Murder of The Nightingale

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Summary

A mercenary, who lives a double life, is given the daunting task of assassinating the Tribal Queen of the Steppes to prevent an outbreak of war in Rome. During her hunt, the mercenary meets a woman who shares her appreciation for art without knowing that the woman she comes to develop feelings for, is the enemy she is ordered to kill.
Rome. It was considered the greatest and most powerful place in the world. Travelers from all over flocked to the city. They expected great opportunities and riches to fill their empty purses. The great wonders of Rome had been washed away when Nero crowned himself as Emperor. Rome once was a city flourishing with life was now a den of filth, plague, poverty and death at every corner.

There was no life here and every citizen that attempted to flee was executed by Nero’s command. With every weed in the field one must look at the flowers surrounding it. There were pockets of happiness throughout the empire’s capital. You just had to look for them.

Life is what you make it out to be. Some resorted to taking any job they were able to do even if they hated every waking moment of their day’s work. You must find a reason to go on living even if that meant killing people as a job.

In one of the said pockets of happiness in Rome, children were entertained by puppeteers and stage performers. Afar, sitting in a canopy covered outside a tavern, Gabrielle sat in her black hooded cloak, nursing a cup of water.

She lingered in the open faced tavern, watching the children cheer and laugh as the performers made fools of themselves. Cracking a smile she tried not to laugh as others were around her. If the Roman military were in the vicinity the entertainment would be put to a halt.

No enjoyment was allowed unless approved by the emperor. A horrible life it is to live through other people’s suffering.

Gabrielle hid her face at the men passing by and a man in a heavy thick cloak discreetly weaved through the crowd of people. She noticed his sly hand gesture and slipped a small scroll out of his long willowy sleeve.

She glanced around at the oblivious onlookers and scooted to the end of the bench and held out her palm. The man passed and handed the scroll off into her hand and hurried away. Tucking the secret message in her cloak pocket she stood from the bench and threw a couple of coins on the table to pay for her meal and drink.

Across the busy square, Gabrielle searched the area and slipped in between two buildings, one belonging to winery and the other to a sea of Rome’s finest artists. She took the scroll hidden in her palm and read it quickly.

Heavily, she sighed and pulled the hood off her head and walked by an open lit fire outside the winery and dropped the letter in the burning embers. Making sure nobody was watching she stripped herself of the heavy black cloak and rounded the corner.

She entered the workshop beside the winery and tossed her cloak on a bench near the entryway. She lathered her hands with a bar of soap and knelt down in front of a spigot and turned the knob. Water flowed from the spigot and drenched her hands then she splashed some water onto her face several times.
“Gabrielle! Have you come to share some of your satirical ballads today?”

She stood and dried her face and hands with her blouse. Lifting her head she spotted Zenodorus standing on a thirty foot ladder, soiled in clay from head to toe. She rested her hands on her hips and arched an eyebrow.

“What are you doing up there?” she asks the artist.

Zenodorus slid down the ladder and jumped down a foot in front of her. She jumped and took a step back. “I’ve got a new assignment. I’m designing a new statue for the emperor.”

Ah, the emperor. Nero the Mad, she called him. She was positive that he was the only emperor who requested to have as many statues and busts made during his reign. He had far more than the emperors before him scattered across the empire.

“I’m not surprised he wants another statue. He’s so full of himself,” she muttered. “How large is this statue going to be?”

Zenodorus wagged his finger in her face and wrapped an arm around her. “Picture it, Gabrielle,” he set the scene, waving his hand across the workshop. “A hundred foot tall statue with a crown of laurels, chiseled physique, sword in hand, standing on a dais. What do you think?”

She rolled her eyes. “I think that you’re going to boost his ego.”

She shrugs his arm off and grabbed a set of paintbrushes off the table and walked towards the small space she had to work on her paintings. He followed her and jumped on the table, sliding across with ease on his rear just as she was beginning to grab a new canvas to be stretched.

“Guess who stopped by today.” He wiggles his eyebrows mischievously.

Gabrielle yanked a couple of wooden boards from beneath the jumpy artist and waltzed over to the stretcher.

“Who?” she asks, trying to sound interested.

Zenodorus grabbed one of the paintbrushes and swiped it across his clean shaven face. “Augusta Sabina,” he sniggers.

She whipped her head around. “What did she want?”

“Oh, you know, a little something from you,” he whittled the brush on his arm, distracting himself. “She wants a commission for her private villa.”

She strung the canvas sheet on the stretcher and pulled it over the wooden beam, cursing under her breath.

“That cow is just as bad as him,” she growled. “If I have to paint one more portrait of her I swear I’ll rip my eyes out!” she hammered the canvas to the wooden frame and Zenodorus flinched.

“At least she’s not ugly like his last wife,” he mused.

“You mean the wife he murdered?” she snorts. “When she gives birth to that spawn I have no doubt Nero will chop her head off. Just you wait, Zenodorus.”

The artist clicked his tongue against his inner cheek and shook his head. “You shouldn’t talk badly about the emperor’s wife, Gabrielle.” He crept up behind her and whispered, “The walls have
ears.”

“Get away from me,” she playfully snaps back. “When is she stopping by so I can prepare myself?”

Zenodorus lay down on a table and gazed at her with an arch of his thick eyebrow. “It’s gonna cost ya.”

“Come on!”

He laughed and rolled off the table and climbed up the tall ladder to continue working on the steel framework of his newest creation.

“She’s coming by tomorrow morning.”

“Perfect.” She pulled off the freshly stretched canvas and placed it on the easel. “I hope she doesn’t want to ‘chat’ while I paint because I hate talking to her.”

“But you’re so good at it!”

Two steps. Three steps. Four steps.

A noble Roman woman sauntered around the market, searching for jewelry, followed by two male guards posted on either side of her. She stopped at a small shop and stood underneath the canopy, inspecting the necklaces, casually talking with the friendly jeweler.

Five steps. Six steps.

She waved her hand, no longer interested by the small trinkets that the merchant was selling. She took a detour down an alley as a short cut to get through to the next market ahead closer to the square. She and her bodyguards rounded a corner and walked in the deserted alley of apartment homes.

Seven steps. Eight steps.

Two sets of eyes peered from behind the buildings. Men dressed in fur cloaks and leathers, slithered up behind the Roman guards and wrapped their hands around the Romans’ mouths. With a swift twist of their necks the Romans collapsed into the arms of their attackers.

The Romans were dragged off behind the buildings by their arms. The oblivious Roman noblewoman proceeded to head toward the market and then she mistakenly turned around and gasped at a tall woman with wild raven hair and blue eyes standing behind her.

She opened her mouth to scream and then her attacker’s arm wrapped around her neck.

Snap.

The noblewoman fell to the ground with a loud thud and her body was dragged off by her boots into a small alley off the main street.

