arched an eyebrow at her friend.

The blacksmith at first couldn't understand what the princess meant but then it struck her. "I didn't think-"

"I saw," stated Gabrielle. She cleared her throat while folding her arms over her chest. "I'd like to think I can barter without having to intimidate my opponent."

"I did not mean to insult your skills, Gabrielle."

The slave relented some and touched Andra's right arm. "Just save the weapons for people who need to be intimidated."

"Of course." Andra dipped her head in respect. She felt the bard's hand leave her arm. "I apologize."

"Thank you," whispered the bard.

Eponin faintly smiled and went back over to her sister and Solari.

Gabrielle decided it was best to change the topic. "Are you comfortable in the Nation?"

Andra could tell that her friend wanted only the truth. "I am trying." She now rested her right hand on her sword hilt. "It will take me time. I like it though."

"I'm very grateful that you joined us." The younger woman smiled softly. "We truly needed a blacksmith."

"That is not why I ever chose to come," stated Andra.
The princess studied her friend.

Andra could tell that Gabrielle wanted the truth. "It was more your words that helped me decide, Gabrielle. I know I've been living alone for far too long. I've been on the road too many seasons."

"You traveled a lot?"

"Yes," Andra sighed. "My father liked to travel… it was what actually killed my mother." She shook her head at the distant memory. "She'd fallen ill… it killed her. Yet my father refused to settle anywhere." She gazed at the princess. "I suppose I am more my father than my mother."

"Perhaps," softly spoke the princess; her own parents coming to mind. "So you hope to settle in the Nation?"

"Yes… I believe I am ready." Yet Andra shrugged. "Who knows if anybody will settle for me though."

Gabrielle said nothing as she studied Andra and how her wavy dark brown hair floated around her face. She read into the depth of Andra's blue eyes. She could tell that Andra was as much of a lost soul as Gabrielle was. Maybe that was the key to their bond since the beginning back in mid-summer.

"I think I understand," finally whispered the bard. "You could say I've been moving around a lot."

"Time to make a home," stated Andra. She mirrored the smile that was on the princess's face.

"Exactly." Gabrielle's attention was stolen away when the Amazons filed out of the smithy. "Buy anything?"

Solari held up her new toy. "Nothing like poking around with one of these!"

Gabrielle laughed at seeing the dagger. "I saw that one." She then shifted her interrogating look to her girlfriend. "Eeeph?"

The Amazon shook her head several times. "Nope. I was good."

Gryta merely held up her empty hands for her answer.

Eponin though moved past everybody. "And I refuse to answer, princess." Before
anything came out of the princess's gaping mouth, she went into the sea of bodies.

The rest of the Amazons hurried to catch up with the weapons master. The Amazons continued milling through the market but nobody really bought anything afterwards. It started to become late and Eponin decided it was best for them to head back. She had no intent on making Ephiny or Gabrielle late for the Academy.

So the friends hurried back to the stables and tacked up their horses. It wasn't long before they began their journey through Athens and Eponin made sure to point out their inn. They then began the short ride back to the Academy gates and once there, everybody said goodbye with hugs.

Gabrielle and Ephiny waved together as they went through the open gates. When they were through, the guards pushed the gates closed the dropped the wood timber to lock it. Quietly the two girls made it across the grounds and stabled their horses before finally making it back to their room for the night. It didn't take them long to slip away into their dreamscapes where pleasant dreams filled them.

The following day the bard and her girlfriend spent the day giving their friends a tour around the Academy. The visitors seemed to appreciate the beautiful grounds of the Academy along with the satisfying food. At lunch time, Ephiny and Gabrielle had invited the boys to join them. The boys were well received by the four Amazons and there were many stories passed around. All four of the young men were very excited to meet other Amazons and hear more about the Nation.

For the rest of the days, Ephiny and Gabrielle spent them with their friends. It wasn't until about four days after their arrival did the Amazons decide it was time to go. The four Amazons had packed up from their inn then trekked out of Athens to the Academy. There the guards met them and they requested to see Gabrielle and Ephiny.

One guard hurried off and sought out Feodoras. It wasn't long before Feodoras showed up with the two students that'd been quietly doing homework in their room. The princess and Ephiny came out of the gates and smiled at their friends.

"Time to go," sadly mentioned the weapons master.

The bard felt her shoulders slump a little. "Yeah we know."

"Thank you for coming." Ephiny scanned each of her friend's faces.

"It was our pleasure," replied Eponin.

Gradually the group said their goodbyes and refrained from getting upset, Gabrielle may have been the slight exception. She'd been so touched by the surprise visit from
all four and she couldn't help as a few tears came down her cheeks.

"Hey its okay." The blacksmith stepped up for another hug.

Gabrielle chuckled some and hugged her friend again. "I'm sorry."

Andra had a sad smile while she stole a heartbeat to rub the younger woman's back. "We will be back for graduation."

The bard pulled back and quickly wiped her tears back. She felt Ephiny touch the small of her back. "We'll be in the Nation for Solstice break."

Andra brightened at the news.

"I forgot about that," murmured Solari.

Then a thought occurred to the princess. "But we may not be there right away. Actually...." She focused solely on Eponin. "Can you tell the queen that Ephiny and I plan to go to Articia to see my grandfather."

The weapons master understood. "I'll relay the message to the queen."

"Thank you."

"We should be on our way," ordered the weapons master. She mounted her mare now. The other three Amazons shifted to their horses too and swung up onto them.

"Study hard, ladies," ordered Eponin.

"We will," promised Ephiny. She smiled up at her sister.

Eponin briskly nodded then pulled her mare around to head off.

"Be safe everybody!" called Gabrielle. She shifted closer to her girlfriend. When Andra, Solari, and the historian turned to wave goodbye, she and Ephiny waved back. "Eponin is too proud."

Ephiny sighed as she now understood what her girlfriend meant. "Truth be told, she's a bigger mush ball than you."

Gabrielle laughed. "Come on, Eph. We need to finish our homework."

Ephiny conceded and headed back into the Academy.
On the slow walk back to the dorm, Gabrielle's thoughts took her away for awhile. She then snapped back when something occurred to her. "Ephiny?"

The older Amazon pulled away from her own thoughts. "Yes?"

"I meant to ask, why do you and Eponin always call each other sister?" Ephiny was mildly confused and Gabrielle noted it. "Because you've told me you're not blood related."

"Actually in a way we are," replied Ephiny.

The bard stopped walking and grabbed her girlfriend's arm. "But…?"

Ephiny's lips creased with a grin. "We became blood sisters."

"You mean you did a ritual?" After Ephiny's nod, Gabrielle became even more curious. "How'd it happen or… who did it?"

Ephiny chuckled at the princess's curiosity. "Well it was many, many seasons back that Eponin and I did it. We went to Priestess Narkissa and she performed the ritual."

Her head tilted in question. "Why do you ask?"

Gabrielle continued the trek towards the dorm. "I was just curious about why you two call each other sister when you're not blood related and I've never noticed anybody calling each other sisters when they're not related."

Ephiny absorbed Gabrielle's long winded explanation. "It doesn't take very long… just a day."

"What is the ritual?"

"First there are no witnesses other than the priestess, yourself, and whoever you're bonding with. The priestess cuts both women's palms and ties them together. After that, they stay in a quiet room within the temple for a full day. After a day has passed, the priestess will let them out and tell you that the ritual is over and that you're now blood sisters."

The bard had knitted eyebrows as she tried to figure out why they would spend a day together. She decided she couldn't quite understand so she finally asked. "Why for a day?"

"The idea is that the two future blood sisters are supposed to talk about their pasts so they get to know each other. They also sleep together, eat together… like they're
family. Its time set aside to experience each other, develop more, and become sisters."

"Huh." The slave found the information interesting. She could think of one person who she'd want to share the ritual with yet the detail about sharing her past wasn't something she thought she could do. "Do they have to share their pasts?"

Ephiny stopped at the bottom of the steps to the dorm. She turned to her girlfriend. "Its apart of the ritual… if it is to work properly." She saw how Gabrielle hung her head some. "You don't want to share what's happened huh?"

"Not really." Gabrielle lifted her dark green eyes. "But if I were to ask somebody to become my blood sister then I shouldn't be concerned about what they'd think about my past to begin with."

Ephiny lightened at hearing Gabrielle's resolution about the problem. "Very true." She then ascended the steps while saying, "Come on."

"Is that an order for the princess?" teased the bard.

Ephiny rolled her eyes. "Come on, princ-ass."

Gabrielle's mouth hung open for a few heartbeats but she hurried up the steps.

When the girls got into the dorm, they found their dorm mates already working on their homework. They quietly slipped by and went into their room to finish up their own work. Eventually this ritual continued for several moon cycles as the students went to classes, dinner, homework, and to sleep. The days became shorter while the nights lengthened and the leaves had turned and some were beginning their decent to the ground.

It wasn't until there was a brisk chill in the air did the Winter Solstice come near. The Academy released the students ten days prior to the Winter Solstice so that everybody had time to travel far and wide to family or friends. It was Gabrielle's intention to see Cornelio so she and Ephiny went directly to the small town of Articia. It only took them a day's ride but they were glad to make it considering the brisk nights. It would only be a matter of days before the first snow could possibly fall.

The bard felt incredibly excited as she rode through the metal gates to Cornelio's compound. She and Ephiny went first to the stable and settled Torqueo and Diana in for the night. And despite Gabrielle was a little saddle sore she couldn't help but hurry across the grounds to the main house. When she knocked on the door, she was greeted by a young slave and he peered up curiously at her.

"Yes, ma'am?"
Gabrielle settled some as she realized she hadn't met him the last time she was here. "Hi, I'm Gabrielle." She held her hand out to Ephiny. "This is my friend Ephiny."

The young man was a little younger than Gabrielle with sandy blond hair, brown eyes, and a few hairs taller. "Gabrielle?" He chewed on the name then suddenly his face lit up. "Oh yes. Master Cornelio has been waiting for you."

"Who's that?" called a girl's voice.

The slave stepped aside as a small girl came in the doorway. "Gabby! Auntie Ephiny!"

Gabrielle took a step back when Mary threw herself into her embrace. "Ooph," she gasped when the air was knocked out of her. "Its good to see you too, Mary."

The girl laughed and hugged tighter. "I missed you." She finally released Gabrielle then came after Ephiny for a hug.

The older Amazon felt the wind wrung out of her too when Mary hugged her. "How are you, cutie?"

Mary smiled when she released Ephiny. "I'm great now!" She boasted a huge smile. "How are you, Auntie Ephiny?"

"I am wonderful." Ephiny bent forward some, her eyes levelling with the child's. "Are you ready for Solstice?"

"Yes, I can't wait!"

Gabrielle couldn't stifle her giggles. "Have you been good this past seasons cycle? Senticles won't come otherwise."

Mary smiled at the blond, who'd become an old sister to her. "I've been very good." She had her hands behind her back and she rocked back and forth on her heels. "Even grandfather says so."

The older slave stepped closer to Mary and put his hand to her back. "I am Julian."

"It's nice to meet you." Gabrielle held out her hand for a shake.

Julian accepted the brisk shake and also took one from Ephiny. After the introduction, he quietly asked, "Did you wish to see Cornelio? He said he'd be expecting you any day now."
"Yes, we'd like to see him." Gabrielle held her smile and she followed Julian and Mary inside.

"Grandfather will be happy to see you, Gabby." Mary came over to Gabrielle's left side and took her hand. "He's missed you a lot."

Gabrielle felt the sadness wash over her. "I've missed grandfather too." She lifted her head and studied the back of Julian, who was leading. "Julian, how long have you been here?"

Julian moved off to the left some so he could twisted his head back to Gabrielle as he spoke. "About two moons now."

"Not long then," confirmed Ephiny.

"No, I am just getting use to the compound now." Julian offered a smile for his next words. "Cornelio is a wonderful man."

"How did you come to his house?" inquired Gabrielle.

Julian cleared his throat. "I was purchased at the market in Articia."

"I didn't realize Articia had a slavery market. It didn't when I was last here."

Julian sighed and slowed down some to get closer to the girls. "From what I over heard from my previous master, the slave market in Articia is new. It seems that slavery is flourishing."

The princess licked her lips then quietly asked, "How many were sold along with you?"

Julian shrugged then answered, "I think somewhere near seventy-five. Give or take."

"Gods," muttered the bard, her head shaking.

Mary squeezed Gabrielle's hand to get her attention. "Grandfather says he's trying to stop the slavery."

The Amazon Princess quietly absorbed the girl's faith in Cornelio. She resolved that it was best not to refute her hopes because she could only hope for the same. "And he just may."

Mary beamed at the older girl's response.
"Here we are." Julian came up to the office door and knocked on it. When his master called him in, he poked his head through. "Gabrielle and Ephiny are here, sir."

Cornelio brightened at the news. "Bring them in, Julian."

The young slave stepped back some as he pulled the door open for the girls. He let them all file in then he followed in last.

"Gabrielle, I'm so happy to see you made it safely." Cornelio was already up from his chair and desired a hug.

Gabrielle didn't hesitate to hug him as much as she could. She'd come to love this man that'd taken over the lost role of her father. In many ways, he'd given her a new foundation in life to stand upon and she would never forget that of him. "How have you been, sir?"

"I'm well. You look well yourself?"

The princess nodded her head. "Very well, sir."

Cornelio didn't lose his smile but he turned his attention to Ephiny. "Its wonderful to see you again, Ephiny." He held out his hand.

The Amazon quickly took it and gave a strong shake. "I'm glad I could come too."

"You're always welcomed here, Ephiny. I always appreciate you bringing Gabrielle here." He released her hand and stood tall and strong despite his age. "Gabrielle has always been a daughter to me."

The bard felt a flush burn over her cheeks.

Cornelio looked over to Julian and Mary by the door.

Julian dipped his head a little. "Did you need anything else, sir?"

"No, Julian. Thank you." The master faintly smiled at Mary. "Why don't you help your Aunt Maria and grandmother prepare dinner, Mary."

"Yes, grandfather." Mary grabbed Julian's closest hand. "I'll see you later, Gabby and Auntie Ephiny."

The two Amazons twisted around to the young child and smiled at her then said goodbye. After the two young slaves were gone, Ephiny and Gabrielle returned their focus to the master of the house.
"Sit down, please." Cornelio signaled the three chairs in front of his desk. He also sat back down.

The two Amazons took seats next to each other and became comfortable.

Gabrielle stole a quick glance out of the nearby window and saw Helios was beginning to set. The red and orange colors streamed into the office yet her attention was taken away from the sunset when Cornelio said her name.

"Gabrielle, how's the Academy been?"

The student quickly smiled. "It's been very busy but good, sir."

"How goes it for you, Ephiny?"

The older Amazon's head bobbed. "Well, sir."

"You both will be graduating this spring?" He received a nod from both young women so he continued on. "I plan to be there for your graduation. You must inform me of when it'll be."

"We will do that," promised Gabrielle.

"Have you considered your plans afterwards, Gabrielle?"

The bard crossed her legs at her ankles and slightly fidgeted with a button on her long jacket. "I was thinking of completely joining the Amazons, sir." She quickly peered up from playing with the button. "If that is okay, sir?"

The master slowly smiled. "I don't see why not, Gabrielle. I believe that is where you belong especially since you are their princess."

"I know, sir but I wanted to seek your permission first."

A bit of warmth flowed through Cornelio at Gabrielle's concerns for his approval. "Thank you, Gabrielle." He folded his hands in his lap. "You will become quite important to the Amazons."

The bard curiously tilted her head. How could he be so sure of her?

Cornelio smiled at his slave's uncertainty. "All in time, Gabrielle." He then went a bit more serious. "I would though like for you to visit here."
"Of course, sir." There was a smile on Gabrielle's face as she added, "I would miss you and everybody else if I went too long without a visit."

Cornelio chuckled. "I am glad to hear it." He stretched his legs under the desk some before he asked, "How long will you be staying?"

"A few days, sir." Gabrielle glanced at Ephiny then back at her master. "The Nation will be missing us if we do not show up for Solstice."

Cornelio dipped his head. "I wish you could be with us." The princess felt her panic rise some and Cornelio was able to pick it out. "But I understand, Gabrielle."

The bard faintly relaxed and quietly stated, "The Nation has a large Solstice Festival… especially for the children."

The master felt a smile take his lips at the thought of the children. "Well you must be there since you are the princess."

"Thank you, sir."

Cornelio straightened up in his chair. "Why don't you go get settled in. I'll have Julian bring your things to your room."

"We can get them, sir," interjected Ephiny.  

Cornelio held up a hand briefly. "I'll keep him busy, Ephiny." He then picked up his quill from his ink well. "I will see you both for dinner."

The Amazons took the hint and rose up from their chairs.

"Thank you, sir." Gabrielle smiled then followed Ephiny out of the office. With Ephiny at her side, they made the trek upstairs and went into the guestroom that they always stayed in when they came. Ephiny took a minute to ready the fireplace in the room since she knew the night would be cold.

Gabrielle made her way around the dimly lit room and lit about two-thirds of the candles. "Can I help?" She asked after getting the candles lit.

Ephiny was bent in front of the fireplace and she shook her head. "I've got it." She knocked the two flint stones together next to the thin twigs and dried leaves. She leaned back when the leaves caught on fire followed by the twigs. Next she rose up and placed the flint stones back on the ledge of the fireplace. "We should stay warm for the night."
Gabrielle nodded but she glanced over at the open window. "I should go ahead and put the mat over."

The Amazon nodded at the princess. "Yeah, good idea."

The bard went around the large bed and picked up the woven mat that rested on the floor. She held one end and it unrolled easily. Then on her tip toes, Gabrielle managed to hook the mat over the open window. Finally the mat was tied down on the two bottom corners.

Ephiny had been resting on the edge of the bed and working her boots off.

The slave shifted back over, bent down, and helped Ephiny get her boots untied.

"I can do it."

The bard paused and peered up at girlfriend after hearing her harsh tone.

The Amazon sighed and grabbed Gabrielle's hand. "I'm sorry." The corner of her lips curled under. "I just… with being here… it reminds me of things… for you."

For a moment Gabrielle was confused then it struck her. "Its okay, Ephiny." She tilted her head to one side; a smile caressed her soft lips. "I'm not doing this out of slavery habit… doing it to help."

"I'm sorry… that was stupid."

The bard shook her head and went back to untying the right boot. "No its not… you're not."

Ephiny shifted to getting the left one off. When her boots were finally pulled off it seemed to remove some of her edginess. "Thank you."

The princess rose up and set the boots aside. "Want your jacket and sword off?"

The Amazon tried to not grimace when her bare feet touched the cool floor.

Gabrielle efficiently took the long jacket and removed the sword in sheath. She went over to a wood trunk near by, lowered the sword down, and covered it with the jacket.

"Going to lie down too?"

The princess faced her girlfriend. "Yeah… I need to rest." She lost her eye contact. "I'm slightly saddle sore."
Ephiny had an amused expression but she climbed up onto the bed. She just flopped down and sensed her spine realigning into place.

Gabrielle had her boots off in no time flat and was resting next to Ephiny. "Thank you for coming, Eph."

The Amazon laced her hand through Gabrielle's. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you don't have to."

"Hmmm well I don't think the queen would be too happy that I left the princess alone." Quickly she was hit with a swat of Gabrielle's hand. Ephiny chuckled and turned her head to the right. "Of course I'd come."

The couple remained silent for awhile, both their eyes closed but neither of them asleep.

"Gabrielle?"

"Hmmmm?"

"Were you planning to perform the blood sister ritual with somebody?"

The bard chewed on her lower lip but she finally answered. "I was thinking about Andra."

Ephiny never stirred and remained quiet. After she took in a deep breath, she finally said, "I kind of thought so."

"I don't know what it is… I feel like I've known her for some time."

Ephiny's lips twisted into a silly grin. "That's how I felt about Eponin."

There was an instant smile on Gabrielle when she heard Eponin's name yet she lost it when a thought came to her. "I'm scared though to tell Andra about my past… about being a slave."

Ephiny briefly squeezed her girlfriend's hand. "Well if she wasn't meant to be your blood sister then you couldn't trust her with that information."

"I know," murmured the bard.

"So are you scared? Or don't you trust her?"
The princess bit her lower lip then quietly replied, "I think I'm just scared. I don't think Andra would be judgmental about it."

"I don't think she would be either." Ephiny considered the new Amazon. "She seems fairly open minded." She now opened her amber eyes and twisted her head to the right again. "Honestly I don't think there would be many judgmental Amazons in the Nation."

Gabrielle understood Ephiny's suggestion. She was now staring deep into Ephiny's soft, golden eyes. "I know but… I'm worried for the Nation more so than worried about the Nation." At seeing Ephiny's confusion, she further explained. "I'm just worried that if rumor spread outside of the Nation about the princess being a slave that it could put the Nation in potential harm."

"Do you really think it'd be a major threat?"

The bard's thoughts traveled back to her days when she was in Hecht's compound. She knew how valuable she'd recently become by taking on the princess caste of a powerful Nation. If Hecht ever found out that she'd become an Amazon Princess, he could easily demand to have her returned and the local government would force the Amazons to do so. The continuing thoughts of what could happen made Gabrielle's head spin. "Yes," she finally whispered, "it would be a huge threat."

Ephiny felt her anger bubble up inside because she knew this would be Gabrielle's shadow for life. She was also amazed at how Gabrielle was so concerned for the Nation's safety. "You'll never be able to escape this," she hotly whispered.

"No." Gabrielle quickly wiped a tear away from her right eye. "As long as there's slavery or I am alive." Her throat grew tighter as her thoughts raced about how she was trapped for a lifetime.

Ephiny sensed her girlfriend's distress and she hastily rolled onto her side. She rested part of her body on Gabrielle and placed a sweet kiss on her temple. "It'll be okay, Gabrielle… I promise."

The bard bit back her tears. She would not cry anymore about being a slave because she'd wasted too many tears on something she had no control over. She'd promise herself that with the Amazon Nation she would begin a new life. She would be Gabrielle, the Amazon Princess, and not Gabrielle, the slave.

The couple remained quiet and Ephiny held fast to her girlfriend. Gabrielle gained control of her emotions and felt her resolve strengthen again. She was thankful for Ephiny at moments like these despite she felt Ephiny had seen her at her weakest too
many times.

It wasn't long though before there was a knock at the door.

Ephiny released her girlfriend and slipped out of the bed.

Gabrielle sat up and sat cross legged in the bed. She brushed her hair back as Ephiny opened the door.

"Hi, I brought your things." Julian stepped in with the two saddlebags on either arm. He carefully laid them on the floor next to the trunk.

Gabrielle now smiled when she saw Mary poke her head in too. "Hi, Mary."

The child smiled broadly. "Hi!" She held her hands behind her back. "I am to tell everybody that it is almost dinner time."

"Ooo wonderful." Gabrielle shifted to the edge of the bed. "I'm starved."

Ephiny smirked at the princess.

Gabrielle pretended to ignore it as she grabbed her boots.

Julian slipped into the doorway but let Mary move past him. "I'll see you girls down there." He left with the door closing behind him.

Both Amazons hastily put their boots on and laced them up.

Mary patiently waited despite her tummy was rumbling.

"What's for dinner, Mary?" Gabrielle straightened up and came over to the small girl.

"We're having lamb shish kabobs and flatbread then baklava for dessert."

"Mmmm." Ephiny even hummed at the thought of a wonderful dinner. "Lead the way, Mary." She held out her hand.

Mary took Ephiny's hand and then took Gabrielle's. She led the two older girls out of the room, down the hall, down the steps, and towards the dinning room.

The dinner began as soon as Cornelio arrived and started it himself. The meal was quite good and Gabrielle couldn't recall having such an amazing meal since her days here in Cornelio's house. After a full meal, the Amazons felt quite exhausted and well ready for bed yet Mary still retained some last energy.
Mary had just finished her piece of baklava and happily gazed across to Gabrielle. "Gabby, will you tell us a story?"

The resting bard lifted an eyebrow at the request. She tuned her head to Cornelio.

The master dipped his head and quietly said, "If you feel up to it, Gabrielle."

The princess turned her attention back to Mary. "Well… I suppose I can tell a short one."

Mary beamed. "Please!" She wiggled around in her chair.

Gabrielle rose up from her chair and stood behind Cornelio but Cornelio took a moment to move his chair around. The bard considered her many stories she could tell then finally decided on one. "I sing a song about two best friends that met as children and never had a worry about thing."

Everybody around the table fell silent and they were captured by Gabrielle's magical voice.

The bard dove into her story and brought the story to life before her listeners. Her hands and tones moved with the story and her body animated every part. She smiled as her listeners lived through the story with her. When she finally reached the end, she paused and whispered, "And maybe one day they will meet again."

Adara was still stunned but she spoke up first. "That was beautiful, Gabrielle. Thank you."

Gabrielle saw everybody's appreciative expressions however her concern was on Cornelio. She was solely focused on him.

Cornelio had his left elbow on the table and her hand propped up to hold his chin in his palm. He lowered his elbow from the corner of the table and now smiled. "My wife is correct. That was beautiful, Gabrielle." His smile shifted into a faint grin. "It seems the Academy has honed your skills."

Gabrielle bowed her head in respect when she lifted it again, she quietly stated, "It has, sir. Thank you for sending me."

"It has been my pleasure." He then twisted his head around to get a sidelong view of everybody. "And I believe it is late." He caught sight of all the dishes on the table. "The dishes can wait 'til tomorrow."
"We will get them into the kitchen at least," offered Maria.

"Thank you," agreed Cornelio. He then rose up and moved his chair back into its home. "Thank you for dinner, ladies."

Adara enjoyed her husband's gratefulness. She stood up and began collecting the plates.

Cornelio came over to her and when she paused, he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek gently. Without another word, he disappeared out of the dining room.

Everybody except Julian quickly picked up the dishes and moved them into the huge tub of water in the kitchen. Julian hurried out of the house but made sure to snatch his cloak for the brisk air outside. He took care of his final evening chores before it was bedtime.

It wasn't long though before Gabrielle and Ephiny were taking Mary upstairs and putting her to bed. Then the two Amazons went to their room and quietly prepared for bed. When Ephiny and Gabrielle finally slipped into bed they curled up together and went into their dreamscapes within a short time. It was a fitful night of rest that both Amazons were grateful for. Just a couple of days ago the pair had been taking their exams, which meant little sleep and tonight was their first chance to rest well.

A candlemark after sunrise the couple finally rose up from the warm bed. The sun's rays streamed through the mat over the window and quickly the bard shot out of bed to pull the mat away. When she wiggled back under the covers, Ephiny pulled her in close and kissed her softly.

"Sleep well?"

Gabrielle smiled at her girlfriend. "Yeah I did. You?"

"Yes... I was exhausted." Ephiny ran her index finger along Gabrielle's exposed shoulder. "What do you want to do today?"

The princess was silent for awhile as she gazed out of the window, which overlooked the courtyard. "I want to see mother this morning."

The older Amazon had been expecting that response. She pressed her lips against Gabrielle's shoulder then whispered, "Then we will."

It wasn't long before the girls emerged from their room and went downstairs for breakfast. After they had a quick breakfast, they donned their jackets and went into the brisk morning outside. Together the pair silently trekked across the compound until
they were upon Hecuba's grave.

Ephiny stopped several paces away and let her girlfriend have her space.

The Amazon Princess carefully walked up to the simple stone that was placed in the ground by Cornelio. She bent down until her knees rested on the firm ground. "Hello, mom." Gabrielle brushed her hand over the engraved stone and moved any collected leaves and dirt. "I miss you."

Ephiny stood still, her eyes closed, and listening to the sounds around the compound.

"I've been doing well at the Academy… just as you always expected." Gabrielle sadly smiled. "Some days are harder than others but I keep fighting." Unconsciously she reached up and wrapped her fingers around her quill necklace. "I keep hoping I'll see Lila again especially since Xena's journal."

The bard licked her lips as her thoughts strayed to Xena's journal. "Her journal doesn't say if Lila is alive… or not. It is a start though." She cleared her throat some. "Ephiny seems to think that when I am queen I'll be able to have more resources." For a heartbeat she bit her lower lip. "I won't give up though, mom. Not until Lila is home."

Gabrielle brushed back a strand of her blond hair. Her thoughts traveled to her father, who was buried back in Potidæa near the destroyed house. "One of these days…." She leaned forward some and whispered, "when I am queen, I will take you home… to father." Her green eyes lifted and scanned the compound before lowering to her mother's grave. "You should not be here."

The princess took in a shaky breath. She felt her raw emotions now bubbling to the top. Her eyes began to sting despite she held strong. Gabrielle lifted her right hand and kissed her fingertips then pressed her hand against the stone. The chilled stone return a frozen kiss. "I love you, mom." With that, Gabrielle stood up and folded her arms against her chest.

Ephiny now moved from her still position.

Gabrielle sensed the warm hands grasping her shoulders tightly. She gave in and turned into Ephiny's embrace.

Ephiny held her girlfriend tightly while rubbing her back. "Sssh. It's okay."

And Gabrielle held the dam against her emotions until they ebbed into calmness again.

The days wore on as Helios moved across the sky twice and then by the third day, the
Amazons were preparing to leave and journey to the Nation. It would be a long trek from Articia to the Nation if they would make it in time for the start of the Solstice Festival. The festival was something Gabrielle did not want to miss and not just because she would be expected to be there but also since she wanted to see it.

The Amazons rode at a gallop across the wooded lands headed towards the rising sun. It took them two and half days before they reached the borders of the Nation at Helios high. Gabrielle slowed her horse when she sensed that she was in familiar woods and Ephiny did the same.

"We should dismount," mentioned the bard.

Ephiny agreed and quickly swung off of Diana.

Gabrielle did the same and took Torqueo's reins over his head and went to her saddlebags.

Ephiny had made sure to pull out her mask and it as pushed overtop of her head. When she glanced over at the princess she saw she'd unlash her staff. "Ready?"

The bard adjusted the reins into her left hand and staff in her right. With a nod, she continued the walk into the Amazon Woods just ahead.

It wasn't but a quarter of candlemark before three undetected Amazons glided down from the trees to halt them.

Ephiny and Gabrielle didn't hesitate to give the Amazon peace signal.

The three patrol Amazons hadn't bothered to unsheathe their swords but they pulled back their masks.

Gabrielle smiled at seeing a familiar face, her hands lowering back to her side.

"My princess," greeted Maired, her head bowed.

The princess's cheeks flushed as the three Amazons all bowed in respect.

Maired straightened up and smiled. "Its good to see you both made it."

"I didn't dare miss the festival."

The apprentice priestess laughed and shifted closer to the two young Amazons. "Of course not, princess." Her attention shifted to Ephiny. "How are you, Ephiny?"
"Well."

Gabrielle now smiled at the other two Amazons but she only knew one of them. "I haven't seen you in awhile, Deka."

"My apologies, princess. I am often on patrol duty."

"Nothing to be sorry about," assured the princess. She then stepped closer to the unknown Amazon yet something about her seemed recognizable. "I'm Gabrielle."

The Amazon, who was older and about Gabrielle's height stepped up and held out her arm. "Yes, I know. I am Kaylee, princess."

The princess clasped the Amazon's arm and briskly shook. "It's great to meet you, Kaylee." Now Gabrielle realized why she thought Kaylee struck a cord. Solari's description of the new Amazon had come to mind. Gabrielle quickly held out a hand to Ephiny. "This is Ephiny."

The Amazon now smiled at Ephiny as she absorbed the young Amazon. "Hi, Ephiny." She accepted the arm shake from Ephiny.

Maired brought back the princess's attention to her. "May we escort you into the village, my princess?"

"Hmph." The bard smirked. "I have a feeling that really wasn't a question."

"Not particularly since it's required," spoke up Deka.

Kaylee gave a stern nod. "It is protocol."

The princess chuckled and stated, "By all means then... Ephiny would love an escort."

Ephiny snorted, shook her head, and began walking in the direction to the village.

The princess and her Amazons started on their trek to the gates of the Nation. Gabrielle was quickly asked by Maired about how the Academy was going and the bard reeled into a conversation.

Ephiny remained quiet for the most part since she was weary from the journey. She'd taken some time to study the surrounding forest and found it was rather blanketed by brown leaves. It wouldn't be long though before the first snow would coat the leaves. The distant smell of horses and grilling food was floating on breeze from the village. Just at the thought of food made Ephiny's mouth water and her stomach gurgle. She may be worn out but not enough not to eat something soon.
The air was an invigorating cold that wasn’t quite at the point of biting. The sun was directly above them and keeping them warm against the chill. Ephiny even sensed her dark cloak warming against her skin and she was thankful for it. Then no more than a hundred paces ahead the gates seemed to rise up from the horizon.

Ephiny’s eyes narrowed as she sought out the guards at the gates and she finally spotted one in each watchtower at the corners of the gate. Then there were several Amazon guards at the closed gates also keeping watch. Ephiny knew that this was a potential time for attacks with the festival. The gates always remained closed at this time unless there was an emergency.

When the group approached the gates, two of the guards quickly opened the small door on the right gate door. After they stepped through, the guard quickly shut it and the guard on the inside put the wood bar into place again. Finally they arrived at the stables and they stopped at the entrance.

Gabrielle came to a stopping point in her conversation with Maired and she smiled. "Well I think we're okay from here."

The apprentice priestess dipped her head. "I am glad you're here, princess. We need to return to duty."

"It was good to see you again, princess." Deka offered a warm smile.

Kaylee also bowed her head some then her eyes met Gabrielle's. "It's nice to finally meet you, princess. I look forward to working with you in the future."

"Thank you, Kaylee. I'm glad we met too." The bard said goodbye quickly then followed Ephiny into the stables.

The three patrol Amazons slipped away and hurried through the busy village.

"I can't believe how busy it is here."

Ephiny peered across the stall to her girlfriend. "The Nation is getting ready for the festival."

"It's still five days away."

Ephiny slightly grinned because this was Gabrielle's first Amazon Solstice. "And thank the gods we do this every other seasons cycle."

"Why is that?" That bard was curious about that tradition.
"Well because it does take a lot of work," explained Ephiny, "And also some dinars. So the council many seasons back decided it was best to do it every other Winter Solstice. The Solstice we don't have the festival is a time for family to spend it together instead of with the entire Nation."

The princess thoughtfully chewed on that new information. She understood the concept too. Finally she had Torqueo's tack off and his saddle along with the bags. She unhooked the saddlebags and hung them on the door. She then hastily put some feed in his bucket and she was happy to find the water bucket already filled. She snatched her staff from the stall wall, picked up her saddlebags, and slipped out of the stall. "I'm ready."

Ephiny smiled as she just finished too. She led the way out of the stables but stopped in the entrance way. "I'll come get you in half a candlemark?"

The slave nodded her head. "Yeah, I'm starved but I want to get settled in and cleaned up."

The older Amazon completely understood. She nodded then leaned in for a sweet kiss. "I'll see you in a bit."

Gabrielle had a wistful expression when Ephiny ended the tender kiss. Her eyes fluttered open and she whispered, "Okay. See you then."

The pair went their separate ways to their huts. As soon as the bard stepped into her hut, she leaned her staff against the wall next to the door - an old habit. Gabrielle was relieved to sit down at her desk for a moment and not feel her body bouncing up and down. She knew later tonight when she would go to bed that her body would still feel like it was bobbing up and down in Torqueo's saddle. Luckily this time though she wasn't saddle sore.

The small bard placed her saddlebags on her empty desk then pulled out her clothes so they wouldn't smell too much like leather. She tucked them away in her dresser then moved the leather bags on top of the oak dresser. Once more the bard flopped into her desk chair and just moaned in relief. "Gods."

Gabrielle stared out of her window in front of her desk. She took some time to take in the bustling village. Then for the first time, Gabrielle noticed some of the differences unlike earlier. There were strands of garland hanging along the overhangs of some of the huts. She also picked out wreaths hanging from other huts. She huffed and wondered if she would get garland or a wreath. She would have to ask Ephiny. The princess should certainly have either if not both.
The smirking bard now twisted her head around and stared at her hut. She sighed when her eyes fell upon the dead fireplace, which she knew she needed to get started if she planned to be warm tonight. Slowly she forced herself from the chair and went to the fireplace. Beside the fireplace was a stack of wood but the fireplace was already stoked with wood.

Gabrielle picked up the flint stones from the mantle then knelt down. She worked her hands underneath the wood to where the leaves and twigs rested. It wasn't but after a few tries and she had the sparks jumping onto the leaves. With success burning before her green eyes, the bard stood up and returned the stones to their home. And for a heartbeat, Gabrielle debated whether to cover her window with the mat but decided against it since it was too early yet.

The slave now took a few steps back and sat down on the warm fur that she'd pulled out before leaving this past summer. She'd been told by Solari that the fur was of a deer that Terreis had killed, her first kill from her first hunt. Terreis had saved the fur and had it made into this warm sitting mat for the fire. It was enough for two people to sit on or one person to mostly lie on. Gabrielle decided to test out the laying part of it and she stretched out her back on it, her wool and leather jacket poured off of her.

Gradually her eye lids grew heavy and her forest eyes couldn't be seen. Gabrielle rested her hands on her stomach that had grown taut over the past summer. Briefly her thoughts conjured up what this Solstice Festival would be like but her imagination eventually put her to sleep. Her breathing was shallow and her propped up legs slid down to meet the rest of the fur or the heavy cloak.

There was a sudden knock at the door however the bard never stirred. Next came a second set of knocking but still nothing. Eventually the door cracked open and curly, dirty-blond headed Amazon poked her head through and she scanned the room only to rest her gaze on the sleeping bard.

Ephiny's lips curled into a silly grin at seeing the princess completely passed out by the fire. Silently she eased body through the door so that it wouldn't squeak. She then took a seat next to the bard and enjoyed the slow rise and fall of Gabrielle's chest. Ephiny had a soft smile as she played with Gabrielle's bangs, brushing them off to the side. She was hungry yet she wanted to let Gabrielle sleep just a little longer. She knew she was tired so Gabrielle had to be even more exhausted.

The Amazon let out a faint sigh then pulled her legs in to sit cross legged. She still stared down at her girlfriend. Her mind went over many of the events and changes for her and Gabrielle. It'd been more than a seasons' cycle since she met Gabrielle and two seasons since they'd been together. She truly admired Gabrielle for all of her strength and will to keep going despite her tormented past. At the beginning she was quite skeptic that Gabrielle would make a decent princess let alone a queen some day.
Yet as time had worn on, Gabrielle had reshaped herself into an amazing young
woman and Amazon and Ephiny could only imagine what kind of queen Gabrielle
would be.

"Maybe there's hope for this Nation after all," murmured Ephiny, her hand sweeping
across the bard's soft cheek.

The princess stirred from Ephiny's voice reaching into her dreamscape yet she didn't
wake up.

Ephiny licked her lips. Her thoughts narrowed down to her relationship with
Gabrielle, which had become slightly peculiar lately. She and Gabrielle had been
together for two seasons now yet their relationship still failed to be consummated.
Ephiny never once brought it up as she deemed it of little importance at the start
especially since they were a new couple. But as the moon's cycles faded in and out,
she began to wonder if there was something wrong or out of place. She knew it would
only be a matter of time before she would have to face the issue with Gabrielle. Until
then, she left it alone and found her enjoyment in the light touches, kisses, and
cuddling.

The Amazon gave out a heavy sigh and decided it was best to wake her girlfriend
before the afternoon wore on any later. She bent forward and brought her lips to
Gabrielle's. Gabrielle responded with a soft moan and Ephiny slightly deepened the
kiss for a longer response.

Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open and a smile graced her pink lips. "Hi."

Ephiny chuckled and brushed her nose across Gabrielle's. "Hi, sleepyhead."

The bard stretched her legs out and her arms over her head. "I just wanted to test this
fur."

Ephiny straightened up some, a smirk breaking her face. "What's your opinion?"

"Quite comfortable." Gabrielle stopped her stretch then sat up. "How long were you
here for?"

"Not too long. I tried to hold my stomach off to let you sleep a bit longer."

The slave touched her girlfriend's cheek and smiled. "Thank you. Ready to eat?"

"Yes." Ephiny gave an inquisitive look. "Are you?"

"That's a silly question," teased the princess, "I always am." She then climbed up onto
her feet and Ephiny did the same.

The girlfriends gathered themselves and Gabrielle made sure to take her staff. They went directly to the food hut and there were only a few scattered Amazons eating a midday meal. It didn't take them long to fill up their plates and go over to an empty bench.

It wasn't long though before two familiar Amazons entered the hut and approached their table. Gabrielle stopped eating and smiled up at her two friends. "Solari, Eponin." She put her fork down and stood up to give them each a hug.

Ephiny also stopped eating and gave her sister and best friend a hug.

The weapons master and Solari both took a seat at the table, Solari next to Ephiny and Eponin next to the princess.

"I am glad you both made it safely."

Gabrielle patted Eponin's leg. "I had the best protector."

"Run into trouble?" quipped Solari.

"No, thank Artemis," replied Ephiny. She pierced several of her peas. "We had a safe ride here."

"Glad to hear it," agreed Eponin. She then switched her focus to the princess. "How go classes since we were there?"

"Really well." The bard pushed her peas around some then added, "Exams were hard but we worked just as hard." She noted Ephiny nodding her head in agreement. "I can't believe we'll be graduating in the spring."

"It's not far." Eponin flashed a grin at the students. "Right around the corner."

"How was Articia?"

The princess smiled at Solari's consideration. "It was good. I was glad to see my grandfather."

Ephiny quickly took notice about how Gabrielle considered Cornelio her grandfather. She knew it wasn't by mistake or to hide anything since Solari and Eponin both knew of Gabrielle's position with Cornelio.

"Visit your mother too?" softly asked the weapons master.
The bard slowly nodded but said nothing as she ate some of her peas then picked up her flatbread.

"You do know you'll be doing some training and classes after the Solstice Festival?"

Gabrielle had broken off a piece of flatbread but she stopped from eating it. She peered up at her mentor. "Since I have a moon off before the Academy?"

The weapons master nodded her head. "If you're out of shape or not honed, I would suggest getting ready." Her eyes then rested on her sister. "Same for you."

Gabrielle and Ephiny looked at each other then simultaneously they said, "We need to run."'

Solari laughed at the pair then smirked at them. "A little out of shape?"

The princess released a light groan. "We've been so busy we haven't had a chance to do anything."

The weapons master patted Gabrielle's back while saying, "Well you have seven days to get ready."

Gabrielle shook her head but she stuffed the bread into her mouth to refrain from saying anything smart.

Eponin tilted her head some at the quiet princess. "Also you'll be taking some classes with Andra. You and she are about at the same level now."

The bard was about to say something but her mouthful of bread made her stop. She quickly swallowed the dry food down then asked, "She's moving that fast?"

"She's quite good," admitted Eponin. "She's pretty well mastered her sword."

"You think she'll be taking the sword challenge?" spoke up Solari.

Eponin only nodded her head.

"Wow," murmured the bard.

Ephiny curiously looked to her sister. "When will Gabrielle have her sword challenge?"

The weapons master considered Gabrielle's training so far. She knew Gabrielle had
become quite good with her staff but they'd just touched into the sword at the end of the summer. She calculated in her head how long it would be and finally answered, "Most likely at the end of the summer."

The bard huffed. "Knowing me, it'll be next summer."

"Have some faith, Gabrielle." Solari wagged a finger at the princess. "And work at it."

Eponin was happy Solari hadn't said any compliment but kept to encouragements.

Gabrielle's thoughts ran wild with the training program she'd been doing with Eponin. A question came to mind though and she turned her head to her mentor. "Will I have to use my sword after I pass the challenge?"

"Not at all," replied Eponin, "it is your choice. You may continue with the staff or something else." She folded her arms on the table and leaned against them. "We'll actually have a required class where you learn the basics of many weapons. It's really a safety feature too incase you find yourself without your chosen weapon."

"It's really good for you incase of challenges," piped in Solari.

"Challenges?" The Amazon Princess felt her body automatically tighten just at the word. "What challenges?"

Eponin sighed; she hadn't covered that topic yet knowing it could instill some fears.

"When you become queen," explained Ephiny, "you could be challenged for the mask as queen."

