

## **Disclaimer & Notices**

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**Violence:** There is violence in this story.

**Subtext:** Any subtext becomes main text here.

**Summary:** This dramatic epic opens up to Xena and Gabrielle's childhood when they are best friends with an growing friendship. One day, Gabrielle's hometown is attacked while Xena is visiting her. Xena tries desperately to protect Gabrielle but ultimately fails. Xena will not stop believing that Gabrielle is alive, and she hunts for her friend. Along Xena's journey, things become darker and lead her further from Gabrielle and the memories. Meanwhile, Gabrielle is taken into slavery but it isn't for some time before her luck comes back. She meets a very caring master, who sends her away to be schooled as a bard. Later, Gabrielle befriends a very unusual girl, and the girl claims to be an Amazon. It isn't long before Gabrielle discovers how real the Amazons are, and that she's fated to be more than just a slave.

**Feedback:** [redhope@redhope.net](mailto:redhope@redhope.net)

**Homepage:** <http://www.redhope.net>

**List:** <http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/redhope/>

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Series 9: **Destiny of Mine** – Story #1

**To Find What was Mine**

By Red Hope

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.

The young slave looked across the table to her mother.

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.

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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 make it through!"

"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 finally 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 its 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 barrelling 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 along side 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 open 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 as 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-no 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-”

“Its 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 smile 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 dining 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 out side 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... welllll...” 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 ease. 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 make up for it."

"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 some how 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.

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"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 spat 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 unwidened 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 sprung 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 walk 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 shake 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. “It’s 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.”

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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?”

“Hmmmm?”

“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 smile 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?”

“Nnnno.” 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."

"It's 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 overheard 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.

“It 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 Eilis.

“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 manor 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.

“Its 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. “Ooooooh 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...”

Ephiny 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?

#### 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 sssuggestio-" 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 stars 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 whether 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 candelmarks 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 candelmarks."

"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 proceed 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, to stunned to finish it.

"Yesssss, 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 simply 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 galle. 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 expect to see you again.”

“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 out how just how Xena managed to become 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 its 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.”

“A do shasheesh,” translated Lila.

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.

“Hmmm.” 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 reseeded back. “Aglah alainn,” she whispered.

Lila didn’t think her jaw could have gone any slacker 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 deirfuir 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 inwardly 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 sun light.

“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.”

“Dolphin,” translated the captain. “Alainn,” she added.

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 iss 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’fheidir,” 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?”

“Is ea. Protect Lila,” agreed Xena. “Lila ni h-ea laoch.”

“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 from 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 scribing.

Lila crawled into bed and rolled onto her side. For awhile, 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 mustered 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 fisted 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 M'Lila 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.

M'Lila 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 M'Lila's word. "Its okay... he's my friend."

M'Lila'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.

M'Lila 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 M'Lila. 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. M'Lila and Lila however were closer to the bow and M'Lila 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 honour 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. “Graum 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 look 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 the 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 iss 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.

“Graum 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 fall 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."

**To be continued.**