Gabrielle waited for Zenodorus to leave the workshop so she could go upstairs into the tower. She was sure that he knew that she lived upstairs but since he never said anything the subject was moot. She looked at paint stained hands and dipped them into a water basin.
Scrubbing profusely she wasn’t able to get even a small smidgen of the paint off her hands. She wiped her hands on a cloth and plopped down onto the bed and gaped at the wooden beam ceiling. As she lay there in solace her mind wandered over the message she received this afternoon.

Normally, she mentally prepared herself for such tasks but she wasn’t sure how she was going to go about this one. All she could think about was Emperor Nero and his will to get rid of every single enemy in his path. He couldn’t even do it himself, she scoffs.

She pressed her fingertips together and blew a strand of blonde hair away from her face. Listening to the pure silence surrounding her, she closed her eyes and inhaled. The streets outside were quieting down, people were retreating to their homes, merchants were closing their shops. She heard the usual yelling from the winery next door.

A husband and wife, always arguing over the same thing: grapes or apricots. She wondered if they actually loved to argue since it was the same bickering at the same damn time every single day. Still, she enjoyed listening to them. It was amusing and comical but most of all, it was normal.

Gabrielle even copied some of the words from the argument since she memorized it. While she was listening to the wife yell at her husband she mouthed the words straight from the wife’s mouth as they were being said.

She giggled softly and exhaled heavily, listening to the birds walk across the rooftop. In the midst of her normal routine she heard a loud bang downstairs in the workshop. She jumped off the bed and reached underneath the bed and pulled out a curved dagger.

Quickly, she pads down the stairs and peered from afar.

“Hey!” she yelled.

Two teenage boys had broken into the workshop and had all of her paint brushes laden in their arms. They scurried and ran out of the workshop, dropping a few brushes and small vials of paint. Gabrielle ran down the spiral staircase.

She chased after the boys and heaved heavily as they were already too far away for her to catch them. She slammed her hand against the wall and watched as they disappeared into the dim-lit streets. Reluctantly, she turned around and saw her workstation was completely empty minus a few miniscule brushes and useless white paint.

She huffed and bent down and picked up the scattered brushes, vials and canvas skins off the floor. Angrily she threw the supplies onto the table and stared out the window. A sea of darkness.

Gabrielle turned to go back upstairs and paused at a tall woman dressed in maroon gown and veil draped over her dark hair with the bluest eyes she’s ever seen. She raised an eyebrow and cleared her throat.

“The shop is closed until morning,” she informed the woman.

The brunette walked inside, not heading the blonde’s words at all. She walked around a few small sculptures that resembled what looked to be deities.

Gabrielle crinkled her eyebrows and irritatively eyed the intrusive woman.

“I said we are closed,” she repeats. “Hello?”

The woman swiftly spun around and pointed to a sculpture. “Did you make this?”

“No…” she paused and looked around the empty workshop. “We have a sculptor who also works here. Sorry, I don’t mean to be rude but I’m not really allowed to let anyone inside after closing time,” she proceeds to coax the woman to leave.

The veiled woman smiled and looked down at Gabrielle’s paint stained hands.

“So, you’re a painter.”

Gabrielle shyly hid her hands behind her back. “Yes. If you want you can come back tomorrow and I could commission something for you.”

She nods her head slowly and her eyes wander around the large marble work space.

“I’ll come back around the same time tomorrow.” She turns and heads towards the exit.

Gabrielle’s mouth gaped. “Well actually you can’t come –“ she began to say as the woman vanished. She folded her arms and felt a headache encroaching.

Zenodorus got an early start on his new sculpture and head to the workshop just after dawn. He sketched the sculpture before he began sculpting the statue but the longer he stared at the sketch he changed his mind.

He slid down the tall ladder and took a step back to examine the height of the statue. One hundred feet. That was a tall task, he snickered at his inner jokes and puns he continuously made throughout the day. He licked his finger and closed one of his eyes, picturing the finished product.

He heard footsteps and smiled at his friend. “Gabrielle!” he greets her with a chipper tone. “Sleep well?”

She rubbed the back of her head and yawned. “I had a horrible night.” She walked over to her station grumpily. “Someone stole my…” she looked at the table where she kept her supplies and cinched her eyebrows. “Paintbrushes…” she mumbles.

The paintbrushes which were stolen by those thieves had magically reappeared on the table. She spun around to the thin artist who gaped at her confusedly.

“Did two boys come in here this morning?” she asked.

Zenodorus eyed the brushes and stared at her wide green eyes. “Um, ah, no Gabrielle. Nobody came by. I’ve been here since after sunrise.”

“Hmmph.”

She picked up the brushes and examined them. Her eyes drifted to the window above the work station and stared at the citizens preparing for their day. Merchants set out their creations to be sold, vendors put out their fruits, grain and oils to be sold. She tapped the brush against the table and turned back to Zenodorus.

“I should get my station ready for Augusta Sabina,” she mocks.

“That’s the spirit, Gabrielle!”

She sent a frown his way and he winked with a bright smile.

“I’m just trying to be optimistic,” he shrugs a shoulder.
Surveying the busy streets of the south of Rome, a pair of hazel eyes peered through a telescope. With one eye shut and the other seeing the world beneath her in a tall tower, she took a bite of an apple to keep her busy. So far her job was tedious and could be boring at times but she insisted on following orders.

During her quiet time alone she heard footsteps coming up the narrow stairs. Quickly she unsheathed the knife at her hip and tossed the unfinished apple on the ground. Keeping her guard up was a necessity to survive in this era, especially in Rome.

The footsteps crept closer and closer. Her fingers firmly wrapped around the knife's hilt and held her breath. She didn't feel ready to attack someone just yet. She received a horrible beating a week before arriving in Rome and the bruises all over her ribcage weighed her down.

The tension in her body relaxed when the boots matched the person. She smiled and lowered the knife close to her thigh.

"Xena," she greets while trying to hide the knife.

Xena frowned and took notice of the young woman's knife that she was desperately trying to conceal. She snatched the knife away and the dark haired woman hung her head shamefully.

"You were going to attack me?" she took a step closer to the woman. "Know your place, Gölge."

The timid thin framed tall woman licked her suddenly dry lips. The knife was placed back into her palm and she lifted her eyes, staring into her ruler's crystalline eyes. Inside, her stomach churned and a knot formed in the middle of her chest.

Xena looked into the girl's hazel eyes for a couple seconds longer then brushed by her, bumping shoulders. She stripped herself of the maroon veil and garb that she stole off the noblewoman the night before. Curiously, Gölge turned around and saw the conqueror's toned backside and put a hand to her chest, almost able to breathe again.

"How's the search? Have you seen anything suspicious?"

The conqueror looked over her shoulder and Gölge averted her gaze. She smiled softly and threw her vest on and began running the laces through the small eyes, tightening it slightly from her waist up.