Gabrielle's jaw was slack but she snapped it shut.

"And whoever is challenged may select the weapon for the battle." Solari's head bobbed a few times to confirm her own words.

The bard seriously considered this new information. She never knew anything of this Amazon tradition or law but may be in some way it made sense. "So can anybody challenge the queen? Can I be challenged now as the princess?" She looked between the three Amazons for answers.

"No you can't be challenged now as the position of a princess is more for image and a time for training."

Ephiny picked up after her sister and answered the other question. "And the queen can be challenged by anybody as long as they're an Amazon from this Nation."
"Sooo hypothetically speaking I could challenge Queen Melosa right now?"

All three Amazons bobbed their heads.

"You just won't win," informed the weapons master.

The princess frowned at blunt statement but she knew it was true. There was no way she'd ever beat the queen nor did she want to challenge her. "So why would somebody challenge the queen anyway?"

"Typically because the queen is weak one way or another." Ephiny shrugged then added, "Queen Melosa took power though blood line but her mother took power through a challenge."

"So if, for example, I challenged Queen Melosa and won can Queen Melosa turn around and challenge me back?"

Ephiny bit her lower lip, her answer was quiet but it was defining. "No because the loser of the challenge is killed."

Gabrielle stared at her girlfriend as she realized the future position she could be placed in when and if she became queen.

"Just a slight insurance to make the queen rules well," joked Solari.

The bard cleared her throat. "I would say so." She nervously brushed her hair back and everybody picked up on it.

Eponin's heart dropped at the sight of her student becoming slightly pale and worried at all of the pressure. "It something you won't ever have to fear, Gabrielle if you're a fair and just queen." She now rested her hand on the bard's knee. "Nor something you should be worried about right now."

"I know," murmured the princess. She peered up at Eponin and whispered, "But its apart of being the queen and I know I have to accept that if I were to become a good queen."

Slowly the weapons master nodded her head. "Yes."

Ephiny didn't like the new mood set between them and she decided it was time to change the topic. She didn't want her girlfriend think too much about such things despite it was unavoidable now. "When does the tree arrive?"
The slave's head quickly whipped around at Ephiny's question. "Tree?"

All three Amazons grinned at the princess's instant curiosity.

For the rest of the day, Gabrielle and Ephiny helped around the village with getting things ready for the festival. The princess quickly found out who the main coordinator was of the festival and it was an older Amazon by the name of Tanya. Tanya was a council member and appointed by the council and queen to handle the festival this year. It so happened that when each festival came that a different member of the council would have the duty to run the festival. It so happened it was Tanya's turn.

Yet by the mid afternoon Councilor Tanya excused Ephiny and the princess from doing anymore work. She knew the pair had done a lot of traveling to reach the Nation in time for the festival. She'd thanked them both then hurried them away from all the activity. The couple decided that maybe it was time for a warm bath in the hot springs since they most likely needed it.

Ephiny and Gabrielle each went to their huts to collect clean clothes then they met in the bathing hut. It was actually fairly quiet and they found a room where there was nobody in it. So they'd stripped and Gabrielle gingerly stepped into the small, steaming pool and each deeper step seemed to soothe her muscles.

The Amazon however didn't waste time and ignored the steps by just sliding off the edge and into the water.

The bard rolled her eyes as she leaned against the wall of the pool. "Gods." She sighed, dropped her head back, and heavily breathed the steam into her lungs. "Whoever built this bathing hut should be considered a goddess."

Ephiny quietly laughed before she bent her knees until she was completely under water. When she popped back up, she wiped the water from her eyes and her wet hair dripped down her shoulders.

Gabrielle decided to follow suit yet when she broke through the water though she found herself right in front of Ephiny. She almost jumped back having not expected her girlfriend there.

Ephiny smirked then reached up to brush a few stray pieces of Gabrielle's blond hair. "Hi."

The slave slightly grinned. "Hi back." She leaned in for a quick kiss then she went to the edge of the pool. She scanned the ledge and her eyes honed in on her target. Effectively the bard lifted herself enough to grab the bar of sandalwood soap. "Here, you're first."
"Ooo no the pri-"

"Go first or this soap will be in your big mouth," stated the glowering princess. At Ephiny's teasing smirk, Gabrielle readied to insert the soap into a teeth baring cave.

"Okay, okay!" Ephiny laughed and held up her hands. "Here." She received the soap and washed her body first.

The bard went back to leaning against the side of the pool. She admired the scene of her girlfriend soaping her body down. The scent of sandalwood flowed through the steam and filled Gabrielle's senses. She loved the scent. "I'll do your hair."

The Amazon nodded after finally getting cleaned up. With her head turned sidelong, she handed the soap to her girlfriend then shifted so she was just in front of Gabrielle.

Gabrielle knew she'd need quite a bit of soap since Ephiny's curly locks were so thick. She soaped up her hands really well, placed the bar on the ledge, and started on Ephiny's hair.

Ephiny closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of small but strong fingers working through her hair. Her scalp was also getting a nice massage and it soothed her. There was a brief pause as Gabrielle retrieved more soap for the lower portion of Ephiny's hair.

Finally the bard was done and whispered close to her ear, "You're finished, Eph."

The Amazon almost groaned but she dunked herself anyway and worked the soap out of her locks. Sometimes the soap came out easy and other times it took a bit more effort. When she figured she had it all out, she lifted up out of the water and found Gabrielle was already washing her body. She refrained from sighing now since she'd planned to try and wash her girlfriend's body.

It wasn't long before Gabrielle was finished washing and needed help with her hair. Her girlfriend easily accepted the offer and soaped up her hands. This time though, she moved in closer to Gabrielle's back than she normally would do. Her breasts lightly pressed against Gabrielle's upper back while her hands worked through the blond strands.

The princess wasn't blind to what her girlfriend was trying to do; it caused her to grin wickedly. She knew some time ago that Ephiny was ready to sleep with her but she'd never made that mental step. Something in her held her back and it wasn't something she was ready to confront just yet. Right now she was accepting the many levels of kissing, the touching, and always after the cuddling. She became lost in Ephiny's
soothing fingers and a quiet moaned filtered between her lips, which made her snap out of it. "Ephiny?$"

The Amazon leaned in and brushed her lips against Gabrielle's right ear. "Yes?"

A slight chill rippled down the bard's spine. "Is my hair done?"

Ephiny's eyes narrowed because she knew she was losing at the game. Yet she wasn't going to accept total defeat so she lightly nipped at the back of Gabrielle's ear. "Yes," she purred.

Gabrielle's body was certainly responding but her emotions were wild. She quickly retreated by disappearing into the water and coming up on the other side of the small pool. When she had the water out of her eyes and focused on her smirking girlfriend, she stated, "I'll get you."

"Please do," teased back the Amazon.

The Amazon Princess rolled her eyes and placed the back of her palms on the ledge. "You won't be saying that later." She arched an eyebrow and her eyes gleamed. With that, she hauled herself up out of the water until her butt met the cool stone floor.

Ephiny's mouth went dry at seeing the display but she decided maybe this time she'd use the steps. She made some random decision about whether she'd be able to lift herself out or not when her body felt a little weak.

Gabrielle already had her towel out and drying herself off but she paused and tossed Ephiny's towel to her.

The Amazon just caught it before it smacked her in the face. She took her time drying herself because she was too busy looking over Gabrielle's body. In past times she'd seen her girlfriend's body but this was completely in a different light. In the past they weren't together or too busy for her to take the time yet today she had all the time before dinner.

Gabrielle was bent forward and toweling her legs and feet off when she picked up on Ephiny's leering gaze. Instantly her dark green eyes narrowed into a dangerous degree.

Ephiny wasn't any fool and saw the quick change. She shifted back with a step then she took two steps away when her girlfriend straightened up, towel at her side. Then Ephiny's amber eyes were wide as the sun when Gabrielle suddenly twirled her towel tightly. "Gaaabrieeeeelllee… don't do it."

The bard was hunched forward some, the towel tightly wrapped between her right and
left hand. She was prepared to snap it. She knew for a fact that Ephiny hadn't learned how to make a whip out of her towel... yet. "I need to teach you a lesson about staring. It's not polite to stare at your princess." She stalked forward.

Ephiny had an offended look. "I was not staring I was admiring you. It was a compliment." She took a few steps back, her hands now coming up and her towel hanging from her right hand.

"Liar!" challenged the bard and she promptly snapped the towel at Ephiny.

The Amazon squealed and jumped back just in time. "I am not!" She then saw Gabrielle preparing for another attack and she hastily came up with another response. "I can't help it, Gabrielle... you're so beautiful."

The bard snickered and came closer. "I am but that doesn't mean you need to stare."

Ephiny's jaw dropped at Gabrielle's outright pride. "You can't blame me for it!"

"Wrong answer!" The princess jumped forward and her towel came snapping through the air.

This time Ephiny yelped in pain and spun away as another towel whipping came at her. "Gabrielle!"

Gabrielle was twirling her towel tightly again and taking aim. "That's princess, Ephiny." She snapped it but made sure to miss. "Get it right."

The Amazon couldn't believe her ears at seeing Gabrielle's fierce display. "Well princ-ass, I am-" Ephiny screamed when the towel whipped her just at the side of her bare stomach. She dropped her head and saw the small red mark forming.

"What was that, Ephiny?" Gabrielle's contained laughter finally bubbled up and it was rather evil. "What'd you call me?"

The Amazon cleared her throat and said, "I called you princ-ass!" She held up her towel as a shield just as the whip came at her. "Ha!" But she wasn't fast enough to deflect the next attack just over her right breast. She screamed in pain and jumped away from her opponent. She needed a plan before she'd get back backed into a corner. She decided she required some time first. "Please don't snap that towel again."

"Ooo I don't plan on stopping until we're clear." Gabrielle bared her teeth in a snarling grin. She was bent over, arms stretched out with the towel at the ready. "Not 'til I feel you've been taught a lesson."
Ephiny took a faint step back. "I had every right to do what I did."

"No you didn't," challenged back the princess. She took that faint step closer. "You have to apologize, Ephiny."

The Amazon licked her lips and looked to her right at the wall then to her left at the pool about ten paces away. Her head snapped around when Gabrielle's towel snapped right in front of her.

"Don't even think of escaping," growled the bard.

Ephiny held up her hands again. "I wouldn't dare, my princ-ass."

Gabrielle snarled then shot her towel out.

Ephiny was prepared and she dropped her towel, her right arm exploded out so fast. The towel wrapped around her upper arm and down to her wrist.

Gabrielle stood shock.

Ephiny smirked. "Your turn, princ-ass." She gritted her teeth then suddenly began to swing.

Gabrielle screamed as her feet were lifted off the floor, she soared through the air but she held tight to the towel in complete fear. "Eephinyyyy!"

The Amazon laughed so loud that it rang in the small room. She brought the swinging to a dead stop when Gabrielle was coming over the pool.

The princess's feet connected with the ledge near the pool and she stumbled forward but her right hand stopped her when it hit the wall. She jerked her towel free and faced her daring girlfriend. "That's it!"

Once again Ephiny's laugh filled the room and Ephiny quickly jumped up high when the towel came at her knees. She then turned yet she got whipped directly on the right butt cheek. She screamed in reaction but she wouldn't give up, she wouldn't lose the war. Ephiny raced around the pool and bent to her right just as she came to the wood bench. Her hands neatly scooped up her and Gabrielle's clothes.

The bard realized what was happening and she chased after Ephiny, her towel taking aim. "Don't you dare, Ephiny! I will kill you!"

Ephiny had the clothes bundled up in her left arm, her right hand on the door handle, and the door was slightly ajar. "Laaah-oo-o-seeer!" She viciously laughed and flung the
door open just in time so that Gabrielle's towel snapped against the door. She then bolted out of the room.

The few dressed Amazons that were gathered in the central portion of the bathing hut all turned their heads when a young, naked Amazon came bursting through. Earlier they'd heard the pair horse playing and they'd all been getting some good laughter out of it. They all then suddenly turned their heads when somebody back in that same bathing room yelled out, "Ephiny!!!" Simultaneously the group snickered.

Ephiny came to a skittering stop by the exit of the bathing hut and she hastily threw on her leathers, at her feet were Gabrielle's clothes and her extras. She didn't fear Gabrielle coming after her because she knew Gabrielle was too shy to come out naked from the room. She heard the next angry yell from her girlfriend asking her to come back to the bathing room. She knew better than to go back to the fuming girlfriend so she slipped her feet into her sandals then gathered the articles at her feet and raced out of the hut with a sinister laugh.

Gabrielle was grounding her teeth when she realized Ephiny was never coming back. "Great," she growled and looked around in the bathing room. "What now?" Her eyes rested on Ephiny's towel on the other side of the pool. "I am going to kill her." Her teeth were grinding hard as she stalked over to the other towel. "I will get her. She's only won a battle… not the war," she hissed while yanking the towel off the floor.

The bard tossed the towel over her shoulder and took a moment to tie her own towel around her waist so that it covered down to her knees. Next she brought Ephiny's towel across her back and tied it just between her breasts. She stomped over to the door but she came short when she realized she'd be walking out in front of a few of her Amazons.

Gabrielle's anger dissipated into fear. Her heartbeat picked up. "Ooo sweet Artemis… I can't do this." She slightly moaned and covered her hand over her face. Then another fear sprang into her mind and Gabrielle peered over at her right side. Her hands checked to make sure her slavery brand was perfectly hidden.

"Okay." The princess straightened up and stared at the door. "I can do this," she whispered. "We're all women here… same stuff." She sucked in a deep breath. "I can do this," she said in a slow mantra that started in her head. She squared her shoulders, put on a stoic mask, and grabbed the door handle.

The group of Amazons stopped talking and giggling when the door to that bathing room opened again. They bit their lower lips as the young Amazon came proudly sauntering out of the bathing room.

The Amazon Princess didn't look any of them in the face and made a clear beeline for
the exit of the hut. Yet when she made it to the door, she came to a complete halt with her hand on the door. She just realized she was about to walk out in front of her Nation with only two towels to cover her dinar and prizes. Gabrielle tried to quickly think of what to do but nothing was forthcoming. As she considered her options, she heard the Amazons' whispers filtering back to her. Suddenly she grinned.

The four Amazons that were leisurely sitting on chairs went silent when the princess came around the corner and cleared her voice.

Gabrielle noticed how the four older Amazons' attention completely rested on her. She couldn't hide her embarrassment. Again she cleared her throat and finally said, "I was just wondering if you ladies could help me...?" She tried to remain stern so that they wouldn't start laughing at her.

One Amazon rose up from her spot and bowed some, her wet locks of hair falling forward. "How can we help, princess?" She straightened up and tried her best to control the smirk that was clawing at her lips.

The bard almost groaned when she had confirmation that the Amazons knew she was the princess. "Um... well..." She stopped herself so she could gather her wits; she was the damn princess for Artemis's sakes. Gabrielle was now composed and finally asked, "I was wondering if you four were about to leave?" She knew none of them weren't since they were relaxing and socializing.

The standing Amazon licked her lips and questioningly gazed at her friends but she turned back to the princess. "As a matter of fact we were, my princess. How may we help?"

Gabrielle suddenly beamed at the offer for assistance.

Ephiny had made it back to her hut in record time, especially since the cold was nipping at her damp skin. Yet she made it back to her hut she suddenly felt really bad. She'd tossed her items onto her dresser and went back out of the hut with Gabrielle's things. She knew that if she didn't return to her girlfriend that there would be more than Hades to pay. With that thought in mind, she picked up her pace into the fastest jog that her sandals let her go. Just as she came halfway to the bathing hut, she saw something very strange and it made her stop.

There off to her left about fifty paces were the four Amazons from the bathing hut and they were hiding something or somebody. Ephiny tilted her head some at how one Amazon was in the front, to the left and right, and the fourth walked in the rear of whatever was in the middle. She now squinted and caught sight of a small, blond princess being secretively escorted across the village. "Ooo you're so good, Gabrielle."
The young Amazon licked her lips and decided that her girlfriend was perfectly hidden despite many passersby were trying to get a clear look. She laughed some then took off in the direction of Gabrielle's hut. She made it in record time before Gabrielle and her escort. She was thrilled to find that Gabrielle hadn't yet put the mat over her window so she tossed Gabrielle's clothes and sandals through then squirmed through herself.

Just as she heard the door starting to open to the hut, Ephiny was scrambling to the foot of the bed and she sat down. She slapped Gabrielle's clothes in her lap, sandals on the bottom, and a huge gigantic smile on her face.

Gabrielle laughed at the Amazons as she stepped backwards into her hut. She held onto the door while saying, "Thank you Gredel, Oriona, Page, and Medora. I really appreciate it. I owe you four big!"

Gredel, who had been the first one to offer help to the princess, laughed and happily said, "It was our pleasure, princess."

"You can pay us back by getting Ephiny," called out Page.

The bard laughed. "Ooo I plan to."

"Have a good evening, princess," spoke up Medora, "I'm sure we'll see you at dinner."

Gabrielle smiled at the four then said goodbye with a wave. She closed the door and when it was shut, she dropped her head against it and let out a heavy sigh.

Ephiny remained silent and still but her massive smile still wide across her face.

Finally the Amazon Princess straightened up then turned around but she jumped back with her hand over her chest. "By the gods! Ephiny!"

The Amazon didn't flinch and didn't change her expression.

"What in Hades are you doing in here?" The slave's eyes then lowered to her things in Ephiny's lap. That seemed to jar her earlier anger so her eyes darkened. "Eeeephinyyy."

The Amazon licked her lips and held still.

The bard stalked forward.

"How about a truce?" finally offered the girlfriend.
Gabrielle's eyes responded by narrowing. "I don't think so." When she was close enough, she launched herself at her girlfriend.

Ephiny screamed and caught the small bard, who threw her onto her back. Gabrielle's clothes tumbled to the floor in a messy pile.

The couple began rolling around on the bed, laughing and giggling. They came to a stop near the edge and Gabrielle was on top but her towels were all askew.

Ephiny's laughter settled down and her soft smile took over. "Truce?"

The princess grinned and rubbed her nose against Ephiny's as a peace offering. "Truce… for now." She relaxed against the stronger woman and absorbed the closeness. The mix of leather and sandalwood scent filled her senses and calmed her. She shifted around some to get a bit more comfortable.

Ephiny tightened up when cold feet connected with hers. "Yikes. Your feet are freezing."

"Well that happens when you're forced to walk on cold ground with bare feet," whispered the annoyed bard.

The Amazon offered a warming smile but it was lost on Gabrielle. "I was coming back."

"I'm sure you were," teased Gabrielle.

Ephiny chuckled and whispered, "Let's sit by the fire so you can warm up."

The bard considered the idea and decided it was a good one. She rolled off of Ephiny and went over to the fur. She sat down cross legged and already started to feel warmer.

Ephiny picked up Gabrielle's articles and placed them on the bed again. She then neared the fireplace but noticed it was slightly low on wood. She gathered up two cut logs and tossed them in to help it. Satisfied it was growing stronger, she took a seat by her girlfriend. "Much better."

Gabrielle couldn't contain her amused smile. She leaned over, wrapped her right arm around Ephiny's waist, and rested her head on her shoulder.

The Amazon kissed the top of Gabrielle's blond head. "Feel warmer?"
"Definitely," murmured the bard.

The couple remained silent as they enjoyed the warmth of each other and the fire. Ephiny stole a quick look out of the window and saw the sun's setting rays were streaming across the clouds. She turned her head back to Gabrielle, who merely stared into the fire because she was lost in her thoughts.

"You should get ready," murmured the Amazon. "Dinner will be soon."

Gabrielle stretched her legs out and the fire warmed the bottom of her feet quite well. "I guess I should." She wiggled her toes some then stood up. "Think I should wear my princess ensemble?"

Ephiny dropped her head back some and grinned up at her girlfriend. "I would but just skip the extras."

The bard thoughtfully considered it and agreed. She went to her dresser and pulled out the leathers. It wasn't long before she had everything on and she had a moment to brush the knots from her hair.

Ephiny hadn't moved but she heard the distinct sound of Gabrielle putting her boots on.

"Do you need to go back and get your boots?"

Ephiny glanced around her shoulder. "Yeah I better." She now stared at her stretched out legs and the sandals. "It's going to be cold tonight."

"Mmmm," mumbled the bard. She stood up after lacing her boots and she stifled a yawn with the back of her hand. She ambled over to her window and put the mat into place to block out the evening chill. "You ready, Eph?"

The Amazon popped up onto her feet and met her girlfriend by the door.

The princess picked up her staff and opened the door.

"After you, princess." Ephiny emphasized her point by bowing.

Gabrielle eyed Ephiny then she proudly started through the door but picked up her jacket from next to the door. She swung her jacket on, buttoned one button, and tossed her staff into her right hand.

The Amazon came out and they started their quick walk over to her hut first. When they got in, Ephiny quickly put her boots on and grabbed her dark jacket too. She then
hurried Gabrielle out of the hut so they could make it to dinner on time. The pair walked into the bustling hut and went into the dinner line without a second thought. After they picked out their meals, they exchanged quick kisses then separated.

Princess Gabrielle rose up onto the large dais where all the officials ate together. She contained her sigh because she sometimes felt she never fit in with the group. She knew it was because she was young and as she'd gotten to know the others she'd become more relaxed. Gabrielle found her usual spot open and quickly took it.

The weapons master was soon to follow as she ascended to the table. "Princess."

The bard smiled at her friend and mentor. "Hi, Eponin."

Eponin flashed a smile back then took a seat on the opposite side of the table but a few chairs down.

Next to follow were several other officials such as the priestess, the stratègos, several of the councilors, Ambassador Majorie, the master healer, and several others.

Gabrielle's spot to sit was to the left of the queen, who always sat at the head of the table. She'd noted a long time ago that councilor Rena was on the queen's right. The bard then always had the priestess sitting to her left. She was relieved for that much because she adored Priestess Narkissa.

"It's good to see you're back, princess," warmly whispered Narkissa.

The bard smiled up at the priestess. "I didn't want to miss the Solstice Festival."

The priestess's body shook with a silent laugh but her smile gave her away. "Your first one here, isn't it?"

Gabrielle enthusiastically moved her head in confirmation.

"You will enjoy it then." Priestess Narkissa went silent though when she saw the queen rise up onto the dais.

Gabrielle studied the queen and realized she had a thin plate of food and dark circles under her eyes. She could only image what was causing the queen so much stress. She made note to herself to catch up with Solari about the latest gossip.

Despite Queen Melosa's worn features, she still held herself strong. She proudly walked down to the head of the table, lowered her plate and mug, and sat down. Her back was ridged, her eyes piercing, and her stoic manner in place. "We shall begin." She'd picked up her fork and started eating. The Amazons at the royal table all
followed suit after the queen's approval.

Gabrielle had always found that tradition rather fascinating. She'd always wondered if the queen wasn't present then if everybody would follow her. She'd received her confirmation several moons back when her and her friends ate at the tavern in Athens. Yet as she considered it, she thought about how in her family they always waited for their mother to begin the dinner since she'd been the one to cook it. The traditions were somewhat similar.

"So how goes the Academy, princess?" questioned the queen.

The bard had taken a bite of her flatbread but she didn't respond until she swallowed. "It is going well, my queen."

Queen Melosa nodded then gave a curious look. "Do you and Ephiny expect to graduate this spring?"

"Yes, my queen. We're not exactly sure when this spring but yes."

The queen's head bobbed a few times. "I am glad you'll be finished soon."

"I assume you will return here when your schooling is complete?"

The bard turned her attention to the head councilor. "I believe so." She then faintly grinned and added, "But I believe my schooling will not stop once I am here."

Councilor Rena chuckled and so did the weapons master.

"You have a ways to go," confirmed the queen.

The princess peered up at the queen but said nothing.

"You will succeed, princess," spoke up Narkissa. She now felt the chilling looks from the stratègos. Her eyes met the stratègos's and she gave a challenging look.

Commander Kalonice's eyes narrowed but something of a grin played with her lips.

"I plan to," proudly stated the princess.

The priestess lost her focus on the stratègos and looked at Gabrielle again. "I am glad to hear it."

Queen Melosa now decided a change of topic was needed. She gazed down the table until she found her new target. "Councilor Tanya, how goes the preparations for the
festival?"

The councilor had just taken a drink from her mug. She nodded to the queen. "Quite well, my queen. Things are on schedule."

"You plan to be ready in time?"

"Of course, my queen… as always."

Gabrielle carefully listened to the councilor's report. She felt excited just from hearing about it.

"When does the tree arrive?"

The councilor smiled at the queen's question. "Tomorrow actually. The cutting will begin tomorrow morning at first light."

Queen Melosa now directed her words at the stratègos. "I would think some of the best warriors are on the cutting team…?"

Commander Kalonice grinned at the queen. "Would you expect any less, my queen? I have my finest prepared to cut."

Melosa had a distant grin but she lost it just as quickly.

"What day will it be decorated?"

Everybody's eyes shifted to the princess at the break of her voice.

Councilor Tanya quickly answered back. "The following day, princess." A warm smile caressed her lips. "I expect you to be there to help with that."

Gabrielle beamed at the offer. "I wouldn't miss it." Then a random thought came to mind and she decided to ask Councilor Tanya. "What kind of tree is it?" She noticed though that the councilor wasn't going to answer but signaled to somebody else.

The director of the agricultural department took over the question. "It is a Greek fir, princess some of the finest in these parts. We've been growing them for many, many seasons."

The bard hadn't formally met the head of agricultural department but she knew her name, Lelia. "How big can they get?"

"Quite tall, princess… about as high as the walls."
The princess was quite impressed because that meant the tree would be seen from outside of the Nation. "Is this particular one that tall?"

"Yes, you'll be able to see it from outside the village." Director Lelia enjoyed the princess's continued questions. She appreciated the princess's natural curiosity and need to understand.

"We grow this particular tree just for this festival," added the queen.

Gabrielle looked to the queen. "I didn't realize that."

The stratègos grinned at the young princess. "There is still much to learn, princess."

The Amazon Princess nodded her head.

Commander Kalonice turned her head to the right and gazed at the weapons master not far down. "How are the plans for the smithy, Master Eponin?"

"It is going well, stratègos. Andra and I plan to take a trip soon to Aegae to see how much a forge will cost us."

"Yes, it will not be long before the spring comes."

Eponin nodded at the stratègos's statement. "It won't be."

Councilor Rena gave the weapons master a challenging look. "I hope your proposal and numbers are good, Master Eponin."

The weapons master refrained from sighing. "Of course, councilor I will make sure of that."

"I have every faith in that, Master Eponin."

Eponin was slightly relieved at the head councilor's confidence and hidden support.

"We were fortunate enough to take on a blacksmith thanks to the princess," stated Councilor Rena.

"And don't forget the fish this coming spring," spoke up Ambassador Majorie.

Mostly everybody chuckled at the ambassador's excitement about the future seafood.

"I personally look forward to the oysters," spoke up the stratègos.
"Not if I beat you to them, stratègos," chided the ambassador.

The group at the table laughed.

"What are some of the other seafoods we expect, princess?"

Gabrielle turned her head to Director Lelia. "If I recall correctly, there will be other things like tuna, halibut, perch, bass…" She stopped in the middle of her thinking but brightened as she recalled the other seafood. "Prawn, eel, some squid."

"Quite a variety," agreed the agricultural director.

"Yes there is."

Director Lelia tilted her head some before asking, "How did you come upon the pact with Potidaea?"

The slave was quiet for a heartbeat then she knew it was best to be honest. "I am originally from Potidaea. My father and the constable go way back so I was able to talk him into the pact."

"Well I have to say I've greatly appreciate the pact, princess. It has put our excess olive oil to use along with an increase in production for the olive groves."

Gabrielle smiled at the director. "I was happy it worked out."

"Even if you were a little ahead of yourself," reminded the queen.

The princess tried not to sink into her seat because she needed to remain proud of her decision this past summer. "Yes I was imprudent, my queen but I wasn't foolish."

The ambassador stifled a laugh that wanted to break from her. She could tell the queen's annoyance was heightening at the princess for her blunt but honest statement. "You did a fine job, princess," rescued the ambassador, "And with some more proper training you can acquire permission to authorize such pacts."

Queen Melosa felt her anger increase another level.

Gabrielle swallowed because she sensed the tension from the queen. She decided it was best to ebb it and quickly. "Maybe once I've assumed some duties and had some more experience, ambassador. Particularly after the queen has trained me." Gabrielle gave a curious stare at the queen.
Queen Melosa relented some and quietly stated, "Perhaps." She then picked up her mug.

Priestess Narkissa's hands were in her lap since she'd finished her meal awhile ago. Her right hand wondered over to the princess's knee and she squeezed it.

The bard tried not to jump but she did give a side glance to the priestess.

The priestess patted the small knee then removed her hold.

It wasn't much longer before the group broke apart and everybody went their separate ways. Some Amazons were beginning to leave the dining hut already. Gabrielle though sought out her group of friends in the bustling, loud hut and it didn't take her long.

Ephiny smiled up when she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Hey."

"Hi." Gabrielle scooted in when Ephiny made some room for her.

"How'd it go up there?" inquired the girlfriend.

The slave sighed and shook her head.

Eponin appeared at the table too and took a seat across from the couple. "Nothing like some politics, princess?"

The bard groaned and dropped her head into her hands. "I hate sitting up there some times."

Ephiny chuckled and patted her girlfriend's back.

"You could always start a new tradition," spoke up a new voice.

Gabrielle lifted her head to Jocasta.

Jocasta grinned at the princess. "You can get rid of the royal table and let everybody mingle together."

Gabrielle snorted.

"As if that wouldn't start up a lot of politics," joked Solari.

The bard turned to Solari and said, "I need to talk to you later."
Solari had a smirk now. "Ooo? About what, princess?"

The princess rolled her eyes. "Some stuff… I need to ask you about."

"I'll tell you anything," teased Solari. "Or show you."

Ephiny shot a warning look to her best friend.

"Anything Ephiny might have left out."

Gabrielle pointed a finger at her friend. "I've already had to deal with enough of that crap today, thank you."

"Yes, I heard rumor about the beautiful princess sashaying through the village in only towels," spoke up Adonia.

The princess's own dangerous look now centered on Adonia. "I was not sashaying."

Adonia's smirking features grew wider. "That's not what I heard."

Gabrielle groaned and decided to give up.

"Yeah what was that all about?" Solari wiggled forward in her seat as if getting any closer would help her read Gabrielle's thoughts. "It's the latest gossip in the Nation. Something about you and Ephiny."

Princess Gabrielle hotly stared down her girlfriend. "See what you started?"

"Me!" bellowed the Amazon, "As I recall you were whipping me first."

"Whipping?"

Gabrielle's eyes flickered to Solari and she could have sworn Solari's ears had just grown. "Look you," she pointed a finger at the gossip queen, "don't you start anything or else there will be Hades to pay with me."

Adonia couldn't help herself. "Now that sounds like less of a threat and more of a pleasure, my princess." When she had Gabrielle's attention, she quickly added, "Do you offer private whippings to everybody?" Yet before she received her answer, she was smacked hard by Jocasta.

"Ooo you'll get a whipping alright," warned Jocasta.

Adonia gave a peace offering to Jocasta by saying, "Yours would be much more
exquisite then, love."

Quickly Jocasta's sunny smile revealed itself again.

"I heard from a good source, princess that you make towels look quite sexy," teased Solari.

Gabrielle ran her tongue along the back of her teeth. Her frustration was mounting very quickly.

Ephiny's wicked smile appeared in Solari's direction. "Better than you could, Solari."

Solari's jaw dropped. "Is that a challenge, Ephiny?"

"No, it's a fact." Ephiny's eyes gleamed fiery amber.

Solari tried to stare down her best friend but was failing. "Fine!" She threw up her hands. 'I'll leave it alone then.'

Ephiny enjoyed her win and also received a kiss on the cheek from Gabrielle.

"My hero," murmured Gabrielle so that nobody heard but her.

Ephiny's body quaked with a few silent laughs.

When Gabrielle straightened back up, she immediately felt two strong hands on her shoulders. This caused her to drop her head back and she was met by the smiling face of Andra. Gabrielle didn't hesitate to jump out of her seat and throw her arms around the blacksmith.

"I see you made it back safely," whispered Andra into the bard's ear.

Gabrielle smiled while pulling back but not without relinquishing her hold. "Yes, we had a safe trip here. How are you?"

The blacksmith released one hand and brushed back loose pieces of Gabrielle's blond hair. "I am well. You?"

"I'm tired but good." The princess shifted out of the warm embrace and held her hand out to the table. "Sit with us."

Andra briefly considered it then nodded. "Alright."

Ephiny ordered everybody on the bench to scoot down again.
Gabrielle sat back down but in Ephiny's earlier spot.

Andra then took Gabrielle's spot.

"So do you know everybody here?" offered the princess.

"Everybody but two," answered the blacksmith, her eyes rested on those two.

"Okay." Gabrielle started with Jocasta. "That's Jocasta and to Jocasta's right is Adonia."

"Pleasure to meet you both," stated the blacksmith.

Jocasta had her brilliant smile. "You as well."

Adonia leaned forward some. "So you're the famous blacksmith?"

Andra laughed at the young Amazon. "By far I am not."

Adonia's grin widened. "That is not what has been going around."

Ephiny dared to ask. "What is going around?"

Solari quickly took up the question. "They're calling Andra Princes Gabrielle's blacksmith."

Once again, the bard groaned and dropped her face into her hands. "You got to be kidding me." Her voice was muffled.

"Well that is fitting, princess," started Jocasta, "since you sought her out. The Nation will thrive now that we have a blacksmith."

"Yes well she does have a name besides the princess's blacksmith," complained Gabrielle.

Now everybody understood Gabrielle's implications and annoyance.

Adonia peered across Jocasta and looked at Solari.

Solari understood Adonia's expression and she only nodded.

"When will we have a smithing hut?"

Andra smiled at Jocasta. "We plan for the spring or late spring."
"Are you excited, Eponin?"

The weapons master nodded at Jocasta. "It will be nice."

"How about the headache about getting the metals?" teased Adonia.

"All in due time," simply stated Eponin. She then shifted her attention to Gryta, who was approaching the table.

"Hello, ladies," offered the small warrior Amazon.

Gabrielle climbed to her feet and met the Amazon.

"I am glad to see you, princess." The historian gave a brief hug. "How was your journey and the Academy?"

"The journey was tiring as is the Academy."

The historian chuckled. "You will be finished soon."

"Yes," Gabrielle smiled at that thought. "How goes things for you?"

"Very busy, princess." Gryta folded her arms over her chest. "I would like to speak with you in the next day or two."

"Of course, Grytra." Gabrielle clasped the Amazon's arm. "We'll meet up tomorrow."

"That would be good." Gryta smiled her appreciation. "I must go though." She waved at the group at the table. "I'm sorry I can't visit." Her eyes then fell upon Ephiny. "How are you, Ephiny?"

"I'm great, Gryta. You?"

"The same." The historian smiled at the princess and quietly said, "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Goodnight, Gryta." Gabrielle watched the historian quietly leave the hut. She went back to sitting beside Ephiny.

The group continued talking for another half of a candlemark until they felt it was getting late. Plus the food hut was rather empty by that point. Just as they all stood up and started saying goodnight, Andra grabbed Gabrielle off to the side.
"Are you headed to bed now?" quietly asked Andra.

The bard shook her head. "No, I plan to be up for a bit. Why?"

"I was just wondering if I could come over for a visit…?"

Gabrielle glanced over at Ephiny, who was busy with Solari. "Yeah." She looked back at Andra. "Just let me say goodnight to Ephiny."

The blacksmith nodded then watched as Gabrielle went to Ephiny.

Ephiny smiled at her girlfriend and slipped her arm around her small waist. "You headed to your hut?"

"Yes, I was going to visit with Andra. You don't mind?"

Ephiny chuckled and shook her head. "No. We've spent the last several moons together." She then grinned at Solari. "I think Solari and I are going to catch up."

Gabrielle also grinned despite an unexpected ping of jealousy shot through her. "Alright. Have fun." She stood on her tiptoes to steal a kiss.

Ephiny lightly touched Gabrielle's cheek as they kissed. When she pulled back, she whispered, "Sleep well tonight. I'll be by earlier for that run."

The princess groaned and rested her hand on Ephiny's jacket covered stomach. "I almost forgot."

Solari snickered. "Ephiny will whip you into shape again."

"Don't I know," joked the bard. She patted Ephiny's stomach. "I'll see you then."

"Night." Ephiny watched her girlfriend leave then she returned her focus to Solari.

Andra and Gabrielle slipped out of the warm dining hut and into the brisk night. They pulled their jackets close and also walked closer together to block away the wind. They didn't say much since they were too concerned about getting into the princess's warm hut. When they did get in, they hung their jackets by the door on the wood pegs then Gabrielle offered a seat by the fire.

The blacksmith got comfortable on the fire and was warmed. She watched as the princess put a few logs into hearth, which caused the fire to snap in hunger.

Gabrielle settled down beside her friend, her legs stretched out and her hands behind
her to support her upper body. "How have you been?"

"Pretty good." Andra smiled to guarantee her words. "I'm finally getting settled in."

"I was wondering how that was going." Gabrielle chuckled at Andra's extreme sigh. "Hasn't been that bad?"

The blacksmith softly laughed. "No, not at all. My training is going well."

Gabrielle's eyebrows naturally furrowed with her thoughts. "I heard that you and I will be taking a class together after the festival."

"I've heard that too." Andra brushed back several of her wavy, dark locks. "I'm not sure what the class is… Eponin won't tell me."

The princess bit her lower lip. "Huh." She drummed her fingers behind her. "I wonder what it is."

Andra only shook her head. "How's the Academy been? Exams?"

"The exams were tough but Ephiny and I studied a lot. I think we did okay."

"You won't find out 'til you go back huh?"

Gabrielle's head bobbed a few times. "When we get back we have about… four moons of classes then we graduate."

Andra proudly smiled at the bard's future success. "I plan to go to your graduation."

The princess suddenly had a shocked expression. "Andra, you don't need to come all the way to Athens for that."

"Why would I not?" countered the older Amazon. "I wish to see you graduate."

Gabrielle let out a faint sigh. "It would mean a lot if you came."

Andra smiled at Gabrielle's acceptance. "Thank you." She then shifted some by pulled her legs in to sit cross legged. "I was wondering about something."

The Amazon Princess tilted her head, her questioning eyes locked on her friend.

"Do you know much about these… raids that go on this coming spring?"

Gabrielle lowered her head and stared at the fire. She hadn't learned much about these
mysterious raids that happen during the spring and fall seasons. She'd never questioned anybody about them after deciding that some day she'd be taught about them. However from the bits and pieces she'd collected, she had an idea. "Honestly I am not sure what they are… or entail but I have some ideas."

Andra knew Gabrielle was much younger than she but she was hoping she knew something of them. It'd been just about one season for Andra now in the Nation but she knew it'd almost been four seasons for Gabrielle. "I've heard some things too."

The bard licked her lips. "I believe they have something to do with…." Gabrielle trailed off as she tried to find the right word. "With keeping the population up in the Nation."

The blacksmith chuckled at the bard's description skills. "Well I have found it slightly odd how there are no men here yet several women are pregnant."

Gabrielle couldn't help but laugh now. "I know… I was thinking the same thing when I first joined the Nation."

"I think these raids are connected to it somehow."

The bard slowly nodded. "That's what I think too."

Andra lifted a dark eyebrow at her friend. "Are you thinking the same thing?"

Gabrielle smirked and replied, "That a Nation of masked women raid a village for sex?"

The blacksmith laughed and shook her head. "Gods." She ran her hand through her locks again. "That has to be a sight."

"Well…." The princess shrugged as best as she could. "I guess it's the only way to do it."

"Hmph." Andra smirked. "I would say since two women together won't make a child and they won't let men here."

"Men are just baby makers anyway," joked Gabrielle.

Andra laughed. "Gods."

Gabrielle's devilish smirk came over her face. "You know I've always considered myself a single-minded person."
Andra had a wicked grin and carefully listened.

"Of course if I got married I'd have to ask my husband if it was okay."

Andra roared with laughter and between her laughter she rasped, "Say... say that... to another... Amazon."

Gabrielle was laughing some too but she shook her head. "They'd hang me over the wall for it."

The blacksmith settled down. "Or you could just tell the queen."

"Ooo gods... there's no way in Hades."

Andra cleared her throat some then seriously asked, "How are things with you and Ephiny?"

The young Amazon felt a smile touch her lips. "We're doing well." Yet her expression fell. "There's just some underlining tension though."

"What's that about?"

Gabrielle shrugged.

The blacksmith poked her friend on the side. "You can tell me, Gabrielle." She gave an encouraging smile. "We're like sisters."

Gabrielle's warm smile formed at hearing herself be called a sister. "It's just that... well Ephiny and I have been together for about two seasons."

Andra only nodded but was listening very carefully.

"And Ephiny and I haven't exactly...." Gabrielle lifted her right hand and waved it around in the air. "You know."

Andra arched an eyebrow.

Gabrielle giggled at the look. "You know, Andra."

The blacksmith bit her lower lip then said, "Had sex, Gabrielle?" She enjoyed the hot flush that washed over the young woman.

"Yeah," she shyly muttered.
"Well," started the older Amazon, "do you feel ready to take that step? It is a big step."

"Ephiny seems ready."

"I didn't ask if Ephiny was."

Gabrielle's lips puckered some then she shook her head. "I don't feel ready, I think. I'm not sure why either."

"Then don't do anything, Gabrielle." Andra now shifted her body around so that she faced her friend. She smiled when Gabrielle straightened up and faced her too. "Besides that you're still young. You're only what?"

"Sixteen springs old."

"How old is Ephiny?"

The bard did a quick check in her head. "She'll be nineteen summers old."

"Ooo," murmured Andra. "I see."

Gabrielle dropped her head to one side. "What?"

"It's just that Ephiny is… in a different stage of her life, so to speak." She sensed Gabrielle's instant annoyance and she quickly gathered up Gabrielle's right hand into her own. "I'm not saying you're at different maturity levels, Gabrielle or anything. As a matter of fact, you're very mature for your age." She squeezed the small hand then released it. "Let's just say that Ephiny is at that experimental stage."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I am too."

"Yes but not as much as Ephiny." Andra then rested her elbows on her knees and lowered her chin to her hands. Her blue eyes were solely centered on Gabrielle. "I think you need to figure out why you're not ready."

The bard nodded her head but her thoughts were on the problem between her and Ephiny. She had ideas about why she wasn't ready to be with Ephiny but she didn't want to face those reasons, especially with Ephiny. "It will change everything, won't it?"

"Yes," murmured Andra, "Everything." She knew how innocent and naive the bard was and she hated the thought of her losing it. "Has Ephiny been with anybody?"
Gabrielle's eyebrows knitted tightly together. "I don't know actually. She's never talked about it."

"Ever ask?"

"No… never thought to." A faint chill of nervousness rippled down the bard's back. "I'm not sure if I want to know."

Andra patted her friend's knee. "Give it time… and don't push yourself to do anything." She then gave a warning look. "Or let Ephiny push you into anything."

"I won't," promised the young woman. Gabrielle shifted a little then said, "Do you mind if I ask you about something?"

The blacksmith's lips curled into a grin. "You can ask anything."

"I was wondering if you'd heard of the blood sister ritual?" Gabrielle became nervous as she played with the end of her skirt.

"No, I really haven't," confessed Andra. "What is it?"

"It's an Amazon ritual performed by the priestess so that two women, not of blood, can become blood sisters."

The blacksmith absorbed the information then it dawned on her what her friend might be implying. "Did you wish to perform it with somebody?"

The bard let go of her skirt and lifted her head finally. "I do but I am nervous about something."

"What's that?"

"Part of the ritual deals with telling your blood sister about your past." Gabrielle shook her head then whispered, "I don't exactly have a pretty past."

Andra could only imagine what it was that caused that much fear in her friend. She gathered up the young woman's hands into her own. "Whatever it is, it wouldn't matter anyway." She smiled at Gabrielle. "It's about who you are… not what you've done. That past can be forgiven and never control the future."

Gabrielle swallowed. "That's just it… the part about who I am."

Andra now was concerned. She squeezed the princess's hands. "What is it, Gabrielle?"
Gabrielle's head dipped down and her eyes shut against her rising fears. She had to tell Andra or how would she ever be able to consider this woman her older sister. She bit into her resolve then lifted her head, her emotional green eyes appearing again. "I'm originally from Potidaea and when I was young my town was attacked by a warlord."

The blacksmith couldn't imagine where this story would go but she knew she wouldn't like it.

"My mother, sister, and I were captured by the warlord and eventually sold into slavery."

Andra straightened up with shock. "Gods… Gabrielle…"

The princess face was as dark as her eyes. "I have a master now but he's more like my grandfather. He's the one actually sending me to the Academy."

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle. I didn't know."

"I know… I've wanted to tell you… I just…."

Andra pressed the palm of her hand against the bard's cheek. "It's okay." She then softly smiled. "It doesn't change anything either." Yet she paused then quietly added, "I lied… it does change something."

The bard's body was jolted by fear.

Andra ran her fingertips under Gabrielle's chin. "I'm even prouder to be your friend."

Gabrielle didn't know what to say but she quickly gathered the older woman into her arms. "Thank you," she whispered.

Andra picked out all of the emotions in Gabrielle's voice. She rubbed the bard's back then slowly let her go. When they were comfortable again, she grinned and teasingly asked, "So will you go through the blood sister ritual with me, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle was racing between all of her emotions and she laughed. She began to cry from being relieved and happy about Andra's response. She pulled the blacksmith in for another hug while saying, "Of course."

Through the rest of the evening the friends continued talking and relaying their past couple of moons. Gabrielle was happy to find out that Andra was starting to fit into the Nation. She knew how at first it all seemed overwhelming but once there's a set routine it wasn't so bad. After a few candlemarks, Andra decided it was best she left especially when she noticed how tired her young friend was. She said her goodnight.
with a warm hug then slipped out of the hut. It didn't take long for Gabrielle to get ready for bed and even less time to fall asleep. Despite how well she slept it just didn't seem long enough as Ephiny started banging on the door bright and early.

Gabrielle let out the largest, annoyed groan ever and threw open her hut door. "What?"

"Good morning, sunshine." Ephiny beamed a huge smile. "Time to run."

Gabrielle was about two heartbeats from slamming the door shut but she remembered her promise. She grumbled and walked into the washroom.

The Amazon strolled into the hut and closed the door. "Sleep well?" Her only response was grunt from the washroom. "Just not long enough," she muttered to nobody but herself.

The girlfriends eventually collected themselves and started their early morning run through the Nation and surrounding woods. It was a good candlemark run and within the first half, Gabrielle was sure she was going to throw up but Ephiny urged her on. Eventually the nauseas feeling subsided and Gabrielle actually felt like she could run even faster but she refrained from doing such.

After breakfast, Gabrielle and Ephiny went to seek out Councilor Tanya to see if she needed any help with the festival preparations. They soon found themselves thrown into the preparations and doing whatever the councilor needed them to do. Yet it was around Helios high when the entire Nation came to a screeching halt as the main gates opened up with a lot of yelling and hollering.

At the entrance of the village, there was the tip of a gigantic fir tree. Gabrielle had stopped her chores and came by the gate to see what the entire ruckus was about. She was in complete awe at seeing dozens of Amazons working on hauling the tree on its side using three open ended wagons. It took six pulling workhorses, eight pushing Amazons, and four directing Amazons to get the tree through the gate, through the village, and to the central location next to the queen's dais.

Gabrielle stayed alongside the event. She then was so curious to how they would ever get it to stand up in what look to be a big tree stand. She was stunned even more as fourteen Amazons centered the base of the tree near the tree stand and then they lashed down ropes. Soon the tree was filling Gabrielle's vision as it rose up from the wagons and up into the air before it slid directly into the tree stand.

There was a loud cheer through the Nation while the fourteen Amazons steadied the tree with their ropes. Two other Amazons disappeared under the tree and quickly worked to tighten the tree stand around the tree's trunk. Then finally they tied several
ropes on branches deep in the tree and nailed the other ends into the ground.

The fourteen Amazons, one by one, snapped their ropes free. And everybody held their breath to see if the tree would topple or not. After several heartbeats there was no movement from the tree and every spectator Amazon started cheering about the success.

The rest of the day carried on in haste as every Amazon realized that tomorrow would begin the Winter Solstice Festival. By the afternoon, Gabrielle was given the duty to have several Amazons, including herself, decorate the tree. Once Gabrielle was able to find out where the ornaments were stored, she had them carted to the tree and directed the Amazons where to hang the ornaments on the tree. The bard was quite successful with the task and it was truly her first time ever instructing more than one person on what to do. She was relieved to find that all ten of the Amazons listened to her carefully and carried out every order in earnest.

When the sun hung low in the west sky, the princess felt rather worn down yet quite proud. She stood a hundred paces back, the tree in her full view, and her hands rested on her jacket covered hips. Slowly a corky smile creased her lips at the sight of the beautifully decorated tree. She then sensed another Amazon beside her then a warm voice broke the silence.

"It looks amazing, princess." Councilor Tanya clasped the bard's upper shoulder in appreciation. "You did a nice job."

"I didn't do a thing but tell them where to place the ornaments," replied the bard.

The much older Amazon chuckled at the princess's refusal. "Yet without any guidance I can guarantee you that they would have placed all those ornaments in one spot on that tree."

Gabrielle quietly laughed and dropped her hands to her side. "Perhaps." She then took a few steps forward and called out, "Page, put that one further to the left. There's one already there just to your right, over your head."

Page stopped from hooking the ornament and dropped her head back. In fact there was the same ornament already placed not far away. She grunted at that then moved around the tree to the left. "Here?" she called out.

"Perfect," called the princess.

Councilor Tanya folded her arms over her chest and thoughtfully smiled. She knew she made the right choice in asking Gabrielle to decorate the tree. "Thank you for taking care of this, princess."
The Amazon Princess faced the councilor again. "It was my pleasure… I've enjoyed it."

"I do have another request to make of you."

Gabrielle picked out the councilor's serious tone and her own expression tightened. She shifted closer to the older Amazon then softly asked, "What is that, councilor?"

"I was wondering if perhaps you would tell a story tomorrow… during the festival."

The bard went still as the councilor's request swept through her mind. She'd truly expect anything but this and she was frozen by shock.

"Princess?" tried again the concerned councilor.

"I'm sorry." Gabrielle brushed away her astonishment by shaking her head. "I just… I wasn't expecting that."

Councilor Tanya realized that the petite, young princess was in fact frightened by the opposition to speak before many Amazons. "I believe it would be mostly young children that would come to listen."

Gabrielle sucked in her next breath then forced a grin. "I have feeling it won't just be that." Now her body trembled and she wasn't sure if it was from the cooling evening or the thought of getting up before so many people. She steadied her emotions and reminded herself that this was why she wanted to become a bard. A bard performs before an audience and Gabrielle knew once she entangled not only herself but her audience into her stories that her nervousness would stop. Finally with some conviction building up, she smiled and stated, "I would love to, councilor. Thank you for asking."

Councilor Tanya suddenly smiled happily at the princess's agreement. She grabbed the bard's closest arm, never losing her smile. "Thank you, princess. It will be a wonderful treat for the young ones."

At the thought of all the children, Gabrielle melted and her confidence even grew. "I hope so." She then saw that the decorating Amazons were finished up with the tree. "I should help them." She took a step backwards.

"I will meet with you in the dinner hut, princess."

"See you then, councilor." The bard flashed a brilliant smile, spun around, and hurried to the Amazons.
For the rest of the evening, Gabrielle found herself busy first at dinner then followed by meeting up with Councilor Tanya, who was slowly recruiting Gabrielle's help for the festival. The bard had no problem readily agreeing but she hoped she'd have time to also enjoy the festival. After dinner, Gabrielle was due to catch up with Gryta to discuss how the research and recording of the Nation's history was going thus far. She'd come to discover just how many scrolls Gryta had lined up in her room on the wood floor. That left the princess's rubbing the back of her neck and wondering what to do about it. Maybe this winter she would get a chance to ask somebody for help on building a small shelving unit to hold them.

Gabrielle made it back to her room rather late and quite weary again. She hadn't seen Ephiny except during the morning and also at dinner. She knew that she needed to rest soon because Ephiny would show up as soon as Helios began his ride across the sky. It didn't take Gabrielle long to prepare for bed, stoke the fireplace, and crawl into her cool bed. Tomorrow would be the Solstice Festival and it would be a long but exciting day for the bard.

The bard slept fitfully after being worn out by the day's activity. Her dreams were obscure but calm and when the sun kissed the eastern horizon, there was a loud knock. Gabrielle merely stirred but turning to the other side of her bed yet the knock jarred her awake the second time. She sat up quickly just as the third set of knocks came to her door. "Come in, Eph."

The curly-haired Amazon pushed the door open then slipped in so that the cool air wouldn't get into the hut. She smiled at her girlfriend, who was sitting on the edge of the bed and was between yawning and stretching. "Good morning."

The princess sleepily smiled and muddled her already knotty looking hair. She slid off the bed, went to Ephiny, placed a kiss on her cheek and murmured, "Good morning," close to her ear. Gabrielle then dragged herself into the washroom to clean up and organize her hair.

Ephiny took her usual spot on the foot of the bed and she enjoyed watching her girlfriend prepare for the run. "Sleep well?" A solemn nod from the bard. "Good dreams?" A second nodding confirmation. "Ready to run?" This time she received a shake of the blond head and it made her chuckle.

Gabrielle straightened up after lacing her boots but she still sat in her desk chair.

"Ready?"

The princess sighed. "I think so."
Ephiny stood up and approached her girlfriend as she stood up too. She encircled Gabrielle with her strong arms and leaned in. "Happy Solstice."

Gabrielle's eyes and face suddenly lit up at the realization of today. "Happy Solstice too, Eph." She leaned in for a tender kiss.

The Amazon ended the kiss with a gentle bite to Gabrielle's lower lip. "Let's go," she whispered. At hearing Gabrielle's groaning protest, she quickly moved to the door.

The bard had her simple leathers on that exposed most of her body. When she came near the door, her bare stomach, legs, and arms were taken over by goose bumps from the nipping cold air. She pushed through it though and started her morning run with her girlfriend.

During the portion of the run that went through the village, the two young Amazons saw the beginnings of Nation stirring awake. A few select Amazons were already out and finishing the final preparations for the Solstice Festival. Gabrielle fell slightly behind her girlfriend when she became curious as to what was happening but then when she saw the gates just ahead, she hurried up.

Ephiny quickly shot a grin at the princess's curiosity. She led them out of the cracked open gates and went into the woods.

The run was only a candlemark compared to the usual candlemark and half. By the time they returned to the village everything and everybody were busy and the two Amazons were just able to squeeze past. They each went to their huts and hastily changed before joining the bustling festival.

The great Solstice Festival was one of the major highlights for the Nation, especially for the children. It seemed as if every Amazon came out of the woodworks for the event since there was absolutely no space or room to move around. In front of the Solstice tree there was a mini dais and then there was somebody dressed up in quite an unusual outfit and sitting in a heavy wood chair. Gabrielle decided to watch the event as so many children lined up at the foot of the dais to have a chance to sit and talk with the figure. The bard bit her lower lip as she tried to recall what this red and white clad figure was called then it struck her: Senticles. Now she began to really wonder who was dressed up as Senticles but it would have to wait until later.

Gabrielle now began wondering around the village to the various stands that were up. Each stand had a different game going on that somehow related to the holiday. The children could win various toys too that were all brought in from the nearby town or handmade by certain Amazons.

Then the bard finally made it to the more adult area, which was located in the sparring
fields. At the fields there were several Amazons practicing for the later event of a challenge. There were different challenges depending on the Amazon's weapon of choice. Gabrielle wondered over to the stand where people could sign up and she was instantly greeted.

"Care to sign up, princess?"

The Amazon Princess chuckled and shook her hand and hand at the older Amazon. "I know I'll be beat my first time."

The Amazon softly smiled and shifted some in her chair. "You don't know 'til you try."

"No but thank you." The princess glanced at the Amazon to her right, who was signing up. She then smiled back down at the Amazon she'd been talking to. "I was curious though." At seeing the Amazon's attention on her, she continued. "How many are signed up?"

"Would you care to see the roster?" The Amazon picked up the scroll and held it out.

Gabrielle shifted around the table and read through the names that she wasn't too familiar with many of them. As she neared the bottom, she paused and recognized one particular name. "Gryta signed up."

"Yes, your historian is quite good."

The princess noted the Amazon's association of Gryta to her. She handed back the scroll. "When do the challenges start?"

The Amazon's smile widened. "Around Helios high, princess."

"Thank you." Gabrielle smiled then headed off again to keep exploring all the events. Then somebody quickly hurried up behind her and wrapped their arm around her shoulders. "Hi, Solari."

Solari smiled happily. "How are you, Gabrielle?"

"I'm great."

"How'd the run go?"

The slave chuckled and shrugged her shoulders. "It's getting easier."

Solari finally freed her arm and adjusted her long jacket again. "Still sore?"
"Not as bad," confessed Gabrielle.

"Ephiny said she was sore as anything." Solari laughed along with Gabrielle. "What'd you need to talk to me about?"

Gabrielle brightened up at her friend's reminder but then her excitement went dead just as she recalled why she wanted to talk to Solari. "I was just curious about what you may have heard."

"Wait." Solari grabbed Gabrielle's arm while coming to an abrupt stop.

Gabrielle faced her friend.

"You want to know about what rumors I've heard?" Solari's voice was low but very teasing.

The princess let out a heavy sigh then nodded. "I am worried about the queen."

Solari quickly looked around at the Amazons wondering past them. Her hand shifted down to Gabrielle's wrist and she hauled her friend off of the small street. She found an empty bench that was out of the way and sat down. "What you want to know?"

Gabrielle folded her hands in her lap. "I just noticed how the queen looked stressed. Is something going on since I've been at the Academy?"

Solari carefully considered the princess's question and concerns. "The Nation is close to a war with the centaurs."

The princess stiffened at the news. "What's happened?"

Solari shook her head. "Queen Melosa thinks that a centaur killed her sister." She stared down at her open hands in her lap. "She hasn't proved it but she's almost sure." She lifted her eyes to Gabrielle again. "If she proves it, there is no doubt that the queen and council will decide on war."

Gabrielle's right hand was tangled in her blond locks as she considered this new information. "Can't the Nation and the centaurs just agree to hand over the murderer?" At Solari's shaking head, her hand flopped down into her lap. "Why?"

"The centaurs refuse to say who let alone extricate them. They're actually claiming that it wasn't a centaur that killed Terreis."

"What happens if the queen can't prove it was a centaur or anybody else for that
matter?"

Solari's expression fell. "Then... Terreis will never be avenged." She lowered her gaze down to the ground. "The war will most likely happen still. The tension is building a lot... it hasn't been this bad in many season cycles."

"You really think the queen will attack the centaurs without the proof?"

Slowly Solari nodded her head and looked at her friend. "I wouldn't doubt it. It may take several season cycles just because she'll have to win over the council." She paused and considered a few more things then added, "The queen's mother was killed by a centaur in battle."

Gabrielle sighed. "And now Terreis." She shook her head and chewed on her lower lip then quietly asked, "What does the Nation think about the war?"

"The Nation is split in half. Honestly...." Solari's head tilted in her thoughts. "Honestly its split by the age groups. The younger Amazons aren't really promoting the war... it seems to be the older Amazons that are pushing for it."

"Because of previous wars?"

"Exactly. They all are still seeking revenge from the past." Solari let out a huge sigh. "The scary part is if we have this war and if we survive it then the young Amazons will want revenge later."

"And the cycle never ends," murmured the princess.

"Yes," quietly agreed the now distraught Amazon.

"It has to stop," argued the bard.

Solari frowned at her friend. "Only the queen can stop it. She sets the tone through the Nation... the council can only keep her at bay. If most of the Nation is behind the queen or the council then that is the final say."

"So if the queen rallies more of the Nation behind her then she can begin the war?"

"Yes... that is why there isn't one right now because the council has half and the queen the other half."

Gabrielle breathed heavily as she took in all of the information. She never knew the system was so complex but it worked quite well since it always left the Nation empowered. "There has to be a way to stop it."
Solari held her tongue for once when she thought of the one way to stop it. She knew it wasn't the right way so she said nothing instead.

The princess shook away her thoughts and worries then sadly smiled at her friend. "Thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome." Solari clenched and unclenched her hands in her lap. "Sorry it is such bad news."

"It's okay. I just like to know what's going on." Gabrielle stood up with Solari. "I think we should just enjoy the holiday right now."

Solari now smiled brightly. "I can't argue with that."

The two friends continued their strolling through the festival grounds. They enjoyed watching some young Amazons try at the various games. It was about a candlemark before the sun was high when Ephiny caught up with the pair. Gabrielle greeted her girlfriend with a brief kiss then mentioned she was rather hungry and she got a laugh from both Amazons. The small group decided to head over to the food hut for lunch then catch the challenges afterwards.

It wasn't until after the challenges that Gabrielle was sought out by Councilor Tanya. The councilor requested Gabrielle to come to the small dais by the Solstice tree to begin her story. Gabrielle didn't hesitate to hurry to the center of the village with her friend and girlfriend trailing along side. When she arrived there, she was surprised to already see several children circling around the dais.

The councilor smiled when the princess appeared by her. "Are you ready?"

The princess only nodded.

"Follow me."

Councilor Tanya escorted the bard through the crowd of children and some older Amazons then up the small dais. She and Gabrielle faced the crowd and she rested her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. After a deep breath, she loudly announced, "Princess Gabrielle is an aspiring bard and has agreed to tell us a Solstice tale today." She smiled at the children. "Please give her your full attention." She then bowed her head at the princess and stepped down the dais. As soon as her last step brought her to the ground, she was happy to hear and see the children praise the bard.

Gabrielle licked her lips and smiled at the excited children. She took a heartbeat to clear her throat then began speaking. "Now did everybody have a chance to see
Senticles today?" After seeing all the enthusiastic nods, Gabrielle chuckled and shifted closer to the edge of the dais. "Well you are very lucky to have seen Senticles and tell him what you wish for this Solstice." She grinned at seeing the children's interest peak. "You see in far away Greek Kingdom there was an orphanage full of young children, just like you, who were not so lucky." Gabrielle paused and watched all the children lean forward towards her. "In this kingdom ruled a bitter and angry king named King Silvas. King Silvas was so bitter that he didn't allow his kingdom to celebrate the Winter Solstice."

The children gasp in surprise.

A grin curled the corner of Gabrielle's lips. She realized how much she too was enjoying this. She bent forward some and held out her arms. "Whenever one of his subjects were caught celebrating Solstice he would charge them and find them guilty. The celebrating subjects would be given at least a season's cycle of hard labor. But you know what was even far worse?"

The children shook their heads together.

"Well it so happened that on Solstice day King Silvas planned to evict the children of the orphanage for not paying their moon's rent."

"What an awful king," cried out a young girl.

Gabrielle straightened up now. "He was very cruel," she agreed. "Yet there was still hope because the day before Solstice, before the eviction, a great hero showed in the town." She paused and straightened up then proudly announced, "Xena the Warrior Princess."

All the children awed at the hero's name, their eyes bigger than Helios.

Ephiny stood off to the side with her best friend. She folded her arms against her chest and carefully listened to her girlfriend weave the tale of Xena the legendary hero and her partner that stopped a cruel tyrant from destroying Solstice and saving the orphanage. Ephiny realized the entire time she was smiling because of Gabrielle's talents as a bard.

Ephiny's thoughts also wondered off to Gabrielle's concept of Xena the Warrior Princess and her partner. She'd heard other such tales and she knew they were based off of Gabrielle's best friend and Xena's loyal partner was always Gabrielle herself. There was no mistaking it. After some time, Ephiny had come to realize that it was Gabrielle's way of keeping Xena alive and the relationship they'd harbored since children.
The only fear Ephiny ever had was that if the real Xena showed up again would she be anything like Gabrielle's heroic Xena? Something in her told her that it was highly doubtful but she would never tell Gabrielle, so long as it wasn't important.

Quickly Ephiny came out of her thoughts as Gabrielle neared the end of her story. She glanced at Solari, who was totally engrossed in the tale.

"'Tobias, now take care of these people, okay? Don't be stubborn.' And she petted the donkey, who heehawed his response very sadly. After she told Tobias that she would miss him, she continued down the road with Xena." The bard paused and considered her next lines. "'The pair continued down the road a little ways but Xena stopped and said to her friend, 'That was a nice thing you did back there.' Gabrielle merely shrugged. 'What would I do with a silly, old donkey anyway?' Xena's grinned at first then teased her friend. 'Uh huh.'"

The bard licked her lips then moved across the dais some before continued her story. "'Gabrielle just shrugged again before replying, 'They needed him more than me. Besides, they seemed pretty nice. After all, it is Solstice.' Xena had moved closer to her beautiful, golden horse and pulled out something that was wrapped in cloth. 'That's right… Happy Solstice.' She held out the item to Gabrielle. Gabrielle carefully unwrapped the item but sadly smiled at her friend. 'I don't have a gift for you,' Gabrielle continued to stare down at the small gift, a sheep carved out of wood. The warrior clasped Gabrielle's shoulder to get her attention then whispered, 'Gabrielle, you are a gift.'"

Ephiny was jarred out of the story when Gabrielle described the gift as being a wooden sheep. Her memories quickly raced back to the wood sheep that sat back at Gabrielle's desk in the Academy. It was the same wooden sheep that Gabrielle had discovered in the remains of her old home in Potidaea along side Lila's Lammy. Now she began to summarize there was some connection and she'd have to ask Gabrielle later.

The children continued to praise the Amazon Princess and thank her for the story. Gabrielle warmly received each girl's thank you and some of them even hugged her. After the children finished, she slowly made her way to Ephiny and Solari with a smile on her face.

Ephiny enjoyed the warm glow that surrounded the bard. She'd never thought she'd ever see Gabrielle as beautiful as she did in that moment.

"Beautiful story, Gabrielle."

The princess thanked Solari.
"The Academy has paid off," gently teased Ephiny but she hugged her girlfriend while whispering, "I'm so proud of you."

Gabrielle pulled back with a smile but she release Ephiny when Councilor Tanya approached them. She warmly received the councilor's words of praise and thankfulness. Then the young group of Amazons continued on their day with the festival and trying out some of the games even.

By the time it became dark, the entire Nation was cramped into the food hut and enjoying a very rare feast. The kitchen had put together a usual meal that consisted of wild goose, olives covered in a special cheese and oil sauce, a light salad mixed with grapes and nuts, Gabrielle's favorite nutbread, and then for desert was the famous Solstice pudding. When the dinner was finished, the mothers took their worn children to their huts and prepared them for bed. It wasn't long though before the late night Solstice Festival went into full swing with the finest wine and leftover pudding.

The Winter Solstice Festival turned out to be just as popular as it always did. The children thoroughly enjoyed every amusement as much as the older Amazons. Gabrielle was included in that list of Amazons that now adored the festival. She especially loved the dancing later that night because for once she could dance with the group and nobody would remember from being so drunk.

After the festival ended the next day, it wasn't long before winter took full control and light, gentle flakes glided down from the sky about seven days later. During the day they never stuck to the ground but by that night the flakes collected on top of one another until they were even with most Amazons' ankles. While some Amazons loved the snow others were complaining about the mess but Gabrielle was quite content by the peacefulness of winter.

The princess had been spending training time with Master Eponin and Andra but today she and Andra were given off. It was a rather important day though as Andra and Gabrielle quietly stood before the priestess in Artemis's temple.

"Gabrielle, Andra...." The priestess had the two Amazon's full attention. "You will become blood sisters before Artemis here in her temple. You must remain in each other's company for one day. The time you spend together is a time to learn of each other… your pasts, your dreams… your fears...." Narkissa held up her hands as she stood between the two younger Amazons. "Your love." She watched as Gabrielle and Andra nodded their heads. "Your hands, please."

Gabrielle was nervous about everything but she held up her right hand. Andra was to her right so Andra lifted her left hand.

Priestess Narkissa materialized a golden dagger from under her robe. "I will now cut
your skin so that your blood may be free to intertwine." She first took the princess's hand and whispered, "Cup your hand." Once Gabrielle followed her instruction, she brought the side of the blade down and in lightening speed, she cut Gabrielle's palm.

The bard gritted her teeth at the stinging sensation, she also resisted from clenching up her hand.

The priestess turned Andra, who already had her hand cup. She quickly repeated the process. She hastily twisted around to the altar behind her and placed the dagger on top of a strip of red silk. Narkissa then grabbed the bleeding hands and brought the blacksmith's palm down on Gabrielle's. After the Amazons linked hands together, Narkissa picked up the dagger and also the silk sash. She wiped the golden dagger clean on the silk cloth, hid it back in her robe, and brought the silk strip over the linked hands.

"Now your blood is Andra's," whispered the priestess to the princess. Her eyes flickered to Andra, "Your blood is Gabrielle's." She wrapped the sash around the linked hands then tied it at the top. "Let us now pray to Artemis for her blessing." With that she held up her hands, turned around, and dropped her head back until her eyes met those of the green emerald eyes of the Artemis statue. "Artemis, I bow before you as your priestess." She began to kneel down to the hunter green pillow.

Together Andra and Gabrielle held out their hands and link hands to the statue while calling out, "Artemis, I bow before you as your Amazon." The Amazons knelt down behind the priestess until their knees met pillows as well. They held their linked hands tightly while letting their heads remained bowed before Artemis.

Priestess Narkissa sucked in a deep breath then finally spoke out. "Artemis, two of your Amazons have come to me to be forever bound as blood sisters. Princess Gabrielle and Andra wish to become blood sisters so we ask for your blessing. If you deny these two as sisters then strike."

Gabrielle actually held her breath, wondering if something like that could ever happen or ever has in the past. She heard and saw nothing, which made her relax again.

Andra could sense the tension in the princess but she held her tongue but she did grin a little.

The priestess quietly went into a chant while the two Amazons remained silent and their heads down. When Narkissa finished her gentle song, she remained silent and still for quarter of a candlemark. Finally she rose up and faced the two women, her hands lifting up in acknowledgement for them to stand.

The blacksmith and Gabrielle climbed to their feet and held out their linked hands.
The priestess remained emotionless as if she were almost possessed. She gingerly undid the silk binding but whispered, "Do not let go." She removed her dagger once again from her dark green robe and carefully cut the long sash into two pieces. "Andra."

The blacksmith released Gabrielle's hand finally and held hers out but palm up.

Narkissa easily tied one piece of the sash across Andra's hand to stop the bleeding. She then repeated the process with Gabrielle. Once her hands were at her sides again like the Amazons, she softly spoke, "Andra and Gabrielle, you are now blood sisters."

The bard's face spread into a wide smile and she revealed it to Andra.

Andra silently chuckled.

"Now sisters, you shall retire to a room for the day until tomorrow at this time. You will remain there and share time together. I will stop in on occasion to bring you food and drink. Understood?"

"Yes, priestess," replied the princess.

"Very well." The priestess turned and beckoned them to follow her through a side door. She led them down a long corridor that was lined with doors. She finally came to a stop before one door and pushed the heavy wood door open. "In here."

The sisters slipped past the priestess and were dazzled by the large room. Gabrielle was rather surprise that the Nation would provide such a luxury to the temple. Then she decided that it was the temple that was very much the heart of the Amazon Nation.

"If you require anything, please just call on me." Priestess Narkissa stood in the doorway.

Gabrielle faced the old priestess and smiled at her. "Thank you, priestess."

Suddenly Narkissa's worn expression broke with a tender smile. "My pleasure, princess." She paused while grabbing the door handle. "I believe my daughter will stop by."

"We'd like that," agreed the bard.

"Thank you too, priestess," pitched in Andra. "I know this means a lot to us both."
Gabrielle nodded her agreement.

The priestess now recalled one of the many reasons why she decided to take on the priestess-hood so many season cycles ago. She bowed her head then promise, "I will stop in soon. Enjoy what the temple offers." With that, she quietly close the door and glided down the hallway.

Gabrielle had her head hung down and she intently studied her wrapped up hand. She flexed it a few times.

Andra silently took a chair by the window and curious stared at her new sister. "What do you think?"

The bard chuckled as her hand fell back to her side. "I can't believe it. I'm so excited though."

The blacksmith grinned at her sister's enthusiasm.

Gabrielle broke her eye contact with her sister and now studied the room. It was quite large she'd decided as soon as she first entered- probably the size of two huts. Off to her right were two beds and a table between them where a large, thick candle rested. When she gazed off to her left there was an entrance into another room.

Slowly the bard wondered over to the doorway and the light streaming into this room from the ceiling above revealed a large bathing tub. "Gods," she murmured.

Andra pulled up to her feet and curiously peered into the room. "Wow. That's a bath."

Gabrielle had a brief grin but she stepped up to the empty bath. "I wonder if the priestess will fill it for us?"

Andra laughed as she literally took Gabrielle's meaning. "I'm sure Priestess Narkissa will be happy to haul all the water into here."

The slave spun around and quickly slapped her sister on the stomach. "You know what I meant." She then walked around the tub and she noted a wrack off to the right wall that held towels. She then went to the edge of the tub and peered into it. Suddenly her face wrinkled up with confusion. "What is that?"

The blacksmith shifted to the tub. "That?"

"Yeah," answered Gabrielle to the pointing blacksmith.

Andra had her head tilted to one side in confusion too. She brushed back a lock of
stray curly hair then she reached forward as far as she could.

Gabrielle giggled when short Andra couldn't reach the interesting wood plug in the middle of the tub.

Andra glared at her sister with dark, hooded blue eyes. "Funny."

The bard covered her mouth to contain her laughter.

The blacksmith decided to solve the problem by just hopping into it. She pulled the wood plug and it dawned on her now. "Ooooo," she murmured. She grinned up at Gabrielle. "It's a drain. I can sort of make out the pipe that's connect to it."

"Pipe?"

Andra's lips crease together as she thought of another explanation. "Like a tube."

The bard brightened at now understanding. "Well that's easier than bucketing it out."

"Can only imagine where it drains to," she muttered. Andra inserted the plug again but as she was prepared to hop out again, she spotted something else on the wall of the tub. "What is…."

Gabrielle shifted some and saw what Andra was questioning next. "You might not want to-" She was suddenly cut off by Andra's yelling.

"Hera's tits!" The blacksmith's wet hands frantically worked to plug the hot, burning water. She hissed in pain against the burning water yet she managed to plug it in time. "By the gods," she growled while flapping her hands to dry them. She twisted her head around and flashed her sister a dark warning look. "Don't even say it."

The princess was biting her lower lip so hard to stop her laughs. She cleared her throat then carefully offered, "You might want to unplug the drain to let out the water."

Andra narrowed her eyes at Gabrielle but she took the suggestion. Once the water was out, she hopped out of the tub. "Well I guess that answers your earlier question."

The bard was perplexed.

"The priestess won't be bringing us hot water."

Gabrielle came around to the other side. She made her way back into the main bedroom. For some reason, she had her eyes up and something on the ceiling made her stop.
Andra had been drying her hands on one of the hand towels by the washbasin in the bathing room. She came out and lifted her gaze when she saw the awed bard.
"Sweet... Artemis."

Beautifully painted on the ceiling was the very same tree that was depicted on the doors of the temple. The tree's branches reached up to the skies where there was the depiction of Artemis and her green eyes watching over her Amazons that were worshiping her from below on the ground. The branches that were the longest designed a circle and they bent around until they met the roots that spread below ground. The central roots spread out far and deep to show how well rooted the tree was. The roots were so strong that they extended all the way into the Amazon Land of the Dead where brave, loyal Amazons rested but still worshipped their goddess.

"I've never seen anything... like this," breathed the astonished bard. She thought for a moment she could remain there for candlemarks just studying the stunning artwork. As she memorized the fresco piece by piece she couldn't help going back to Artemis's vibrant green eyes. She was almost positive if she stared long enough, she could pick out an even smaller image of a forest in the goddess's eyes.

Andra lightly clasped her sister's shoulder and whispered, "Before I just thought I was lucky to be an Amazon."

The princess tore her attention away from the fresco and looked to her sister.

"Now I realize I am honored to be an Amazon," proudly whispered the blacksmith.

Together the Amazons gazed upon the fresco and admired its glorious beauty for some time. It seemed to touch deep into their hearts and lift their spirits higher than any tales could about Artemis and the Amazons. This was exactly where these two women were meant to be and it'd been fated. So maybe it was just a little bit more than Gabrielle and Andra being in the right place at the right time.

When the Amazons broke away from the fresco, they began talking for several candlemarks. They did as they were instructed by the priestess; each sharing their stories from start to current. Gabrielle was moved just as much as Andra was by her sister's story. Andra could feel every emotion and see every event that her sister described. And Gabrielle envisioned each place that Andra traveled and cried for each fear or her heart fluttered with Andra's happiest moments.

It wasn't until just at sunset when there was a knock at the door. Maired stood before the two Amazons, her right hand with a tray of food and wine while in her other hand was a bag dangling. She only spoke for a brief moment before she wished them goodnight and promised to see them in the morning. After she was gone, the Amazons
found sleepwear in the leather satchel for them but first they decided to eat.

The new sisters spent the rest of the night talking and sharing. They laughed at times and other times they cried. It was the rarest day for them both and the memories they created with each other were burned forever in their mind. Gabrielle couldn't have been happier that she spoke to Andra about becoming her sister. By the next day when they were allowed to leave, she knew she'd made the right decision in asking Andra for her sisterhood.

Two days after the blood sister ritual, the sisters found themselves back in Eponin's capable hands. The weapons master continued her rigorous training with the pair. Her hopes were that by the time the princess went back to the Academy that Andra would be trained enough to join the regularly training Amazons. She disliked having Andra separated from the rest of the students but she knew it was necessary until Andra learned enough. Yet it still isolated Andra from the rest and Eponin wasn't too fond of that idea.

It was the seventh day since the two Amazons became blood sisters and it was nearing sunset already just as Eponin ended the training. However Eponin didn't dismiss the pair and ordered them to follow her off the sparring field. She came to a stop by a bench and gently ordered, "Sit down."

The blacksmith and princess took a seat on the bench.

Andra sheathed her sword behind her back.

Gabrielle was toying with her staff but her focus was fully on her mentor.

Eponin was quiet and pacing, which never meant well. Finally she came to a stop before the two green Amazons. For a heartbeat she almost seemed to glow with fire from the setting sun behind her. Her long, dark wool jacket fluttered in the winter breeze but it settled around her body. Her hard molded facial features spoke volumes. "In two days…." She folded her arms across her chest. "You two will be tested."

The bard licked her chap lips then posed the question that was between her and Andra. "What is the test?"

Eponin's serious expression broke apart by a grin. "It is a survival test."

It quickly dawned on Andra first. "From the lectures?"

Now it struck Gabrielle and she breathed heavy, which developed a fine mist in the air. "You mean wilderness survival, Eponin?"
"Yes." The weapons master read both Amazons' faces before continuing. "It is a part of every Amazon's training. An Amazon is required to know how to survive in the wilderness with nothing but their weapons. You've heard me lecturing about the survival techniques for the past five days." Her hard expression returned. "Within two days you both will be prepared for the test… just like every Amazon."

"What does this test… entail exactly?" spoke up Andra.

The weapons master nodded at the blacksmith's question. "You both must go out into the Amazon woods but remain within the borders so that patrol can keep an eye on you. You will be required to stay out there for two nights and on the third day you may return. You will be allowed your weapons and a pack that will have your bedroll, waterskins, as well as furs."

"What weapons are we allowed to take?" inquired the bard.

Eponin held out a hand to Gabrielle as she answered. "You can take your staff, a sword, and dagger. Whatever you feel you can carry or you may need." She folded her hand back against her chest. "You will be required to hunt for your food, start a fire, cook your meal, and monitor your surroundings."

"What about anything extra?" Andra quickly thought of an example. "Could Gabrielle take her scrolls?"

The bard curiously studied her teacher but when she shook her head, Gabrielle inwardly sighed.

"This is a time of reflection as well," stated the weapons master. "Out there…." She pointed to the Amazon woods far beyond the walls of the Nation. "You will be one with Artemis and you will be dependent upon her. Only the Amazon that does not give herself to Artemis during this test is the one that returns to the Nation before the third day."

Gabrielle chewed on her lower lip and she nervously fiddled with her staff still; it rolled between her sweaty palms. "Eponin, I know you told Andra and me about how you can start fires using two tree branches but will you actually show us?"

"Yes." Eponin faintly smiled at the bard's concern. "I know I've only told you about certain skills and techniques, which require more hands on examples. These next two days I will show you how to build fires, make the fire pit, what wood to look for so its smokeless, how to skin your kill, how to monitor your camp's perimeter, and so on." She paused and noted that Gabrielle seemed more nervous compared to Andra so she did her best to reassure her. "This isn't has hard as it seems. Many Amazons have thoroughly enjoyed this test just because they had some time alone, to reflect, as well
as learn very important skills."

Gabrielle softly smiled at the thought of actually putting the techniques to work.

"We'll start practicing tomorrow when Helios awakens." Eponin lowered her arms to her side finally. "Good work at training today. I think we're finished."

The sisters stood up and together the group made their way back to the village but Eponin broke away. She had work to do in her office hut before she could head in for dinner. For several heartbeats the sisters were quiet as they walked across the darkening Nation. Andra though surprise Gabrielle by walking closer and wrapped her arm around the princess's shoulders.

"You'll do fine."

The bard's nose crinkled up. Her body continued to flow with her staff at her side. "I don't know... I don't like the idea of hunting and...." Her nose wrinkled even tighter as her colorful eyes peered up.

Andra chuckled and she patted Gabrielle's back. "Skinning it?"

"Yeeah," drew out Gabrielle.

"Well you need to eat to survive," reminded the blacksmith, "and you're not wasting."

Slowly the bard moved her head in agreement. She released a hefty sigh then she noted the dinner hut shaping just ahead. "Well I guess I better enjoy these next few meals in the hut."

Andra chuckled despite her concern about her younger sister. She knew once Eponin demonstrated everything these next two days it wouldn't be so bad.

And to Eponin's word, she spent the next two days preparing the Amazons how to survive on their own in the wild with minimal supplies. The weapons master noticed that Andra seemed to pick up on things much faster than Gabrielle. She figured it was due to the fact that Andra may have been shown by her father in the past from all the traveling they'd done. She knew that Gabrielle was a mix of a village girl and a slave, neither of which required survival skills. She was please though that when Gabrielle did learn something she remembered it very well. The princess also had a natural tendency to always question Eponin until she felt she fully understood something. Despite Gabrielle's constant questions were frustrating to Eponin at times she also appreciate it because she knew that meant Gabrielle would always remain open minded. It also meant that Eponin would grow very patient.
By the third morning since the announcement of the upcoming test, the two sisters found themselves being escorted to Master Eponin's office by Ephiny. Gabrielle walked in the middle with Andra to her right and Ephiny to her left. She sensed the full support of her girlfriend even though they hadn't been able to spend much time together recently. Ephiny was far too busy with her training classes as well.

"You ready for this, sister?" lightly bantered Andra.

The princess tossed a glare at the blacksmith. "More than you," she teased.

Andra laughed then briefly touched the small of Gabrielle's wool covered back. "We will see."

The bard understood the teasing challenge from her sister. "You'll be back in the Nation before me."

The blacksmith snorted.

Ephiny carefully watched the exchange, a grin on her face.

"And you'll be in the bathing hut as soon as we get back."

Gabrielle heartedly laughed and agreed.

"You feel ready?" questioned Ephiny.

The bard's attention switched to her girlfriend. "I think so. Eponin taught us a lot."

"She's quite knowledgeable." Ephiny folded her arms against her chest in hopes to stop the chill in her body. "Just make sure to get a fire built first."

"Gods. I know." Gabrielle shivered at the unspoken cold.

Shortly the group entered the Eponin's office to find her bustling over some scrolls. She finished up her current scroll then put her quill away. She leaned back in her chair and studied the Amazons. "Ready?"

Andra and Gabrielle exchanged looks then nodded to the weapon's master.

"Excellent." Eponin stood up and came around her desk. "How are you, Ephiny?"

The young Amazon smiled while brushing back some loose, curly locks. "Great. You, sister?"
"Well." Eponin flashed a smile then went to a corner of her office to pick up two leather packs. "These are yours." She held out one to Gabrielle then the other to Andra. "The weapons you requested are in there."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow at her teacher. "How many daggers?"

"Six… as requested." Eponin mirrored back Gabrielle's grin. She then went and picked up a bow and filled quiver. "And yours." She held out the weapons to Andra.

The blacksmith gratefully took the weapons that she planned to use for hunting.

Gabrielle had decided on daggers to use for hunting. She just didn't trust herself with a bow and arrows yet. However she was quite efficient with daggers and she'd surprised Eponin and Andra with her ability with them. Neither of them expected her to be so quick and aim so perfectly with them. She hadn't quite expected it either but she attributed it to her seasons old lessons from Xena.

Quickly the group left the office hut and Eponin lead them to the center of the Nation. She then stopped and faced Andra and Gabrielle. "You two will be split up as I told you but Andra will be going through the north gate."

"I'm on the south side," decided Gabrielle aloud.

Eponin slowly nodded. "Ephiny, will you escort Andra to the north gate. I'll take Gabrielle to the south."

Ephiny understood her sister's silent implications. She faced her girlfriend and enveloped her in a long hug. She kissed Gabrielle softly then whispered, "Be safe. You'll do fine." She forced herself to move away then signaled the blacksmith to follow her.

The princess remained still aside from leaning against her staff and watching Ephiny walk away with her sister. She sighed and rested her eyes on the weapons master.

"Ready?"

Gabrielle straightened up, adjusted her pack, and started the trek to the gates.

"Remember everything I taught you," reminded the weapons master.

"I will," promised Gabrielle.

Eponin softly smiled. "You'll do fine out there."
"I know I will." Gabrielle's corksy grin shaped her soft expression. "I am actually excited."

Eponin's body loosened at hearing the news. "I am glad." She gently touched the princess's mid back as they arrived at the sealed south gates. She came to a stop.

Gabrielle stopped too and faced her mentor. "It'll give me time to think of some stories."

Eponin chuckled at the bard. "Good. See that you be safe. If you get into any serious trouble don't hesitate to find help." She crossed her arms. "This isn't a test of stupidity."

Gabrielle was somewhat amused but she also took Eponin's words seriously. She touched her friend's closest arm and promised, "I will."

Eponin nodded, uncrossed her arms, and held out her left arm to the open but guarded side doors of the wall. "I will see you on the third day, princess." Her head bowed in respect.

Gabrielle looked from her mentor to the guards in front of the small door. She straightened herself out then walked towards the door.

Master Eponin lifted her head and proudly watched the Amazon Princess walk through the door without another look or word. She waited for some time until Gabrielle dissolved into the thick woods far beyond the gates. She let out a long sigh then exchanged formal nods with the gate guards before leaving for her office.

Princess Gabrielle began her journey through the dense Amazon woods. She gazed about her surroundings and enjoyed how everything was well lit since there were no leaves to stop the sunshine. The thin layer of snow however was rather bright as it reflected the light. She decided to make her first stop to the Great Oak and then she'd already picked out a spot for the next two days.

It was within a half of a candlemark when Gabrielle found the Great Oak. She approached it slowly and with her free hand, she touched it. With her head dropped back, she gazed up and up to the highest branches that seemed to touch the skies. She then kissed the tip of her fingers and pressed the kiss into the tree's trunk. After sending a prayer out, she continued on her way to the camp area she had in mind.

It took another half of a candlemark before Gabrielle found her campsite. It was an area nearby the canyons that she often climbed or ran up when she was exercising or looking for a place of solitude. There was also a nearby stream that was only partially frozen by a thin sliver of ice on top. The stream ran through the canyon pass and
ended in a pool on the edge of the Amazon woods.