"No. I --I haven't seen anything useful. I do not believe anyone knows we're here," the olive skinned woman replied. She toyed with her long thick braided hair and took another look at Xena behind her. "Where did you go last night? You were gone for a long time," she hinted.

Xena stopped in the middle of tying her vest and glared at the wall in front of her. There was a moment of awkward silence between them.

"Is that really any of your business?" she answered in a calm tone. "You're supposed to be spying
on Romans. Not me."

"I…just…I just worry about you. Emperor Nero has a bounty on your head."

Xena pinched the girl's chin and gazed into her hazel eyes. "Put your emotions aside, Gölge. I brought you here because I have a very special task assigned," she leans in close, "just for you." Her warm breath grazed the girl's cheek and the hair on the back of her neck stuck up like needles.

The tall woman, mirroring the conqueror in height, hair color and stature, lips plump and cheekbones that could rival the conqueror's before her. Her palms drenched with clammy sweat as she kept her gaze locked with the blue eyed one. It was then that a smile crept onto the conqueror's lips that Gölge's cheeks reddened.

Stepping aside, Xena walked over to the telescope to take a look at the busy city. With a steady hand she guided the seeing-eye scope and looked for Roman soldiers searching the city but found nothing of note yet. The scope turned slowly from left to right and then she snapped her fingers.

"Ah what do we have here…"

Gölge took a moment to gather her inner thoughts and she walked over to her ruler. She was closer than necessary and Xena felt the girl's closeness, inching nearer to her backside.

"What did you see?" asks the girl with a crack in her voice.

Xena raised an eyebrow and took a step away from the telescope and spun around swiftly to face the young tanned woman. A narrowing of her eyes was enough to scare anyone off, all except this one. This girl. This girl was unique. She knew it from the moment she laid eyes on her in a tribe she invaded.

"Now I know why I gave you the name 'Gölge'," she chirps with a snort. "I spotted Augusta Sabina walking across the square on the north side."

"Are you going to follow her?"

"No but you," she poked the girl's chest, "are going to keep watch. Wake me when she comes back this way. I'm going to rest for awhile."

She side stepped Gölge and brushed her hand against the girl's and gripped one of her fingers before disappearing into the back of the cramped room. Gölge kept her smile to herself and sat back down in front of the telescope.

Roman soldiers entered the workshop and told everyone inside to leave immediately. Gabrielle lifted her eyes over the canvas and saw the artists in the middle of working on their projects being ushered out. She tried to hide herself, knowing what was to come.

All of the artists had to stop their work and hurry out of the workshop. That also included Zenodorus who before vacating, smiled at Gabrielle and gave her two thumbs up for luck. She groaned and hit her forehead against the canvas several times lightly.

"Gabrielle! Are you hiding from me?" Sabina's voice boomed in the workshop.

She groaned and stood quickly from the stool on which she sat. Put on a face, she told herself. She rounded her work station and presented a façade to the empress. The smile hurt her cheeks in the presence of the irritating empress.
"Augusta Sabina, I was told you were coming by today. You want a portrait for your private villa?" she asks politely.

Sabina sighed heavily and sat down on a chair then fanned her face. "It's so hot outside," she complained. "Will this summer heat ever end?"

Gabrielle tried her best not to roll her eyes. She poured a glass of water for the empress and offered it to her. Sabina grinned and graciously accepted the water and downed it quickly. Gabrielle's eyebrow arched. It was indeed hot but this woman had the luxury of living in a huge palace with people to serve her at all times. She didn't feel bad for the empress in the least.

"On the bright side you will deliver your baby in the fall. The heat wave will have died down by then," she tries to sound concerned and sympathetic which definitely fed the empress' ego.

Sabina grinned and crossed one leg over her knee. "I cannot stay too long today, Gabrielle. The emperor has a curfew set for me. I can understand why," she continued to fan her face and wipe sweat droplets off her forehead.

"I wasn't aware there was a curfew especially for you, empress. Aren't you allowed to come and go freely in the city?"

The empress snorted. "Haven't you heard? That primitive woman has entered the vicinity of the empire. Who knows where she lies in wait? Hera forbid that she be in Rome," she sighs heavily and shifts uncomfortably in the chair.

Gabrielle took that information, locking it away in the back of her mind. She prepped her station to sketch the portrait and opened several vials of paint. She wondered if this was going to be an easy task to achieve. If that so called Steppe queen was in the empire, lurking in the shadows, then this could be a very amenable task.

"Did you bring anything to change into or will you be wearing the gown you have on?" she ignored the statement she heard. Being too eager could get you in trouble she quickly found out.

"We'll do a quick sketch today. I'm exhausted," Sabina swiped her sweaty forehead. "The walk from the palace to here is quite a journey for me."

Gabrielle hums and nods her head. She sat down on the stool and held a piece of charcoal in her hand. She peeked at the dramatic empress from behind the canvas and raised her hand. "Could you move your head a little to the left?" she asks and Sabina frowned. "If you wouldn't mind, empress? We only want your best angles."

"All my angles are the best, Gabrielle," the Augusta bats her eyelashes and gives the artist a shimmering smile.

"Of course, such a beautiful empress as you wouldn't dare have a horrible angle..." she says and faces the canvas, sketching away. Inside, she was smoldering. This was exactly what she was trying to avoid. Conversation. The young empress loved to blab her tongue until it turned numb. Luckily today was a short day.

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Gölge braided a piece of rope to keep busy as she was told to watch the streets. Occasionally she glanced back at the conqueror sleeping on a small bedroll on the floor. Keeping focus wasn't as easy as Xena said it was. She received several mixed signals from her ruler and teacher over the years spent together.
She remembered when she first saw the Steppe conqueror and how horrified she was. Her tribe was massacred for not paying their dues. It was only a matter of time until her people were attacked. She prepared herself for that day, or so she thought. That day was long and bloody. The loss of her friends affected her greatly because they were all she had. Her family left her to go to war when she was a mere child and never returned.

But that day she helped out of a large tent by Xena's lending hand. At first she thought she was going to be sliced in two and left for the coyotes. That day she became the Steppe conqueror's student. That was three years ago. Gölge quickly realized that she and her teacher weren't far apart in age and her desire to get closer burned within her.

Her life was forever changed and so was her name. It'd been so long since she heard her birth name that she couldn't recognize it if someone called her by it.

"Shadow," she murmurs to herself.

She finished braiding the rope and sighed. She threw the small piece of rope on the ground and peeked in the telescope. Scanning the area she locked onto the Augusta making her way across the square with her guards and maids following her.

She gasped and ran to the other side of the room. "Xena!"

With a jolt the Steppe woman awoke to a pair of wide eyes staring at her from above.

"Sabina is coming back this way!"

Xena jumped up and ran to the small window and she didn't need a telescope to see the empress. A grin formed on her lips.

"Timing. It's all about timing."