The princess debated whether to make camp now or later. Well she figured she had plenty of time just yet so she decided to carefully make her way up the canyon pass to the top. The pathway hadn't been touched since the snowfall, the snowy path completely untouched. Gabrielle made sure to take care so that she wouldn't slide or fall so the trek up took a little longer than normal. When she finally came to the top, she went to her usual spot that overlooked the entire Nation.

Her vibrant green eyes rested on the beautiful Solstice fir tree that stood in the center of the village. It made her chuckle at the memories of the amazing festival. She sighed while leaning against her staff. Gradually a smile touched her lips as her thoughts wondered to the first time she ever came up here on the canyon ledge. She was stunned by how many changes that she'd seen in herself these past seasons. There were still plenty left to go.

After some unknown time, Gabrielle went back down the pathway and went back to her originally intended campsite. She scanned the white land and spotted what she was most concerned about finding. It was a large rock that would serve an important purpose later.

The bard found a nearby tree and she shook the branch liberally until all the snow flopped off. She swung her pack off and hung it on the branch to keep it dry. She then faced the rock that would become her arms and legs future frustration. She licked her slightly chapped lips, huffed while rubbing her hands, and she went to the frozen rock.

The princess gripped the cold rock as best as she could and with all her strength, she shoved the large rock forward. It didn't take her too long to move the rock and reveal perfectly dry ground underneath. She then stood in the center of the brown earth and carefully kicked more snow out of the way. Next she began kicking some of the dirt out of the way so that it was fresh.

"Now for the wood," spoke the bard aloud. She scanned the area and knew she'd need to go into the woods for it. She first went to her back and grabbed three of her daggers for safety. After she tucked them into certain hiding spots with her long jacket, she placed her staff against the tree that her pack hung from. She went into the woods, her boots crunching the snow as she went.

It took a little less than a candlemark for Gabrielle to find enough fire wood. She went back to camp with an armload and dropped it nearby the formed fire pit. She meticulously picked out three pieces of branches meant for a certain fate later. She organized the wood into the fire then she hastily went to the edge of the woods and dug through the snow. There she found her source of flint for the fire. She put the leaves on that same rock from earlier but made sure it wasn't snow covered. She
realized it'd take some time for the leaves to dry so she busied herself.

She first discovered a snow covered log close by so she hastily brushed the snow off so it would also dry before sunset. She then worked on removing more snow by closer to the fire so that she could later put her bedroll and furs there.

Finally she went back to the now drying log with her three branches. With two branches on the ground and one in her lap, Gabrielle revealed a dagger. She easily began stripping down the branch, which she'd recently cut from a tree. This branch would be very important later when she would need a skewer for her dinner. The other two dry branches would be cut down to size to help start the fire later.

Around mid-afternoon, Gabrielle found herself kneeling beside the fire pit and rigorously trying to bring life to a fire. She huffed when the spinning of her small piece of wood didn't ignite anything. She blew with frustration up at her bangs then went back to trying.

The princess was growing a little annoyed that she couldn't get the fire started. Many times Eponin had shown her and eventually she caught on then from that point on she always had it. This though seemed different. There was something missing.

"Gods," growled the angry bard. She forcefully yanked the little piece of wood and her branch out then studied them. She'd had a few sparks earlier but the leaves weren't catching them enough. She slipped the wood back underneath the piled wood and tried again. This time though, she leaned forward and tried gently blowing.

She knew not to blow too hard or else it wouldn't work at all. She spun the wood between her palms rapidly and when the sparks began jumping at the leaves, she carefully breathed on them.

The sparks grew stronger and hungrily ate at the leaves piled up.

Gabrielle grinned when she realized her plan was working. "Thank the gods." She pulled back her hands quickly when the sparks became flames and quickly ate the dried branches. She stood up and stretched her sore legs from squatting so long but she was happy it worked. It wasn't long before the content bard was placing pieces of actually firewood onto the fire. Once she decided it was safe to leave the fire, she went to her pack and retrieved her other daggers. It was time to find dinner.

It was about a candlemark and half before the sun would set and Gabrielle was tucked behind some snow covered brush. Her eyes were locked on the bunny that was feasting on a patch of revealed green grass. A patch of green grass that Gabrielle had conveniently uncovered just for this reason.
The bard remained crouched behind the brush, her breathing somewhat ragged because of her thoughts. She knew she had to kill this rabbit if she planned to eat tonight but Hades if she liked the idea. She ate rabbit fairly often actually but tonight not only was she planning to eat it but watch it die, by her hands.

Gabrielle's inner turmoil was silenced though by her growling stomach. She sighed, silently reached into her jacket, and removed three daggers. She held two of them in her left while she held the third by its tip. All she had to do was carefully peer around the edge of the bush and throw it at her mark. It was so simple.

She knew she could do this, she reminded herself. She took a steady breath and prayed to Artemis that her aim would be true. She snuck around the brush with her dagger at the ready then with a silent growl she threw the dagger.

The rabbit sensed the immense pain before it all quickly stopped. It remained on its side with its blood slowly draining out onto the green grass.

The princess tucked her daggers away and stared at the dead animal. Her eyes suddenly stung and she knew she hated this next part more than anything else. She knelt down by the rabbit and picked it up but carefully removed her dagger first. She wiped the dagger clean in the snow yet she knew shortly it would only be bloody again.

Gabrielle tried to will her emotions to stop but she couldn't help it. She had to skin the animal if she planned to cook it and eat it. She bit her lower lip hard while she carefully began the process of removing the skin. Eponin had shown her several times where to start and how to do it without bruising anything. She also showed Gabrielle the difference between meat and fat so that she could remove as much as she could. Then there were the organs to deal with.

Gabrielle finally had all the skin off the animal and it was fairly clean. She'd been trying so hard not to get upset but yet her cheeks were stained by tears and her lower lip bitten too hard. Finally she stood up with her catch, bloody hands, and a bloody dagger. When she returned to camp, she quickly skewered the rabbit through the sharp branch she'd made. The bard then placed it over the fire using her makeshift spit unit.

Hastily she cleaned her hands and dagger with one of the waterskins before returning back to the fire. She felt more settled now that everything was clean and the rabbit looked more like food than an animal. She sat on the dried log and watch the food cook for some time. She also was happy to see that because of the heat from the fire, the spot for her bedroll was drying. Just before sunset she planned to put her bedroll down with her furs.

Gabrielle peered down at her hands and flexed them. She wished she had her scrolls
and quill with her so that she could write. She also knew too that she was rather exhausted and tonight's sleep would come easy. She wondered about what she would do tomorrow.

After the needed amount of cooking time and rotating the rabbit, the food was ready for eating. Gabrielle also found it was rather dark with the exception of red and orange flooding the western sky. She picked up the rabbit skewer and sat down on the log. When she tried the meat, her stomach growled very happily.

"Mmmm… this is pretty good," she commented to herself. "A little gamey though." She shrugged but continued ripping pieces of meat free to munch on. It wasn't long before she was full but there was still some left so she decided to set it aside. The skewer was run into the ground close to the fire so that the meat would remain warm.

Finally feeling worn, the bard collected her bedroll and furs from the satchel and brought them to their ground by the fire. She shivered when the warm fire chased the cold away from her. She was relieved that the camp fire managed to keep her so warm; she'd half expected it not to.

With her staff in a hand's shot along with daggers, the slave sat down on her bedroll and furs and worked on getting her boots off. When she had them off she felt somewhat chilled but luckily the special wool socks on her feet still kept them toasty. She crawled under the furs and was surprised that the bedroll was definitely dry.

The weapons master had explained that the bedroll that her and Andra were using were special. Gabrielle found herself asking how they were unique and Eponin showed them how the bedrolls, on the bottom, were coated with a waxy material to resist from soaking any water. The princess was dazzled by the idea and was right now very grateful for it.

Gabrielle sighed happily and snuggled into her furs. She rested on her back and stared directly up to the twinkling stars. She smiled at the stars that made her think back to her days with Xena. The stars were one of her constant reminders of her best friend.

The bard drummed her stomach lightly and whispered, "I wonder where you are, Xena." Her eyes stung against her wondering thoughts but she held control. It'd been too many seasons for her to continue crying about the past or even somebody that may be long gone. Yet Xena's shadow seemed to follow her every step no matter what.

Slowly the princess transitioned into her dreamscape. Her dreams were calm and didn't reveal any dangers. When the quarter moon reached the height of its peak, there went an unusual danger in the camp.

Gabrielle stirred when there was a gently ripping noise. Her mind woke first before
her body and her mind quickly informed her hands to grab her staff as her hips lifted her up. Her confused eyes rested on the subject that'd awaken her.

On the other side of the fire stood a very tense but wild wolf, his neck stretched out and his teeth tangled in the rabbit meat that dangled from the skewer. His eyes though were locked on the small petite human on the other side of the fire after being caught in the act of stealing her meat.

Gabrielle sucked in a breath and held a staring contest with the wolf. She carefully observed him and she was absolutely awed by his beauty. His fur reflected the yellow and orange fire against his pure white coat. He would have blended in with the snow perfectly if it wasn't for the fire mirroring of his coat. And as Gabrielle tried to quickly read into his eyes she could pick out fear from him, which surprised her.

The wolf released the meat and recoiled his neck. He sensed the need to flee yet he only took one step back.

The Amazon Princess acted quickly by getting to her feet, her staff defensively positioned.

The wolf reacted by hastily running several paces away to stand next to the log. He faced the human again though despite his sensed told him to run.

"Wait," hastily ordered Gabrielle. She held up a free hand in a halting motion. She rammed her feet into her boots and ignored lacing them up. She started around the fire.

The wolf crouched some, his fur rearing up on his back, and his teeth flashing the fire.

Gabrielle came to a quick stop. "Wooo." She held up her hands but the staff still in her right hand.

The wolf now started to growl, his tail at attention.

Gabrielle glanced at her staff and realized the problem. "Hades," she muttered. She regretted not grabbing a dagger for extra safety but maybe she could work this out. "Okay... wait." She knelt down very slowly and lowered her staff into the disturbed snow then held up her free hands. "Its okay, see?"

The wolf did seem to understand, his teeth hidden again, his growl ended, and he wasn't hunched forward.

"You hungry huh?" The bard scooted closer to the remaining rabbit and pulled the skewer from the ground. She held it out towards the white wolf in hopes it'd keep his
attention. "You want some?"

The wolf looked between the rabbit to the human holding it. His eyes were narrow in distrust but he was very hungry. Earlier he'd found the fur and organs of a rabbit then sniffed down its remains to here. He unconsciously licked his lips with his long tongue.

Gabrielle slightly grinned. "Come on." She easily pulled free a piece of meat and held it towards him. She noticed he wasn't about to budge so she gave the meat a good toss.

The rabbit meat landed about two paces away from the wolf or rather two paces closer to the human for the wolf.

The white wolf took one step forward but his eyes remained on the human. He carefully took the last step then stretched out his neck to snatch the meat. He happily chewed on it then swallowed it.

"Good huh?" The Amazon smiled then ripped another piece. She threw it at him and it landed right at his feet.

The white wolf scooped up the meat. He then rested his eyes back on the human. Maybe if he stayed right here, she would just keep feeding him anyway. The human didn't feel as much as a threat as before not that she didn't have that long branch in her hands. In the past he'd seen similar humans like her in this area but he always stayed clear.

The Amazon ripped a large scrap then threw it to him.

This time the wolf was ready and he jumped up some to catch it in his mouth neatly.

Gabrielle responded by giggling.

The wolf remained still when the human made a funny noise from his actions. He stood still and meat hanging from his front teeth. He tilted his head at her some. He was confused by her soft expression.

The slave covered her mouth with her freehand to silence herself.

The animal ate his meat then waited for more food.

Gabrielle figured she only had so much rabbit left and so much of a chance to get this wolf to trust her. The easiest way to her heart was through her stomach and she figured this wolf was no different. She pulled another tidbit free and threw it but made sure it wasn't as far.
The wolf lowered his eyes to the morsel that was now two more paces forward, closer to the human. His nimble steps brought him closer since he couldn't resist eating. He picked up the meat but soon as he ate it another piece came at him. He chewed it too but the third piece was thrown two more steps ahead.

Gabrielle held her breath because she wondered if the wolf would come. The proximate would be very close to her.

The white wolf took one step and tried to stretch his neck out to grab it but he couldn't. He straightened up again and stared at the human that could easily attack him if he went any closer.

Gabrielle kept her eyes on him. She tried to remain calm and not displaying any fear.

The wolf watched her eyes and his earlier prickled fur had rested back down. He stretched out his front right paw and went forward gradually. He gingerly picked up the rabbit piece with his tongue and front teeth.

The princess happily took in the fact that he trusted her. She slowly stretched the skewer out sidelong so that he had easy access to the remains of the rabbit.

The wolf sniffed the food then nibbled on some. After several heartbeats between the two strangers, the wolf started taking bites of the meat while Gabrielle merely watched him eat. She still held the skewer while her left hand rested on her left knee.

"Hi," whispered Gabrielle to the eating wolf. "I'm Gabrielle."

The wolf kept eating but his eyes studied the human.

"You must be very hungry to come into my camp."

The animal pulled the last hunk of meat from the spit and hastily chewed it up.

The bard placed the skewer down in the snow.

The white wolf finished his meal then stared right at the lively green eyes of the human. He blinked and twisted his head at her some.

Gabrielle's lips pulled with a smile. "Your eyes are like mine."

The eyes in question blinked again and the wolf dropped his mouth open some. His long tongue just slightly poked out between sharp teeth.
The Amazon bit her lower lip from giggling at the sight. She pondered what to do next and she really wasn't sure. She considered that first she'd see how much the wolf would trust her. So she stretched out her right hand out again but her palm was up.

The wolf tensed but he didn't move surprisingly. He studied the human's green eyes then he lowered his head down but never failing to lose his focus. He first sniffed the human's hand and logged her scent into his memory. He decided this was what a Gabrielle smelled like.

Gabrielle dared an even more dangerous maneuver and she wiggled her fingers under his soft chin.

The wolf was shocked and quickly jumped away from her touch.

The Amazon Princess mostly expected it and tried not to chuckle at his shyness. She very slowly stood up and he moved away from her more when she did that. "It's okay." She knew that was all the progress she was going to make tonight with him. She knew this would make him wonder too when she walked away from him and went to her bedroll with staff in hand.

The slave placed her staff by her bed again then shoved her boots off. She slipped between her furs and got comfortable. She remained sitting up but staring over at the bewildered wolf.

The wolf stood still and wondering why this odd human wasn't worried about him. He tilted his head when the human lay down. He snorted some, which caused a mist to develop. He lowered his head and sniffed the bare skewer but he could still smell the remains of the rabbit. He then lifted his head and stared at the strange human.

Gabrielle sighed contently and closed her eyes but she couldn't sleep knowing the wolf was still here. She didn't feel threatened by him but instead she was very curious about him. She'd seen a couple of wolves in her childhood but mostly after they'd been killed by shepherds. What was even more interesting was that none of those wolves were ever a solid, pure white and had a lot of gray in them. This wolf also had green eyes and Gabrielle didn't find that natural to wolves but she wasn't exactly an animal expert either.

The white wolf in question finally sat down on his hinds. He merely watched the small human resting in the bundle of furs by the fire. He slightly shivered against the cold and from some of the heat radiating off the fire. He glanced over his right at the dark woods and debated whether to leave. He'd have to find a hole to curl up in or some uncovered ground, which could take a long time.

Slowly he turned his head back to the human and the fire. He noticed on the opposite
side of the fire from the human there was clear ground. He dipped his head a little at the natural instinct that wanted to go over there. He now noticed his hind legs, tail, and butt were getting chilled as well as wet from the snow. He stood up quickly then after making his choice, he silently trekked over to the left side of the fire. He sniffed the ground all over to make sure it was what he wanted, he did a few circles, and laid down into a curled up ball.

Gabrielle had been watching the entire scene through slotted eyelids. She smiled as she closed her eyes completely then drifted into a peaceful dreamscape again. The rest of the night was quiet as an Amazon Princess slept fitfully and a lost wolf stayed warm by a human's fire.

When the sun kissed the eastern horizon the wolf woke up and saw that the human was still asleep. He got up and decided to stretch out first. Then afterwards he moved away from the slowly dying fire.

Gabrielle woke up about a candlemark later and she yawned with a big stretch over her head. She slumped back in her furs then glanced around the small fire to see if the wolf was there. She didn't see him but when she sat up she quickly spotted him sitting by the log and intently watching her.

"I bet you've been up for awhile," muttered the sleepy bard. It then struck her that she needed to put wood into the dying fire before she would have to redo everything again. Gabrielle stumbled into her boots and grabbed some nearby wood. She stoked it into the fire and watched the flames grow larger. She then fell into her furs but bent forward to lace her boots up. It seemed to take a lot of effort simply because she was still sleepy.

After she was finished, she stared over at the wolf then at the skewer on the ground. "Well… what to do about breakfast since you ate mine last night."

The wolf just stared at her.

Gabrielle drummed her fingers on her bedroll. "Some quail would be nice." Her cheeks puffed out then she let out the big puff of air. "What to do…." Suddenly she grabbed her daggers and staff then whirled up onto her feet with her jacket falling around her body. "Quail, I think."

The wolf stood up onto all fours.

The princess tucked her daggers into her belt, placed her staff by her hanging satchel, and took off into the woods.

The wolf raced to the edge of the woods and his eyes followed the disappearing
human. His inner turmoil went on then just before Gabrielle was gone from his sight, he hurried off. He followed her trail and when he caught up, he made sure to stay several paces behind her.

The bard sensed him behind her but she didn't bother to acknowledge him. She enjoyed keeping him in mystery about what she was doing instead of paying attention to him. She finally sought what she was looking for and it was a small but large enough log. She came up to it and with strong hands she rolled the log over. When she did this, on the ground was moist dirt and countless amounts of bugs.

"Perfect," she murmured. Gabrielle then sought out a hiding place and she noted the wolf was at the other end of the bush. She gazed across to him.

The wolf hung out his tongue at her.

Gabrielle almost laughed but she focused on her mission at hand. She'd have to wait for some time but it would work.

A candlemark later Gabrielle found herself in the camp, two quails cooking, and a patient wolf waiting for her to share it. When the meal was ready, Gabrielle found herself giving tidbits to the animal while she ate. The scraps she set down close to the wolf but not so much that it'd scare him.

The princess had picked out a plan for today. She would practice with her staff by executing some regular moves and drills then she'd have a talk with her new friend. So for several candlemarks the Amazon worked her technique and on an occasion the nearest tree found itself to be an opponent.

The white wolf remained in the camp and watched the human move around with the big branch. He'd found some ground that was melted by the sun so he remained rather comfortable. He was also very entertained by how this human moved so well when just earlier this morning she was anything but agile. He was quite taken by the demonstration.

Gabrielle reached her cool down part and within quarter of a candlemark she stopped with heavy breathing. She'd tossed her wool jacket ages ago onto her bedroll but now she needed a drink. She picked up a waterskin from a hanging branch to her right. She happily drank and she also sensed her sweaty skin getting chilled from the cold air.

The princess went to her bedroll and sat down to keep warm by the fire while her body calmed.

The wolf stood up, walked over, and sat down on the edge of the ring between the fire and snow. He stared at the human while she rested.
Gabrielle had a crooked grin. "Liked that huh?" She picked up her cool waterskin from her lap and took one last drink before setting it aside. "And to think I still have a lifetime to master this thing." She tapped her staff to her right.

The wolf twisted his head.

The bard giggled at him. She then settled down and seriously stated, "We need to have a talk. Tomorrow I go home so you need to go home too."

The wolf’s only response was a blink.

Gabrielle drummed her fingertips on her knee. "I can't take you back. You need to go home, boy."

The wolf dropped his tongue out because he was slightly too warm between the fire and the sun.

The bard chuckled but lost her amusement. "Not like you can understand me."

The wolf seemed to sense that the small woman was distraught so he leaned forward and grabbed the string attached the waterskin. He started to drag it out of her lap.

Gabrielle quickly grabbed the waterskin and tried to pull it back. "Hey!"

The wolf mocked growl as he tried to pull it from her hands.

"Aaah!" The bard fell forward but her hands still clutched the waterskin. "I don't think so." She fought back and pulled her arms back as she sat up again. "Got you now!"

The wolf shook his head while pulling hard. He wasn't putting all his effort into it so he started sliding forward towards the human. When he felt too close, he let go.

Gabrielle laughed as she triumphantly won the battle. She smirked then instinctually reached out to pet the wolf.

The animal jumped at the unexpected touch and he backed away several paces.

The princess sighed at the still evident distrust between them. She knew it would take some time. And what was she thinking? She couldn't take this wolf back to the Nation let alone to the Academy in sixteen days. When she looked up at the sitting wolf, she became sad at the thought of him being alone. He had to have a pack, right?

The slave knew her mood was growing sober so she had to change it. "How about a
story, boy?" She popped up onto her feet then picked up her jacket. After she swung it on, she took a stand in front of the wolf and started a long, heroic tale. The rest of the day and night went on with two strangers from two different worlds blending together.

Melpomene, Deka, and Gryta continued on their patrol around the borders. They'd also been on a lookout for a particular Amazon that'd been due back in the Amazon Nation this morning.

"I hope she's okay," murmured Deka. She shifted her white wool jacket some to give her better access to her sword.

"She better be." Gryta huffed while her boots crushed the snow neatly.

Melpomene, the senior grade healer, sighed at the pair.

"You just don't want to do the history work alone," teased Deka.

The historian smirked. "You got me pegged." Yet she was really concerned about the princess since she was six candlemarks overdue from returning to the Nation.

Eponin had been near close to sending out a search party until Deka, Gryta, and Melpomene showed up at the gates prepared to go on patrol. They promised they would go out and find her then report back.

The patrol Amazons fell silent as they continued through the melting forest. They were coming up on the Great Oak then something caught Gryta's attention.

"You hear that?" The historian stopped and listened.

"Somebody is coming," stated Melpomene.

The three Amazons hurried to the oncoming noise and they were relieved to see the Amazon Princess happily traveling through the forest towards the Nation.

"Princess!" called Deka.

The bard stopped and smiled at the group. "Hey." She veered around and came to the small group. She noticed how they seemed almost relieved to see her but then she saw how Deka was reaching for her sword.

"Princess there's a wolf behind you!"

The other two Amazons reached for their swords.
"Wait," quickly ordered the princess but it was too late.

The white wolf just off to Gabrielle's right raced ahead of her and stood between her and the Amazons. He stood tense, muscles alive, and his teeth bearing at the Amazons.

"Stop," instructed Gabrielle. "It's okay."

"Princess-"

"Be quiet." Gabrielle had her hands up towards them. "Just put your swords away, please. He's fine."

The Amazons slowly and carefully sheathed their weapons. They never moved their eyes away from the angry wolf.

When the swords stopped scraping against the sheaths, Gabrielle's attention lowered to her new friend. "It's okay now, boy. Come on."

The wolf relaxed under the woman's soft voice. He huffed at the three Amazons and walked away from them. He stood next to the princess again.

"Well he's real cute," muttered Gryta.

The healer Amazon huffed out.

"Yeah," started the princess, "I'm not sure where he came from. He came into my camp the first night."

"He didn't hurt you?" inquired Deka.

"No… he was hungry actually." Gabrielle stared down at the wolf. "I guess he's lost… separated from his pack."

Melpomene folded her arms against her chest. "It seems you are his pack, princess."

The bard lifted her head. "I guess so."

"We need to get you back to the Nation," cut in Deka, "Everybody is worried… especially Eponin."

"What? Why?" Gabrielle adjusted her pack. "Something happened?"

"They thought something did when you didn't show up this morning," answered
Gryta.

Gabrielle groaned. "I was busy trying to chase off my friend here." Her eyes fell to the wolf, who peered up at her.

Gryta slightly grinned at the sight. "I see it worked."

"Funny." Gabrielle glared at her historian.

"Come on, we can walk and talk back to the Nation." Deka directed the group towards the gates.

The group of Amazons tried to encircle the princess on either side but they quickly found that the wolf wouldn't let anybody to Gabrielle's right side. It was established that her right side was his. So everybody marched on Gabrielle's left side instead.

"Eponin was about to send out a search party."

"Ooo sweet Artemis," murmured the princess. "I'm going to be in trouble."

Melpomene shook her head. "I don't think so as long as she knows you're okay. We would have been the ones in trouble if we returned without you." She then considered it and stated, "I think I'll actually run ahead and let her know."

"You sure, Mel?" questioned the princess.

"It's best to do it." The healer didn't say anything else then hurried off at a run to the gates.

The rest of the group made it to the gates a little more than a quarter of a candlemark later. They were greeted by three impatient Amazons namely Ephiny, Andra, and of course Master Eponin.

"Where were you?" quickly interrogated Eponin.

"And more importantly, what is that?" The blacksmith pointed at the white creature sitting beside the princess.

Every Amazons' eyes lowered to the handsome wolf.

"Um… I can explain everything?" Gabrielle showered her brightest smile on the three worried Amazons.

A half a candlemark later after much explaining, Gabrielle found herself in her hut
finally and tossing her belongings onto the bed. Next she tossed herself into the comfortable bed. "Godssss!"

Ephiny stood still in the room, her hands on her hips. She stared down at the wolf to her left. "Well does he at least have a name?"

Gabrielle quickly sat up with her tussled hair. "No actually." She shrugged and added, "Sometimes I call him Wolfe."

Ephiny was shaking her head, her curly locks swaying back and forth. "Only you would go into the woods and return with a wolf."

"A white wolf," reminded the bard.

The Amazon threw up her arms. "With green eyes no less."

Gabrielle quietly laughed then went silent. "Come here, Eph."

Ephiny came over and sat on the edge of the bed then happily sensed warm arms encircle her waist. "I missed you."

The bard had sat up and rested her boots on the bed frame below. "I missed you as well." She kissed the side of Ephiny's cheek. When she lifted her head, her eyes met another set of green ones and she smiled.

The wolf twisted his head at the two humans in each other's embrace. He'd never seen such a thing. He became very curious so he tensed up, stretched his neck out, and his tail went parallel with the floor. He sniffed them and noticed how their smells mixed together.

Gabrielle chuckled at her new friend's curiosity.

"He acts like you," muttered the Amazon.

"Hey!" Gabrielle poked Ephiny in the ribs.

The Amazon yelped and swatted at her girlfriend's offensive hand. "You ready for dinner?"

"I think so." Gabrielle squeezed Ephiny's waist then let go. When Ephiny stood up, she slid off the bed and bounced up.

The wolf moved away from the pair and sat by the door.
"You hungry too, boy?" The slave went to the animal and stood near him. She lowered her hand to him, which he sniffed but she didn't try to pet him.

"You can't take him to the dining hut," pointed out Ephiny.

The princess turned her head. "Well I don't think I'll have much choice. He'll follow me there."

The Amazon sighed and shook her head because she wouldn't win. She decided to quickly get the fire started in Gabrielle's fireplace before they left. When she was finished they all exited the hut.

When they made it into the dining hut, Gabrielle noticed how the wolf stayed quite close to her than normal. While she was in the food line the wolf followed along her side and he was picking up many looks from all the Amazons. Gabrielle sighed because she knew it would make him skittish especially since he kept looking between Gabrielle and the open door of the dining hut.

The princess steadied her plate in her hand and bent down some. She ran her fingers throw his thick coat. "It's okay, boy."

The wolf slightly jumped at the unexpected touching yet he seemed to calm down.

Gabrielle moved in the line with Ephiny just behind her. She then parted from her girlfriend and headed for the head table. As she walked between the rows of tables, she spotted many of the Amazons down casting their eyes to the wolf that was on her heels. Gabrielle refrained from grinning but she remained neutral like she did this everyday.

The next hurdle would be the queen, Gabrielle concluded. She could only imagine what the queen would say about the wolf and what would happen. All day she'd been working on reasons why the wolf should be allowed in the Nation. She could only hope the reasons were sensible in Queen Melosa's mind.

The princess found her usual seat so she placed her food down. She pulled out her chair but paused then looked over at her furry friend. "Stay there, Wolfe."

The wolf twisted his head then sat down behind Gabrielle's chair but closer to the wall.

Gabrielle smiled at him then took her seat. She waited patiently as the other officers began arriving and sitting. It wasn't until the priestess showed that Gabrielle received any response about the beautiful wolf behind her.
The priestess first lowered her meal onto the table then faced the wolf. "I see you had a very successful time in the woods, princess."

The bard twisted in her chair and her eyes rested on the wolf. She cleared her throat then peered up at the priestess. "Yes, he's been pretty determined to follow me."

Priestess Narkissa thoughtfully smiled at the princess. She then neared the wolf.

Gabrielle grew worried. "Priestess, he's a bit...." She lost her words when Priestess Narkissa gently rubbed the wolf behind his ears.

The wolf's eyes slid closed and he leaned into the comforting touch. He seemed almost in a trance.

The bard was absolutely perplexed how the priestess managed to touch him without scaring him. Anybody else that even was close to him made him skittish let alone touch him.

Priestess Narkissa kneeled down while still soothing him. She stopped scratching his ears and her hands slid down to the sides of his face.

The wolf's sparkling green eyes fluttered open to level with the priestess's.


Gabrielle's mouth opened to ask what the priestess said to the wolf. She didn't understand the tongue whatsoever but her question faltered on her lips. She was absolutely dazed by the spell between the wolf and the priestess. She watched in amazement as Priestess Narkissa rubbed the wolf's long back then stood up.

"He his quite beautiful, princess." Narkissa contained her grin that threatened her lips at seeing the princess's dumbfounded expression. She took her seat next to the young Amazon. At Gabrielle's silence, the priestess softly spoke, "Beauty begets beauty, my princess."

The princess was absolutely at a loss.

The priestess refrained from saying anything else as the queen arrived at the table. She knew what one of the upcoming dinner topics would be as he sat proudly behind the princess.

Queen Melosa saw everybody was at the table. She signaled for everybody to begin their meals.
"So how went the survival test?" inquired the stratègos. Her eyes flickered between Eponin and the princess.

"It went well," reported the princess.

"Slightly behind schedule but well," agreed Master Eponin.

Commander Kalonice slightly grinned. "Yes, I heard reports that the princess was missing in action this morning."

The bard faintly flushed.

"I hear it is due to your pet behind you." The queen motioned to the wolf directly behind the princess's chair.

Several of the officers on the opposite side of the table all tried to get a glimpse of the creature. Several of the officers were mildly shocked and it wasn't because he was a wolf but by his white coat and steel green eyes.

"Word gets around quick," mumbled the princess; she lifted a piece of meat to her lips.

"The queen knows everything, princess." Councilor Rena's tone was dire. "She is the driving force of the Nation."

The slave could have contested to the queen knew everything speech. Instead she shoved the meat between her lips to keep her mouth occupied.

Then the question finally came to life, the one Gabrielle dreaded these past couple of days.

"What do you intend to do with him, princess?"

The queen's question hung in the air like summer humidity for what seemed to be a very long time. Gabrielle pretended to have a mouthful so that she could think out her strategic plan. The princess gathered her wits; she reminded herself that she was a bard with a skill.

"I really don't intended to do anything, my queen."

Many of the Amazons around the table paused in their eating. The ambassador was one of them and despite she was tempted to intervene in the mess she would not. She'd been teaching her student several moons how to negotiate and this was a prime
Queen Melosa's expression tightened and remained on the princess.

Gabrielle quickly regrouped with an explanation. "He's not my pet is what I mean, my queen. He simply came into my camp the first night and has followed me since." She paused before adding, "I even tried to rid of him before returning to the Nation but he is relentless."

"Sounds like a particular princess we know," chimed in the stratègos.

The princess's expression instantly darkened at Commander Kalonice.

The stratègos thoroughly enjoyed the warning sign from the princess especially since she hadn't expected it. Maybe the princess did have some bite behind her. However she was silenced faster by Queen Melosa's disapproving look.

"Besides," charged on the princess, "is there any law stating he isn't allowed?" Her eyes flickered between the queen and the head councilor, the highest powers in the Nation.

"There… is none," finally reported Councilor Rena.

Queen Melosa remained very silent as she stared down the princess.

Gabrielle held her position and never faltered.

Priestess Narkissa slightly shifted, which caught the queen's attention.

Queen Melosa saw how the priestess's darkening eyes narrowed in some warning.

The queen held strong then lowered her gaze to the princess. "He may stay, princess." She then relaxed back into her chair and returned to her meal.

Gabrielle bit back her smile from winning.

Narkissa calmed too as she won against the queen. She was relieved that nobody saw the subtle exchange between her and the queen. The queen and council may hold power over the Nation but it was the priestess that reined control so directed by Artemis.

"I do ask of one favor, princess."

Gabrielle's head turned to the director of the agriculture. "Yes, Director Lelia?"
"See that your wolf doesn't find his way into the flocks or chicken huts."

The princess offered a confident smile. "Of course."

"Thank you." The agriculture director settled and went back to her meal.

The rest of the night melted away as the dinner came to an end but Gabrielle found herself at her friends' table again. And sitting directly behind her was the topic of conversation. Gabrielle relayed how her survival test went then how she befriended the striking wolf. All the Amazons at the table were absolutely entranced by the bard’s story of her two days in the woods. They also couldn't believe a wolf would follow her back to the Nation.

After the long talks, Gabrielle realized she needed to feed the wolf before he found his own means. Yet the wolf remained seated nearby and patiently waited for Gabrielle.

The bard stood up and bent down to the wolf's level. "You hungry, boy?"

"You haven't picked out a name yet?" inquired the weapons master.

"I guess I need to huh?" The princess straightened up.

"Especially since he's your charge now," teased Master Eponin.

"How about Wolfe?" offered Solari.

Gabrielle shook her head. "That's his nickname. Right, boy?"

The wolf perked his ears up.

"Daemon?" supplied Ephiny.

"What's that mean?"

Ephiny grinned at her girlfriend then answered, "Guardian spirit."

"Hnnmm." Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest. She studied the wolf then asked, "Daemon?"

The wolf twisted his head.

"Try Artemesio."
The bard glanced from Jocasta to the wolf. She cleared her throat. "Artemesio?"

The white wolf whined and twisted his head the other way.

"I don't think so," muttered the princess.

Andra was sitting next to Ephiny. She twisted around to watch her sister and the wolf toe to paw. She simply stated, "Faolan."

The wolf stood up on all fours and wagged his tail happily.

"Huh." Gabrielle grinned then said, "Faolan?"

The wolf wagged his tail more vigorously.

"I think that's a winner, Andra."

The blacksmith chuckled at her sister's words.

"What does it mean?" inquired Adonia.

Andra turned back around. "It's Gaelic… for little wolf." She turned her head sidelong to her sister and the wolf. "I've heard the name in the past when my father and I traveled to those lands."

"Well he's by no means little," huffed out the weapons master.

"No," consented the bard, "but he likes the name." She centered on the wolf. "You hungry, Faolan?"

The wolf kept wagging his tail but now his tongue hung out.

"Okay, let's see what we can scrap up." The princess walked around the table and headed for the kitchen before it got any later. She rounded the corner with Faolan right behind. "Hello?" she called into the empty kitchen.

Suddenly a bulky but worn out Amazon with an apron came around a hidden corner. "Princess Gabrielle," she greeted warmly. "What can I help you with?"

The bard stepped into the kitchen more and when her furry friend sat by her side she signaled to him. "I was wondering if you had any scraps for him?"

The Amazon's eyes fell to the white wolf. "Sweet Artemis." She carefully came closer yet stopped a few paces from the wolf. She bent over and leveled her eyes with the
wolf's. "He's quite handsome." She straightened up. "Is he shy?"

"Yes actually."

The Amazon nodded her head. "It will take him some time then… and some good food." She chuckled then put her hands on her apron clad hips and twisted around in the clean kitchen. "I think everything has been pretty well cleaned." She then held up her right hand with a pointed finger. "Give me two heartbeats." She whirled around and disappeared behind the same corner again.

Gabrielle smiled at the wolf. "I bet she has something good left, Faolan."

Faolan's ears jumped up and his tail swooshed across the floor some.

The princess grinned then saw the chef coming back to her.

"Here we are." The Amazon held out a small leather satchel full of some unknown goods. Then in her right hand was a large size bone. "I figure he can carry this."

The bard received the satchel.

Faolon received the bone and quite happily.

"Just bring the satchel back tomorrow." The chef smiled at the wolf while saying, "I'll be sure to have something for him ready tomorrow night, princess."

"Thank you." The princess was taken by the Amazon's helpfulness. "Please call me Gabrielle."

The chef now smiled at the princess and held out her arm. "I am Crystal."

Gabrielle mirrored the smile. "And this is Faolan."

When the chef released the princess's small hand she stated, "Well I am glad Faolan will give the leftovers a good home."

The wolf was lying down and gnawing on the bone already.

Gabrielle laughed. "Yes, he will."

"I must go, princess. I need to finish cleaning."

"Thank you again. I will see you tomorrow."
The chef smiled at the promise. "Goodnight, Gabrielle." She then disappeared.

Gabrielle dropped her gaze to the wolf. "Come on, boy. Let's go say goodnight to the others."

Faolan climbed up to his feet and followed the princess out of the kitchen.

"It looks like you found some things," stated Eponin.

"Sure did." Gabrielle held up the small satchel. "Crystal was very helpful." As her arm hung at her side again, she announced, "I think I'm going to head to the hut."

Ephiny stood up and came around the table. "I'll go with you." She turned to everybody. "Goodnight, Amazons."

"Goodnight," called the friends.

Gabrielle and Ephiny started off but the princess paused and waved to her friends. When they stepped out of the dining hut, they were hit by the cold air. "I am glad the fireplace is already burning."

"Me too," grumbled Ephiny.

When they returned to the hut, Gabrielle gave her furry friend his meal to keep him busy. She then climbed into the bed with Ephiny and they snuggled for most of the night with gentle talks. Eventually they fell asleep in each other's arms until the early morning when there was some whining.

Gabrielle moaned softly at the sound. She finally forced herself up into a slight sitting position to see what was wrong.

Faolan paced around in front of the door.

The bard was confused for a second then it hit her. "I'm sorry, boy." She extracted herself from Ephiny and the bed then went to the door. She opened it up enough to let the white wolf slip through. She left it open while going to fireplace to stoke it.

For a heartbeat, Gabrielle wondered if the wolf would return or not. She tried not to worry herself and instead went to the washbasin to clean up. When she came back out she was surprised to see Faolan resting on the fur in front of the fire.

The wolf lifted his head and his tongue rolled out. Next to him was his bone that was rather small now.
Gabrielle ran her fingers through her knotty hair and smiled. "Good morning." Then a thought occurred to her as she wondered back to the washroom muttering, "He's probably thirsty." She reappeared with a small bowl and she picked up her waterskin on her desk leftover from the survival test. She made sure to close the door while on her way.

Faolan got up and wondered over to where Gabrielle lowered the filled bowl. He lavishly drank up the water. He then went over and sat beside Gabrielle in front of the fire.

Gabrielle turned her head to him.

Faolan looked at her too with his tongue slightly poking out.

The bard noticed his expression was very soft. She dared to try again so she reached out slowly with her palm up.

Faolan lowered his head some and sniffed her hand, confirming it was still her. He then lifted his head and waited.

Very carefully, Gabrielle brought her hand to the top of his head with her fingertips touching first.

The wolf didn't move and he didn't even flinch. He just stared back at the human.

Gabrielle smiled happily when he let her touch him. She gently rubbed his head then down to his shoulders.

For quarter of a candlemark, the pair remained in each other's presence while Ephiny slept. Eventually the Amazon wiggled out of the bed and suggested they get ready because training would be soon.

And that day rolled into the next with the same routine each day. There were lectures with Eponin and training with her too. Each day Faolan also took on an unknown studious position among Eponin's ranks. He always went into the lecture hut, sat by the door, and listened then when it came time for practice he too went. The first time he saw that Amazon with the blue eyes and curly dark hair fighting against Gabrielle, he almost attacked her. Gabrielle had to reassure him that it was okay. So eventually Faolan realized it was just make believe much like the day he'd watch Gabrielle practice in the camp.

Master Eponin would always stand off to the side of the sparring of the sisters. She would direct them, teach them, and intervene at some points. She'd come use to Faolan sitting right beside her and also watching the sparring with her. As if he too
understood all the moves and techniques.

But eventually the day approached for the two students to return to the Academy. It was the third day before the students were due back at the Academy and three days were just enough time for them to make it. Ephiny and Gabrielle were well packed and now were preparing their horses.

At Torqueo's stall door sat Faolan, he was patiently waiting for Gabrielle. And at the entrance to the stables waited several Amazons that wished to say goodbye to the pair. When the small group exited the stables, they were surprised to see everybody there including Eponin, Andra, Solari, Jocasta, Adonia, and Gryta.

"It's like a damn party," joked Ephiny.

Eponin smirked. "Yes, we're excited to see you two go."

"Especially the princess since she stirs up so much trouble," chimed in Solari.

"You're not going to be my favorite anymore," threatened the bard.

Solari snickered.

"Come on. You two don't need to be late." The weapons master guided the group towards the gates.

When the entourage arrived at the gates, everybody said goodbye to the princess and Ephiny as well as wished them good luck at the Academy. Gabrielle was solemn especially when the last person she hugged was her sister. Andra though promised that she would come down for the graduation as did several others in the group.

Finally the Academy students slowly trudged out of the door in the gates and vanished into the woods. Eponin let out a heavy sigh but she sensed the blacksmith next to her.

"Hard isn't it?" the blacksmith murmured.

"It is but I remind myself one thing."

Andra folded her arms over her cloaked chest. "What's that?"

"In about four moons we'll be permanently stuck with them."

Everybody in the group broke out laughing at the weapons master's truthful words.

When the pair arrived at the Academy, they were warmly received by Feodoras
despite he wasn't so sure about Gabrielle's new company. He let the wolf come into the Academy but he warned that Gabrielle would have to take it up with Gastacius in the morning. The bard's stomach knotted just at the thought of talking to the master bard. She had to though if she wished Faolan to stay within the Academy grounds.

So by the next morning, Gabrielle rose earlier than normal and with determination she went into the Great Hall. Right behind her was her white shadow and she figured the master bard out to see the wolf first hand. She was called into his office, which surprised him as students were rarely up this early. He also was shocked by what came in behind the student.

For half a candlemark, Gabrielle debated with the master bard about why Faolan was allowed on the Academy grounds. Gastacius was taken aback by the student's persistence and eventually he caved into her demands. He sighed in absolutely relief when the relentless woman left his office. He'd never seen quite a display but he'd grown a healthy respect for Gabrielle's talking skills.

So with the master bard's gracious consent, Faolan was allowed in the Academy along with scraps from the mess hall. He was never allowed in the classrooms as he would be quite the distraction but he was allowed to remain by the door to the classrooms. He was also allowed to stay with Ephiny and Gabrielle in their dorm house but only in that dorm house.

Faolan continued to follow his friend to and from the classes, across the grounds, and out on rides or walks. He especially enjoyed the walks out of the grounds and into the surrounding woods. The forest was very much apart of him and at times he yearned to feel that life again but it was too lonely.

Gabrielle had grown a very deep bond with him. She figured it was why he stayed so near her and never wondered off. She found a lot of comfort in knowing he was always by her side, always loyal. And in some odd way, Gabrielle had come to realize Faolan had become another anchor in her life.

That bond was gently tested when the winter started to sooth to the oncoming spring and it was time for the senexes to begin their Internus program in the city. The program began on the Spring Solstice and so Gabrielle, along with other students, were carted into Athens. Gabrielle was nervous about performing while Faolan was edgy about entering a huge human city. He'd never once experience such a life shaking event but he dared not to leave the Amazon's side.

Each time Gabrielle and Faolan went to Athens, which was every fortnight, they both became more comfortable with their own inner turmoil. Gabrielle became a more confident Internus Poietes while Faolan grew calm in the city because in a lot of ways he realized it was just as wild as the woods.
The princess was sliding off the cart on her fourth fortnight in Athens so she was feeling much more comfortable with speaking. Tonight though she was working at a tavern that she hadn't been rotated to yet. She smiled at her fellow students in the cart and said, "Good luck tonight, fellas."

"You too, Gabrielle," called Orion as he watched the young woman and wolf climb the steps of the tavern.

The bard adjusted her satchel at her side then her staff in hand. She stepped into the tavern and she ignored the turning heads mostly due to Faolan. She approached the bar and smiled at the owner.

"You must be the bard from the Academy." The tavern owner put his clean mug away then came around the bar. "I am Kratos."

"Gabrielle," answered back the student, who took the man's large hand. "Thank you for having me."

"Trust me I appreciate it just as much." The owner released her hand just as he spotted the animal next to her.

Gabrielle caught his motion so she quickly asked, "I hope you don't mind?"

The tavern owner's hands went to his hips. "He seems calm enough."

"He is," promised the bard, "He won't cause any problems."

"I'll take your word on it." Kratos put his hands on his hips before adding, "If you do well enough I'll throw in dinner for him too."

Gabrielle chuckled. "You're on."

The tavern owner smiled then he held his hand out to the small stage. "It's all yours, bard."

"Thank you." Gabrielle patted her leg to signal her fuzzy friend to follow. She climbed up onto the stage while the wolf remained by the steps in a guard mode. She'd left her staff and satchel with him too. When she was up in front of the audience she captured their attention immediately. Many of the patrons already knew that an aspiring bard from the Academy would be performing tonight but some patrons happened to be passerbies.

"Well…." The Amazon Princess brushed her skirt then asked, "Are there any
requests?" She received a response for a heroic but comical tale. Gabrielle paced the stage briefly as her mind worked out a story. She stopped then loudly asked, "Have any of you heard of the warlord Zagreas?" When everybody shook their heads, Gabrielle reeled into her story about a crazy warlord and dumb giant named Gareth, whom tried to defeat a legendary heroine.

As the bard wove her tale to her audience something caught her eye or rather somebody. She only slightly faltered in her barding but nothing anybody would quite catch.

The brief subject of Gabrielle's distraction was a short, curly blond haired man in the far back. He was quietly listening to the story as was the much taller man to his right.

When Gabrielle finally wound down the end of her story, she felt relieved. She loved telling stories but right now she wanted to hear somebody else's story or rather some bodies'. She finished her tale and the audience applauded her wildly. Just as she stepped down from the stage not only was she greeted by Faolan but also many of her listeners. She tried to refuse any dinars they offered but many insisted so she found herself twenty dinars richer.

By the time her listeners finished speaking with her, she was approached by a man about her own height. Gabrielle's face suddenly hurt from her huge smile.

"You did a beautiful job, Gabrielle."

"Iolaus," happily welcomed the bard.

He was quickly pulled into a warm hug.

"It's been so long since I've seen you."

Iolaus chuckled then shrugged. "I've been busy."

"You and your friend," offered the princess.

"Yes." Iolaus turned some and signalled towards his friend with a jest of his chin. "I want you to come over and meet him. You have some time?"

"Of course." Gabrielle picked up her satchel and staff then caught Iolaus's attention. "I want you to meet mine too." She held her hand out to the white wolf.

Iolaus blinked at the wolf but then he bent down. "Wow."

"Faolan, this is my friend Iolaus."
The wolf picked out Gabrielle's gently tone so he carefully neared the small man. He sniffed him first and logged Iolaus's scent away in his memory.

"Hey." Iolaus happily petted the animal and whispered, "You're quite handsome, aren't yah?"

"He is that." Gabrielle smiled at her friend's appreciation for the wolf.

When Iolaus stood up he started for the other side of the tavern. "Come with me."

Gabrielle weaved through the tables with Faolan behind her. She came to Iolaus's table and instantly Iolaus's friend stood up to welcome her.

"Gabrielle, this is my friend Hercules."

The Amazon Princess stepped forward and met the man in a brisk arm shake. "It's nice to meet you, Hercules."

"You as well," rumbled his deep voice. "Iolaus has talked a bit about you."

Gabrielle sensed her cheeks warming.

Hercules admired the look on the young woman yet he held his hand to the table. "Sit with us and eat."

"Thank you." Gabrielle took a seat then settled her satchel and staff on the floor and she noted that Faolan sat next to her chair. "Ooo." She peered up shyly at Hercules. "This is Faolan."

The demi-god bent to his right and smiled at the wolf. "Nice to meet you, Faolan." He offered his hand to the animal.

Faolan stood up and stretched his neck out. He carefully absorbed and filed away Hercules's scent. He let the human rub his head then he took his seat next to Gabrielle again.

"He's quite beautiful," admired Hercules.

The bard quipped a softly smile. "And quite bright too."

"Where did you find him?" inquired Iolaus. "I don't remember him."

The princess brushed back a few strands of loose blond hair. "He actually found me. I
was out camping just outside the Nation when he came into my camp."

"Huh," murmured Iolaus. "Listen, I'll go get you a meal." He started to rise up but Gabrielle's voice caught him.

"It's okay actually. The tavern owner will bring it to me... its apart of the deal." When the small man took his chair again, Gabrielle explained, "The Academy has an agreement with certain inns and taverns where we're allowed to perform for practice. In agreement, the tavern owners get a free bard to bring in crowds and all they have to offer is a free meal to the bard."

"Iolaus mentioned you're an aspiring bard at the Academy."

"I am," confirmed the slave. She was about to add more but she was cut short when the tavern owner appeared.

"As promised, Gabrielle." Kratos held two dishes in his hand. He placed the larger one in front of Gabrielle. Then he bent over and slid the second next to Faolan, who didn't wait for any Amazon approval to eat. Kratos straightened up again, a smile on his face. "I've never had so many customers in my tavern especially pleased ones. I've had a few other Academy bards in here before you but they didn't draw a crowd in like you did." He stopped to place his hands on his hips. "Please take an unconditional invite to my tavern anytime, especially when you finish with the Academy."

"Thank you, Kratos. I will keep the offer in mind always."

"Please do." The tavern owner stepped away but paused to say, "My barmaid will be over shortly with your drink." His eyes fell to the wolf happily eating his meal. "And a bowl of water." He glanced at the two men. "Do you fellas need anything?"

"Just a round of drinks too," answered Hercules.

Kratos stiffly nodded. "Right away." He disappeared in the ocean of customers.

"Well," started Iolaus, "you're becoming famous before you even graduate."

The young bard's cheeks flushed.

"You tell an excellent story," agreed Hercules. "You'll do well after the Academy."

"I'm afraid I won't have much time to be the traveling bard." Gabrielle picked up her fork.

"The Amazons?"
Gabrielle nodded at Iolaus's question then she began eating.

"I wouldn't worry," argued Hercules, "word of mouth travels faster than any mortal can."

Iolaus chuckled but he agreed.

The Amazon Princess swallowed down her tidbit. "I've heard quite a few tales about you two." She grinned when the two men had curious looks. "A friend of mine in the Academy relays them to me quite often. He's a big fan. He particularly liked telling me about you and the Amazon women, as he puts it."

Iolaus smirked at his friend's words. He held his tongue because he could only wonder what Hercules would say.

"Well… Queen Hippolyta and I worked things out." Hercules presented nothing else as his emotions were still raw from that time ago.

"And I appreciate it." The princess reassured the demi-god with a smile. "She is an amazing queen. It would have been blow if we lost her."

"She is," quietly agreed Hercules. His blue eyes lifted when the barmaid appeared with the drinks. He gratefully took his.

"How are things in the Nation?" Iolaus could tell a change of topic was required.

Gabrielle finished eating her fish and moved onto a side item. "They are well for the most part."

"Still troubles with the centaurs?"

The Amazon Princess answered with a sigh. "Unfortunately."

"Who is the queen?"

Gabrielle's attention switched to the demi-god. "Melosa."

Hercules rolled the name around in his mind. "The name is familiar." His fuzzy eyes settled on the bard again. "The age old war between the Amazons and centaurs?"

"Yes." Gabrielle shook her head while roughly spearing her peas. "The older Amazons can't seem to let go of their hatred."
"It takes time." Hercules lowered his mug to the table. "And the right leader."

"I'm starting to realize this."

"Didn't a centaur kill the queen's sister?"

Gabrielle looked to Iolaus. "Yes, that is how I became an Amazon. I tried to… tried to save her." She shook her head at the old memory from over a season's cycle. She sensed Iolaus's gentle touch on her hand for a heartbeat.

"You did what you could," spoke the small man as he removed his hand. "Now you can honor her memory."

"I do… everyday." The slave finished the last of her meal and felt rather content. She leaned back into her chair, her hands on her stomach. "Where are you two headed?"

"Well we were just passing through." Iolaus exchanged looks with Hercules. "But we're headed to Claydon."

"When do you graduate, Gabrielle?"

The bard grinned at the demi-god. "This spring."

"Excited?" inquired Iolaus.

"I can't believe it," admitted the bard, "but I can't wait."

Iolaus took a draw of his port but after he put his mug down he posed another question. "How is Ephiny?"

Gabrielle was remotely surprised her friend recalled Ephiny at all. "Ephiny is doing really well. She's excited to graduate too."

Iolaus explained who Ephiny was to Hercules. Then he faced the slave again. "Does Ephiny have any position in the Nation or will she?"

"Not that's assigned to her," replied the bard. "But that could always change if something comes up." She thoughtfully considered her girlfriend and concluded that Ephiny did have a lot of potential in the Nation in some officer's spot. She let go of the idea for now as it was far too early to tell.

"When do you have to get back to the Academy?"

Gabrielle released a faint sigh. "Fairly soon actually… they'll come by to pick me
"Well tell me more about yourself, Gabrielle before you have to go." Hercules leaned back in his chair with his mug in his lap.

The small woman bit the inside of her lip and debated what to tell the pair. She only told them the generic things about being from Potidæa and who her family was. She also explained how her 'grandfather' paid for her schooling at the Academy. By the time she told them the longwinded information, she found it was time to go.

Hercules and Iolaus stood up together when the bard rose up.

"Thank you for having me," Gabrielle dazzled her biggest smile. "It's nice to see an old friend." Her eyes shifted to Iolaus then rose up to Hercules. "And make a new one."

The demi-god stepped forward and held out his hand. "If you ever need any help or get into a bind don't hesitate to find us."

Gabrielle held Hercules's hand while her left hand covered his strong hand. "Thank you, I really appreciate it. I pray I never have to take you up on that offer."

"Just in case," assured the hero. He finally let go and watched as Iolaus came around the table.

"I'll walk you out." Iolaus touched the small of Gabrielle's back. "I'll be back."

"No rush." Hercules took his seat again. He then rubbed Faolan's back and said, "Goodbye, boy."

The wolf's eyes sparkled at the demi-god then he dissolved into the crowded tavern with Gabrielle and Iolaus. He came out onto the porch and took a seat beside the Amazon Princess.

Gabrielle was busy saying goodbye and hugging her friend. She thanked him for his company and asked him to visit the Amazons someday. She quickly described where the Nation was located just as the cart rolled up. After one last hug and word of goodbye, Gabrielle hastened down the steps with Faolan vaulting down. When she got into the cart with her furry friend, she waved at the small man at the top of the steps.

"See you soon, Gabrielle!" Iolaus watched her and the full cart of bards absorb into the crowds of Athens. He could only wonder when he'd see his young friend again but right now he had to return to Hercules.
Just as Gabrielle's visit with Iolaus and the legendary Hercules went quickly so did the rest of her senex term. She continued her fortnight visits to various inns, theatres, and taverns. She was especially warmly welcomed to any of them that she'd previously performed in. By the time her program was completed, she'd already made a name for herself in Athens, which excited her to no end.

It was a moon before graduation when Gabrielle found out the exact date. Graduation was set to be on the day of the next full moon however every bard had to pass their final. The senex bards were absolutely excited and stressed at the same time of the thought of the final exam as well as graduation. The final exam held true to the rumors as every senex bard was required to go to Athens and take a stand on a gigantic stage in the famous Theatre of Dionysus, which the Academy owned.

When Gabrielle heard they would be performing in the Theatre of Dionysus, she almost fainted because she knew that theatre could seat over seventeen thousand people. She also knew it was where some of Greece's most famous tragedies were written by playwrights such as Aeschylus and Sophocles. She knew she could never compare to such amazing talents yet Hades if she would fail her final exam when she was so close.

That day of testing finally arrived and the senex bards were all carted into Athens. The students were either rattling on out of nervousness or they were like Gabrielle and quite silent from inner fear. Gastacius of course accompanied them as he would be in the front row at center to grade them. He also warned them that he would have three teachers far in the back trying to strain to hear their voices at the top of the theater.

The students were brought into the back of the theater where they were told to remain until it was time. Once they were called up by one of the teachers, they would walk out onto stage, introduce themselves, and start their tale.

Orion was sitting next to the Gabrielle, who was next to Ephiny on a marble bench.

Euripides was pacing back and forth in complete anxiousness.

On the other side, Twickenham and Stallonus sat together along with a few other students. Stallonus had his head against the wall and trying to remember to breathe. Twickenham was beside himself as his right leg vibrated and his head was down, eyes shut too.

Just watching her friends made Gabrielle nervous and the only reassurance she had was Faolan at her feet. Occasionally she would lean forward and pet him just to comfort herself.

"It'll be okay, Twickenham."
Twickenham lifted his head at Gabrielle's voice. "N-n-no it-t-t-… no it-t-t- won't." He suddenly got to his feet and walked away, going down the marble hallway.

"Let him work it out," softly soothed Orion.

The princess frowned as she watched Twickenham stomp down the hallway.

Ephiny reached over and slid her fingers through Gabrielle's.

The slave though kept chewing on her lower lip. "We have to remember what we've been taught; about getting up in front of crowds."

"You are correct," agreed Euripides. He stopped pacing then faced his friends. "Perhaps we should go over what it is we need to do."

Gabrielle perked up at the idea. "We should." She then leaned forward and called, "Twickenham!"

The upset student wondered back down to his group of friends. He stood next to Euripides, a questioning face.

Euripides gently touched Twickenham's shoulder. "We are going to go over what we've been taught when dealing with crowds."

"O-o-o-okay." Twickenham returns to his seat next to Stallonus, who is now focused on his friends too.

"First we have to speak slowly," offered the Amazon Princess.

Ephiny chimed in, "Remember to breathe deeply. It'll help relax you."

Euripides added another. "We can focus on somebody familiar in the audience to help us."

"Like Gastacius," suggested Stallonus, "because he's the damn reason we're here."

The group chuckled but continued with the exercise.

"Have your story well planned out in your head," offered Orion, "but not too detailed."

"Ther-r-re has t-t-to be emot-t-tions in our st-t-tory," supplied Twickenham.

Gabrielle bounced up onto her feet without hitting Faolan. She shifted in front of the
group, opposite of Euripides. "Remember that once you draw your audience in it'll be much easier. It's just that first step to get them."

"Also body language," reminded Stallonus.

Twickenham was shaking his leg against the floor. He was frightened because of his speech problem. He felt as if he could easily fail the test compared to his friends. "I-I-I can't-t-t do this."

Gabrielle became solemn again at seeing her friend's attitude. "Twick, you can beat this."

"N-n-no."

Everybody noticed how his stutter was growing stronger as his final exam grew nearer. It would be a bad collision of things if there wasn't some solution.

"There has to be a way to get some control on your speech," tried Gabrielle.

Twickenham vigorously shook his head.

Euripides tilted his head in thought about Twickenham's problem. "Perhaps the solution is that Twickenham needs to take his stutter to his advantage."

Twickenham confusingly stared at his friend.

The slave was rolling Euripides's riddle-like words through her head. Suddenly it struck her like a blind cyclops from nowhere. "That's it!" She bounded over and grabbed Euripides into a huge hug then she kissed his cheek. "You're a genius, Eurip!"

Euripides, for once, actually flushed from the compliment and affection.

"What's he saying?" interrupted Stallonus.

Gabrielle shifted and bent down in front of Twickenham, she gathered his hands into hers. "What Euripides means is that you need to tell a story where your stutter is important." Her lips curled up into a devilish grin. "Where your main character does have a stutter."

The concept now struck everybody else in the group, especially Twickenham, who would have never thought of the idea.

Gabrielle stood up quickly and looked at her friends. "Come on. Let's work out a story
together for Twickenham to tell."

Ephiny grinned at her girlfriend's concern for Twickenham's success. "A famous hero that has a stutter," she started.

"Great." The Amazon Princess beamed.

"He's tall, dark, and has short dark hair," described Orion.

"Originally from Olympia."

Gabrielle smiled at Stallonus. She then led the group forward as they thought of the concept of a realistic but true hero that also happen to have a stutter. By the time the friends outlined the character and a story for Twickenham, a teacher arrived with a student that had just performed. The student seemed relieved but not excited either.

"Gabrielle of Potidaea," announced the teacher, his eyes on the student already. "You're up."

Gabrielle held her breath as her stomach pitched. She was given words of assurance from her friends and Ephiny offered her a strong hug. She started down the hallway and Faolan didn't falter to follow behind her.

The teacher paused at the exit towards the stage. His eyes dropped to the wolf. "He cannot go out there."

"I know, hold on." The student knelt down in front of her friend and smiled at him. "Okay, boy you need to stay here." She twisted some and pointed to the gigantic stage. "I'll be right there; you can see me from here."

Faolan's ears fell back on his head and his face pulled back.

Gabrielle read it as fear and she leaned in for a gentle kiss to his head. "I'll be fine."

The wolf sat down which allowed him to lick the human's soft cheek.

"See you soon." After one last rub to his head, she rose up and faced her teacher.

The teacher stood with his hands behind his back. He looked quite formal in his toga and so was his tone of voice. "I would say good luck to you, Gabrielle however you do not require it."

The student tasted the teacher's words. She dipped her head in respect then turned to face the audience or what seemed to be an ocean of heads. After a confident breath,
she walked out onto the stage. She knew what her first step was and that was to introduce herself. "Good evening, everybody," she called out, "I am Gabrielle of Potidaea." Before she could say another word there was a loud cheer from the field of audience that she hadn't expected.

Many of the voices in the audience cheered out her name or just yelled words of enthusiasm. This seemed to relax the aspiring bard since it meant people were familiar with her.

"Well I would say some of you know of me." Gabrielle chuckled and smiled at the gigantic crowd. "I plan to keep to my tradition that many of you know." She neared the front center of the stage, her hands behind her back. "Are there any requests out there?" she called out.

Gastacius was very surprised by the response from both the crowd and the student. He twisted some in his seat as the people began crying out their requests.

There was one name that was being chanted, "Xena, Xena, Xena!"

The slave laughed and held up her hand for some silence. "Xena it is then." She dipped her head while thinking about what story she should select then it came to her. Her electric eyes met the audience again. "I thought since I am in the famous Theatre of Dionysus I would follow some of the historical works produce here with a drama." Gabrielle walked away from the edge of the stage as a few listeners called out her name.

The student spun around with a huge grin on her face. "Xena was known as the Warrior Princess a legendary hero yet early in her life… she was a legendary among the hated." Her voice thundered through the now silent theatre. "She was known as a murdered… a killer because she was once a warlord… a very dark and feared warlord."

The audience held their breath, waiting for the bard to continue.

"She was considered a disease in Greece as she swept across the lands with her army." Gabrielle threw out her arms to emphasis her point and some of the crowd gasped. "During her conquest she wreaked havoc on one small town known as Cirra and ultimately changed one girl's life." Gabrielle stepped closer to the edge of the stage and her next whisper was loud, "One girl's life who would forever haunt the Warrior Princess."

Gabrielle reeled into her dramatic tale about a crazy woman that sought revenge on the Warrior Princess for that one fated day that the ex-world destroyed her world. The audience was entranced to hear about this crazed warrior's attempt to hunt down, plot,
and end up failing to kill Xena. Yet Gabrielle's closing of the story left the audience absolutely held into their seats.

"I'm glad you saved her," stated Gabrielle. Xena pulled away from the scene of the crazed warrior lashed down. She finally replied, 'It was the right thing to do.' And when the two friends left the jailhouse, the crazed warrior suddenly had a wild grin. 'The right thing to do… that's what they think.'" The princess lost her demonstration of the feral grin that the character would have had. She then bowed before her audience and when she straightened up there was an unbroken silence.

Suddenly the crowd broke out applauding and cheering for Gabrielle of Potidaea. Many of them begged for her to continue into the sequel.

"I would love to tell the rest but…" Her eyes lowered to the master bard then back up. "There are other amazing bards to still go. Thank you everybody!" She waved to them all and carefully made her way to the back exit. She could only pray to Artemis that her shaky legs would carry her all the way. She climbed the steps up to the exit way where Faolan patiently waited for her. She noticed the teacher was already gone.

When Gabrielle stepped through the doorway and came into the corridor a ways, she leaned her back against the wall. She slowly slid down it with her eyes closed and a moan vibrating between her lips. She sensed her wolf beside her. She gradually lifted her head when the audience's chanting voices reached her ears.

"Gabrielle, Gabrielle, Gabrielle!" they demanded greatly.

The bard grinned at her success and that her name would be on everybody's lips. Her grin shifted into a soft smile at Faolan. "You hear that, boy?"

Faolan wagged his tail across the floor, his ears perked.

The Amazon Princess forced herself to get up particularly when she saw the teacher approaching with another student. She wished the fellow student good luck then she made her way down the corridor to her friends. She wasn't about to tell them everything right now as it would make them too nervous about when they'd go.

When she settled in her spot next to Ephiny, she remained passive. Faolan sat down at her feet then he slowly slid down onto his belly.

"How'd it go out there?" inquired Ephiny first.

Gabrielle shrugged. "It wasn't too bad." She didn't make eye contact with of her friends.
Gradually a deep, knowing smirk grew on Ephiny's face. "Gabrielle?"

The princess met Ephiny's light amber eyes.

"We could hear the audience in here."

Gabrielle's instantly went into a setting sun shade. She scanned her friends' faces, which confirmed that they too heard the audience. She cleared her throat then quietly said, "I uh…"

The Amazon chuckled at her girlfriend and touched her cheek lightly. "It's okay. I'm proud of you."

"All of us," stated Euripides.

"Thank you," whispered the slave. Her subtle fears about her friends' reaction were destroyed by their support. She then turned to Orion to her left and quietly asked, "What name are you going to use?"

Orion stared down at his hands and after some long silence, he looked at Gabrielle. "I was thinking Orion."

Gabrielle frowned in response. She'd found out over a seasons cycle ago that Orion was merely his nickname. His real name was Homer and she rather preferred it. She even tried to call him by his proper name but Orion wouldn't let her.

"You should go by your proper name," chimed in Stallonus.

Orion sighed while leaning against the wall.

"You don't-t-t see any of u-u-us going by other n-n-names."

Euripides was still standing up, too excited to sit at all. He folded his arms against his chest. "The real Orion is merely a fable but you are more." His eyes locked with Orion's. "Don't make your name a fable but a legend, Homer."

Orion toyed with his white toga as he debated. He wasn't sure what to do.

Gabrielle patted his friend's knee. She knew he had to decide for himself.

Faolan suddenly lifted his head when the echoing sound of sandals came to him. His green eyes centered on the teacher that was escorting a student back. He simply yawned and rested his head back down on his paws.
The teacher had a small scroll in his hand. He rolled it open and read out the next name. "Homer of Smyrna."

Orion rose up to his full but short height then stepped around his friends. Everybody wished him luck and he gave them a confident smile.

Orion was led to the entrance way. After the teacher's words of confidence, Orion stepped out and into the great theatre. He was absolutely dazed by the size and sheer mass of people; thousands upon thousands of people. In his mind, it seemed almost impossible to be scared because the beauty of the theatre stole away any time he had to be fearful.

Orion stepped up to front stage center. He first took a deep breath then announced, "Good evening, everybody. I am...." He faltered and he noted how the master bard became curious. "I am Homer but some may know me as Orion."

There was a sudden applause from previous fans he'd picked up in the taverns and inns.

Orion did a faint bow then when he straightened up, he had a grin. "Tonight I would like to share with you an epic but comical poem I've called Batrachomyomachia or for some of the non-Greek, The Battle of Frogs and Mice."

The crowd hooted between cheers and laughter of the poem's title.

Orion spun into his verses about a mouse that met the Frog King. Throughout the singing he would have to pause and let his crowd shake off their laughter. He then would continue on and by the time he finished the tale, his crowd adored him.

After he thanked his listeners and bowed, he hurried off stage. It wasn't long before he joined his friends and he didn't have to tell them how well it went. The audience's ringing voices were crying out Homer loud enough for all to hear.

The rest of the evening trickled by as each of the friends made their way out onto stage. Twickenham was the last to go and he was also the most nervous. Yet he held fast despite his stammer and he used the story that he and his friends worked out. To his pure amazement, the crowd ate up his fascinating story about a hero, who had a stutter and it seemed to make the hero all the more realistic.

When the final exam ended, the Academy surprised every student by taking them out for a dinner and celebration. One of the taverns that the students had performed in had been set a side just for the event. All of the teachers were there and even Gastacius stayed through the meal and party. He also went around to each student and congratulated them on a fine job. He particularly spent the most time with the student
from Potidaea more than any other student.

By the next morning, Ephiny and Gabrielle found themselves rushing to write out invites to be sent out. They were please to find out that the Academy was already expecting such from their students so several messengers were waiting in the Great Hall. Ephiny wrote the message for the Amazon Nation while Gabrielle wrote one to Cornelio. They both could only hope that some of them would be in attendance for the graduation.

And the graduation, it was only twenty days away from when they sent out word. The senex students busied by finishing up the last of their classes and the homework was actually lighter. The teachers always planned it as such because they knew the senex students were always too excited to remain focused on their studies. Plus they figured it had something to do with the coming spring weather as many students would go for walks or into the city.

Just as Gabrielle, Ephiny and Faolan were doing today. They decided after class to take their horses for a ride and give Faolan a good run to keep him fit. They followed their usual trail, which was very clear now that the snow was gone and the sunshine could still beam through the budding leaves. Eventually they found their way to the beautiful lake that they'd discovered seasons back.

Gabrielle dismounted first and took Torqueo's bit from his mouth.

The horse whined happily when he could freely move his mouth. He didn't wait to lower his head into the new, lush grass that'd been growing.

Ephiny followed her girlfriend's example too. She was relieved to be getting some air and peaceful time away from the Academy.

Gabrielle went to her horse's light saddles and fished around in it. She produced a waterskin and bowl, which she filled up and gave to Faolan.

The wolf greedily lapped up the water. His fluffy chest was failing and rising quickly from the running.

The Amazons silently trekked down to the edge of the lake but it was Gabrielle who bent down to touch the water. She shook her hand free of the water then reported, "It's a bit chilly."

Ephiny knelt down next and also tested the temperature. "Not too bad."

"You first," teased the princess.
"Ooo no… royalty first," shot back Ephiny.

The slave shot a dark look at her girlfriend. "I don't think so. I'm not going in."

Ephiny's amber eyes darkened into a golden brown. "Come on, sissy."

"No." Gabrielle did her best dark look she could conjure up.

Ephiny only laughed then stood up quickly.

The bard slowly climbed up to her short height but something made her tense up. "Ephiny, no!!" She dug her boots into the slippery, soft ground that was easily giving way. She tried to push her girlfriend away but it was a losing battle.

"Get those feathers wet!" Ephiny was behind Gabrielle, her hands pushing against Gabrielle's mid back. "In you go!" She gave a powerful shove and she hysterically laughed when Gabrielle went face and belly first into the lake.

The water's mirror image was broken by a tangle of arms and legs thrashing around in the water.

Ephiny took a step back, her hand over her mouth to calm her laughs when a very angry bard looked up at her.

"Ephiny!!"

The Amazon took another step back, her expression full of laughter and mirth.

Gabrielle growled as she stood in waist high water. Her blond bangs were pasted to her forehead and water running down her slightly bronze body. "You are a dead Amazon!" She suddenly smacked the water with her hands so that it would spray at Ephiny.

Ephiny laughed while jumping out of the way of the water attack. "Missed me!" Her eyes went as wide as Helios when the pissed off princess came charging out of the water. "Oh Hades' balls!" She sprung into action at a fast run.

"Ephiny!!" bellowed the bard, who was right on her heels.

Faolan lifted his head as his friend began chasing the other human. His head gradually rotated to the right as they went all over the place. He yawned after deciding there was no threat then he lowered his head back down to his paws. He was too comfortable under the tree's shade to want to participate.
Gabrielle was catching up to her girlfriend and she saw they were coming back towards the lake. She pushed herself harder then suddenly she gave out a cry.

Ephiny knew it was coming. She was suddenly slammed from behind by her girlfriend's body but she was sent off her feet.

The two Amazons screamed and for once it seemed as if they had feathers as they went flying over the lake. They then came crashing down into the serene waters with a huge splash.

Gabrielle bobbed to the top first and found her prey when a soaked, curly headed woman sputtered out water form her mouth.

"Gabrielle," growled the Amazon. "These are my best leathers!"

"And this is my best outfit," shot back the bard, who was in her green halter top and brown skirt. "Now we're even."

Ephiny's eyes darkened and swirled. "Not by a long shot." She flashed a grin then dove under water.

"Oh sweet Art." Gabrielle's words were cut off when she was drug underwater by the yanking on her ankles. She found her lungs already tight having not caught any air in time but her problem was easily solved by a sweet kiss from Ephiny.

The two kissing Amazons broke through the ceiling of water, lips still sealed. The water continued rolling down their body and between their lips and touching bodies. Gabrielle returned the fire in the kiss. Ephiny pulled back for a moment to breathe but her girlfriend didn't give her much time. She was suddenly taken by a hungry kiss.

Gabrielle moaned between the kissing and her right hand was locked in Ephiny's hair while her other was gripping Ephiny's ass. She dug her nails deep into Ephiny and received a growl.

Ephiny already had one arm around Gabrielle's waist yet her other hand was free. She ran her nails down Gabrielle's mid to low back and enjoyed the sharp intake of breath from Gabrielle.

The bard suddenly found Ephiny backing her up until they were on the beach line, which was thin. She was carefully brought down but still being kissed.

Ephiny had her girlfriend laying on the bank and her own body on top. She pulled away from the kiss, her lips trailing down to Gabrielle's soft, moist neck.
Gabrielle moaned and her back instinctively arched. "Ephiny," she murmured between the hazy desires.

The Amazon continued her pursuit with gentle bites and soft kisses. Her lips finally made it to the peeks of Gabrielle's covered breasts. One hand was over Gabrielle's left breast while her other was trailing up the inside of Gabrielle's thigh.

The location of Ephiny's hand sprung Gabrielle's eyes open. "Ephiny, wait."

The Amazon pulled back, her face confused and worried. "What's wrong?"

Gabrielle's eyes were coming back from a dark green to a lighter shade. "I… I can't… do this."

Ephiny's head slightly fell forward, her eyes closed. She hastily rolled away and fell to her back on the bank side as well. "We need to talk about this, Gabrielle."

"I know," murmured the bard. She dropped her head against the wet ground, her hands over her face. Her eyes were tightly shut against her various emotions and body's feelings. "Just… not right now." She removed her hands and turned her head to Ephiny. "We will," she swore.

Ephiny glanced at her girlfriend then turned away. She knew Gabrielle would need some time but she wasn't sure yet how much. It may be more time than anybody could really provide to Gabrielle.

The couple remained still and silent on the lake side for a quarter of a candlemark. They were both in their own thoughts and emotions. Gabrielle processing what almost happened and probably should have happened but why she wouldn't let it. After some time, Ephiny eventually got up and went to dry off.

Slowly the pair found themselves in a warm embrace close to the horses and Faolan. Ephiny was sitting with her back against a tree and Gabrielle between her legs and arms. They never spoke but only enjoyed each other's comfort and presence. It was enough for now.

They left the lake after two candlemarks of being away. They only rode at a walk back to the Academy as too much of a run would cause a stronger wind which meant they'd get cold. Eventually they made it back in time for dinner and they fell back into their usual pattern for the remaining days until graduation.

And graduation did come to the senex bards as they thought it never would for them. The entire Academy closed down for that day with the exception of the guards, whom watched the gigantic groups migrate to Athens. The students, teachers, and other
various staff arrived in Athens and went to the Theatre of Dionysus by the mid morning and were then broken apart. The students that weren't graduating were led away by many of the teachers and taken to certain rows in the theatre.

The teachers that remained behind took the senex students into the back of the theatre so they could be prepared for the ceremony. The female teachers worked with the few female students while the male teachers took care of the guys. To say the least, the scene was insane as the senex students and the teachers ran around like Hades broke open.

It wasn't until mid afternoon that Gastacius walked into the back of the theatre and stood very still. He watched the insanity for a few heartbeats then he cleared his throat. Everybody came to attention at seeing his presence. He cleared his throat one last time then announced, "Are we ready to begin?"

One teacher stepped forward, "I believe so, sir."

The master bard glanced at all of the students that were formally dressed in black togas. He himself wore a silk maroon toga while the teachers wore a light blue. He nodded at the teacher then further added, "We will begin then in a quarter of a candlemark." He started to step away but paused and smiled back at the students, "There are many families and friends out there." With those as his final words, he strolled off calmly.

Suddenly the madness lived again as the teachers and students finished getting prepared. One teacher was calling out names down by the exit way, it was the order of who went first in the assembly. He quickly stole a look outside and saw that the stage was indeed prepared with rows of chairs. He also was dazzled by how many people were attending the graduation and it wasn't just locals but families too.

The chattering crowd made a loud din throughout the theatre but it went silent when a prominent face showed up on stage.

The master bard smiled at the people attending the graduation. He held out his hands while calling out, "Welcome to the Theatre of Dionysus!"

The crowd clapped and cheered but instantly stopped when the master bard lowered his arms.

"I am Gastacius from The Academy of Performing Bards in Athens. It pleases me to see such a large turnout of family and friends here at the graduation." He paused and shifted in his stance some. "Today over fifty of the Academy's students will be graduating and this is a record breaking number this spring. For the past two seasons cycles these students have been working diligently and without fault to become
confident and hone their skills as scribes, poets, and playwrights. Yet underneath these broad talents all of these students are bards and soon to be graduates of The Academy of Performing Bards!" He turned to his left and gave the signal.

The audience cried out as the master bard stepped off to the side of the stage and students filed out.

Gabrielle was in the theatre and watching some of her classmates step out. She looked at Faolan, who sat off to the side. She reached over and patted his head. "I'll see you soon, boy." She then straightened up just as it was her time to step out.

Faolan went to the exit, sat, and watched his human friend stroll down to the stage.

The Amazon Princess held her breath at seeing the audience so clearly before her compared to at night. For some reason she felt more nervous today than she did the night she performed here. She took her chair next to Euripides.

Ephiny leaned over Euripides some and whispered to Gabrielle. "You see them?"

Gabrielle scanned all the faces but then they stuck out like centaurs.

There in the mid-row off to the right wing was a huge group of leather clad women with feathers in their hair.

The princess chuckled and teased, "I can't believe it."

"I told you they would come." Ephiny wanted to add more but she stopped because the precession was finished

The slave though was wondering if Cornelio made it. She hastily searched over the faces but she came to a quick stop by the middle row in the center. She was suddenly excited to see Cornelio, Adara, Maria, and little Mary. Just as she was settled back into her seat, her sight floated back to the Amazons and two distinct faces surprised her next to the Amazons.

"By the gods… it's…"

Ephiny had the hugest, knowing grin ever on her face once her girlfriend realized it. She gave a small wave to the two familiar faces that Gabrielle had just recognized.

Cyrene and Toris waved back at the Amazon.

Gabrielle was beside herself. "You… you… how'd you… when did you… Ephiny," she hissed.
Ephiny switched over to an innocent look. "Well, you told me to send out word about the graduating date. You never said who."

Gastacius walked back to the center stage and teacher was at his side. The teacher held a basket with scrolls, which were sealed by red leather thongs.

The master bard faced the audience. "First we will begin with the awards for certain students that excelled." He slightly turned so that he was now partially facing the crowd and the students. He already had all of the names and awards memorized. He picked the top scroll out, held it firmly, and began his short speech. "Our first award goes to that bard, who showed an advanced skill in the form of playwright. We believe this bard will become most successful in the realm of playwrights particularly with classical Greek tragedy. We give this award to Euripides."

Euripides for the first time had a dumbfounded look, which was quite the odd expression on such a usual man. He hesitated at first but Gabrielle and Ephiny urged him to his feet.

Everybody started clapping while Euripides went to collect his award. He was shaking but happy as he received the scroll in one hand and shaking the master bard's hand.

Gastacius waited until the student sat then he went onto his second award. "The next award is given to that bard that has excelled in the way of scribing. This bard will most likely become one of the most renowned scribes especially for a kingdom as so many are in need of such talent. This award is given to Sibella."

After the master bard handed out the award, he picked out the third. He cleared his throat then began his speech. "This award is given to the bard, who has outclassed all other bards in the way of poetry. We believe this bard's verse will be sung on every future poet's lips. This award we give to Ephiny."

The color drained from Ephiny's face as she mumbled, "He's joking."

Orion bent over with Gabrielle and said, "Go, Ephiny."

Gabrielle arched her eyebrow at her girlfriend. "Get up there, Eph."

The Amazon fumbled and tried to get to her feet. She went out of her small row and approached the master bard. She flushed deeply when familiar voices hooted out her name.
Gabrielle giggled at the Amazons in the crowd calling out Ephiny.

"Thank you, sir," whispered the Amazon.

Gastacius smiled while shaking the young woman's hand. "You earned it, Ephiny." He gave her the award after the handshake.

Ephiny smiled and quietly walked away.

The master bard took the next award and held it firm while speaking. "This fourth award goes to a bard that set-aside time during their busy studies to help other bards. This giving bard not only performs well but this bard helped other bards find their own greatness. This award we give to Theron."

The awarded bard took a few heartbeats to realize he'd been called. He quickly shot up from his chair in the back row and claimed his award. He was all smiles as he took his spot in the back again.

"This next award is given to a bard that shows the flare and dramatics for what it takes to be a bard on the stage. This bard, we would say, is quite dramatic and not only do they tell their stories but they act them. This bard's methodology places life into every story they do. We give this award to Stallonus."

Stallonus was sitting next to Theron and Sibella. Theron slapped the bard on the back for a great job. Stallonus nervously laughed then climbed to his feet. He adjusted his dark toga and went to the master bard. He nervously shook the master bard's hand and received his award. But then he came over his small fear and he faced the crowd. "Woohooo!" he called out and the crowd roared in laughter.

Stallonus quickly retreated before the teacher or master bard could threaten him.

Gastacius sighed while shaking his head despite he was grinning. He retrieved the next award. "Now this award is something new this spring. We started this award because one bard demonstrated a certain fear yet they didn't let it stop them. When the final exam came this bard took something that many saw as a negative and used it to their advantage. This award goes to the most improved bard and that is Twickenham."

Twickenham's jaw fell open. He looked over at Stallonus for confirmation.

"Get up there, buddy," urged Stallonus.

Twickenham ran his hand through his short brown hair but he got up. He went to the master bard and slightly bowed. "Thank you, sir. Thank you so much."
"It is my honor, Twickenham."

After the hand shake, Twickenham took the award and just as he did somebody called out, "Go Twicky!" Twickenham peered up at the audience, his cheeks red, and yet he smiled at the young woman waving to him. It was his girlfriend.

Finally it was time for the last award. Gastacius didn't touch the basket. Instead he began his speech he'd been working on since late last night. "The final award is our most prestigious award. It is an award given to a bard that excels beyond any teacher's dreams and beyond my expectations. It is for the bard that starts out at the bottom and finishes far beyond their peers. This bard will become the one most likely to succeed as a legend." The master bard paused as his final thoughts came together. "This spring was excessively hard to pick out that bard and so hard that we could not settle on a final bard. For the first time, this award will be given to two bards as they both are exceptional in their own ways. This award goes to Homer of Smyrna and Gabrielle of Potidaea!"

Orion sat motionless.

Gabrielle forgot to breathe. She looked at Orion and rasped, "By the gods."

Orion came to himself and he grinned. "They had nothing to do with," he joked.

Gabrielle laughed and together she stood up with him. Without notice, she suddenly grabbed her friend into a gigantic hug.

Orion laughed happily and held strong in the hug.

The theatre was ringing with a roar of happiness.

"Come on," offered Orion, his hand held out.

Gabrielle held onto her friend's hand and was led through the row. She never released Orion's hand as they shook hands with the master bard and accepted a scroll each. She then faced the crowd with Orion and she soaked in the chanting of her name and Homer.

Ephiny listened to the Amazons shouting out Gabrielle's name at the top of their voices. She suddenly stood up and began clapping loudly.

Euripides jumped to his feet and joined Ephiny's clapping.

Twickenham and Stallonus followed suit.
Gabrielle and Orion twisted their heads around. They smiled together when they realized all their classmates were standing and praising them. Then the most unexpected sound broke throw it all as a wolf's howl vibrated through the theatre. Gabrielle's eyes went wide in Faolan's direction and she covered her mouth to stop the laughs.

The audience laughed together at the white wolf's appreciation for the arts.

Gabrielle glanced over at the master bard and mouthed an apology. When Gastacius merely shrugged she felt relieved.

The bards finally bowed to the audience and quietly went to their seats for the last of the graduation.

When Gabrielle came to her seat and broke away from Orion she found herself in a powerful hug from Ephiny.

"I'm so proud of you," murmured the Amazon into the princess's ear.

"And I am proud of you too, poet," whispered back the bard.

The Amazon's broke the embrace and took their seats like the rest of the students.

Gastacius nodded at the teacher by his side.

The teacher power walked off stage from behind while another came on stage with two baskets in hand. The new teacher took the same position beside the master bard.

The master bard quietly cleared his throat then announced, "Now we began with the diplomas from The Academy of Performing Bards. Each bard will receive this document as recognition of their time at the Academy. This will go alphabetically. Please hold your applause for the end." He picked up the first scroll from the closest basket. "Adonis of Marathon," he called out.

The bard rose up from his seat in the front row. He stepped up to the master bard.

The master bard continued down the list of graduating bards. Each time a bard went forward, some portion of the crowd called out that bard's name. After reading off the fifty names and handing out the scrolls, Gastacius faced the audience and called out, "Quickly I want to invite the family members, friends, and underclassmen to a fine, local taverna just around the corner called Cameo. There we will celebrate these bards." He then held out a hand to the alumnae bards. "Congratulate the students who are now true bards!"
There was a rhythmic clapping as the audience rose up to their feet and continued applauding.

Every bard had a smile as they too stood up.

Gabrielle went to Ephiny first and hugged her tightly—both her scrolls in her right hand.

The Amazon happily chuckled while hugging her small girlfriend back.

"We did it, we really did it."

Ephiny squeezed tightly and pulled back in the embrace so that she could look at her girlfriend. "Yes, we did." She then twisted her head around when people began ascending the stage. "Let's find everybody."

Gabrielle hurried out of the row with Ephiny in tow. She stopped at the end of the row, gazed over at her fuzzy friend, and met his eyes.

Faolan didn't wait any longer. He bounded out of the exit and raced across the stage.

The princess bent down and hugged him around the neck.

The wolf whined happily at her then when she pulled back he licked her cheek.

"Come on, boy you have to meet some people."

Faolan snorted but he faithfully followed the Amazons. He was carefully not to get stepped out as he weaved through the mass of humans. He took his usual right side to Gabrielle and sat. He tilted his head back and studied the humans surrounding Gabrielle and they were quite the variety.

Gabrielle went first to Cyrene and Toris since it'd been so long. She engulfed Cyrene into the largest and longest hug ever followed by Toris. She was on the brink of tears.

It was at least half of a candlemark before Gabrielle and Ephiny did all of the introductions between Cornelio's house, the Amazons, and Cyrene's side. Cornelio warmly greeted every Amazon and each Amazon warmly received the man. Eponin and Solari especially received well to Cornelio since they knew the truth about his position with Gabrielle. They knew if it wasn't for him that Gabrielle may have never gone to the Academy, met Ephiny, and ultimately become their princess.

Ephiny and Gabrielle were amazed to see so many Amazons showed as it was Eponin, Solari, Andra, the historian, Adonia, Jocasta, and unexpectedly Masika, Ambassador
Majorie, and Priestess Narkissa.