Gölge shifted her weight and gawked at the raven haired warrior. "What are you planning to do?"

"It's not what I'm planning. It's what's already been done."

She turned and saw much confusion in the girl's eyes. She grazed her finger on her cheek and her once malicious smile turned soft. She could feel the heat radiating off the girl's flesh. A moment too long, she thought, and pulled her hand away. Her smile vanished and her face became cold and eyes distant.

"I'll be leaving to search the city by nightfall. Tildus will come to drop off food and wine. Do not leave this tower." It was more than advisement. It was a threat.

She walked off back to her bedroll and Gölge shows a frown.

"Where are you going? Aren't you supposed to tell me everything?"

Xena spun around, wide eyed. "I don't have to answer to anyone but myself. I urge you to keep reminding yourself of that."

Augusta Sabina and her entourage stumbled upon a crowd of people. She waved her hand to the guards her husband assigned to her, to clear a path for her. She waits patiently as the people dispersed and she was able to pass through.

A sight she wasn't expecting to see was about to be burned into her mind. The citizens bowed their
heads upon her presence and she smiled at everyone, though there were whispers among the people. They kept staring at her and she felt the circumference of eyes.

She halted in the center of the giant circle of Roman people and lifted her head slowly up to the burning skies. Holding a hand over her eyes she gasped. A naked noblewoman was nailed to a crucifix for the whole city to observe.

"Kelaina!" she screeched. She let out an ear piercing scream, sobbing profusely at the sight of her friend and confidant of Emperor Nero.

The guards quickly surrounded the crucifix and pushed people back. Sabina dropped to her knees, tears streaming down her cheeks as she wailed loudly.

After a long day of sculpting and painting all of the artists left their stations to go back to their homes. Zenodorus stayed a bit longer than usual to finish the arm of his sculpture. The assignment was the biggest one yet and since he planned to make a colossal monument he had to sculpt each piece separately and attach them to the frame later.

To finish up his station he threw a large sheet over the sculpture and washed his hands underneath the water spigot. He heard cursing and loud thrashing around so he peeked over his shoulder and snickered.

"Tough day with the empress, Gabrielle?" he inquires.

She rearranged her supplies on the table and slammed a dirty cup of paint water down next to her brush set. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay," he kept washing his clay covered hands.

"She said it would be a short day!" she yelled.

Zenodorus raised his eyebrow. Didn't she just say she didn't want to talk about it?

"She was here for four hours! Her servants had to bring food in! I told you she's a cow," she rambled. "You wouldn't believe the stuff she was talking about, Zenodorus. She actually asked me to paint a mural on the wall after she has her spawn child! Can you believe that?"

He smiled and dried his hands. "I can. You know how she is. Listen, Gabrielle I have to –"

"And then she wanted me to paint her from the chest up because gods forbid that she be captured in time while pregnant," she scoffed and began putting her bits of charcoal back into their respected box. "And then in the middle of the sketch –are you ready for this? She changed her mind! So now I have to redraw everything that I worked on for four hours." She groaned loudly.

Nervously, he backed away. "I'm sure you'll be able to come up with something real quick! I have to go now but I'll see you tomorrow…"

Gabrielle grunted and while she was reorganizing her station she spilled the paint water all over herself and the floor. The paintbrushes inside the cup rolled off the table and hit her on the head. She felt like this day was worse than yesterday. Augusta Sabina was a curse to her creativity. Whenever that woman appeared she wanted to rip her a new one.

She gathered the brushes off the floor and then saw a hand holding one of the brushes in front of her face. She whipped her head upwards and her mouth parted slightly.
"You should keep these somewhere safe so they're not stolen again," said Xena.

Gabrielle hesitantly grabbed the brush from her and stood up, placing the cup back on the table. She smoothed her hands down her dirty smock and looked around the empty workshop.

"You really shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

Xena raised an eyebrow. "Why? Are you some kind of assassin?"

The blonde laughed awkwardly. "Did you..." she paused and shook her head. "Never mind. What are you doing here? It's after hours."

"I told you I was coming back at the same time I came by last night. Do you not remember?"

"Oh, right." She slapped her forehead. "It's been a busy day. I guess I forgot." She sighs. "Well, I don't normally let people in after the shop is closed but since you're here...would you like for me to paint you something?"

Xena mingled around the shop and came to the sketch of Sabina on the large canvas. She looked over to the blonde artist and smiled. "Is this the empress?"

Not her again. Gabrielle nods her head.

"Yes, she comes by and requests portraits all the time."

"Does she?" the Steppe woman admired the drawing. "You must be very good if the empress comes to you. There are hundreds of painters in Rome and yet she wants you."

Gabrielle brushed a long strand of hair behind her ear. "Um, I've never seen you around before. You're not from here I take it?"

Xena lifted her eyes over the canvas and came around to stand in front of the artist. "I'm just visiting but I think I'll be staying for awhile."

"Here, sit down." She offered her a seat and Xena eyed the chair and slowly took a seat. Gabrielle smiled and grabbed some parchment from a box on the table. She swiveled the stool around and sat down with a fresh stick of charcoal and stared at the blue eyed woman, smiling faintly.

Xena watched the blonde's eyes inspect her face and she'd never had anyone stare at her so intensely for so long that she was beginning to feel self conscious. She adjusted the maroon veil on her head and wrapped an arm around herself.

"Your face is very symmetrical," she says with a hint of surprise in her tone. The longer she stared at her the more awkward it was. She looked down at the parchment and started to sketch slowly starting with the outline of a face.

"So, where are you from?"

The Steppe conqueror tried to peer at the sketch but couldn't see from this distance. "From Greece," she lied.

"Oh, Greece!" Gabrielle says while lifting her eyes periodically. "Where in Greece?"

"Delphi," she answers. She wasn't used to being on the opposite end of the unknown.

"That's a nice city. I've never been there but I've heard a lot of strange things happen there. So what
brings you to Rome? You must be a noblewoman given your clothing."

Xena briefly stared at the gown she wore; almost forgetting that she was dressed like a Roman. "I plan to buy a villa here and I'm sightseeing. Rome is supposedly the best city to do that so I've heard."

A chortle came by the artist and she continued sketching without lifting her eyes. "If you say so. Ever since the emperor was crowned he's prohibited all types of entertainment. But I guess it must be different for an upper-class woman like you."

Very interesting. Xena leans forward to sneak a look at the sketch and caught eyes with Gabrielle. "You better not make me look hideous."

Gabrielle crookedly grinned. "I don't think that's possible."

It took a second for her to realize that what she said was not supposed to be said aloud. She swallowed and cleared her throat. Those eyes; they could break glass with their intensity. Her heart palpitated and she quickly dipped her head down to the sketch again.

Xena smirked and leaned back to allow the artist to continue sketching in peace.

"If you're not busy I could show you around Rome…" Gabrielle offered what thought might be a good idea after that horrible thing she blurted out. "But I'm sure you have better things to do."