The priestess finally had a moment with the princess. Her emotions were full of pride at the princess's success. "Congratulations, princess."

The bard softly smiled and pulled the priestess in for a warm hug. "Thank you." When she broke the hug she said, "I didn't expect you here."

"I did not want to miss this." Priestess Narkissa folded her arms behind her back. "Despite I already have a daughter I feel as if you're mine as well."

At the mention of being a daughter, Gabrielle's happy mood slightly faltered as her mother came to mind. Yet she knew in her heart that her mother was there with her as was her father. "Thank you, priestess that means a great deal."

"Maired asked that I apologize on her behalf that she could not come." The priestess slightly grinned. "She said somebody had to stay behind and run the temple."

The slave quietly giggled. "I understand."

"She wishes you congratulations though," added the priestess.

Gabrielle smiled at that but her attention was caught by two other older Amazons.

"Princess, congratulations," honored the ambassador.

"Yes, princess this is quite a success," agreed Masika then she wickedly smiled. "I had a feeling that mouth of yours would pay off."

The princess tried to swat at the council member but she certainly missed.

Ephiny was busy talking between Eponin, Solari, and Cornelio with his wife.

Mary wiggled between the groups and came over to somebody or rather something that had caught her attention from the start. She smiled at the white wolf. "Hi, I'm Mary."

Faolan stretched out his neck and sniffed the girl. He memorized her scent. He was also taken with the fact that he was pretty much eye level with her.

The little girl gingerly brought her hand over his head then lowered it. When her fingers went through his fur, she was all smiles.

Ephiny broke away from the conversation and touched Gabrielle's arm.
The bard pulled away from her own chatting and turned her head to Ephiny.

"We should head to the tavern."

The princess's realization came over her face. "You're right." She called out, "Everybody we should take this to the tavern. I know I am starving personally."

The friends and family all broke out laughing but they agreed. The large group slowly began migrating through the theatre.

Andra came up along Gabrielle's left side since her right side was occupied by a certain wolf. "I'm very proud of you, sister."

The bard paused and stole a quick hug from her sister. "Thank you, Andra and thank you for coming all the way down here."

"It was my pleasure and honor to see you graduate." The blacksmith then signaled to the scroll in her sister's hand. "May I see?"

"Of course." The princess hastily unrolled one scroll and handed it to her.

Andra read through the scroll and slowly a smile etched her lips. She then traded for the other scroll. When she was finished, she rolled it up and returned it.

Gabrielle shifted closer to quietly ask, "How is the Nation?"

The blacksmith laughed. "You always have concerns for your Nation."

"I wouldn't be a good princess otherwise."

Andra slowly nodded. "The Nation is well and wait 'til you come home." Slowly a grin eased over her lips. "We've begun production of the smith hut."

"Sweet Artemis, finally," breathed the bard.

"We'll talk about it later." Andra touched her sister's arm. "This evening we're celebrating yours and Ephiny's success."

Gabrielle conceded as her mood went higher and higher through the rest of the afternoon then into the night. She spent candlemark upon candlemark with her family and friends. She was still getting over her shock that Cyrene and Toris came all this way. She could only imagine what troubles they went to so that the tavern was closed, to travel, and the expense. She planned to spend as much time as she could with them.
Gabrielle never felt so many emotions as she did on this day. The last time she ever recalled being this happy was on her fourteenth birthday so many moons far back. And it was in that one thought that her mind roamed far away to where and who Xena was now. To the one person she wished more than anything that could be sharing this day with her.

Section Four B

Part 8: Xena's Fifth Year

The dark, cloaked figure shifted through the black woods and swiftly moved without even stirring a stone. The figure paused by a tall tree and their hooded head tipped back some. The sliver of moon reflected in the figure's eyes as they stared at the squatting forms in the tree several paces ahead.

"Pasha, I will bet you a week's patrol."

The silent Amazon, Pasha, now spoke and whispered, "You'll only lose."

The figure's grin suddenly shined white teeth. They silently slipped past the two Amazon on the late patrol shift. The ghostly form swept through the woods that were only recently budding from the oncoming of spring. Finally the figure broke through the forest and onto a small road. The figure's head snapped to the right when there was a quiet whine.

Down on the road several hundred paces stood a warrior with two horses.

The warrior slightly grinned as the figure approached him. He stepped in front of the horses then quietly said, "It's good to see you, Xena."

The Warrior Princess didn't return the sentiment; she merely pulled back her hood. Her blue eyes sparkled icily at the second in command. "How goes things, Chuang?"

"They are in order." Chuang handed the warlord the reins for one horse.

Xena tangled the reins between her fingers as she came along side the mare. She breathed in Argo's natural but familiar scent that she'd missed. Her hand instinctively ran down the mare's neck and side. She suddenly sprung up and landed into the saddle with ease. "We shall see then."

Before the second in command could say anything else, his leader gave a loud yah and spurred the horse into a gallop. He quickly moved, mounted his horse, and raced after the warlord.

The pair road for half of a candlemark then they climbed a crest of a hill. Xena came
to a quick halt, which caused Argo to whine unhappily and rear up.

Xena laughed at the small thrill from her mare's excitement. "Hoo, girl." When Argo's front hoofs connect with the soft ground, Xena took the chance to study her army's camp. It was smaller than she expected and intended it to be, which caused her blood to pulse from her anger. Somebody hadn't carried out her orders nor heeded her warnings.

Chuang sighed in relief when he caught up to the warlord. He pulled his gelding into a slow trot then finally stopped at Xena's side.

"How many men?"

"There are a hundred and fifty now." Chuang shifted in his saddle. "Of that, there are fifty on horseback."

"Archers?"

"Only thirty." Chuang let out an aggravated sigh. "These parts seem to lack any decent archers."

The Warrior Princess twisted her head to the man. "Then make them, Chuang."

The second in command opened his mouth to refute the orders, however, he stopped and stiffened. His eyes for once in his life were level with Xena's icy blues.

Xena held her position as she leaned towards the warrior. "I don't want any excuse," she chewed out, "when I arrive this coming summer I want a hundred horsemen and fifty archers." She slowly straightened up with her saddle creaking in response. "Are we clear?"

The second in command only nodded.

"I want to hear that you understand me."

Chuang shifted his reins in his hands. "As you wish, Xena."

"Excellent." The warlord twisted her head towards the tiny army. She briefly watched the smoke flowing up into the sky from the small campfires. "What of Prostig and Tracker?"

"They arrived a moon ago."

"And Borias?"

Chuang sighed. "Whiny as ever."

Xena smirked at him now. "I am relieved you get to listen to him instead of me." She adjusted the reins in her hands then yelled, "Ya!" With a tap to Argo's sides, they took off again down the hill.
The second in command remained on the hilltop for a few heartbeats as he gathered himself. He slowly grinned while watching the warlord enter her camp she'd vacated for so long. He felt that thrill refuel him at seeing the dark warlord return to the army even if it was for less than a day.

The Warrior Princess slowed Argo down at the edge of the camp, and she dismounted once close enough. She walked Argo in a ways and decided to merely tie her for the few candlemarks. From the corner of her eye, she saw Chuang coming down now. She decided not to wait and went into her camp.

Xena's feral grin slowly grew across her lips as her warriors all lifted their heads to her. She ignored them each because she had no regard for the rough warriors that were only tools or weapons to her. Yet she came to a quick stop when one particular large, burly warrior stepped into her path. Slowly her feral grin curled into a smirk. "Prostig," she purred, "it's been too long."

"My apologies," the warlord murmured. "I'm surprised you came."

Prostig grunted then he had an amused look. "After your message, I had to come see for myself." His eyes ran up and down Xena, who was no longer a young girl but was a woman in her prime with a darkening glow. "I wouldn't miss this for all of the known-world." He held out his arm.

Xena's eyes grew dark. "I'm glad to hear it." She clasped his arm tightly in a binding shake. "Where is Tracker?"

"He's not far… probably off gambling his dinars away." Prostig put his hands on his hips. "And what's with this Borias guy?"

The warlord's eyes flickered to her other warriors that were ease dropping. She patted his metal chest then walked away while saying, "Don't get in over your head, Pro."

Prostig turned on his heels and watched the retreating form of the dark warlord. He muttered, "Yours or mine?"

Xena's eyes went into slits as she could hear the warrior's muffled words behind her. If it was one thing that'd saved her on several occasions it was her unique hearing. Now she finally came upon the tent she was searching for all along. She threw open the ten flaps and entered.

Borias jolted from his small chair when the other warlord entered. He stiffened at how the Warrior Princess seemed to completely fill the tent with her amazing presence. "Xeeena," he hotly breathed.

Xena suddenly rushed forward, and she swiped at the items on the table.

Borias bared his teeth at her about to yell at her.
Xena growled in rage, grabbed his neck, and lifted him into the air. She swung him up over and slammed him hard on his back.

Borias tried to get up quickly, but he was rammed back down by a booted foot on his chest. He reached up with his hands wrapping around Xena's ankle.

The Warrior Princess hastily acted by unsheathing her sword from her back. The tip of her blade went under his neck. "Don't try me," she hotly drew out.

Borias was breathing heavily, and he was locked in place by steely blue eyes high above him.

Xena directed off to her right with her chin while grounding out, "What is that centaurs shit out there?"

Borias opened his mouth to speak, yet he halted when the blade probed deeper into his skin.

"Ah-ah, Borias I don't want excuses." The dark warlord pulled the tip of her sword away from his neck then trailed it down his neck. "It seems as if you're not performing as I requested." Her blade traveled down between his chest and paused at his belt buckle. "Perhaps you're not quite the sum of your parts." She drew her blade down between his groin and pushed her tip down. "I'm thinking maybe I should subtract a piece of you for each failure." Suddenly her stoic expression broke with a hungry grin. "It's a fair trade, don't you think?"

Borias had labored breathing because never once had Xena threatened him, at least not like this. He wasn't sure what had become of her these past moons, but she seemed to be growing darker and wild.

"I asked you a question, Borias," the warlord snarled, "I'll just assume you agree." She gritted her teeth and prepared to run her blade through.

Borias snapped out of his shock. "Wait," he begged.

Xena's entire body was tense, although she remained still. Her wild eyes burned Borias.

"There is a small time warlord that is marching this way," Borias hastily explained. He noticed how Xena's taunt muscles soothed under her skin again - it was a good sign. "Chuang and I plan to overpower him not that it will require much."

"Go on," the warlord murmured.

Borias slightly relaxed but then he felt Xena's blade circling over his genitals. "He's a rather loose warlord, his men are pretty unsettled." His lips pulled with a faint grin. "It should prove easy to take them and run this guy through."

"Hmmm." Xena licked her lips as she trailed her blade up to her partner's chest. She bent down very low and whispered, "See that you do run him through…." Her fiercest
grin spread over her face. "Or else I'll run you through," she amusingly whispered.

Borias blinked and within that instant Xena was completely gone from his view. He hastily climbed to his feet to see the warlord on the other side of the tent. His eyes followed downward to what Xena was staring at on the ground.

Xena tapped the tip of her blade against the map on the ground. "This is his current location?"

Borias adjusted his armor. "Yes," he coldly replied. "I plan to meet him about thirty Roman miles from here."

"Where is he marching to?"

Borias's expression was tight, but he answered, "I believe either Aenus or Doriscus." He folded his arms over his leather clad chest. "He failed miserably in the Macedonia province."

Xena lifted his head towards him because she could tell he was hiding something. Her eyebrow arched up.

"He tried for Amphipolis."

The Warrior Princess's eyes immediately darkened. "When?"

Borias sensed a chill ripple up and down his back at Xena's voice. "Two moons ago, but Amphipolis defeated him quite well." Slowly a smirk spread over his lips. "It seems that Amphipolis has allied with the Delian League."

Xena's icy eyes lowered back to the map, her vision focused on the mark of Amphipolis and the mark for this warlord's location. "Interesting," she murmured. Again the tip of her sword met the mark for the warlord. "I want him dead, Borias...." She read the name of the warlord then coldly whispered, "And I want Kyros's head."

Borias straightened his back out when the warlord approached him.

"Are we clear?" Xena whispered when she was in front of him, only a mere breathe away. "Because if we're not then I'll take your heart now."

Borias held his ground, his eyes locked with hers. Her hot threat chilled him, yet he didn't show it. "He'll be taken care of."

"Glad to hear it." Xena lifted her sword up and let it lean against her right shoulder. She smiled casually at him then turned and marched out of the tent.

Borias sighed before following her out. He stood at the entrance of his tent, arms braced against his chest, and his eyes carefully watched the other warlord.

Xena nonchalantly strolled through the camp, then it happened. She'd come upon a tent meant for four men and inside there were muffled cries. Instantly Xena's rage
flared when she easily concluded what was happening inside so she entered.

Suddenly there was a man's yelling then there was a sickening smack as the large man came reeling out of the tent. He landed hard on his back, his pants down with belt clinking, and a soft moan from his lips. He tried to regain his balance by first pulling his pants up.

The warlord stepped out of the tent, her sword at her side, yet her eyes only for this worthless warrior. Her rage was growing with each step she took towards him, but she'd learned over the season to harness such anger.

The warrior finally was on his feet by the time Xena was before him. He hesitantly searched for help from his buddies but all the other warriors merely encircled him and Xena for the show.

"Come on," Xena provoked, "show me you're a man like you were showing that girl." She spun her sword.

The warrior backed away one step. He hadn't expected Xena to return tonight or ever again actually. He suddenly registered what Xena had said to him. He growled, spun around, and ripped a sword from another warrior's sheath. He narrowed his eyes at the warlord as his body hunched forward.

The Warrior Princess's laugh filled with amusement, and her eyes lit up as she attacked him.

The warrior found himself stepping backwards as Xena pressed down on him. He snarled at her then tried to give a kick.

Xena jumped away in time.

"I was enjoying the spoils of an army," the warrior argued.

The Warrior Princess raised a dark eyebrow at him. "You picked the wrong army." She gave her loudest warcry, which vibrated throughout the entire camp.

The warrior felt as if he was suddenly attacked by several enemies at once. He desperately tried to parry every furious blow that Xena gave, but he was losing stamina. Suddenly he cried out when a hot blade sliced through his right leg.

Xena whirled away with her bloody sword when her opponent fell to his knees. When her cloak settled around her body she was surprise to see the warrior trying to raise his sword to her. Xena easily kicked it out of his hands. She then stood before him, her burning eyes on him. "For raping in my army your life is forfeited."

There was a blur of Xena's sword as it swept down.

The warrior's mouth was open, eyes wide, and he couldn't say anything as his head and body separated. His body collapsed to the right while his head rolled off to the left.
The Warrior Princess remained still, staring at the lifeless body for a heartbeat, and then she looked at her men. "Is there anybody else that wishes to follow his path?" She waited but the only thing she heard were the various fires crackling. "I want this trash cleaned up." she harshly ordered, "and then training will begin." Her gaze met Chuang, who was beside Borias near his tent. She signaled him then she spun around and stepped into the tent where she'd earlier found the now dead warrior raping a young girl.

The young woman sensed another presence in the tent again. She buried her wet, flushed face into her bound hands. Her shredded top was all that covered her body as she huddled on a straw bed.

Xena was silent as she stared at the girl. She first wiped her blade clean of the blood and sheathed it behind her head. She noted how there were cuts with bruises over her body then her mouth was gagged by dirty rags. Now she began to wonder if she shouldn't have made his death much slower and very painful.

After a sigh of regret, Xena stepped forward and bent down with her right hand lightly touching the woman's bruised shoulder. "It's okay," she tried in her lightest voice. She reached behind the girl's head and easily untied the gag then removed it.

The girl whimpered and tried to ball up even tighter after the touches.

The warlord's eyes narrowed at the reaction. She didn't realize how hard this would be. She removed her touch then offered, "You're safe now." She noticed that faintly relaxed the girl's posture. "What's your name?" she finally tried.

The girl started shaking, yet she mumbled, "Dasha."

Xena just barely picked out what the girl had said. "Alright, Dasha I'm going to take you to my tent…." She trailed off when the girl balled up tightly again and was uncontrollably shaking. "I'm not going to hurt you, nobody is but I need to check your wounds." Finally she had a view of the scared face of Dasha.

Dasha's amber eyes were consumed with fear; her face scratched up and wet then her mangled blond hair all over.

"First, let's cover you." The warlord straightened up as she reached for the clasp of her cloak.

The girl's eyes widened when she saw the beauty and power of the woman before her since the cloak was no longer in the way.

Xena sensed the night's chilled air biting against her bare skin. She only wore her Amazon leathers. She carefully lowered the cloak over the girl's body. "Come on."

Dasha sensed strong arms coming under her then lifting her. Her senses were no longer filled by straw and sweat from the bed but by wool and leather from the warlord's cloak. She held back her whimpers, and she buried her face away as she was carried out of the tent.
Xena exited the tent with the concealed bundle in her arms. Next to the tent stood Chuang at attention, and she nodded at him.

Chuang fell in step behind the Warrior Princess as they went across the camp. When they came to Xena's tent, he stepped aside and waited next to the tent flap outside.

The warlord made a beeline for her bed that she hadn't seen for many moons. She settled Dasha onto it but made sure to adjust the cloak over her body. She then went in search of her medical supplies in a small trunk nearby.

The girl remained huddled, however, her eyes were watching Xena's every move.

The Warrior Princess came back over with a leather satchel in her left hand. She placed it on the edge of the bed down by Dasha's knees. She opened it up and hunted around for some supplies. "I need to look over your wounds."

Dasha understood the older woman's implications so she tried to get her body to relax. It was very hard, but she slowly did it.

Xena had pulled out a tiny wood jar of balsam made from jewelweed. She smeared her fingers though the pasty substance then explained, "I'm going to put this on your cuts. It'll clean them and help them heal." She pushed the cloak away some then slowly worked on applying the salve to each wound she found. It took some time as there were so many cuts and wounds so it wasn't until about a quarter of a candlemark until she was up to Dasha's round cheeks.

"Are you…." Dasha lost her confidence when icy eyes met hers.

Xena lost the eye contact as she knew it was what scared the girl. She continued focusing on the cuts.

The girl decided to try again, her small voice asking, "Are you an Amazon?" She was given a faint grin by the warlord.

"Something like that," the Warrior Princess muttered.

"The Amazons are in these parts," the girl softly spoke. She watched as Xena pulled away and put the cap back on the jar. "What's your name?"

The warlord shoved the jar into the kit then lashed down the flap. "Xena." She turned away with the satchel in hand.

Dasha watched as the muscular woman went to the open trunk and tucked away the medical kit. When the dark warlord faced her again, she slightly shrunk away.

"Where are you from?"

"Maroneja," the girl murmured.

Xena considered the mental map in her mind. She knew it would be a solid candlemark ride to that town as her army was nestled between it and Doriscus. "Stay
here and rest. I will be back soon." She moved for the exit but paused.

Dasha studied the woman's back and how her muscle rippled under smooth skin. She was taken by it and also by the uniquely designed sword hilt protruding from the sheath.

Xena twisted her head until her dark gaze settled on the girl. "The tent will be guarded." She left her implications at that then she disappeared.

Dasha felt more at ease. She was surrounded by the smell of balm, wool, and some unknown sweet scent. She reached up and with her scratched up fingers, she toyed with the steel clasp on the cloak. She slightly lifted it and realized it was a detailed feather.

She was never sure when she'd fallen asleep. She didn't know how it happened considering she was so shaken earlier. She never knew how long she slept for but what awoke her was a tall, dark figure looming over her. Dasha gasped until she realized who it was.

"I see you slept," Xena stated. She was pleased that her valerian root that was mixed in the balm put the girl to sleep.

Dasha slightly nodded.

"Time to go now." The warlord bent forward.

As Xena picked her up, Dasha quietly asked, "Where?"

The Warrior Princess hefted the girl into her arms while simply saying, "Home." She walked out of the tent.

Chuang waited for Xena with two horses by the tent. He was about to move to help Xena with the girl, but he came up short.

Xena merely gave a low whistle to Argo.

The mare's ears flickered, yet she carefully bent down until she was resting on the ground.

Now Xena easily mounted her horse with the girl still safe. She adjusted her feet into the stirrups then organized Dasha for the ride. After gathering the reins into her right hand, she repeated the whistle.

Argo huffed then rose up to her staggering height.

The second in command was remotely surprised. He quickly mounted his gelding then followed Xena out of camp.

The warlord's eyes scanned over her men's beaten and worn forms. She'd trained them hard for the past two candlemarks, and she was barely pleased. She made sure to remind Borias of his duties while she was gone these next moons.
Right now though, Xena had more pressing matters as she needed to get this girl back to her town then make it to the Amazon Nation before day break. She knew if she was found missing in the Nation then every suspicion and rumor floating around about her would be confirmed.

Xena had been with the Amazons for five moons now. She'd already earned her Amazon sword and was close to taking the Amazon Judgment for her mask. She would be quite happy the day she would receive her mask. It wasn't long ago that she'd discovered a little, hidden rule about challenges made to the queen. Whatever Amazon challenged the queen must not only have a right of caste but also have passed their Amazon Judgment, mask in hand or rather on head.

The rumors were already stirring about the fear of Xena's claim to a mask and then the queen's own mask. Yet there was no proof and nothing anybody could do to halt Xena. And the Amazon that most feared the day of Xena's Amazon Judgment was Queen Cyane herself as she dreaded the Nation falling into Xena's hands. Not only was she envisioning a Nation controlled by this dark, mysterious Amazon but also by the evil shaman. The queen's only hope rested on her adopted sister, Yakut, the young apprentice shaman.

It was a candlemark and half before dawn, and Yakut was already awakening. She received little rest these days as her worries about the Nation grew stronger. She woke up with a rapid beating heart from a nightmare. She forced the memories of the dream away, then she went into her washroom.

It wasn't long before Yakut was ready, cleaned, dressed, and weapon in place. She gathered her cloak from its hanging spot by the door then tossed it on. She knew the early morning would be chilled until Helios was fully awaken. She swung her cloak on as she stepped out of the hut. She quietly closed the thatched door then scanned the sleeping Nation. The only faint life she could pick out was the outline of a guard in the small keep at the top of the wall. The torch inside of the keep neatly drew out the Amazon's lean body.

Yakut sighed then decided to go eat first. She knew the kitchen would be open of all places. As she made her slow trek across the quiet village her walk started out normal but then she went slower and slower until she stopped. Yakut lifted her bent head then twisted her neck around towards her left. Her senses were heightened now and something was out of place, she knew it.

The Amazon carefully turned in the direction she sensed the disruption. She followed the trail that she felt, and it eventually guided her deeper into the center of the huts. She paused near one hut because she knew she was close, very close. She focused her sensed better then it caught her eyes.

There about several hundred pouses or just over a hundred paces away was a tall, dark form shifting in the night.

Yakut hunkered down behind the hut. Her mind had an awful feel of deja-vu, but she ignored it for right now. Instead she desperately tried to center her sixth sense on the moving figure in the shadows to figure out who it was. Her two-spirit powers
suddenly came to life, and her mind was slammed by random images of Amazons that she mostly knew. Finally the image halted on one woman's face.

"Xena," Yakut breathed. Her two-spirit vision linked to the dark Amazon, and she watched as Xena moved through huts unseen by all but Yakut's two-spirit. Finally Yakut's vision ended with Xena entering her own hut.

The apprentice shaman let out a heavy breath. Her thoughts raced with what she saw, and her fears were heightened. She didn't know where Xena had been, but she knew it was outside the Nation. She regained her composure and decided it was best to continue on until she could speak with Ino.

When Yakut made it into the dining hut, she found nobody there yet. She was a bit relieved for that fact so she went into the kitchen. She found the head chief already there and preparing for breakfast. She grabbed up some food, drink, and flatware then went to sit at one of the tables. She tried to eat even though her mind was working hard.

After a quarter of a candlemark, Yakut tensed up near the end of her meal. Her eyes went directly to the entrance of the dining hut and there stood Xena. She held her breath.

Xena sensed the apprentice shaman's gaze locked on her. She merely disregarded it while going into the kitchen to scrounge up some food. She collected a plate of food then supplies and joined Yakut from across the table.

"Good morning," Yakut offered.

Xena eyed her young friend. "Good morning. Why up so early?"

The Amazon played with the last of her food. "I couldn't sleep."

Xena raised an eyebrow as she ripped apart a piece of flatbread.

"Why are you up so early?"

"Patrol duty soon," the dark Amazon answered.

Yakut nodded then settled her fork down on her plate. She considered what to say next but asked, "How do you like patrol?"

"Very boring," Xena joked.

The apprentice shaman's body shook with a silent laugh, but the grin on her face revealed her. "It can be that." She straightened her back out as she debated what to do. With Xena right here, she had an opportunity to possibly touch Xena then have things revealed to her. The only hitch was if she'd be able to focus her powers so that she would receive the most recent vision of Xena. She decided she would try and hoped that Ino's lessons would pay off.

"How are your lessons with Alti?" the Amazon tried.
Yakut lightly shrugged. "Long and tedious… sometimes I am not sure why I signed up for this."

Slowly a grin formed over Xena's hard features. "Maybe because you're good at what you do."

Yakut smiled despite the situation. She took the opening now and as her hand went to lay on Xena's on top of the table, she said, "Thank you."

Instantly Yakut's two-spirit powers came to life, and her mind was flooded by images that she tried desperately to control. She needed specific information.

The tip of an Amazon sword met the mark for a warlord's location. "I want him dead, Borias…." Xena read the name of the warlord then coldly whispered, "And I want Kyros's head."

The tall man with long dreads straightened his back out when the warlord approached him.

"Are we clear?" Xena whispered when she was in front of him, only a mere breathe away. "Because if we're not then I'll take your heart now."

Suddenly the images raced forward then came to a jerking pause.

Xena loomed over an unknown, kneeling warrior and her sword was at the ready. "For raping in my army your life is forfeited."

There was a blur of Xena's sword as it swept down.

The warrior's mouth was open, eyes wide, and he couldn't say anything because his head and body separated. His body fell while his head hit the ground and rolled away several paces.

Xena remained still, staring at the lifeless body for a heartbeat, and then she looked at several other warriors. "Is there anybody else that wishes to follow his path?" She waited but the only thing she heard were the various fires crackling. "I want this trash cleaned up," she spat, "and then training will begin."

The image fuzzed over then sped forward to finally rest on something else.

Xena helped the girl dismount Argo then she too got off the mare. Her boots slammed into the dirt road as she faced the small blond. "Your village is just ahead."

The girl faintly nodded but peered over Xena's shoulder at the man on the large horse. She subconsciously pulled the cloak closer to her body.

Xena sighed but her tone remained hard and cold. "See that you forget where that army is located." When fearful amber eyes peered up, she continued, "Or I promise you will not live your next kidnapping." Then with a signal of her chin, she told the girl to go.
For a brief heartbeat, the girl was held by frozen blue eyes that contained no more regard for her as they did earlier. The frightened girl stumbled backwards with a cry, turned, and tried to run towards her town. She never dared to look back.

"Yakut?"

The apprentice shaman jerked out of her vision when Xena's hands disconnected from hers.

Xena was confused by Yakut's lost and ghostly expression. She'd never seen somebody's eyes flicker with images then just disappear like they did with Yakut.

Yakut came back to herself finally. "I'm sorry." She cleared her throat. "That… happens… once in awhile."

The Amazon grew more suspicious. "What happened?"

Yakut quickly tried to cover her earlier display by saying, "Flash backs from my nightmares. Nothing serious." She was surprised by Xena's concerned expression considering what her visions just showered her. It was as if this Amazon was two people in one, and Yakut shivered at the thought.

"Are you okay?" Xena quietly asked.

"I'll be fine, thanks." The apprentice shaman offered a smile then returned to the last of her meal. She now saw several other Amazons filing into the hut for breakfast. "When do you need to go on duty?"

"Shortly here."

Yakut nodded at her friend. "I'll go as well."

Xena's expression flickered with a smile. "Come on." She got up and strolled along side her friend to rid of their dishes then out of the hut. "When do you finished with Altì and her training?"

Yakut pulled her long, wool jacket closed when they came into the cool morning. "Not for another four seasons… at least." Her thoughts wandered off to Xena's future in the Nation. "You will be trying for your mask in the spring soon."

"Yes," the Amazon confirmed, "I believe I am ready."

The apprentice shaman stopped in front of the temple. "I heard rumor you're taking the position of ilarchès."

The Amazon dipped her head then quietly answered, "I am."

Yakut forced a smile. "Congratulations, Xena."

"Thank you." Xena took a step back while saying, "I need to get to patrol. I'll see you
"Until later, my friend." Yakut watched the Amazon turn then jog off to the south gates. A shiver rippled up her spine and back down. She was heavy with thoughts about her visions which followed her up the steps and into the temple.

Queen Cyane's head whipped up when there were fast knocks at her office hut. "Come in," she called. She was surprised to see Ino and Yakut entering together. She stole a look out of her window to gauge that it was in fact the late afternoon already. She wasn't sure where the time went anymore.

"My queen, we need to speak to you." Ino took an offered seat in front of the queen's desk.

Yakut took the other seat.

Cyane was already concerned and asked, "What's it about?"

Ino looked at her student and nodded.

"It's about Xena, my queen." The apprentice shaman steadied her rapid beating heart since her rush to the queen's office. "I had a disturbing set of visions this morning."

The Amazon Queen leaned forward then murmured, "Go on."

Yakut licked her lips then relayed what she saw when she'd touched Xena's hand earlier this morning. After she went through her long winded story, she sighed and stared at the queen, ready for her to speak.

Queen Cyane had her elbows on the table, her hands linked, and her lips touching her thumbs. She finally lowered her hands to her desk then asked, "Have you told anybody about this? Alti?"

Yakut negatively shook her head.

"I am the only other person that knows," Ino stated who was the retired shaman. The queen gradually leaned back in her chair as she tried to absorb this new information about Xena. It hadn't surprised her but it also didn't settle with her at all. Nor did she like the fact that it didn't give her any hard proof to stop Xena.

"There's nothing you can do," Yakut murmured, "Is there?"

Queen Cyane bit her lower lip then sat up again. "Not without hard proof. I'm sorry, Yakut."

"Is there anything you can do?" the retired shaman argued.

"Just keep a closer eye on her," the queen answered.

"Wait," Yakut cut in, "can't you send out a small party to investigate... see if there's
an army near."

"Even if we find them," the queen countered, "it doesn't prove it's hers."

Ino shot up suddenly but looked at Yakut. "You said in your vision that Xena released some young woman?"

It dawned on Yakut, and she quickly explained it to the queen. "Find that woman, my queen. If she describes Xena then we can prove it."

"Yes but we have the issue of Xena's threat on this woman." Queen Cyane had her hand up yet lowered it down. "We can't risk her life."

"We could offer protection," Ino suggested.

"If she agrees to it, yes."

"My queen, we should at least try… it's better than being sitting rabbits."

Queen Cyane knew the apprentice shaman had a point, a very good point. "Alright." She knew this was a better course of action than leaving it alone. "Yakut, do you know Agaue?"

"I know of her but I haven't met her."

The queen subconsciously licked her parched lips then explained, "I want you to find her. She's an excellent drawer, and I believe she can draw this woman's face that you've described. At least it won't seem like we're quite searching for a needle in a haystack."

"Of course, my queen. I'll do it first thing tomorrow."

"See that you do then ask Agaue to turn the drawing into me."

"Who will you send on the mission?" the retired shaman interrupted.

"I'm not positive yet." The queen's eyes lowered to the desk. "I am concerned about the stratègos as she favors Xena greatly."

"So I've heard," Yakut murmured. "She wishes Xena to become the next ilarchès."

"Over my dead body," the queen hotly whispered. "Talk to Agaue, Yakut then we'll go from there."

"Yes, my queen."

"Is there anything else?"

"I believe that is all, my queen." Ino stood up knowing this was the end of the discussion.
"Thank you for informing me." The queen then bid them goodbye.

Ino and Yakut stood just aside of the queen's office hut. Ino could tell the young shaman was disturbed by today's events about her so-called friend. "I am sorry, Yakut." She touched the Amazon's wool cloaked arm.

Yakut shook her head and sadly gazed at her mentor. "I thought she was good… and my friend."

"I know," the worried elder murmured. "You have to remember this is for the Nation. You cannot betray somebody that's already betrayed you."

The apprentice shaman sighed then started walking towards the village. "I suppose."

"You're doing the right thing," the retired shaman assured. "Let's go to my hut and practice more."

"We still haven't figured out what Alti is up to."

Ino's lips were pressed tightly together. "She will reveal herself soon enough." If it was one thing she knew about her previous pupil it was that she wasn't as clever as she liked to think she was.

Xena was strolling through the darkening woods on her way back to the Nation. Her skin suddenly crawled, and she knew what the meant so she stopped. "Alti, where are you hiding?"

"Over here, Xeeena." The shaman appeared from the shadows of the forest, garbed in a black cloak.

The Amazon casually sauntered up to the shaman, a wide grin over her face.

"How goes things back in the army?"

"Less than expected," the annoyed warlord sharply replied.

"I take it you saw to remedying the problem?" the shaman probed.

The Warrior Princess wickedly grinned. "What kind of leader would I be otherwise, Alti?"

Alti shifted closer to the dark Amazon. "Stay away from Yakut." She grinned when Xena's features became angry at her. "She knows… which means the queen knows as well."

"How much?"

"More than enough," the shaman chewed out. "Yakut has figured out she's a two-spirit. Ino has been training her to adapt to her new powers."

"They'll be too late to stop me," the warlord reminded.
Alti lifted her hand up to Xena's chin and ran her thumb across Xena's jaw line. "Let's hope so otherwise I'll be forced to slow Yakut down." She leaned her face closer to Xena's.

"What would you do?" the warlord murmured. She sensed her protective nature over Yakut bubble to the surface. She didn't understand why, but she cared for the apprentice shaman, who'd been there for her.

Alti's teeth shined in the moonlight suddenly. "Don't you worry." She leaned in quickly and captured Xena's lips in a wild kiss.

The dark Amazon matched the kiss's control for power. She tore away from Alti then her powerful body outmatched Alti as she slammed the shaman against the tree behind her.

Alti growled while digging her hands into Xena's midnight hair.

Xena's mouth found Alti's neck and her teeth reeked havoc there.

Alti growled while dropping her head back against the tree. She loved this new agreement for sex between her and Xena. It was more than perfect for Alti's consuming hungry on many levels. She moaned when strong, callused hands found their way to her bare stomach between her cloak. She was soon busy with eagerly devouring Alti's dark passions while keeping her pinned to the tree.

By the next morning, the Amazon Queen received a visit from Agaue, who brought her a scroll. The queen was thoroughly pleased by the portrait of the woman they needed to find. She read something at the bottom of the scroll and peered up at the artistic Amazon. "Dasha?"

Agaue nodded her head then explained, "It is her name… according to Yakut."

"She didn't mention this previously," the queen muttered.

The Amazon merely shrugged while standing before the queen.

"Thank you, Agaue." Cyane offered a smile along side her thanks.

Agaue bowed while stating, "You're welcome, my queen." With that, she said goodbye and left the queen to her thoughts.

Queen Cyane rolled up the drawing and tucked the scroll into her top drawer for later. She got up and started pacing in the office hut as she tried to decide on a few things. She finally made up her mind about her plans so she headed out of the hut. She went to the training fields and found who she was looking for.

"My queen," the weapons master warmly greeted.

Cyane smiled at the old weapons master. "How goes things, Yalena?"
"Fair, my queen. And you?"

"The same." The queen tucked her hands behind her cloaked back. "Have you seen Merta or Pasha of lately?"

"Every now and again." The weapons master turned away from watching the trainees on the sparring fields. "What can I help with, my queen?"

"I need some competent Amazons to go on a mission for me." Queen Cyane tilted her head then stepped closer to the weapons master. "Can we speak about it in private?"

Yalena immediately understood the importance so she pivoted on her heels. "Thaddea?" She called out to the junior grade and when she got the Amazon's attention, she hollered, "Take over, I'll be back in a bit."

Thaddea waved at the weapons master then went back to instructing the trainees.

"We'll go to my office," Yalena offered to the queen.

Cyane quietly joined Yalena on the trek to the weapon master's office hut. When they got inside, it was quiet and just what the queen wanted. Yalena took her seat behind her desk then offered a chair to the queen.

Cyane settled into her spot then began to speak. "I need about four Amazons to carry out a mission for me… for the Nation. It needs to be kept secret too, Yalena." She knew she could trust the weapons master, who'd always been very loyally to her.

"What are the matters, my queen?" Yalena leaned back in her chair.

"There is a woman in one of the neighboring villages that they must find. I would like for them to hopefully bring her back here to the Nation."

The weapons master tilted her head. "This is a wild rabbit chase, my queen?"

"Not at all," Cyane denied. "I have a name and a face."

Yalena was surprised so she sat up and leaned against her desk. "What is happening, my queen?"

Cyane knew she needed the weapons master full help because she could not turn to the stratègos, who favored Xena so. "I have concerns that Xena may not be who she says she is."

Yalena's back straightened out at this news. "Then the rumors are true?"

The queen inwardly grumbled and replied, "Possibly. That's what this search is for. This young woman, Dasha, she may be the key to proving who Xena really is."

The elder Amazon's moved in understanding. "I believe I know who should go on the mission. They are trustworthy."
"Name them," the queen offered.

"Merta and Pasha, as you say and I believe Thaddea will serve well too. Then Asta is quite competent."

Cyane nodded her head at the list then some relief washed over her. "Can you have them report to me in a candlemark at my office?"

Yalena smiled then nodded. "Of course, my queen. I'll inform them now that you wish to speak to them."

"Great." The queen stood up just as the weapons master walked around the desk. "Thank you, Yalena for your help."

Yalena touched the queen's midback. "I know these are trying moments, my queen." She opened the door and exited the hut with the queen. "Everything will reveal itself in time."

The Amazon Queen shook her head then said under her breath, "I pray before it's too late."

The weapons master shook relinquished her touch. "With your leadership, we are never too late." She gave one last confident smile then parted from the queen's side.

Queen Cyane had only been a queen for eight seasons now but she was amazed by how her Nation followed her very faithfully. She never imagined she'd be so well respected and just beyond her capabilities as a fighter, but as a leader. She made her way back to her office hut.

It wasn't long before the queen had her arrivals in the office. She couldn't seat them all so she let them remain standing while she informed them of their mission. Thaddea was selected as the leader of the party, and the queen required them to go by horseback so that their time away would be shorter. Finally, Queen Cyane got up from her desk with a scroll and handed Thaddea the image of the woman they were seeking.

Thaddea stood in the middle of her party. Thaddea and her companions memorized the woman's face. Thaddea rolled up the scroll and lowered it to her side. "We will find her, my queen." Her eyes held determination and promise.

"I believe in you, Amazons and I trust you." Cyane scanned the four faces then nodded her head. "Please be swift. Leave tonight when there are less eyes."

The Amazons bowed to their queen then were excused from the meeting. Queen Cyane steadied herself against her desk with her right hand as her nerves started to settle at the prospect of hope. She went back to her parchment work for the rest of the day.

By moon high that night, Thaddea and her party rode out of the village from the south gates. They hoped to make it to the first village by daylight so that they could begin their search for this mysterious woman. Their luck would fall short of their
determination though on their quest.

The days continued to cycle through the Thrace Amazon Nation as they did for Xena and Borias's army. While Xena learned to become a fierce Amazon warrior, Borias busied with preparing the small army for a battle against the warlord Kyros. Borias soon gave the order for the army to break camp and mobilize then they were marching across the rolling hills of the Thrace lands. The small army easily covered the thirty Roman miles in a day as Borias planned. He then bellowed out to the men to make a temporary camp as tomorrow they would engage Kyros.

Just before dawn, Chuang and Borias commanded the warriors to prepare, and they did with hunger written in their eyes. Borias positioned the few archers on a hill side where they would take aim into a valley that would hold the battle. Chuang then took a handful of men, went into the valley, and up the other side to find their enemy comfortably nestled in a larger valley.

Borias and the rest of the army remained battle ready, waiting for the signal. Borias was on horseback, his head cocked, and listened carefully. Slowly a grin spread over his tan features when he heard the yells. He turned in his saddle then signaled the men to march up the hillside. When they came to the crest, he saw the fight begin as many of Kyros's men had chased after Chuang.

Borias waved his sword down at the valley. "Take them!"

The warriors gave out various warcries and went sweeping down the valley to the pending fight.

Borias turned to his right and signaled the archers to pick off whoever they could then he joined in next.

It wasn't long before Borias and Chuang ordered the army over the crest of the second hill and there in the valley remained the last of Kyros's army. They raided the remaining army easy and finished with more loot and plenty of men turning sides. It'd work like a vision, for once.

Thaddea held up her hand for the party to slow down, they did. She then turned in her saddle as the Amazons came to a stop around her. "This is the town of Maroneja, it is fairly small."

"It's also the last town," Asta mentioned.

Thaddea exhaled but didn't say anything to that fact. "We'll stay here for the night." She ordered the party forward.

The Amazons only received a few odd looks as they entered the village. The village folk already knew of the Thrace Amazon Nation many Roman miles away due northeast. The Amazons went to a stable that was connected to an inn where they stabled their horses. After collecting their things for the night, they weaved through the people and went into the inn.

The innkeeper's head snapped up at hearing the drumbeat of boots coming inside. He
stiffened at seeing the female warriors that were obvious from the Amazon Nation. He swallowed as a tall, dark Amazon with curly black hair grabbed the bar and leaned towards him.

"We want two rooms with two beds in each room."

The owner faintly smiled at the Amazon. "How many nights?"

Thaddea smirked at the man. "One night."

The innkeeper tilted to the right to see past he, and he smiled pleasantly at the three other Amazons. "Eight dinars, please."

"Fine," the leader Amazon clipped. She handed over the money from her coin pouch at her side.

"The two doors on the right at the end."

Thaddea simply nodded then turned to her sisters. "You heard him; I'll be there in a heartbeat."

The Amazons quietly slipped past their leader and went down the hallway nearby.

Thaddea reached into her cloak and pulled out a scroll. "We're looking for somebody."

The innkeeper tilted his head then folded his arms over his chest.

The Amazon unrolled the scrolled, turned it around, and waited patiently.

The innkeeper squinted, leaned forward, and his features brightened with recognition.

"That is Titus's daughter." He shook his head while rocking back into is original position. "That poor girl."

Thaddea was rolling the scroll up while speaking. "Why you say that?"

The innkeeper was weary of the female warrior now, and he narrowed his eyes.

"Listen," the Amazon offered, "my friends and I have been searching high and low for her. Its really important we speak to her." She hoped her plea would go over well before she had to do it the hard way.

The innkeeper's arms fell from his chest. He bent forward then quietly spoke, "She'd gotten kidnapped about half a moon ago." He shook his head. "These warriors came intuh town lookin' for trouble. They took Titus's daughter along with a few boys that signed up tuh join their army."

Thaddea now had a perfect idea where this was going. "You know what army?"

The innkeeper shrugged. "They're a drachma a dozen around 'ere." He considered it, his eyes floated to the ceiling then centered around the Amazon again. "Some'in about Warrior… Warrior… Princess, I think."
Thaddea wasn't sure, but she filed the title away in her memory. "Where does Dasha live?"

The innkeeper put his hands on his hips. "They're jus' outside of town... small farm on the east side."

Thaddea slowly nodded then had a faint smile. "Thanks for the help."

The innkeeper grunted then watched the Amazon stroll down the hallway. He disregarded it and went back to pleasing his customers in the tavern portion.

Merta peered up from milling about in her saddlebags when Thaddea entered their room. "Any lucky?"

Thaddea had a grin suddenly and held up the scroll. "Yes, we're in luck."

"Thank Artemis," Merta breathed, "I was fearful we wouldn't find this woman."

"Well...." Thaddea shook her head then finished, "We don't have her yet."

Merta turned back to her saddlebags. "We will," she promised.

Later, Thaddea informed the other two Amazons of their now warm trail. They decided to eat dinner since it was already nightfall and at first light would set out to find this woman. Just at dawn, the four Amazons were slipping on their cloaks and headed out of the inn with efficiency. They followed the east road out of town by foot, and it only took them quarter of a candlemark to come along a small farm house set off from the beaten road.

The Amazons turned onto the rutted path that led to the house that had a barn off to the right of it. When they were near enough, a slave on the porch of the house spotted them and raced into the house in fear.

Thaddea had everybody stop at the foot of the steps. She cocked her head when she heard hushed voices floating out from the open window. Then the door was shoved open and an older man stepped out with the earlier slave.

"Can I help you?"

Thaddea took a step forward, her boots brushing the bottom of the step. "Hello, I am Thaddea and these are my companions. Are you the owner of the house, Titus?"

"I am he." Titus stood poised at the top of the steps, he scanned over the women. "What is your business?"

Thaddea cleared her throat before speaking again. "We are from the Thrace Amazon Nation, and we were sent on a mission to find a young woman, we believe she may be your daughter."

Titus's narrowed eyes darkened now. "My daughter has dealt with enough. Leave."
Thaddea held up her hands. "We not here to cause trouble." She lowered her hands then explained, "We must speak to her about her recent… incident."

Titus shook his head then pointed towards the road. "Leave. Now." He turned his back on them.

Thaddea quickly unrolled the scroll that'd been stashed in her cloak pocket. "Is this her, sir?"

Titus had his hand on the door handle, but he stopped and dared to gaze back. His back tightened up at seeing the perfect drawing of his daughter's face, and her name clearly written at the bottom. He focused on the Amazon again.

"Please, we need to speak to her… its very important," Thaddea urged.

Titus read the determination and persistence in the warrior's face. He could see that they'd traveled long and hard to come here on some mysterious quest. Finally, he reluctantly nodded his head. "You may come inside." He turned to his slave and ordered, "See to my daughter."

The slave silently agreed and hurried into the house.

Titus waved the women to follow him into the house. He stepped in first and Amazons, by single file, followed after him. He guided them to the neighboring room, which was a large enough sitting room for them all. He signaled to the various chairs in front of the roaring fireplace. He too took a seat that allowed him to face the Amazons. "It is rare we see Amazons in these parts."

Thaddea slowly nodded her head. "We usually do not come this far east… to the Grecian borders."

"No, but I have heard of the Amazon Nation," the man relented. He sat proudly in his wood chair, his brown eyes set on the women, and his thin lips creased. He broke from conversation when the slave brought his daughter into the room.

The respectful Amazons immediately rose to their feet when the young woman entered the room.

Dasha stopped in the doorway once her view was filled by these female warriors, which harbored her fresh wounds. She fearfully looked to her father.

Titus got up and joined his child. "Its okay, Dasha… come sit with me." He steered her through the room safely and set her down in the chair next to his.

The Amazons reclaimed their chairs but said nothing with the tense air between them.

Titus took his daughter's shaking hand into his. "These women are from the Amazon Nation."

Dasha stopped biting her lower lip then looked from her father to the soft features of
the Amazons. The one Amazon, to the far right, reminded her very much of the woman she'd met half a moon ago. The Amazon's body was much the same less her curly hair and more grayish eye color.

"I am Thaddea," the Amazon spoke who was receiving the longest stare. She nodded to the Amazon sitting next to her.

This Amazon took the order and stated, "I am Merta.

The next Amazon offered a warm smile. "I'm Pasha."

"And I'm Asta," came the last introduction.

These seemed to give some relief to Dasha as she leaned back into her chair finally.

Thaddea focused solely on Dasha, the woman from the parchment, and asked, "Our queen, Queen Cyane, has asked us to come find you because of some unusual circumstances."

"It has to do with what happened," Titus whispered, "half a moon ago."

Dasha showed understanding, and she nodded at Thaddea to continue.

Thaddea sadly smiled but lost it as she spoke again. "We believe that you may have come in contact with one of our Amazons when you were kidnapped. We're hoping we could get your help on proving or disproving this story."

Dasha glanced at her father, who nodded so she finally talked for the first time. "Half a moon ago I was taken by some warriors… when I was in town taking care of some errands for my father. I was taken back to their camp… tied up by the man who took me." She stopped as her gaze fell to space between them all. She swallowed and quietly continued. "Just as he was about to…"

"It's okay," Thaddea offered softly. When murky eyes met her, she gave a smile to help her.

Dasha found some confidence from the Amazon's support. "Just before anything happened, this tall female came in and stopped him… kicked him right out of the tent. I don't recall everything but I know she fought him, I remember hearing her talking, and I think she killed him. After that she came in, she picked me up, and took me to another tent… I assume hers." She now knotted her fingers together in her lap on top of her skirt. "She tended to my wounds and I eventually fell asleep after she left the tent. I'm not sure how long I slept, but I didn't wake up until she came back."

Thaddea tilted her head and asked, "What happened then?"

Dasha sighed then answered, "She put me on horseback and… took me home."

Thaddea leaned forward in her chair and gently asked, "Dasha, did she tell you her name?"
Dasha was staring down at her hands, yet she slowly lifted her head then the name crisply rolled off her tongue. "Xena."

Thaddea inhaled sharply as she leaned back in the chair like she'd been struck. She touched her forehead at the implications that this meant, what it meant for the Amazon Nation. "Did..." She faltered and dropped her hand to her lap. "Did she say anything that may have... led you to believe she controlled this army?"

Dasha truly considered, and her mind searched through hard memories then finally she nodded her head. "When I was in that man's tent... I heard her say some things. One thing she said was that if somebody rapes in her army their life would be forfeited."

"Her army?" Thaddea quietly repeated; her head shaking some.

Dasha could see that the Amazons were stricken by fear and worry.

Titus grabbed his daughter's hand to get her attention. "Do you still have the cloak?" At his daughter's nod, he urged, "Go get it for them."

Dasha excused herself and went upstairs; this gave the father a couple of minutes to explain how hard it'd been on his daughter. The Amazons merely listened and didn't interrupt the father's expression of grief for his daughter's hardships. Finally Dasha returned with a folded up piece of clothing article in her hands, she went to Thaddea.

Thaddea stood up and picked up the item from the woman's hand. She held it by the collar when she first laid eyes on the feather emblem. She lifted up her hands, and the cloak cascaded down until it nearly met the floor.

The other Amazons observed their leader examining the cloak.

Thaddea concluded it was most likely Xena's considering it was so long, and Xena was tall after all. Thaddea asked to keep it, and Dasha agreed since she really didn't want to have anything to do with it. Next Thaddea inquired if she could write out Dasha's ordeal with Xena then have her sign it as proof. Dasha agreed, and the father declared he'd guarantee Dasha's word with his seal. Once the agreement was in order, the Amazons excused themselves and promised to return the following day.

Once the Amazons were far from the house, Asta stepped closer to their leader. "Why don't we take her back to the Nation?"

"You saw how shaken she was from it," Thaddea reminded, and her tone held a thread of annoyance.

Asta shook her head then argued, "We can protect her."

Thaddea suddenly stopped and grabbed the Amazon's forearm. "Listen Asta, that girl back there..." She pointed back at the farm house far off in the distance. "That girl has dealt with enough as it is and coming face to face with the woman that threatened to kill her upon seeing her again, that's not exactly comforting." She released the Amazon's arm then hotly mentioned, "If that was my daughter I wouldn't allow her to
leave." Then she continued the trek back to town.

Asta saw her comrades were not in agreement with her either so she hung her head. She fell into step behind the rest of the group and considered Thaddea's words further.

The next day would prove to go fast for the small band of Amazons as Thaddea would spend most of her morning with Dasha. She recorded, in great detail, Dasha's experience then by the early afternoon the scroll was signed, and Titus pressed his seal into the red wax blotch beside his daughter's signature. It would be those written words that would seal Xena's fate with the Amazon Nation.

Back in the Nation, Queen Cyane felt her days slowly pass her, and she grew extremely tense about what news her Amazons would bring her. On one side, she prayed the results would prove Xena's guiltiness so that she could protect her Nation from any harm. Yet, Cyane wasn't too fond of exposing Xena's true nature, and she wished it wasn't so. A part of Cyane did believe that something rested good within Xena. She saw potential buried in the dark Amazon, but she doubted she could harness it.

Also Cyane had trusted Alti's judgment about bringing Xena into the Nation and had she really been so wrong? She wasn't sure just yet, but she knew if Xena proved to be somebody else then Alti was just as guilty. As far as the queen was concerned, she would absolutely enjoyed defacing then banning Alti from the Amazon Nation.

Today was the twelfth or so day since the queen sent out her secret Amazon party. She was concerned but mostly because she was nervous about the results of their hunt. Cyane stayed busy by keeping to her scrollwork. In the middle of her work, she stopped and something felt out of place in her for a second then the feeling became fleeting. She shook it off and returned to her work, her quill scratching over her parchment again.

Queen Cyane stopped about a candlemark later and set her quill in the inkwell for the night. It was late, and she needed to attend dinner then get some rest. She stood up, blew out the candles in her office, and she quietly left her office hut. Her dinner went quickly, however, her dreams tonight came less slowly and when they did arrive they were dark.

Cyane shot up in bed, coated in sweat, and her eyes adjusting to the darkness of her hut. She thought she heard something then she heard the noise again; somebody was knocking at her door. She slipped out of her bed in only her sleeping shift. She cracked the door open and oddly stared at the Amazon. "What is it?"

"My queen, I'm sorry to disturb you so early." The Amazon was pensive as she shuffled from foot to foot. "There's a problem..." She paused then quietly explained, "It is the apprentice shaman, Yakut, she will not awake and has been asleep for over a day."

Queen Cyane hadn't heard anything about this and the confusion was evident on her face. "Um..." She shook her head and touched her forehead. "Give me a beat so I can get changed. Has the healer seen to her?"
"She is there now," the Amazon informed.

"Alright, wait here for me." Queen Cyane close the door, and she ran her fingers through her long, blond hair as she tried to fathom what she'd just learned. She shook off her confusion and fears then hastily got her leathers on and boots.

The Amazon Queen hastened out of her hut and followed the Amazon to Yakut's hut. She charged through the door, entered the dim hut, and her presence seemed to fill the small hut. She slotted her eyes at the still, breathing form on the bed and the healer beside the bed.

"What has happened?" Cyane barked. She stepped up to the healer.

The Amazon healer didn't acknowledge the queen and kept at her work on the apprentice shaman. "Yakut will not awaken, my queen."

The queen stood beside the healer, faced the bed, and placed her hands on her hips. "You have tried smelling salt?"

"Yes, of course." The healer then shook her head and pressed her fingertips against the small Amazon's throat. She felt for a pulse. "She will not respond to anything." She stopped and peered up at the queen. "She is not sick either." She turned back to the apprentice shaman.

Cyane stared at the unmoving Amazon, who was her adopted sister. She clenched her teeth and urged her anger to remain quiet. "Then what is it, Lena?"

The healer, Lena, straightened up then turned to her queen. "It is not something I, a healer, can explain." She tilted her head then sadly suggested, "You must speak to Alti." She stretched out her hand and touched the queen's tense arm. "I'm sorry, my queen." She turned and collected her supplies from the nightstand.

Queen Cyane gripped her leather belt tightly. She blinked away the stings in her eyes and listened to the healer's footfall to the door. "Lena?"

The healer stopped by the door and turned her head sidelong.

"Thank you," the queen whispered.

Lena hated this - she hated when she couldn't help because what good was she as a healer otherwise. "I'll check on her regularly, my queen." She opened the door then silently left.

The queen lost her resolve, so, one by one a tear rolled down her cheeks. She was full of anger and also passion for Yakut's condition. She came to the head of the bed and touched the Amazon's forehead. "Yakut?"

The young Amazon did not stir, but she remained at peace.

Cyane ran her fingers down the petite woman's soft cheeks then over her chin. "Alti did this, didn't she?" She pressed her palm against Yakut's cheek. "I know you can
fight her spell, Yakut... you're stronger than her."

Yakut only continued to breathe in a rhythmic manner while in a peaceful state.

Cyane collapsed her sister's small hand, lifted it, and kissed the warm knuckles. "Hang in there, sister." She gave a squeeze for good measure and lowered Yakut's hand back onto the bed. She quickly left the hut.

Yakut's fingers slowly curled into a fist then stopped. Then her eyelids started to flicker from the side to side movement of her eyes.

The queen just came outside of the hut. She faced the Amazon, who had retrieved her earlier, and she ordered, "You are to stay here on guard. I will be sending another Amazon to join you."

The Amazon nodded her understanding.

"Nobody is to go into Yakut's hut except for me, the healer, and Ino. Am I clear?"

"Yes, my queen." The guard again nodded and stepped back so that she was close to the door.

The Amazon Queen felt satisfied so she marched off but stopped and came back. She then growled, "And do not let Alti anywhere near here."

The guard blinked, yet before she could say anything the queen stormed off. She shook her head and wondered what Alti had to do with this. Then again, that dark shaman seemed to cause plenty of mayhem anymore. Of course if Alti had purposely target the queen's sister then there would be much to pay.

Queen Cyane quickly crossed the village and hurried up the steps of the temple. As she ascended each step, her rage overcame her greatly. She threw open the double doors, and her fire eyes landed on the shaman's back.

Alti was in mid sentence when the doors boomed. She side stepped back once and turned her head to the left. She locked on the angry queen, who's wide strides brought her down the aisle.

Cyane stopped in front of the shaman, but she set her angry sights on the other Amazon, who was Xena. "Leave us."

Xena had a stiff back, and she lifted her chin at the queen's chilled tone.

Alti lightly touched the Amazon's cloaked covered arm. "Later," she simply promised.

Xena glanced at Alti then back at the queen. She stepped forward, which brought her closer to Cyane.

Cyane slowly turned her head while Xena moved past her. She gave Xena every warning she could with her eyes.
Xena did not fear the queen but silently challenged her back with her will. She held eye contact until she was too far past the queen's side then she marched down the aisle. Her boot's carried an echo through the temple until she left and closed the doors behind her.

Alti lowered her attention from the doors to the queen. "Yes, my queen?"

"Yakut will not awaken," Cyane drew out dangerously.

Alti remained passive but asked, "Has Lena seen to her?"

"Yes, and still Yakut will not awaken." Cyane stepped into the dark shaman's space. "Lena concluded that Yakut is healthy and that it is something spiritual."

The shaman locked her hands together in front of her. "I would be happy to assist, my queen."

Queen Cyane lost the scrap of politeness she'd had, and she growled, "You obviously have done enough, Alti."

Alti shook her head then calmly replied, "I have not harmed my apprentice in anyway, my queen. I am offering my help."

Cyane pointed a finger at the shaman. "I do not want your help." She lowered her hand then lifted her face closer to Alti's. "This Nation no longer needs your... help, Alti."

Alti's eyes lit up with amusement. "That is not for you to decide, my queen... that is up to the council. And as I see it, there is no other shaman trained enough to run this temple." She cocked her head and taunted, "The Amazons cannot be a true Nation without a guide for the worship of Artemis."

"And as if you even follow the religious ways of Artemis," Cyane snapped.

"Artemis has not told me that I do not," the shaman chided. "Has she told you otherwise, my queen?"

Queen Cyane clenched her hands at her sides. "Artemis hasn't stopped me from my mission to rid of you, and I will."

"Indeed your wish will come true, my queen." Alti lowered her head close to the queen's and murmured, "Perhaps not in the way you so wish it." She straightened up and walked away from the queen. "You know the way to the door, my queen... keep me posted of Yakut's wellbeing." She disappeared behind a curtain off to the right.

The confrontation did nothing to soothe the queen's anger. She vowed to have Yakut awaken, Alti thrown out of the Nation, and Xena's dark nature revealed to all. Cyane knew these pieces were connected, and she had excellent insight. So she took the first step to putting her plans into motion, and she called a secret, emergency meeting with the council. She had a lot to discuss with them and see to a safer future for her Nation.
The day crawled by for anybody that was concerned about Yakut. Ino spent much of her time in the hut and worked to find out what'd happened. She would be well spent by the end of the day and especially because she'd find no solution. Then close friends of Yakut tried to visit the apprentice shaman but were turned away by the guards. And one friend happened to be Xena.

Xena had attempted to visit her friend when she'd heard the news. For a heartbeat, it did shock her, and yet she knew who was most likely responsible for this strange sleeping spell on Yakut. Xena and the rest of the Nation knew it was Alti but there was no proof.

Xena spent most of her day on patrol duty. Then when she was relieved, she hurried back to the village and marched threw the sunset lit huts. She aimed for the temple, quietly entered, and didn't find the shaman right away. She went behind the curtain and down to the small office.

Alti lifted her head up when the dark Amazon entered her office. "You forget how to knock?"

Xena slammed the door, and her lips curled in a snarl. "What have you done to Yakut?"

The shaman set her quill down on the desk then carefully studied the angry warlord. After several beats, she calmly answered, "She's under a sleeping spell until I revive her."

The warlord's long strides brought her quickly across the office. She grabbed the edge of the desk, leaned over, and held the shaman's gaze. "She is not to be harmed, Alti."

The shaman read the angry warlord's threatening body language. She knew Xena had some strange infinitive for the apprentice shaman, and she didn't quite understand why. "And she won't be, Xena."

Xena was no shaman, yet she had the uncanny ability to read somebody as if they were words on parchment. She suddenly growled when she read something she didn't like in the shaman.

Alti cried out. She hadn't expected the lightening motions from the warlord. She was grabbed by the throat, hauled out of her chair, and dragged across her desk.

The office filled with the din of items spilling off the desk and hitting the rock floor. Then there was a brief silence.

The warlord lowered her face into the shaman's. "She won't be harmed now or later, Alti." She tightened the grip around Alti's throat. "If she dies then so do you." She let her piercing gaze go through the shaman then she coldly questioned, "Do we have an understanding?"

Alti's vision darkened, yet she held off from fainting. "Yesss."

The warlord revealed a vicious grin then deeply laughed. "Excellent." She tossed the
shaman back towards the chair.

Alti slammed into her chair then her head snapped back and hit the hard wood wall. She hissed between pain and anger but steadied her body in the chair. She flashed her rage at the warlord.

Xena was not at all intimidated but more amused. "Without my help, Alti you'll be cooked on the Amazon's pyres." She tilted her head then reminded, "Do not cross me." She stormed out of the office.

Alti touched her sore neck and stared darkly at the door. She wanted nothing more than to fight back the warlord, but she knew it would sever her important relationship that she required. She'd just have to endure it until it was time.

Across the village, the council and the queen were finishing up a meeting that'd been exhausting for everybody. Queen Cyane had greatly debated her points against the council's stubborn attitude. She finally won out though, and the council agreed with her plans wholly. And Cyane thanked Artemis for the support.

The entire council filed out of the hut, except for the head councilor, who waited in her chair. Cyane remained in her chair as well because she knew the head councilor, Talia, wanted to have a word with her.

Talia focused on the queen once the hut was quiet. "Are you sure of this, Cyane?"

The queen met the councilor's stern expression. "More than ever... we can't continue this way."

"I agree that Alti is dangerous," Talia relented. "And I trust your judgment, Cyane... we've been friends far too long for me not to."

The queen dipped her head and showed her appreciation for the councilor's words. She raised her head up again. "I believe between Yakut and Ino, they can run the temple together." She laced her hands together on top of the council table. "Ino knows more practices than Alti can perform."

Talia agreed, but she reminded, "It has been many moons since Ino has performed any."

"I don't think that'll matter," Cyane argued. "Ino was a shaman most of her life... I don't believe that's something you forget one day."

Talia faintly smiled because it was true. She lost the smile and seriously stated, "I would like the request one thing if this works out as so."

Queen Cyane bowed her head in agreement to listen.

"When Yakut takes the position, I would like for her to study the priesthood." Talia fell silent and gathered her words carefully. "I can remember the days, even before you were born, when we were solely a priesthood. There was no shamanism in this village, and all we knew was Artemis."
Cyane carefully asked, "Do you regret that we've brought shamanism into the Nation?"

"Not at all... that is not my fears," Talia shook her head then solemnly murmured, "Ceiť was a woman with a lost soul. The Amazons gave her the inspiration to find her soul again, and Ceiť gave the Nation the power of shamanism. It has only been Atli that has corrupted it."

"Yakut can fix that," Cyane urged.

Talia smiled at the queen's faith in the young apprentice shaman. "I believe you're right, Cyane." She stretched out her hand and collapsed the queen's much younger one. "Promise me that Yakut will study the priesthood?"

Cyane shook her head and asked, "How? Even Ino is limited in her knowledge. The priesthood has been slowly crumbling over the moons."

The head councilor sadly smiled and released the queen's hand. "All is not lost, Cyane." She had a more confident smile. "I know an old friend in the Macedonia Nation."

"Melosa's Nation?" Queen Cyane was surprised, and she'd heard a lot about the powerful queen. "Who is this friend?"

"She goes by the name of Narkissa," Talia revealed, "and she's currently the priestess for the Nation." She paused and considered something then mentioned, "I believe she'll be stepping down soon, and her daughter will be taking over." She shook her head then focused back on the queen. "It does not matter though. What matters is that when it is Yakut's time, she must travel to the Macedonia Nation and learn from Priestess Narkissa."

Cyane nodded and smiled. "It'll be done, Talia. I'm sure Yakut will agree with me when I say that she enjoys learning as much as she can."

The head councilor felt a sense of relief at knowing her Nation would reclaim its connection to Artemis. She was an aging Amazon, and she'd sadly watched the disintegration of the priesthood. Now she prayed that her request would help save the priesthood before it all but disappeared.

"Thank you, Cyane," Talia emotionally spoke.

Cyane grabbed the elder's hand and tightly squeezed. "By my honor, Talia it will be done."

The sun was now gone behind the western horizon. The band of Amazons that'd been sent out by Queen Cyane was only a day away from the Nation. They'd stopped for the evening and made a small camp near an open field next to the woodland. They had two fires going and on them both were skewered rabbits being cooked. The Amazons sat around the fires and idly chitchatted. They were especially happy to be going home tomorrow despite the bad news they would bring to the queen. However they knew it
was important that the truth would now be revealed, and their Nation would be protected.

When Apollo mounted his chariot, the Amazons also mounted their steeds and charged towards the Amazon Nation in the early dawn. While Apollo brought the sun up higher, the Amazons pressed harder to ride the road. Somehow, the Amazons beat Apollo and made it back to the Nation a candlemark before sunset.

Thaddea ordered everybody to the stables where they dismounted and cared for their worn horses. The left their saddlebags in the stables and would return for them later. Thaddea decided it was more important to seek out the queen and relay their findings.

Queen Cyane sat at her desk when the knock came at the door. "Come," she ordered and straightened up when the three Amazons entered. "You've returned." She instantly stood up.

Thaddea bowed to the queen as did her comrades. "We were successful with our mission, my queen."

Queen Cyane became a mix of relief and fear, but she rounded the desk and stood in front of the Amazons. "Tell me."

Thaddea and her comrades explained their mission and how everything turned out. Queen Cyane had originally been concerned when they had not returned with the young woman, Dasha, who had seen Xena. She then understood Thaddea's decision and was grateful there was a signed and sealed letter. Queen Cyane now gripped the scroll in her right hand.

Cyane commended her Amazons for the hard work and thanked them several times. She escorted them out of the dim office and promised she'd find them later. Afterwards, Cyane hurried to the neighboring office hut that the head councilor occupied.

Talia gazed upon the stricken queen and jumped from her seat. "What is it, Cyane?"

The queen closed the door then hastily explained what'd happened. She told of her search party's results, and her fears were completely true.

Talia shook her head in disbelief, but it was all true. She stared at the words on the scroll and touched the seal at the bottom. Cyane then asked her the waited question. Talia lifted her head and held the queen's gaze. "Yes," she simply answered.

Cyane collected the scroll from the head councilor then excused herself from the hut. She tied the scroll to her side then her pace grew faster. She went directly to the training grounds and entered Yalena's office.

Yalena read the dire seriousness from the queen. "It's true then?"

"Yes," Cyane replied, "I'll need at least six Amazons."

Yalena jumped out of her chair and walked the queen out of the hut. "I'll quickly gather
them. Wait here, my queen."

Queen Cyane tried to be patient, and she wondered where she would catch Xena right now. She figured Yalena most likely knew.

Yalena returned with eight Amazons and reported, "She's on patrol duty on the west side."

The queen nodded then focused on the eight selected Amazons. "We are arresting Xena for crimes against the Amazon Nation. We must be careful and not give alarm to the rest of the Nation. Is this clear?"

The Amazons all nodded and mentally prepared to capture the highly skilled, dark Amazon. They each prayed to Artemis that this would turn out okay.

"Let's go then." Queen Cyane and the weapons master led the group through the village, which caught some attention. They exited the gates then headed west in the woods.

Syrinx stopped walking when she heard a lot of movement behind her. "What is that?"

Xena stopped and so did Hadrea. Xena tilted her head and listened more carefully. "It's eight Amazons."

Syrinx was surprised by how Xena seemed to know so well. She then noticed the Amazons forming in the trees ahead. She shook her head because Xena had been right.

"Ho, Syrinx," Yalena called.

Queen Cyane ordered the group to stop behind her.

"My queen," Syrinx greeted and bowed like Hadrea.

Xena didn't and wouldn't lose eye contact with the Amazon Queen.

"What is the matter, my queen?" Syrinx glanced between the queen and weapons master.

Queen Cyane's response was a hasty wave to her eight Amazons.

The eight Amazons fulfilled the instructions they'd received earlier. They unsheathed swords, fanned out, and completely encircled the three patrol Amazons.

Syrinx was dumbfounded and held up her hands. She then was further confused when another Amazon grabbed her wrist and yanked her out of the circle.

The same happened to Hadrea, who looked to the queen in question.

Queen Cyane didn't acknowledge the stunned patrol Amazons and merely focused her
angry face on the dark Amazon. "Xena, you are under arrest for crimes against the Nation. You are to relinquish your sword to us, and you'll be escorted back to the village."

Xena kept a calm exterior and questioned, "And what crimes do you speak of?"

Queen Cyane narrowed her eyes. "You have hidden your true nature from the Amazon Nation. It has been confirmed that you are the true leader of Borias's army, who attacked us. You are also responsible for the kidnapping of Yakut." Cyane wouldn't added that there was a possible conspiracy between Xena and the shaman. "You will have an Amazon trial."

The warlord slowly revealed her cat grin. "I don't have time for that nonsense."

The queen's eyes widened when she saw the muscles in Xena's legs ripple. "Stop her!"

It was far too late. The warlord gave a powerful battle cry that nobody had ever heard before. Xena launched straight up into the air and landed high on a tree branch.

"Get her!" Cyane hotly ordered.

Four Amazons took the trees and chased after the fast warlord.

Queen Cyane and the rest of the band followed but on the ground.

Xena's laugh could be heard echoing through the woods, and she easily escaped the Amazons.

Cyane wouldn't let this warlord escape her Nation after everything that'd happened. She surged her strength from her passions, and she ran faster than the rest of the Amazons. She quickly caught up to the warlord, but she still needed a plan.

Queen Cyane freed the dagger from its sheath on her hip. She held the dagger by its blade then aimed for the fast warlord. She cried out when she threw the dagger.

The dagger soared through the air, ripped through some new leaves, and made its mark.

Xena hissed and almost lost her balance when a blade buried into her right thigh. She briefly stopped because she knew she had enough time to get rid of the dagger and still be ahead of the Amazons.

Queen Cyane took her opportunity and jumped into the trees. She landed on the tree's branch that was near Xena's, and she was eye level. "You won't escape, Xena... as long as I'm alive."

The warlord sneered at the queen and threatened, "Then we'll have to correct that." She held the bloody dagger by the hilt. She gave a power cry then jumped after the Amazon Queen.

Cyane took two running steps and jumped. Just before she met Xena in midair, she
brought out her right foot in front of her. She easily struck the warlord in the chest.

Xena fell towards the ground from the unexpected attack. She caught a tree branch and spun on the branch until she let go.

Queen Cyane watched the warlord rocket into the air in a spinning motion. She unsheathed her sword when Xena landed on the same tree branch as before.

"My queen!" Yalena called.

"Stay back," the queen ordered.

The warlord swayed up and down on the branch, but she removed her sword from her back. She pointed the tip at the queen and smirked.

Queen Cyane wasn't fearful of losing against the warlord. Even if she died then there were still a handful of Amazons Xena had to contend. She gave a cry then ran down the branch.

The warlord mimicked the queen's technique and jumped through the air. She held out her sword horizontally.

Queen Cyane's blade met Xena's in midair then she made a clean landing on the branch Xena had been on earlier. She knew this game could keep up if she didn't finish it quickly.

"We have to help the queen," Hadrea desperately urged. She started to move but the weapons master stopped her.

"No, Hadrea... she must do this alone." Yalena held the Amazon still despite she wanted to help Cyane just as much.

Cyane and Xena now shared the same branch. Cyane brought her blade across the warlord's then kicked at the warlord's unprotected stomach.

Xena growled and stumbled back a few paces on the branch. She held up her hands and steadied her body.

The Amazon Queen bounced the branch harshly and watched as Xena lost her balance.

"Chaaaaayaaaaa!" the warlord cried out and flipped in air and landed on a lower branch. She dropped her head back and shot the queen an amused expression.

Cyane growled then jumped off the branch and aimed for the one Xena occupied. She landed neatly, spun her sword then engaged her enemy.

The warlord parried every blow, and she knew Cyane was an excellent fighter. She gave a few kicks but Cyane blocked them or moved away. Xena grew impatient and took a wild swipe with her sword.
Queen Cyane used it as her opening, parried the blow, and brought her sword around quickly. She slashed Xena's right arm.

Xena moved back and revealed her surprise. She caught how the Amazon Queen was quite pleased so Xena wiped away her expression. She made a mental note never to reveal her fears like that again before her opponents.

The warlord tossed her sword into her left hand and gave a spin. She and Cyane both knew she wasn't quite as effective with her left hand, but Xena would not back down.

"Just surrender, Xena," the queen ordered. "You're just making this worse for yourself."

Xena's answer was harsh, and she lunged.

Queen Cyane defended herself and kept up to the fast pace. She could tell the wound had slightly tired the warlord. She was done letting the warlord toy with her. She gave a sharp scissor kick. She landed a kick to Xena's chin.

The warlord hadn't expected the kick at all. She lost her sword and fell back from the power behind the kick.

Cyane remained still, legs bent, and sword at the ready. She watched Xena fall backwards, losing her footing, and the sword clinked against a rock far below.

Xena went off the branch and tumbled towards the ground without any control. She slammed on her back in the ground then the back of her head roughly collided with a fallen tree branch. She groaned, and the world spun around her. "No," she murmured.

The Amazons hastily encircled the betrayer and pointed swords at her.

The warlord slumped then blacked out completely.

Queen Cyane sheathed her sword and continued to stare down at the unconscious warlord. She narrowed her eyes at the slowly forming stream of blood coming out from under the warlord's head. She partially wished that the warlord was dead, but she studied the rise and fall of the warlord's chest.

The Amazons marched back to the village and with them was the unconscious warlord. The warlord was taken directly to a prison hut and tossed inside of it. Two guards were station outside the locked prison hut and occasionally rotated when their duty was over.

Queen Cyane filled out her report about Xena, the results from the secret mission, and prepared everything to take before the council. The next step to her plans was to take Alti out of power, and she couldn't wait. She already had the council's permission to seize Alti, yet she waited for the right moment. She knew it was now because rumor of Xena's captured has floated around.

So Cyane left her office, and gathered five Amazons that Yalena had selected. She marched them to the temple, climbed the steps, and and shoved the doors open. Cyane
scanned the empty, dimly lit temple and strolled deeper into the temple. "Let's check her office."

The Amazons followed their queen behind the curtain and walked two by two down the hallway. The queen opened the door to the office, which was lit only by a few candles much like the temple. There was nobody in the office either.

"Damn," Cyane grumbled, "Let's go to her hut. Hurry!" The waited may have cost her heavily.

The Amazons turned and sprinted down the hallway. The group raced across the village and rammed through Alti's locked door. Cyane entered last and saw that the hut was empty of any person.

"My queen, it looks as if she's left." The spoken Amazon observed that the room was somewhat bare other than what was too heavy to carry.

"Sweep through the village," Cyane hotly ordered. "I want her found and arrested. Talk to anybody that's seen her."

"Yes, my queen," several Amazons replied, and they left.

Queen Cyane closed the shaman's door and decided she'd get a guard to watch the hut. She started back across the village but was halted by a running Amazon.

"My queen, it's Yakut."

The queen became alarmed again. "What's happened?"

"She is awake," the Amazon happily informed. "She's asking for you."

"By Artemis," the queen rasped and faintly smiled. "Yes." She quickly jogged in the direction of the apprentice shaman's hut. When she entered the guarded hut, she found Ino sitting beside the bed. She then smiled upon seeing the awaken Amazon.

"Yakut." She hastily came over to the bed.

Yakut smiled and pulled her queen, her sister into a warm hug. "Did you miss me?"

Cyane pulled away from the hug and observed that the upright Amazon was in perfect health. "Yes." She had her hands on either side of the apprentice shaman's cheeks.

"How do you feel, sister?"

Yakut smiled and covered the queen's hands. "I'm perfectly fine... just a little mentally worn."

"Nothing some real sleep won't cure," Ino concluded.

Cyane nodded then relinquished her hold. "You must rest then."

"No," Yakut argued and grabbed the queen's hand. "What has happened? I know something has changed in the Nation."
Cyane sighed and exchanged glances with Ino.

Yakut gripped the queen's hand more then used her two-spirit. She sought the answers she wished and found them. She stiffened and whispered, "It's Xena and Alti."

The queen studied how she held the apprentice shaman's hand and wondered if that'd helped Yakut somehow. She released Yakut's hand and stated, "Yes... Xena has been arrested."

"And Alti has disappeared," Yakut muttered.

"Typical," Ino quipped.

"Let me speak to Xena," Yakut urged and started to get up.

Queen Cyane grabbed the young Amazon's shoulders. "No, Yakut." She pushed back and ordered, "You need to rest." She bowed her head closer. "Besides that, Xena is still unconscious." When she was satisfied that Yakut wouldn't move, she lowered her hands to her side. "There's not much that can be done now that it is dark. Tomorrow we'll continue our hunt for Alti."

"I can help," Yakut offered. "I know Alti's spirit well enough."

Cyane sighed because she didn't want her sister to face the dark shaman again. "We'll see tomorrow, okay?"

Yakut could tell that the queen was antsy about letting her find Alti, but she accepted Cyane's concerns. "Alright." She nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Cyane slightly smiled and felt happy to hear that. "Tomorrow, Yakut." She glanced at Ino and gratefully stated, "Thank you, Ino."

Ino bowed her head then lifted it when the queen said goodnight and left.

"Alti went to Xena's army," Yakut stated once the queen was gone.

"Most likely," the aged shaman agreed.

"I have to stop her." Yakut clenched her hands. "She'll destroy Xena's soul."

Ino sighed and dipped her head. "I think Xena's soul is already blackened, Yakut. There's not much hope left for her."

The apprentice shaman turned her head to her mentor. "Ino, she has a good soul... it's her heart that's been blackened."

"And what can you possibly do or say to change her, Yakut?" Ino took the young Amazon's hand into hers. "She has to want to change, and I don't think she has any reason to do it."
Yakut lowered her head and frowned. She knew everything about Xena now that she was in better control of her two-spirit. She found it ironic how Alti's sleeping spell had the reverse effect on Yakut than Alti intended. The sleeping spell had forced Yakut to become better in touch with her two-spirit so that she could conquer the sleeping spell. It had worked perfectly, and now she saw the world in a different light than anybody else.

"Get some rest, Yakut." Ino stood up and kissed the young shaman on the temple. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Ino." Yakut grumbled once the elder was gone. She slipped out of her bed after being in it for so long. She wandered over to the window and watched the stars overhead. She lowered her eyes and stared in the direction of the jail huts.

She shook her head then mumbled, "You can't hide anymore, Xena. Not now." Yakut had a day of fate with the warlord tomorrow before first light.

The warlord was still motionless in the cell and slumped on the floor where she'd be thrown. The only movement were her closed eyes. She was deep in a dreamscape.

"Kill them all!" the warlord commanded loudly to her men. She rode her golden mare and headed down the valley towards the quaint village.

The hundred or so well-trained warriors flooded into the village and swarmed the unsuspecting villagers. They killed anybody that opposed them and burned every house or building in sight. They then rounded up the few survivors and brought them to the center of town like always.

Xena remained astride her mare, who pranced a few times. She settled her normally calm horse down then looked to her men that encircled the few, frightened villagers. "I want crosses built."

"Yes, my liege," called a warrior's voice.

"Line the crosses along the entrance road to the town," Xena further ordered, "I want anybody that comes here to know what's happened." She narrowed her icy eyes at the villagers. "Any village that refuses to annex to my Nation will be destroyed, and the people made an example."

"No!" a villager cried out.

The warlord lifted her chin when she heard the outcry. She twirled her bloody sword then ordered to a soldier. "Bring her forward."

A warrior slipped into the masses of villagers and drew out a petite blond. He hauled her out then threw her at the golden mare.

Xena coldly studied the fallen woman before her war horse. She easily dismounted her mare and landed loudly on her boots.

The woman was on her hands and knees but climbed onto her feet. She straightened
up to her short height and leveled her defiance before the warlord. "My village will never annex to your tyranny."

Xena ruthlessly smiled at the woman's words. She briefly admired the woman's golden hair, defiant green eyes, and pride. "What is your name?"

"Gabrielle," the villager supplied.

The warlord had wild blue eyes now, and she imaged what rested under those peasant clothes. She slowly walked around the villager and raked over the villager's beautiful body.

"Gabrielle of Potidaea," Xena started, "you defy me?" She stopped in front of the villager again.

"Yes," Gabrielle hotly declared, "you're a monster."

The bemused warlord stepped closer and huskily asked, "Am I really, Gabrielle?" She lifted her free left hand and touched the villager's chin. "Tell me how evil I am, Gabrielle."

The villager felt the warmth in the touch and refused to enjoy it. "You're a heartless murderer."

Xena fakely gasped as if the words stung her. "No!" She laughed and pulled her hand away. She strolled behind the villager and stopped. She easily towered over the small woman so she lowered her head close to a tantalizing ear. "Tell me again... it just warms me each time you tell me."

Gabrielle clenched her teeth at the warlord's game.

Xena received no response so she came to the front of her prey again. "You want to know the truth, Gabrielle?" She touched the woman's chin again and tilted the blond beauty's head back. "You really want to know?" She lowered her head. "Your words are nothing... compared to my blade." She traced her bloody, dirty thumb over the villager's firm lips. "Your words have no weight, but this..." She lifted her bloody sword. "This does."

Gabrielle gasped when the blade pressed into her stomach.

"You feel that, don't you?" the warlord murmured. She then tilted the blade so that the sharp edge pressed into the woman's stomach. She read the fear that instantly materialized in the woman's green eyes. "The fear is real too, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle tried to shove her fears away, but the coldness in the warlord's face told her more than she wanted to know. She saw nothing in those blue eyes but a hollowness.

"You're right," Xena whispered, "I am a monster." She tilted her head and let her fingertips trail down the woman's neck. "And I like it." She ran her fingertips across Gabrielle's collarbone. "I take what is mine... whenever I desire it."
Gabrielle's heartbeat grew rapid, and she tried to stop her body's natural reaction to the warlord's tantalizing touch. "You might be able to take my body," she whispered, "but you'll never take my soul."

Xena laughed and ran her hand over the villager's other collarbone. "I will take everything else of yours... your dreams and hopes. Your future... your very life." She suddenly grabbed the peasant by her golden locks and jerked her head down. "By the time I finish with you, you'll never want your soul back."

"No!" Gabrielle screamed.

The warlord violently threw the villager down onto the ground. She then quickly knelt down beside Gabrielle. She brought her blade down in a blur.

Gabrielle was partially sat up and gasped when the blade touched her neck. "Please, no."

Xena leaned closer and murmured, "No what?"

"Don't kill me," Gabrielle begged. "Don't do this to my village. Take me but don't harm them."

The warlord smirked and dipped her head. She had a deep, amused voice when she responded. "But then, Gabrielle I wouldn't live up to the monster that you see me." She licked her lips then whispered, "First, I will burn the rest of your village. Then the crosses will be made, and your people tied to them."

Gabrielle frantically shook her head.

"And just because I like you so much," Xena amusingly informed, "I'll be sure to gift your villagers with broken legs." She chuckled at Gabrielle's rising fears and horror. "And tonight, Gabrielle it will be me and you in my tent." She leaned forward and brushed her lips over the bard's soft ones then bit it harshly.

Gabrielle cried when her lip was broken open and bled.

The dark warlord chuckled and brought her lips close to the peasant's soft ear. "Tonight I will rape you over and over until you wish you were on one of those crosses." She drew back, and she couldn't even count the many tears that streamed down the woman's flushed cheeks. She quickly extracted a dagger from her left boot and brought it at Gabrielle.

The villager screamed when the hot blade dug across her chest and left a bleeding wound that was similar to an 'x' design.

Xena sheathed her bloody dagger then amusingly informed, "You'll always be mine, Gabrielle." She quickly stood up and ordered to her soldiers. "Take her away and build me my damn crosses!"

Two warriors quickly stepped forward, grabbed the fallen villager's arms, and hauled her away on her back.
"No!" Gabrielle's scream erupted, "Xena, please no!"

The monstrous warlord smiled coldly at the villager's cries, then she beautifully mounted her mare. "To my Nation!"

The soldiers raised their bloody swords and hailed, "To the Nation! Xeeena! Xeeena!"

Xena held Argo's reins tightly and kept her sword up to the skies. She then gazed far off and stared at the villager being dragged. She felt the last morsel of life in her slowly die when her two soldiers lifted Gabrielle and beat her so she'd stop yelling.

The warlord dropped her head back and smiled darkly at her bloody sword.

The sword shined red back then a droplet of blood collected on the edge of the blade. The droplet freed, fell, and landed right over the warlord's lips.

Xena tasted the mixed blood, and it fueled her darkness. Today was indeed a good day of fighting, and just over the next few hills her two legions waited for her. Greece was almost completely hers! She closed her eyes and basked in her conquest; she felt like a goddess among these weak mortals. She was destined to be the Conqueror.

"No," Xena rasped, and shook her head. "No." She suddenly dropped her head back and screamed at the sky. "Gaabrielleeeeee!"

The warlord's confused eyes flew open and absorbed the darkness.

"Keep it quiet," barked a voice from outside.

Xena gasped for air, lifted her body up with her hands, and raised her head up. She felt so incredibly sore, yet she ignored it. She recalled what'd happened last. She quickly scanned over her current situation, and she knew she was locked away in one of the cell huts.

The warlord touched the back of her head where it hurt the most. She hissed at the pain. Xena got to her feet quickly when the nightmare washed through her completely.

Xena made it just across the cell to her destination. She became sick in the empty chamber pot and there was nothing left in her stomach by the time she was finished. Xena climbed to her feet and slowly walked over to the small bench against the opposite wall. She sat and stared at the closed door that had a barred window. This wasn't exactly in her plans.

The warlord stretched out her earlier cramped legs. She slumped on the bench some and tried to rid of her nightmare by thinking out a plan to escape. She could only guess where her supposed ally was right now. She was also annoyed that Alti had been right that Cyane was too strong for her to fight.

Xena rubbed her sore neck. She was pretty bitter at her lost, but she wasn't out of the game just yet. She remained in silence and fully awake, but it was before dawn when the noise outside her cell stirred her. She stood up when the apprentice shaman
entered the cell alone.

Yakut waited until the door shut then she neared the dangerous warlord. She could tell Xena was surprised to see her awake despite Xena didn't outwardly show it. "I see you've fallen from Amazon Grace."

"You didn't come here to chat with me about village gossip," Xena chided.

"No, I didn't," Yakut agreed. "I suspect you had pleasant dreams tonight...?"

The warlord slotted her eyes at the young Amazon. She briefly considered whether or not Yakut planted the nightmare, but she doubted Yakut had the skill to do such.

Yakut knew she wouldn't receive a response. She stepped closer and mentioned, "I know everything about you now." She laced her hands in front of her. "Alti's sleeping spell actually helped me become more powerful."