Her subject didn't reply and Gabrielle hurried to finish the sketch as quickly as possible. She blew off the remnants of the charcoal dust and presented the drawing. Xena took the parchment and examined it closely and smiled at the nervous artist.

"You have a good eye," she complimented her. She handed the parchment back.

"You can keep it," Gabrielle insisted.

Xena set the parchment on the blonde's lap. "You're not finished with it. You said you'd paint something for me. I'll come back so you can finish it."

She held her breath and stood up at the same time as her subject. "I assume you'll be back at the same time?" she asks and the blue eyed woman kept quiet with that powerful stare of hers. "You're a woman of few words," she jokes.

The tall brunette let a small grin escape her lips and she turned to leave the workshop. Gabrielle looked down at the sketch and frowned. She gasped and ran after the woman out into the open.

"Wait, I didn't catch…your name." Her eyes glanced around the area and she searched behind the corners of the stone building and rubbed her chin. "That woman is like a ghost," she mutters.

Waltzing back into the shop she safely secured the sketch in a drawer. She cleaned up the table and then a pigeon appeared on the window's ledge. She saw the message attached to the bird's claw and she retrieved it then let the pigeon fly off into darkness.

With caution she opened the small message which read:

*Meet at the Faustina Temple. Half passed noon.*

Chapter End Notes
Gölge - pronounced "gol-gey"
Gabrielle followed her instructions and strolled through the streets to the Faustina Temple. She thought it was an odd place to meet but she wasn't here to argue. She stopped in front of the large temple which was still under construction and pulled the hood off her head and walked inside.

It came to a surprise when the temple was swarming with people. To make this job more difficult she didn't know who she was meeting and with this crowd she'd never be able to find said person. Gabrielle weaved through the people and searched for someone who might be seeking her out.

She was distracted by the amount of new statues that people surrounded. The statues must have been at least fifteen to twenty feet tall. She'd never seen anything like it before. Her appreciation for art had kept with her since she left her home and she pursued her hobby by becoming an artist in Rome, which now she regretted only because she had to deal with several Roman nobles and the very annoying gorgeous Augusta.

Her eyes fixated on the statue of a deity before her. The crowd began to disperse so she was able to get a closer look. She wished she could sculpt as well as Zenodorus. She knew he could make a statue better looking than this but this work of art was pleasing to the eyes.

"Athena. A beauty, isn't she?"

She thought she was alone and jumped at a male's voice beside her. Gabrielle whipped her head around and her eyes drifted up to look at a tall youthful man with piercing blue eyes and jet black hair. His jaw was strong and clean shaven and she could tell he had long hair but it was pulled into a bun which settled nicely on the nape of his neck.

"Yes..." she answers softly, "It's a nice sculpture."

"You don't look like the mercenary type," he says with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Gabrielle frowns. "And you look a little young to be a killer," she quickly snaps back. "Why did you want to meet here in this busy temple?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "It looks less inconspicuous. I think we've gotten off to a bad start." He turned and extended his hand. "Evander."

She hesitantly shook the given hand. "Gabrielle."

He nudged his head to walk with her so they wouldn't remain stagnant. They passed by several more sculptures and it was hard for Gabrielle to keep focus. Evander glanced around the temple and the more citizens that entered the better off they were.
"I understand you've been assigned to a very intimidating task," he brings up casually. "You won't be able to do this alone so I'll be helping you along the way."

Gabrielle crookedly smiled. "Everyone is so afraid of this woman. Even Augusta Sabina fears her. She told me that this 'queen' is in the empire but I can't really trust anything the empress says. She has a head full of hot air."

"I believe she is here, Gabrielle," he whispered. They halted together. "In Rome."

She nervously scratched her neck, feeling itchy all of a sudden. "Why do you think that?"

"A noblewoman, who is a dear friend and confidant of the empress, was murdered and crucified in the square yesterday."

"That doesn't mean anything. People get murdered all the time in Rome."

Evander stared at the blonde mercenary and grabbed her shoulder. "Her body was put on a cross in the middle of the square. Naked. That's not a casual murder. Be aware of your surroundings."

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The door was kicked down in a small loft on the west side of the city. Two men entered the apartment and took the man sitting at a desk, drinking heaps of wine to satiate himself.

"What is this?!" he yells.

He was taken by his arms by force and thrown out of his home. He scurried on the ground, stumbling to find balance and will to escape. The wine had not done him any favors so his vision was skewed and body uncoordinated. He crawled across the dirt road, searching for anyone to help him, anyone at all.

The two men hoisted him up and put a black bag over his head. He was thrown over a shoulder and carried off in broad daylight. Just as the men kidnapped the drunkard, two children ran down the alleyway with their mother calling after them.

Not long after he was dropped to the ground with a loud thud and the bag was ripped off. He muttered softly and saw a pair of black boots standing a mere foot in front of his eyes. Blurrily, he guided his head slowly to the wearer of the boots.

He smiles and wipes the blood trickling from his nose. "Xena..." his voice raspy and hoarse from the alcohol he scorched his throat with for days on end.

"Gaius Julius Vindex." She bent over and tilted his chin with a gentle finger. "You didn't do what I asked you to do," she whispers eerily.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he suddenly his clarity returned. "I just...need more...time," he says, almost begging.

Xena ran her fingers through his sandy short unkempt hair and then reared his head back. He moaned and she placed her hand over his mouth, silencing him.

"You're Governor of Gaul and yet Nero still controls you. Are you going to bend to his every will, Vindex? You're nothing more than a puppet for Rome. What will you do next? Suck Nero's cock?" she smiled.

"Tell me what you want me to do and it will be done. I swear," he raised his hands to show his
"I've given you two chances already." She shoved him and he fell back, groaning at his own discomfort. "Today's your lucky day, Vindex. I'm feeling generous. I'll give you another chance to redeem yourself."

He spat a glob of blood on the ground and glared at the conqueror.

"Cause a rebellion against Nero or I'll take all your teeth," she eyed his crotch, "and then some."

Vindex stood with the help of her two brutish men. He chortles and steadies his unbalanced body. "It is mighty brave of you to be in Rome especially in daylight. God is on your side."

"I don't need you to spew your religious jargon, Vindex." She waved her hand to her men and they began to take him away. "Oh, one more thing before you go."

He looks back at her warily.

"How would I go about getting into Nero's palace?"

"You're a smart woman, Xena. I'm sure you'll find a way."

Steppe Queen, tribal woman, nomadic savage. She hated being called those names. All of the titles given to her were from the Roman Empire. She was no queen, a leader and ruler yes, but not a queen nor an empress. She assumed that Romans bestowed her that title because they feared her.

A question that had not been answered: how does one fear something you cannot see? She didn't know the answer to that question but she understood why Romans were terrified of her, although her rabid violent conquering simmered down the last few years of her reign.