The warlord arched an eyebrow at this latest news. "You're a two-spirit, I know."

"I am." Yakut cocked her head. "And you're a lost spirit, Xena." She sighed at the warlord's forming smirk. "I understand why you're angry... ever since you lost Gabrielle."

Xena grew defensive and pointed a finger at the apprentice shaman. "Don't you dare speak her name!" She lowered her hand and hotly mentioned, "She's nothing but a dead memory now."

Yakut narrowed her eyes and debated whether to enlighten the warlord. Would it be too dangerous or would it help? She decided to take the risk. "Gabrielle is alive, Xena. I can feel her spirit... it still walks this Earth."

The warlord grew furious and shook her head repeatedly. "No... she's dead."

Yakut stepped closer and sadly clarified, "The only place she's dead is in your heart." She never dared to see the warlord become so stricken by the new knowledge. "But what does it matter if she's alive or not." She became emotional and mentioned, "You're no longer the person she once loved."

Xena turned her head away and stared across the cell. She closed her eyes and desperately tried to rein over her rage, which wanted to lash out at Yakut. Yakut reminded her far too much of Gabrielle.

Yakut edged closer and softly spoke again. "You have such great potential, Xena. I know many have tried to reach you, and failed." She bitterly muttered, "Except for Alti."

Xena's temper eased, and she turned back to Yakut with brighter eyes than earlier. "Alti means nothing to me."

"Do I though?" Yakut countered despite she already knew.
The warlord lowered her eyes to the floor but softly declared, "Yes." She met the apprentice shaman's intense eyes.

Yakut knew the warlord was being truly honest. She felt more at ease because Xena was opening up to her again. "It's time you let go of your anger, Xena." She stepped closer and touched the warlord's arm. "You are destined for greatness but you have two ways you can accomplish this."

Xena tilted her head and carefully listened.

"You can follow a very dark path," Yakut explained, "One that Alti will show you." She slid her hand down the muscular arm until she had Xena's hand in hers. "Or a honorable path that'll be lonely for moons to come."

"There is no honor in being a warlord," Xena coldly reminded.

Yakut gave a challenging look and debated, "And name a warlord who has tried to fight by honor?" She squeezed the larger hand. "You have the ability to do it, Xena, and you can bring peace to this nation finally."

Xena lowered her gaze.

"You know the darkness that scourges Greece." Yakut dipped her head and caught the warlord's attention again. "You've survived it, and you've been it. You can stop it all and protect future Gabrielles from being enslaved."

The warlord lifted her face and revealed her passionate features. "My heart is not in the right place."

"But your soul is," Yakut argued, "and the rest will follow in time." She touched the warlord's cheek. "Gabrielle believed you would become a protector for the people. Why can't you see her vision?"

"Do I look like her vision?" the warlord snapped and tried to break free. She couldn't though and Yakut held her in place. She growled until Yakut's hand touched her chest and soothed the mounted anger in her.

"You feel that?" Yakut whispered. "Its beautiful, isn't it?"

Xena had fuzzy eyes, and she whispered, "Yes."

"That's what you'll feel one day... all the time." Yakut pressed her palm deeper against the calm heartbeat she felt. "That's the peace you've always wanted, Xena." She smiled when the warlord closed her piercing blue eyes and soaked into the peace. Yakut knew this taste would help Xena make her final decision in the right thing to do. "I want to free you from this cell, Xena," she softly informed so nobody but Xena heard her.

The warlord opened her eyes, which were extremely calm. "Why?"

"Because I believe in you... because I believe you'll save the Greek Nation from all the
warlords, tyrannical kings, and the poverty." Yakut sadly smiled and murmured, "Greece needs somebody like you... Gabrielle needs somebody like you."

Xena's childhood memories of Gabrielle flashed though her eyes, and the peaceful sensation increased in her. She somewhat smiled and whispered, "Gabrielle is still alive."

Yakut tilted her head and it took her a beat to understand what Xena truly meant. She realized Gabrielle was still alive in the warlord despite such much of the dark past. She felt relieved when Xena expressed this. She carefully pulled her hand away and watched the darkness shift back over the warlord. "If you make a promise to me, Xena then I'll free you."

Xena's icy blue eyes focused on the apprentice shaman, but her eyes weren't so hollow as normal. "What is that?"

"You must follow a path of honor," Yakut urged.

The warlord dipped her head in acknowledgment, but she knew there was something else. "And?"

The young Amazon steeled her emotions when she whispered, "I want you to kill Alti."

Xena searched Yakut's eyes and saw the faith the young woman had in her. It reminded her greatly of Gabrielle's faith, and she still felt she failed her best friend moons back. Could she possible keep her promise of honor to Yakut even at the darkest of times?

Yakut still held the warlord's hand, and she squeezed it tightly. "You can do this, Xena."

The warlord slowly nodded then whispered, "By my honor, Yakut I will."

Yakut smiled happily, lifted on her tiptoes, and kissed the warlord on the cheek. "I know." She released hands then become sober. "We must hurry before the village awakens. We have little time."

The warlord was baffled at how the shaman could possibly help her escape.

Yakut softly murmured, "Wait here." She strolled up to the locked door then stood still. She lifted her hands and faced her palms to the ceiling. Her lips moved in a silent chant.

Xena raised an eyebrow when she swore she heard to bodies fall to the ground. Then the door's lock creaked and grind until finally it swung open.

Yakut grabbed the door and ordered, "Hurry." She disappeared out of the cell.

Xena hastened and discovered that the guards seemed to be asleep on the ground. She curiously peered over at Yakut.
Yakut smirked and joked, "Alti's trick comes in handy." She then grabbed a key from a guard's waist band. She closed the cell door, locked it, and then returned the key. "Let's hurry this way."

The warlord darted through some huts and stayed on Yakut's heels.

Yakut ducked behind a hut and peered around the corner at the guard's station at the top of the gates. She focused her eyes on the guard and repeated the earlier chant. She sighed in relief when the chant actually worked from afar.

The Amazon guard slumped against the rail and dropped her head forward. She just barely kept from falling off the side.

Yakut dashed around the hut and guided Xena through the predawn village. She came out of the gates and led Xena closer to the woods. She turned to the warlord. "Don't forget your promises to me, Xena."

The warlord nodded then asked, "Will we see each other again?"

Yakut smiled at her friend's concern. "We will... when its right." She stepped back once. "Be safe, Warrior Princess." She turned on her heels and raced back into the village. She needed to released the three guards from the spell before anybody noticed.

"Thank you.... my friend," the warlord sadly whispered. She shook away her emotions then focused on her present mission. She needed to return to her army and find Alti, as promised. Xena broke into a run and moved quickly through the woods, and she would easily dodge the patrol.

The warlord didn't have an exact location of her army, but she was fairly sure they'd return to the camp they'd been at previously. She wouldn't make it there until the afternoon since she was on foot. She made it to the road a half a candlemark after leaving the Amazon Nation. Then she sensed a familiar presence behind her so she spun around with her hands up.

Xena sighed and lowered her hands.

"How did you escape so easily?" Alti instantly questioned.

The warlord chuckled and folded her arms. "I'm as fast at escapes, Alti as you are at fleeing."

The shaman glared at the warlord and moved closer to her. She sensed some shift in the warlord, but she couldn't decipher it. "Where is your army?"

"A few leagues." Xena considered her options then mentioned, "We're better off traveling in the woods... less attention that way."

The shaman consented and followed the warlord into the woods. She adjusted the heavy pack that contained much of her shamanism materials as well as another set of
clothes. "They found that girl you'd threatened."

"I suspected as much," the warlord muttered. She slowed until Alti was at her side. "I'll ready my army then attack the Nation."

"They'll be prepared once they discover you're missing."

Xena chuckled and smirked at the shaman. "I'm counting on it."

Alti grabbed the warlord's arm and halted her. "You're foolish if you think you can defeat them." She stiffened when Xena's carnal eyes fell upon her.

The warlord faced the shaman now and glared at the hand on her arm, which dropped away. "Actually, I don't want to defeat them."

Alti's face tightened, and she had darker eyes. She knew something was out of place now. She pieced some of the puzzle together, but her thoughts were dashed when a strong hand came around her neck.

Xena clenched her teeth and lifted the shaman off the ground. She stretched her right, wounded arm out and ignored the intense burn. "I actually plan to kill you."

Alti clawed the warlord's strong arm but failed to get anywhere. "What about... our plans?" She chokingly demanded.

The warlord gazed up at the shaman and smiled at the fearful black eyes. "You mean your plans to harvest power from every soul you can get your hands on?" She clicked her tongue at the dark shaman. "Now I know, Alti that somewhere in there that would include my soul eventually. Do you really think I'd let you do that?"

"We had a deal," Alti hissed and dug her claws into the warlord's wrist.

"Deal is over," Xena casually informed. "I've made a better one."

"Yakut," the shaman snarled. "That little-" She lost her words when she was tossed at the tree behind her.

The warlord stepped up to the slumped shaman, who proceeded to get to her feet. "Yakut is more of a shaman than you could ever be, Alti."

Alti's quick mind worked on a spell to slow the warlord down. "No, I'm just a different kind than she is." She focused her powers on the warlord.

Xena hadn't expected any fight from the shaman. She cried in pain and fell to her knees. She closed her eyes and tried to will the painful memory to stop, but the hammer came at her knees anyway.

Alti smiled when her plan worked. "I warned you that I was powerful, Xena." She bent over and grabbed the warlord's black mane. "You are weak if you think anything Yakut tells you is true." She jerked Xena's head back. "The light is not your place, Xena. It never will be... not with the blood you have on your hands."
Xena gritted her teeth and urged her knees to refuse the onslaught of pain. She knew it wasn't real and that her knees still worked fine. She just couldn't get them to listen yet. "It doesn't mean I won't try." She suddenly rammed her fisted hand into the shaman's stomach.

Alti backed stepped and released the warlord. She hunched over and held onto her pained stomach.

The warlord quickly got to her feet when her will returned. She charged the shaman before Alti could perform anymore spells.

Alti's eyes widened as she was shoved backwards into the tree. She then felt strong hands on her hips, and she was lifted into the air. "No!"

The Warrior Princess hotly growled and threw the evil shaman up higher against the tree. She held her breath when Alti screamed so loudly that it sent the crows flying from the trees.

Alti lowered her head and fearfully stared at the tree branch, which protruded from her stomach. She had a rapid heartbeat because she couldn't believe her death was so near. "No," she begged to the Fates or whoever would listen, but nobody would.

Xena stepped back once then twice and stared at the hanging shaman. She watched as Alti slowly started to pass to the underworld.

"I will see... you... again, Xeenaaa," the angry shaman promised before the darkness claimed her.

The warlord briefly stared at the dead shaman and felt some weight fall off her shoulders. She slowly turned and continued her journey to the army as if nothing happened.

It would be a few days before the dead shaman would be found on the branch stake she rested upon. The Amazon patrol would eventually haul her off the branch and bury her corpse. The shaman's death would bring a wave of relief to the Amazon Nation, but Queen Cyane would always wonder if it was Xena that'd done it or not. Yakut was the only Amazon that would hold the secret for many long moons.

And the Warrior Princess returned to her waiting army several leagues from the Amazon Nation. She returned to power as the leader to a discontent and sloppy army. It didn't take long for the warlord to reshape her army's attitude while they marched further west. The tiny band of warriors collected a handful of new recruits from local villages. But the most critical factor was the money and there were slim purses of dinars.

So when Xena's small army reached Oesyme, a tiny port town, she hired a ship. She selected a dozen men, which included Prostig and Tracker. She and the selected men bored the hired transport ship then set sail due south into the Thracian Sea. The warlord, a former pirate, gave the captain specific coordinates to follow, and the captain did so diligently.
The Warrior Princess stood on the starboard side of the ship. She gripped the rail, and her body swayed to the rocking motions. She sensed someone from behind so she casually greeted, "Yes, Prostig?"

The bulky, metal clad warrior took a position beside his leader and folded his arms. He studied the seas and the land far away in the horizon. "Where are we headed?"

Xena smirked over at the warrior. "You're not much for boat rides, Pro?"

Prostig chuckled and just merely swayed with the boat. "It's been awhile."

"For me as well," the Warrior Princess murmured.

"You were a pirate," the warrior noted aloud.

Xena flashed a grin. "I've been many things." She straightened up, and her height brought her above Prostig's.

The warrior glanced at his leader then looked away. "I like this idea." He received an arched eyebrow so he knew to explain. "To conquer Greece... and to do it with honor." He had a faint smile. "It's kind of a romantic notion in a warrior's eyes."

The warlord grunted and teased, "Don't turn poet on me, Pro. I'll need your sword, not your verse."

Prostig laughed quietly deeply and grew amused. "You don't have to worry. I'll leave this adventure to the bards." He went more serious and cautiously mentioned, "The men talk."

"Just like women," the female leader joked, yet she sobered. "What do they say?"

"After you made the announcement and some warriors walked?" Prostig saw the nod so he continued speaking. "Well, many of the men didn't take you seriously. I think maybe they're starting to figure out otherwise."

"Time will tell them," Xena informed. "When there are examples made and when we begin the campaigns."

"Where will we begin?"

The warlord showed a sly grin and softly revealed, "We need a powerful army of hoplites. Who trains the finest in Greece?"

Prostig had wide eyes. "Sparta?" He shook his head. "It is impossible to defeat Sparta."

The bemused warlord chuckled. She highly trusted Prostig so she decided to divulge a piece of her plan. "A hopelite soldier is quite affective in battle, but they do have a weakness."
The warrior considered what the weakness may be; he tilted his head. "Their backs aren't very well protected," he mentioned.

"Exactly," Xena agreed. "We only need to keep the hoplite armies attention with a few diversions. Then I think a cavalry swooping in from behind will do quite nicely."

Prostig mapped it out in his head with a few scenarios. He laughed at the final result, which was a slaughtering win. Then another aspect occurred to him. "A cavalry will cost money... plenty of it."

"Indeed," Xena muttered. She dazzled a wild grin at the warrior. "And a good pirate always keeps a hefty treasure... just in case."

Prostig's earlier grin slowly returned when he realized his leader's partial plans. This may just work out afterall.

On the seventh day, the transport ship dropped anchor just near an island. The captain ordered his sailors to drop the two rowboats under the warlord's command. Afterwards, the warlord and five of her men descended the rope ladders to the rowboats.

From the crow's nest, the sailor eyed the band of warriors that trampled across the beach and into the surrounding woods. He didn't see them for a solid candlemark. The warlord and her warriors returned to the beach shore and seemed to be hauling large trunks. The sailor could only guess what was so important to this warlord to take a boat ride out here.

And when the transport ship returned to Oesyme, Xena's small army was plenty impressed by the incredible influx of finances. The Warrior Princess tempted the warriors by giving them an extra pay and informed them to polish their armor and sharpen their swords. Once the money was in order, Xena hired two heavy transport ships then her small army embarked it. The ships sailed due south then cut through the gulfs and straights until they were near the Peloponnesian peninsula. The transport ships then disembarked the load of warriors near Cape Malea, which was about three days ride south from Sparta.

Xena paid the captains quite well so that they would hold their tongues. She then ordered her army to build a temporary camp along the cape. She then pulled Tracker aside and gave him orders to map out the peninsula, gauge the distance to Sparta, and find the local towns. She gave a last order to Tracker that he ask around for hired mercenaries and emphasis that good money was involved.

Several days after the landing, Xena mounted Argo and Chunag was at her side. She and Chuang rode hard north and through the mountains that blocked them from Sparta. When they were near, they changed into a less noticeable clothes, and it wasn't long before they entered Sparta.

The warlord's eyes glowed when she observed how the city was built at the base of high mountains. This could prove quite useful. And what Xena knew of the Spartan culture was that the women typically were at home while the men were constantly at the barracks. Yet what truly took the warlord's keen interest was the obvious break
between the upper and lower classes. It was a wider gap than many seas that Xena had seen. She now had a rough idea, and a detailed map she and Chuang drew of the city, its walls, and the barracks.

The spring slowly built up and so did Xena's army. She'd arrived on the Peloponnese peninsula with just a hundred twenty-five warriors, seventy-five horsemen, and fifty archers. By late spring, the army had grown to two hundred warriors, a hundred horseman, and a hundred archers. Xena then made a hefty purchase for wood, workhorses, and a had a smith work some special metal. Then her men busied several days with building an onager and a ballista. And if the onager worked as Xena planned, then it would be the siege weapon to bring Sparta to its knees. Now, the onager just needed a test run.

Xena and Borias decided to capture a close town known as Asopus, which ran along the Parnon Mountains. There at Asopus they could test the onager's capabilities from the low mountain range. Xena dispatched a hundred warriors, twenty-five horsemen, fifty archers and the onager. She marched them northwest to the small town that peacefully waited.

Asopus had not expected anything and knew nothing of the small warlord army due south of them. The town was easily hit. The few men that took arms were captured, and the women and children merely rounded up. The villagers were then gathered into a herd and ordered out of the town. They didn't know who the leader was, but they listened to the strange man that seemed to be in charge. He was odd looking with his beady eyes, thin but long mustache, and flat face.

Xena and Borias stood at the top of a high hill and waited for the villagers to be hauled out of the town. She lifted her right foot and propped her boot on a rock sticking out of the ground.

Borias rested his hands on his hips. "I think they're far enough."

The warlord nodded, and she turned her head to the left. She studied the four men that were now trained to operate the onager. "Aim for the town center."

"Ay!" the lead operator called. He then barked his men to lift the heavy boulder into the sling and tightly twisted the rope. Once it was set, he turned to the warlord and the second in command. "It is ready. On your command."

"You better hope you have it aligned right," Xena warned.

The lead operator or rather the hoplomachos slightly sweat, but he was fairly confident his mark would be true. "On your command," he repeated to show he was ready.

"Very well." Xena nodded. "Fire."

The hoplomachos gave a wave of his arm and ordered the operators.

The operator that had his hands wrapped around the lever suddenly yanked down on it with all his strength.
The onager came to life and the tight rope unraveled at a fierce rate. Next the sling blurred and rose up into the air, and the boulder that was contained in the sling became airborne. The projectile was launched and soared through the sky towards the small town.

Xena slowly felt a grin creep over her lips as the boulder began its plunge. She chuckled when the huge rock smashed into the town center's statue of a god.

The hoplomachos sighed in relief and smiled at his accomplishment. He noted his operators patting each other on the back.

Borias's head bobbed, and he smirked over at his content leader. "From those maps, I don't think the onager will be able to fire far enough."

The warlord had already considered this as she wanted to put several onagers up in the mountains behind Sparta. The onagers would chew up the city quite quickly, but Borias was right. "We need to build something bigger."

The hoplomachos had been listening in to the conversation. "If it is too large then we will not be able to transport it up the mountain passes."

Xena slammed her boot on the ground and twisted on her boots. "That's where the workhorses come in. The onager doesn't have enough range to cover all of Sparta."

The hoplomachos considered the problem then mentioned, "Perhaps a counterweight would serve better than using the rope's energy... pressure."

"Even a catapult would not be enough," Borias argued.

The warlord was still mulling over the hoplomachos's idea of a counterweight. She suddenly grinned at Borias's mention of a catapult. "A catapult with a counterweight would work sufficiently."

The hoplomachos mentally drew the siege weapon in his head. "It may work," he muttered. "I will draw a sketch."

Xena smiled at the suggestion. "Do that, and you'll have your materials." She then signaled for Borias to follow her. "Practice on the town some more." She casually strolled off but called back, "And make sure not to destroy too much."

The hoplomaches wildly grinned then hastily ordered his operators to ready the onager again.

The warlord and the second in command descended the path then joined Chuang. Xena found it was quite easy, while the onager was practicing in the background, to convince the villagers to work with her. In response, Xena made several promises to the villagers and their town. It was a great pact because the town had an excellent blacksmith, and the town was not at all in Spartan territory.

The split army marched back to the camp and rejoined. Xena soon had a design for the
weighted catapult, and she made a few adjustments to the sketch. It wasn't long before she purchased the required supplies to build the beastly siege weapon.

Then word spread about Asopus's pact with the small army. The two neighboring towns to the camp sent out representatives and offered alliances to Xena too. They'd heard about the minor attack on Asopus, which ended with no deaths.

Xena used her powers of intimidation to make sure the alliances favored her. And each time, she promised to protect the villages from any enemies. She was quite satisfied that the three towns would become valuable when she would turn her sword to Sparta.

It was a moon after the onager testing in Asopus that the hoplomaches hastened for the warlord to join him. Xena could tell the hoplomaches had finished his project to build the new counterweight catapult. She, Borias, Chuang, and several warriors came to the testing site to see the new siege engine in action for the first time.

The Warrior Princess first inspected the large weapon that was basically a long, sturdy arm with a strong sling at the end. Then at the bottom of the arm was an oval shaped counterweight made of wood that held a calculated amount of heavy boulders. Finally, the entire weapon was held upright by sturdy legs and cross beams on the ground. It was truly a beastly weapon that looked dangerous. And the best part, Xena decided, was that it was highly transportable in three wagons once it was dissembled.

Xena stood beside the hoplomaches and ordered, "Prepare the weapon."

The counterweight catapult faced the Gulf of Laconia, which was a league away. It was soon wound tightly by its rope. The arm was brought lower and lower until it was hooked into place by a strong pin. Next, the operators loaded a heavy boulder into the sling and carefully prepared the projectile for launch.

Xena had mocked the catapult's arm off a ship's mast because she knew how sturdy they were against storms. She then heard the hoplomaches call that the weapon was ready on her mark. "Fire," Xena called.

The hoplomaches waved his lever operator to pull.

The operator yanked down on the lever, which popped the pin from between the block and eyebolt high up. He then ducked his head when the air filled with a sharp whistle.

The counterweight quickly swung to the rear while the arm rocketed forward. It sent off the boulder in a straight direction through the sky.

Everybody tilted their heads back as the boulder went higher then leveled out for a few heartbeats then made its hasty descent. Then there was a loud boom when the boulder smashed into the soft grass faraway.

Chunag was dazzled, and he leaned closer to Xena. "That has to be a good four hundred pous."

"At least," the warlord agreed. She then turned her head to the left where the
hoplomaches waited for her words. "Hoplomaches?"

The lead operator knew he'd done well, yet he was still nervous. He jogged over to the warlord, bowed his head, and waited.

Xena was silent for a moment then she finally turned to the hoplomaches. "You've done well."

The hoplomaches's shoulders fell because he was relieved. "Thank you."

The Warrior Princess considered another thought, and she made her decision. "The siege weapon will be named after you, Vincien."

The hoplomaches lit up at this great news. "I'd be honored."

Xena grabbed the small man's shoulder and tightly held him. "Then the weapon will be named the vincente."

The hoplomaches, Vincien, could not hide his smile. Then he looked beyond the warlord when his comrades cheered out at the proclamation.

The warlord chuckled at Vincien's dumbfounded look, and she lowered her head. She softly mentioned, "You just made their work a lot easier."

The hoplomaches hadn't considered that fact, but it was true. His new weapon, the vincente, would easily wipe out the barracks in Sparta when it was time. And he couldn't wait to see it.

Xena clapped the lead operator on the back then strolled off. She had plenty of prep work to do now that she knew the new siege weapon was a great success.

When the summer was warm but breezy thanks to the seas, the army uprooted from their camp in a matter of days. The vincente was disassembled under the warlord's command and it was packed into its specially designed wagons. Next, the onager and ballista were hitched to workhorses much like the wagons. Then Xena rode at the head of her army and marched them north. They slipped through the mountain pass and came out just south of Prasiae, which was a fair sized town because it was the only town on the eastern coast of the Peloponnese.

The Warrior Princess stationed her army just southwest of the town. She ordered another temporary camp to be made. Then she split the army and took all but twenty-five warriors with her. She marched them, the onager, and ballista to the town of Prasiae.

The town had heard about the possibility of a warlord in the southern peninsula. They were prepared with a small city wall being built. The hundred farmers were prepared with their dull blades and pitch forks.

Xena saw no challenge. She merely ordered the ballista and onager to make quick work of the gates of the small wall. Then she and her men rained down on the sheep-herding town. The afternoon battle ended with only six of her men dead, twenty
villagers killed, and plenty of frightened villagers gathered in the town center.

The peasants thought they'd be killed. They thought their town would be sacked. They instead were confused when the warlord offered her flag to them. She promised an alliance that would offer the village protection from other warlords and in return she wanted supplies. The villagers hastened to agree despite they were almost sure the warlord would renag on the deal.

Yet, the warlord, who they came to know as the Warrior Princess, merely signed the alliance and walked her warriors out of the crumbled gates with a few carts of supplies. They were stumped yet grateful too. And about eight days after the attack, Prasiea flew a purple flag in their town center.

When Xena rejoined her split army, she was none too surprised to discover that new recruits had come to her army. A moon after the alliance with Prasiae, the army had expanded to three hundred warriors, two hundred horseman, and a hundred fifty archers. And Xena expected Tracker to return with some mercenaries in a moon or two which was just in time.

Several of the warriors were sent out into the neighboring woods, and they hacked down countless trees. They worked hard to begin the build of two new vincentes, three more ballistas, and three more onagers. Xena then sent a request to Prasiae for some blacksmith work done to be done on some strong metal. Along with the request was sent plenty of money.

"The third full moon is a perfect time to strike," Borias suggested.

Xena walked around the enlarged map of Sparta. "It will be enough time." She tilted her head and thought it out more.

Chuang had his hands collapsed behind his back. "Several thousand hoplites will be away. It is a good time to strike Sparta."

The warlord paused at the head of the table and stared at the map. She, like everybody else, heard of the woes of Roman attacks on Greek borders. Even Xena despised the Romans but this time it would serve her well. While a large portion of the Spartan military was away and fighting the Romans this left an opportunity that could not be ignored.

"Nor do we have to worry about the Delian League allying with Sparta to stop our attack." Borias carefully watched Xena's face for any way to tell what she was thinking. He couldn't guess it despite he'd been riding beside her for so long. He still didn't understand what the Amazon Nation had done to the warlord to change her around, but he knew he was grateful.

Xena lifted her head and met her officers' gazes. "When Tracker returns with the mercenaries then we will dispatch." She rested her hands on her leather clad hips, and the movement caused her chakram to reflect the candlelight. "The onagers, ballistas, and vincentes must be built by then."

"They are on schedule," Chuang promised.
"Good." Xena then studied the map carefully. "The vincentes will be positioned in Mount Taygetus. One will be in the north, one to the east, and the other on the west side. Their main purpose is to destroy the barracks."

"Will they be able to erect the vincentes in time?" Borias asked.

The warlord peered up with hooded eyes. "The hoplomachae has been training his team to assemble or disassemble the vincente within four candlemarks." She folded her arms over her bronze chest. "He will be selecting two other teams to operate the other two vincentes."

Chuang slightly grinned at the news. "Four candlemarks should be enough time for the vincente units to trek up the mountain passes and assemble the weapons."

"If the assembly stays on schedule, then the vincentes should be prepared to fire a candlemark before dawn." Xena narrowed her eyes at the map of Sparta. "That'll cause plenty of alarm in the city." She lowered her right hand and pointed her finger at a river. "The Eurotas flows through Sparta from the Taygetus mountain range." She tapped the point where the city walls stopped on the river's banks. "That is the weakest point in the city walls."

"That's where we'll focus our onagers and ballistas," Borias concluded.

"Yes." The warlord removed her hand. "Once we break the wall there, the rest will fall easily." She then tilted her head and grinned at the small port in Sparta. "I've also called in a favor from an old friend."

Chuang perked up at the news.

Xena grinned and explained, "An empty merchant ship will be stopping several leagues south of Sparta on the Eurotas. The captain will be giving several of our warriors a ride."

Chuang chuckled deeply and admired the warlord's rise of inspirations lately. "Sparta will not suspect a merchant vessel to bring in a load of warriors."

Borias smirked and muttered, "Beware merchants bearing heavy loads."

Xena and the two officers continued to talk for several candlemarks into the night. They thoroughly mapped out the plans along with a plan B and even plan C just to be cautious. Although Xena felt rather satisfied that the plan would work out considering most of the hoplites were far away.

And it wasn't long before Tracker reappeared with a healthy size of mercenaries. The mercenaries were a rough group of about two hundred warriors. Xena wasn't too concerned about that factor since they would be brute force. She just needed them to support her in taking the city. Once she had Sparta, then she'd have to quickly mount a defense for the returning hoplites that would surely hear word.

It was two moons after the Summer Solstice when the small army and mercenaries
took arms and marched to Sparta. Xena, however, didn't head the army, and instead she led the small fifty warrior party to the Eurotas's banks. She met the captain of the merchant ship and quickly embarked it in the early afternoon.

Borias and Chuang had sent off the covered wagons with the vincentes a day prior. The operators of the vincentes had changed into regular peasantry clothes, stashed their armor and weapons in the wagons, and started north. The group went off the main roads and continued north around the city walls towards the Taygetus Mountain.

Finally, at sunset the army broke camp and made the slow march north. They wouldn't make Sparta until quite late at night. Just as planned.

"We're here," the captain hollered below deck.

Xena climbed the ladder and popped up on deck after the merchant ship rocked from the docking. She wore simply clothes so it wouldn't draw any attention. She found the captain down on the deck and worked with his sailors.

The captain finished a few orders then turned to Xena. "Sunset will be shortly."

The warlord glanced west and found it to be true. She turned back to the captain. "What time do they close the gates in the city?"

The captain tilted his head and dug through his memory. "In the summer... its about two candlemarks after sunset." He focused back on his old friend. "You should make it to the gates far ahead of that."

The Warrior Princess grinned. "I think so." She patted the man's shoulder. "Thanks for the help, Trenton."

"Well, don't you forget my name if you capture Sparta," Trenton muttered, "And if you fail then please forget it."

Xena softly laughed, but there was a glint in her eyes. "No matter the outcome, the Spartans will never forget this night." The darkness flashed over her hardened face, and she turned away. Xena went below deck and collected Prostig and two other warriors.

The small group of warriors hurried off the merchant ship once the gangplank was down. They weren't noticed by anybody because they looked like any other peasant. The warlord and the warriors went across the city and made it to the gates.

The warriors carefully observed the gates, but Xena already had the lay of the gates. What interested her was getting the knowledge about how the gates opened and closed. She and her men waited until late night when the Spartan guards were ordered to close the heavy doors.

The warriors carefully observed the guards closing the gates and noted that four to six men could easily open or close it. The wood beam across the doors required two men to pull on a thick rope, which would lift it. It was not at all complex.
Xena ordered them back to the merchant ship. She got onboard then went below deck. There she spent the final candlemarks preparing herself and the men for tonight’s battle. She had everything mapped out accordingly.

Xena finished sharpening her sword. She wiped the blade clean with a rag then sheathed it in her loose scarab. She then set the sheathed sword in the hammock next to her. Next she checked her bronze armor over her black leathers. She had everything situated except for her cape. She plucked it off the hammock and attached it to her shoulders. The purple interior of the cape stood out against her black leathers and swirly bronze armor. Finally, the warlord attached her scarab to her left side and double checked her chakram.

"We're ready," Prostig said from the small doorway behind his leader.

The Warrior Princess slowly rotated on her boots, and her dark grin showed. She said nothing and quickly followed the well armored warrior. She hastened down the long, tight corridor where her men lined with their backs to the wall. She quickly ascended to the upper deck with Prostig on her heels.

The captain was waiting above deck and in his right hand was an unlit torch. He held it out to Xena when she was close enough. "Good luck, my friend."

"Keep your sails at the ready," Xena warned. After Trenton's nod, Xena faced the mainmast and quickly assessed the distance to the top. She held tightly to the torch then ran towards the mainmast.

Prostig watched in awe when the warlord gave a faint cry then launched upwards. He couldn't guess how and when Xena learned such a fine skill.

The warlord made it three-quarters up the mast. She then climbed the rest of the way and popped up into the crow's nest. She then fished out the flint stones from her well hidden pocket in the front of her leathers.

Xena held the torch between her knees and clapped the flint stones over the torch. She smiled when the torch began to burn. She dropped the stones to the nest's floor then she raised the torch up as high as she could.

"There's the signal, Vincien!" an operator called.

Vincien was already on his feet from sitting on the stone. He smiled then ordered, "Quickly, light the torch."

An operator hastened to carry out the duty. He clapped two flint stones over a torch then once it was lit, he waved it high over his head.

The hoplomaches gazed off to the west and saw a low firelight being waved. He turned his head due east, and he spotted the second signal. "Perfect." Then he waved for his operator to put out the torch before it was spotted. "Break the wine over the boulder. Prepare to light the fire."

"Ay!" an operator agreed. He in his eleven comrades easily carried out the prep-work
to have the projectile at the ready. "We're ready, hoplomaches."

Vincien grew excited and clenched his sweaty hands as he neared the edge. "Light the fire."

Another operator was already by the campfire, and he knelt beside it. He cracked the flint stones until the sparks set the dried leaves ablaze.

Vincien waited a few heartbeats while the campfire grew in strength. He then saw the two other hidden locations of the vincentes followed suit. He put his hands behind his back then commanded, "Light the boulder."

The operations soldier by the campfire removed the torch from the campfire. He marched back to the wine soaked boulder and carefully lowered it.

The boulder came to life with hungry yellow flames.

"We're ready, Vincien. On your order."

The hoplomaches assessed that the other two vincentes had lit boulders. He couldn't wait any longer because the slings could catch on fire. "Fire!" He sucked in his breath when his ears filled with what would become a horrifying whistle during later battles.

The burning boulder was hurled several hundred pous and streaked through the sky. Right behind it came two other boulders, but they were aimed for different targets than the first.

Vincien gritted his teeth and leaned to his right some as he hoped the boulder would go that way. His eyes grew bright yellow just as the boulder made its final descent upon its target.

Quiet Sparta suddenly erupted into chaos when the central barrack exploded into a burst of flames. A handful of unarmed and unprepared hoplites ran screaming from the barrack. Some were on fire and others quite nude.

The city was shaken again when the east barrack was slammed by a burning boulder. The walls of the barrack spewed up into the night sky and landed back into the flames. Another eruption of screams filled the shaken city when the third flaming projectile smashed into the west barrack.

"Hurry, hurry!" Vincien barked at his operators. He smiled ruthlessly when the din of screams and yells faintly crept up the mountainside to his ears. "Good luck, Warrior Princess," he murmured to himself.

"Move, move!" Xena called to her fifty warriors. "To the gates." She dodged around the frantic people that ran from their homes in a panic. This was exactly what she wanted so they wouldn't be noticed too soon. Just ahead she spotted the gates. "Take the gates!"

The fifty warriors surged ahead of the warlord and charged the confused guards at the gates. Xena had purposefully fallen behind and spotted the handful of Spartan archers
on the wall that hastily collected themselves.

"Stop them!" a Spartan officer cried out. "Don't let them get to the gates! Archers!"

The Warrior Princess stopped, ripped her chakram free, and waited a beat until several of the archers strung arrows. She gave a sharp warcry then launched her weapon at the archers.

"Fire, fire!" the Spartan officer commanded.

The archers prepared to release their arrows on the enemy, but they all heard the whistle sound. Then one by one, the archers lowered their bows when a strange, circular object cut off the arrowheads.

Xena stretched out her hand and neatly caught her chakram. She laughed at the archers' stunned faces, yet she threw her chakram again. This time she aimed for their strings so that they'd be useless. She retrieved her returning chakram once it was finished its mission. She then glanced at her fighting men.

"Get the gates opened," Xena demanded and spun her sword just as a hoplite came at her.

Chuang was down by the riverbank and controlled the ballista and onagers. He ordered the operators to launched the third attack on the falling wall. He'd briefly heard Xena's voice carry in the wind, and he smirked. Behind Chuang was the two hundred strong cavalry and a hundred fifty hired mercenaries.

Chuang gazed off to his right in the direction of the gates. He heard a sudden surge of battle cries fill the air. He knew it was Borias.

Borias remained mounted on his gelding and listened the whistle of arrows as the archers picked off the Spartans that lined the walls. He glared at the closed gates and growled, "Come on, Xeeena." His wish was fulfilled, and the heavy gates loudly opened. He twisted in his saddle and ordered, "Through the gates!" He pointed his sword at the opening gates then spurred his horse.

The two hundred fifty warriors bellowed out warcries then ran forward. They waved their swords in the air and followed Borias through the gates of Sparta.

The archers that were left behind, tightened formation, and continued to pluck off the Spartans on the walls. Slowly the archers inched further forward as backup for the warriors.

"Launch!" Vincien snapped to his operators.

The frightening whistle filled the sky again, and the boulder was now targeted for the king's fortress. The flaming boulder made its mark on the western side of the fortress. The fortress crumbled under the boulder then the fire lapped at the fortress's wall and took control.

Finally, the wall by the river broke apart from the continued onslaught of the siege
engines. Chuang ordered the cavalry and mercenaries to takeover the city. He then stayed near the siege engines, which were slowly rolled deeper into the city. The siege weapons were rarely used at this point other than to disperse some formed groups of hoplites.

Sparta was taken by surprise for the first time in their too proud history. Xena's army swept through the city and engaged any stunned hoplite that dared challenge them. The warlord cut her way through the city until she was on the steps of the fortress of the kings.

Xena was happily rewarded when the armored king hastened out of his fortress and stared at her. She grinned at his speechless and shocked demeanor that he'd been completely surprised and by a woman no less.

The Spartan king shook past his anger then raised his sword at the warlord. He jumped down two steps then brought his blade vertically down at the warlord. "You will not have my city," he snarled at the woman. He pressed his blade down.

Xena's knees bent under the great pressure of the king. She kept her sword up though and halted the king's blade from her face. "It is for the taking because you cannot defend it," she threatened.

The king growled then tried to kick at the warlord.

Xena surged her strength just before the kick. She gave a sharp cry and jumped back. She flipped backwards, landed on her hands a few steps below, and pushed up into the air. She came to her feet at the bottom of the steps. She smirked at the king's awed face. "If you bow now, I may let you live."

"You bitch," the king hissed then hastened down the steps.

The bemused Warrior Princess merely engaged her enemy. She had fast swipes and unexpected technique compared to any enemy the king had ever fought.

The Spartan king faltered when he stepped backwards. He'd tripped over a piece of fallen material from the fortress. He almost fell but recovered and lost his sword from a swift kick. He went for his dagger yet was stopped short by the sword tip under his neck.

"I wouldn't," Xena warned. She ruthlessly smiled at the fear filling the king's eyes. She laughed deeply and sauntered closer to the king while she carefully ran her blade over the Spartan ruler's neck.

The king dipped his head back and stared into primal blue eyes. He felt as if she could read his soul, and it terrified him. "You're not going to kill me, are you?"

Xena smiled at the king's trembling voice. She easily towered over him and enjoyed the fear she placed in him. "Why shouldn't I?" She lowered her face closer to his. "You're a cruel tyrant." She pressed her sword closer against the king's throat so that it started to nick. "Tell me, King Nabis why do you deserve to live?"
King Nabis closed his eyes and lost his voice.

"I actually have a better idea," the warlord murmured. When frightened, black eyes opened to her again, she darkly explained, "I think the people should decide your fate." She chuckled at Nabis suddenly wide eyes.

"No!"

The warlord spotted several of her men behind the king. "Take him," she commanded.

The observing warriors quickly came over and grabbed the king by his arms.

"No, you can't do that!" King Nabis screamed while he was hauled away. "I am the descendant of King Demaratus!" He struggled against the three warriors but made his situation worse. "Nooooo!"

The Warrior Princess briefly watched him go then she sensed a familiar presence beside her.

"Xena," Chuang greeted and clapped his fist over his chest. "I sent orders for the vincente units to cease fire." He dipped his head when he noted the warlord's silence and angry profile. "Your orders?"

Xena briefly shook her head then turned to her officer. "Round up any prisoners." She lifted her chin and inquired, "Are there many citizen casualties?"

"There are few," Chuang promised, "as you requested."

"Good." Xena wiped her bloody sword on her cape then ordered, "Let's find out what the damage is."

Chuang fell into step beside the warlord.

"Begin to spread word to the people," Xena informed, "that we plan to restore proper order."

Xena knew that King Nabis had turned Sparta upside down by freeing many slaves and made the slaves citizens. King Nabis alienated the wealthy by taking their lands, splitting it up, and took their money. Then the increase of citizens, from the freed slaves, allowed for more crime because Sparta did not have enough jobs for all the citizens. Sparta had become a dangerous city much like its king. Finally what pushed the sword's blade through the people's hearts was that King Nabis highly favored torture.

It took countless days for the Sparta to calm down from the surprised attack. The news that Sparta had been overthrown swept through the country like Greek fire. The towns that were originally in the Spartan territory remained with Sparta. Then the four towns that'd allied with the warlord continued with their purple flags.

The Warrior Princess kept King Nabis silent down in the dungeons until it would be his time. In the mean time, she paid off the mercenaries then cared for the citizens as
her top priority. She knew any city or town was nothing but wood and clay without the people.

By the first moon cycle since the takeover, Sparta slowly transformed from a dangerous and depressing city into a stable one. The central barrack went under reconstruction just after the wall's hole was rebuilt. The Spartan hoplites at first refused to follow the warlord so they were disarmed but allowed to live. Then one day a former hoplite swore allegiance to the Warrior Princess. The following day, two hoplites swore their allegiance then a wave followed.

Xena stood on the balcony of the fortress that overlooked the city. She gripped the rail and smugly studied what was now her city. She heard her name on every citizen's sweet lips. Every converting hoplite proclaimed her as the Warrior Princess. And her original men crowned her as something much more grand - the Conqueror.

Xena repeated the crowned title in her mind, and she dropped her head back with her eyes closed. She inhaled as the title repeated again, and she happily drowned in it. She opened her eyes slowly and smirked at the murky clouds over her head. She knew it would rain soon and wash away all the blood in the city.

The gray clouds developed a crack and the beautiful sky mirrored Xena's eyes.

Xena searched the blue sky for answers to questions she didn't have yet. She then felt a smile touch her lips as the gap opened wider in the clouds.

The sunlight pierced through the clouds' opening and shined down to the earth. The golden rays washed over the dark woman that proudly stood in them.

Xena's blue eyes burned brilliantly in the sunlight. She felt her skin and black leathers warm, and she glowed a bright amber before the Spartan people that saw her on the balcony. Xena lifted her head and studied the people that watched her back. She grinned at the awe and admiration that pulsed from them.

Abruptly the clouds closed and sealed off the sunlight. Then Xena was startled by the footfall from behind. She turned and raised an eyebrow at Chuang.

Chuang clapped his leather chest and greeted, "Conqueror."

The warlord's lips curled into a cat grin. "Yes, Chuang?"

The Chin warrior lowered his fisted hand to his side. "The plans are on track." He cocked his head then mentioned, "Athens, Corinth, and Thebes have entered an alliance, declared war on Sparta, and vowed to kill you." He then held up his left hand, which contained a scroll. "They sent the declaration."

Xena received the scroll, broke the seal, and unrolled the formal letter. She quickly glanced over it and slowed at the bottom. "If we," she read aloud, "enter Laconia, we will level Sparta to the ground." She lifted her head and deeply laughed. She rolled up the scroll.

"What is your reply to them, Conqueror?"
The warlord held up the scroll and tightly clenched it. She then tersely replied, "If."

Chuang's grin met his eyes, and he bowed his head. "I'll send the reply." He, like Xena, knew that many would be too frightened to enter Laconia and try to battle for Sparta. It was too risky, and Xena was too formidable now.

The warlord lowered her hand with the scroll at her side. She scanned the city that required repair on many levels. She would see that the city would receive it, and in return the citizens would remain loyal to her. Not only would she conquer these lands, these cities, and armies but she would conquer the peoples' hearts unlike so many previous rulers.

Xena, the Warrior Princess, now knew what she was destined for - Yakut was right. She would make every cruel king or warlord fall to her sword. She could already see Sparta required such guidance. There would be nothing that would stop her, and she would free Greece from the cruelty and tyranny. And Xena would take her destiny and bend it to her will.

She would become the Conqueror of Greece!

The End