She secluded herself in the heart of Edirne settled on the Maritsa River but as Nero's lust for power and expansion rose, she came out of her cave so to speak. Nero not only attempted but he conquered a region that belonged to her and he had the gall to think she'd do nothing about it.

Her time in Rome had been eventful but not as much as she would like it to be. Sometimes she could be very impatient especially when people do not fulfill their promises. Her meeting with Vindex was exactly what she imagined it would be.

As if getting around in Rome was enough of a challenge, she had to deal with idiots as well. She enjoyed walking through the streets listening to gossip about the little mishap yesterday. Xena tried so hard to keep herself from revealing an irking smile as she passed by.

Her men dressed as Romans were a nice touch, she thought. And she also bought more clothes since the last attire belonged to a poor crucified soul. She felt a little guilty for killing the young woman but everyone was a pawn here.

While strolling through the street she spotted a familiar head of gold up ahead. She raised an eyebrow and quietly approached the golden haired artist standing over a spread of art supplies.

"Buying new brushes?" she inquires.

Gabrielle spun around and smiled. "You again," she marveled. "I was beginning to think I was going crazy and seeing things at night. You disappear and reappear so quickly." She felt she was babbling on but she could tell that the brunette was amused.
"I can pay for that," Xena offered.

"Oh, no that's okay you don't have to do that."

Xena pulled out the necessary coin and handed it over to the merchant. She smiled at the blonde and watched carefully as the brushes were packed neatly into a cloth bag. He gave her the bag and she handed it off to Gabrielle.

"Ah," Gabrielle had no choice but to accept the gift. "Thank you. Well, this is embarrassing—you paying for my art supplies!" she jokes awkwardly. "As if I need more pity from the wealthy."

"I can't pity someone that I don't even know the name of."

"Oh!" her cheeks flushed. "My name is Gabrielle. I thought I told you that during our last session. I've been very busy lately."

Xena half smiled. You talk a lot, she thought. "Busy with the empress," she states.

"Let's just say you're a much easier client to deal with," she lightly put it. "Are you busy now? I'm heading back to the workshop. I could work on your portrait."

Xena looked up at the tower on the south side and pinched her brows together. Another difficult thing about being in Rome was that she was waiting on the sidelines for things to get done.

"I…"

"It's okay if you're busy," the artist says with mild disappointment in her tone. "We can work on it tonight at our usual time. I know how you like to lurk in the shadows."

The conqueror grins down at the blonde and nods her head. Lurker in the shadows. She never heard that one before.

"I'll be there tonight."

Gabrielle nodded and shyly turned her head to the tall woman beside her. "This is the most conversation we've had. I like to get to know my clients very well so you should get used to talking to me. If you won't comply then you'll have to find another painter." She playfully threatened with a feathery laugh.

"You're very optimistic, Gabrielle. I look forward to our session together."

Xena couldn't remember the last time she smiled this often. She dealt with the impending death surrounding her in this new atmosphere but her brief time with Gabrielle was more than lovely. It was a chance for her to escape during her city searches and scheming against the emperor.

"We can get a head start by you telling me your name," the artist stepped closer to Xena.

My name. That smile that was so prominent on the conqueror's face swiftly disappeared. She didn't plan to ever stumble upon that workshop at all during one of her nightly searches but she didn't regret it. When she found out that Augusta Sabina frequented there and employed Gabrielle she knew she wanted to stick close. But that wasn't the entire reason she kept returning to the workshop to visit the artist.

The curiosity and sense of relief she felt when around the blonde had come to an end. Her time in Rome was only temporary and she knew that.
Gabrielle noticed the sudden change in the woman's face and perhaps she overstepped so she quickly reneged her question to ease the tension between them.

"You don't have to tell me right away," she relays. "As I said, you're a woman of few words. We'll have plenty of time to talk later. See you then?" she retreats slowly and Xena gave a curt head nod.

Evander gazed out of a small window that overlooked most of the city. Whenever he wasn't searching the city for suspicious activity he frequented a brothel that was on the east side of Rome. He didn't particularly like anyone here all except one woman. He'd been warned several times by his teachers that brothels were a dangerous place to be for a person like him.

He didn't pay any mind to his teachers and once he reached the age of seventeen he was on his own. This life was all he knew since he was a child but he never knew he'd one day work as a mercenary for the Roman Empire.

Skeptically, his eyes roamed over the city, cautiously watching the citizens go about their daily routine. Some people may think this was a boring job; waiting around for hours or days on end, but he loved it. To ease his nerves he twirled a small leather bracelet that he had attached to a necklace since it was too small to fit round his wrist.

A pair of tanned arms came up from behind him and encircled his waist. Evander looked down and held the bracelet in his hand then turned around to a succulent smile and bright green eyes.

"Varinia, you shouldn't sneak up on me like that. You know what I do for a living," he warns her teasingly.

"I certainly do." She ruffled her curly waist length dark hair and traces a finger along his toned arm. She eyed the little trinket on his necklace. "Taking a little trip down memory lane?" she implies.

Evander peers down at the bracelet in his palm and turns his gaze away from her.

"Do you think you'll ever find your family?" she asks while running her fingernails through his hair.

"It's like finding a needle in a hay stack," he murmurs. "I know they're not in Rome at least."

She intertwined her fingers with his and kissed his hand. Her lips traveled from his arm to his bicep and then shoulder before he stopped her by grabbing her chin.

"I need to go," he whispered and pecked her forehead.

"Do you have to?" she pouted and fluttered her eyelashes.

Evander had a hard time resisting that stare of hers and that smile –that enticing smile –was enough to make himself bend to her will every single time.

"I really want to stay but...I can't."

She slipped her fingers out of his hand and waltzed over to the bed and sat down, spreading her legs apart, slowly lifting the long skirt she wore. Evander's eyes widened and he grabbed his cloak and boots to get dressed.

"I'll be waiting for you as always."
Most of the day was spent redrawing the empress' portrait and it was very tempting to rip the canvas in two but Gabrielle refrained. She patiently waited until the sun went down and watched the other artists leave their stations.

She stopped drawing awhile ago and said her goodbyes to Zenodorus. He stayed longer than he usually did but she was eager for the workshop to be deserted and completely empty. She sat in her chair, eyeing the sketch she did yesterday of her new client. The sky was dark and the day was winding down now.

Her nerves and impatience was getting to her and she walked over to the window, sighing heavily. She thought she may have been too talkative earlier today when they met in the market. Perhaps I scared her off? Or maybe she was too busy to stop by?

She caught a glimpse of the new set of brushes on the table and grazed her fingers over the soft bristles. An expensive set of brushes like this would make a lot of the artists very envious but she never had to worry about people stealing her things here.

The longer she glared at the brushes the angrier she got. She never thought her life would turn out like this and wondered how long this was going to last. You never knew how to appreciate a leisurely life until it was taken away from you.

"I need a new line of work," she says wearily.

"Never stop doing what you're best at."

Gabrielle gasped at the sudden voice and raised an eyebrow at Xena. "You're really good at scaring me. It's not an easy thing to do I'll have you know." She wagged her finger.

"It's a skill I have," Xena says nonchalantly.

"Sneaking up on people or scaring them?"

"Both."

Gabrielle raised her eyebrows and backtracked to her stool and offered her a seat. "I don't see how you could scare anyone. You look harmless but sometimes looks can be deceiving."

Xena lowered her eyes and sat down opposite the blonde. Harmless, no. Deceiving, yes. It was fate that led her here and this was a perfect opportunity to get to know the Roman citizens for who they were. But this particular woman, Gabrielle, had a special link to the Augusta and that not only made Xena's plans easier but she also slipped in a bit of alone time while her men crept through the city at night.

"What do you do in Delphi?"

This question caught the conqueror off guard and she gaped at Gabrielle with wide eyes.

"You said you were from Delphi. I assume you're married since you have nice clothes and not to mention those guards with you."

"No," Xena answered rather harshly and then caught herself. "I...no, I'm not married."

Gabrielle continued to sketch periodically lifting her eyes. "Widowed?"

Xena shifted in the chair and crinkled her eyebrows. "I've never been married."
There was a long pause of tense silence. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked. Let me know if I'm asking too many questions."

Sitting quietly Xena looked around the workshop, itching to get up and walk around but she had to sit still and listen to the incessant amount of questions. Gabrielle put down the sketching pad and walked over to her and Xena's eyes enlarged at her close proximity.

Gabrielle smiled softly and held up her hand. She saw the woman's eyes darken a couple of shades but she didn't let her guard down and moved her hand closer to Xena's face.

She grabbed the blonde's wrist. "What are you doing?"

"I…need to re-position your face." She gestured to the candle on the table. "We don't exactly have…the best lighting in here."

They locked eyes, staring intensely for a moment longer until Xena released her grip. Gabrielle inhaled sharply, unsure of what reaction that came to be. The look in her eyes is what disturbed Gabrielle the most. Anger and maybe a hint of fear. It was subtle but it was there; hidden to the naked eye but not to an artist's eye.

She titled Xena's chin towards the light and brushed the blue veil away from her face, exposing her prominent cheekbone. She got the feeling that this woman did not like to be touched or at least she was hesitant about others coming near her.

"Have you ever sat for a painting before?" she asks curiously.

Xena didn't answer and instead lifted her gaze to the blonde who was studying her face.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're very hard to talk to?" Gabrielle teased with a laugh. "I wish Augusta Sabina was as quiet as you. She tells me all about her day during our sessions."

Being on the judged side was something new and she wasn't sure if she liked it. It was the first time she felt helpless and out of sorts. She didn't know what to say or how to say it. She couldn't address this artist as one of her soldiers nor could she punish her for daring to come close or talking back to her. This woman was a stranger. She was innocent. But she was also spry, lively even, and she hadn't been around someone like that in a very long time, if ever.

Gabrielle cocked her head from side to side, staring at her client's face and nodded. She sat back down and began to sketch again whilst being glared at.

"How long have you been working as the empress' personal artist?" Xena asked.

"She speaks!" Gabrielle chuckled. "A little under a year since she married the emperor but we'll see how long she lasts."

Xena sneered. "What do you mean by that?"

She paused during her sketch and met the woman's blue gaze. "Delphi must be another world if you haven't heard what Emperor Nero did to his last wife."

Before she started to sketch again a light caught her eye and she leaned back to peer out the window. She stood up and walked over to the window and Xena spun around in the chair. Gabrielle's mouth gaped at the fire she saw from the port. The light of the roaring fire encompassed the sky and outer rim of Rome.
"There's a fire on the coastline," she says.

Xena hid her smile and once the artist turned around she wiped the smile off her lips.

"You should probably go back to your villa. It might not be safe for you to be here." Gabrielle packed up her supplies and put the sketch pad gently into a cloth bag and set it aside. "I can walk you home if you'd like?"

Walk me home like I'm helpless, the conqueror mused. She stood and held the veil close to her chest, smiling down at the worried blonde.

"My men can take me home but," she pauses, "thank you…for offering."

Gabrielle nodded.

"I look forward to our next session together and hopefully I won't be the only one talking."

The walk to the tower was further away than expected this evening. She could see the fire spreading across the port and several people emerged from their homes to see the flames. Now that she had Rome's attention in her hands she knew she wouldn't be able to stay here long without being found out.

She hid her face with the veil and while walking her ears picked up a familiar sound. Boots. She took a couple of steps forward and then reached into an alley between two apartment homes.

Snarling she shoved the lurker against the wall. "Gölge!" she hissed.

"Who told you to leave the tower?!"

Gölge breathed heavily, seething with anger. "Now I know what you've been doing at night."

"You followed me too?" Xena smiled maliciously. "I gave you an order and disobeyed me. You could've exposed me!"

"It looks like you're capable of doing that all by yourself," Gölge combats with an eerie smile.

Xena backhanded the girl and stepped away. The shock on Gölge's face was enough for the muscles in her face to relax and realize what she just did. Before, maybe a few years ago, she wouldn't give a second thought to hitting someone but now, she felt different.

Everything was different now. Her life was on the line and she didn't deserve any incompetent people around her.

"Let's get back to the tower," she mumbled and grabbed Gölge's arm. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again."
Less than three days after the coastal fire, Evander investigated the site to see what the cause of the fire was. At the time the fire occurred he was in the brothel and heard about it too late to find who set the merchant ships up in flames. He heard several Roman officials tell the commoners that the fire was a mere accident but he knew better. That fire wasn't an accident, it was deliberately set.

A day after the fire, the Roman soldiers forbade anyone conducting any trades with foreigners which was going to put a damper on Rome's influx of mass income. Evander knew better than to have direct contact with the Romans so he listened and watched. The ships were dismantled, or what was left of them, and set to burn in a large bonfire on the opposite side of the city in the countryside.

The message he received from the Emperor was dire and downright rude. He hated working for Nero but he was groomed from a young age to be a mercenary for Rome. He didn't think that the Emperor liked mercenaries by the messages he received. There were so few that could do his job correctly and efficiently without being killed in the process.

He had high hopes that his new partner was going to fulfill her end and find the Steppe Queen. He knew she lurked in Rome somewhere but the city was so large and crowded that it was nearly impossible to find her. It also didn't help that he had no idea what she looked like. He wasn't sure if Nero himself knew what she looked like either.

Evander sat underneath a canopy attached to a shack by the sea wall. He casually sipped a cup of mead and enjoyed the roaring waves rushing in while he waited for Gabrielle to arrive. Most of his job consisted of waiting for long periods of time and he was used to it but what he didn't like was to be stood up by fellow partners.

Gabrielle walked through the streets and found herself standing on the coastline, searching for Evander. She lifted the hood covering her eyes and spotted the young man sitting, drinking and observing keenly. She gruffly cleared her throat and made her way over to the shack and stood at a fair distance so not to cause alarm from the Roman citizens passing by.

"You're late," he said sharply.

"I had some business with Augusta Sabina," she told him. "I have to get ready for a party at the palace tomorrow night."

He nodded and set down a small note for her on the table. "Take it."

She slipped the note off the table and turned from the wandering eyes and read the note with an imminent frown. "I'm supposed to search the city for the Steppe Queen's men?" she chided.

"That's right," he smirked, sipping more mead. "I don't have any leads for you because nobody actually saw who started the fire but I know it was her. I told you, Gabrielle, she's here."

"How am I supposed to look for these people if I don't have anything to go off of?" she crumbled the letter and tucked it in her cloak pocket.

"That's for you to figure out, Gabrielle."

"You're going to the Emperor's party tomorrow," he stated and she kept her gaze towards the
"Be aware of your surroundings when you go."

"I'll try my best," she grumbled. It was almost insulting to be ordered around by someone who just reached manhood about a year ago, maybe. He was so young. "And what will you be doing in the meantime?"

Evander gave a side smile to the petite mercenary. "Gaius Julius Vindex has been gathering soldiers on the south side of the city. I'm going to find out what he's up to. If you find anything I'll be on the eastern side of the city."

She crinkled her eyebrows, knowing exactly what area that was. This young mercenary certainly liked women and she didn't want to go anywhere near brothels especially for clandestine meetings she occasionally had to attend with him.

Gölge winced at the stinging pain on her swollen bloodied bottom lip. The conqueror sat opposite her and tended to her lip, dabbing it with a damp cloth. She inhaled softly and then her chin was lifted so her lip could be visible in the beaming sunlight creeping in through the curtains.

"You shouldn't have left the tower," said Xena as she pressed her fingers drenched in medicine on the girl's lip. She looked into the hazel eyes and had a moment of guilt for slapping her apprentice across the cheek like she did.

Her fingers lingered on the girl's lips and clenched her jaw then sat back, collecting the soiled cloths and washed her hands in a bowl of water. Gölge touched her lip and stared at the conqueror's midnight tresses, shielding her eyes.

Xena stood and then the girl turned her cheek. She offered a hand. "No more leaving without my permission," that was an order and Gölge nodded, taking the offered hand to stand. "I'd hate to scorch that pretty face of yours," she threatened with a warm smile.

The apprentice faintly grinned. She always thought she had a close relationship with Xena but she wasn't so sure the same feelings were to be reciprocated. Three years she'd been at her side and she learned a lot in that short span. She learned what it was like to lose people close to her since she was a child but as soon as she taken under the conqueror's wing she learned how to use various weapons, stage attacks and raids as well as submit people unto her—unto Xena.

She couldn't have been more than ten years her senior but still, Gölge had her doubts that she'd be nothing more than a simple pet for the conqueror. There were moments when she thought she had Xena at the tip of her fingers but there was always hesitancy. If she got too close, Xena would pull away as if she was overstepping her bounds. She wasn't brave enough to voice her opinions and thoughts just yet. She needed more time but how much more time was going to pass, she wondered.

"I'm going to meet with Vindex soon. You're going to stay here and keep watch. Do you understand?" Xena peered from behind the curtain, looking out at the busy city.

Gögle rubbed her arm and glared at the conqueror's backside. "Are you going back to see that artist tonight?"

Xena's fingers slid off the curtain and turned on the heel of her boot, glaring at the girl. She flashed an assertive smile. "Whatever thoughts are going through your mind, wash them away. I'm not playing dress-up, Gölge. I have a purpose to everything I do or haven't you figured that out yet?"

The apprentice huffed and folded her arms, pouting much like a small child would.
"That artist just so happens to be the Empress' personal artist," she said, ignoring Gölge's little tantrum. "I'm fishing for information, nothing more."

Gabrielle worked on the Empress' portrait consistently for the last couple of days. The longer she stared at Sabina's face the more she wanted to slash it with a stroke of red paint. She had enough of dealing with the saucy Empress and her frivolous nature. Still, she worked for the Emperor and although he'd never seen her face, she did all of his dirty work for him. Now she was stuck painting his wife and hated every minute of it.

"Sabina," she growled and gripped the paintbrush to the point of snapping it in half.

Zenodorus was working on the large sculpture and that was going to take a very long time to complete. Lucky for him he had a few artists to help him along meanwhile Gabrielle had to work alone. She was getting tired of seeing both Roman nobles in her workspace constantly. It was bad enough that she had to look at a completely unrealistic sculpture of Nero and then Sabina's face on a canvas.

She set down the brush before her horrid ideas of ruining the painting returned. If she didn't back away now she was going to paint the Empress covered in red paint and then she'd be real sorry then. Gabrielle grabbed her satchel hidden underneath her work station and brought out the sketch she'd been working on for her mysterious Grecian woman.

A smile formed as she stared at her sketch. She feared to bring it out during daylight because others would see her work and unfortunately Zenodorus was very talkative. He'd ruin the entire experience for her.

It was a nice little secret she had working on this portrait but she hadn't seen the so called woman from Delphi as she named her. This was the third day that she stayed awake in the workshop longer than expected only to be left alone again.

She thought maybe the woman had gone back home or maybe she was just busy. That had to be it, right? Either way, she kept holding out that one night she'd come here after the shop closed.

Zenodorus slid the stool he stood on over to her station and she jumped as his face appeared above her canvas. She stuffed the sketch into her satchel and frowned at the sculptor.

"What do you have there, Gabrielle?" he inquired curiously.

"More sketches for Augusta Sabina. What else? Not like I have anything better to do than stare at her all day!" she growled and kicked the easel down and the portrait fell to the ground.

He puckered his lips and cocked his head, taking a good look at the unfinished portrait. "It looks great so far, Gabrielle!" he ignored her fiery attitude she had every now and then. "She really does have a gorgeous face. Much better than Augusta Claudia."

"Yeah, whatever," she mumbled and crossed her arms, sulking in frustration.

"Are you going to present the painting at tomorrow's party?"

She blew her bangs from her eyes. "I'm going to have to. I don't have anything else to show."

"Well either way, it looks great. Just keep working hard, Gabrielle!" he encouraged with a light punch to her shoulder. "I'll be there too to show a small model of the sculpture. I hope the Emperor will take a liking to it. If not, I'm going to have to start all over!"
She put her bad mood aside and smiled at the giddy sculptor. "I'm sure he'll love it, Zenodorus."

She picked up the canvas and set it back on the easel then gathered her supplies to put away for the day. She could only look at Sabina's face for so long, besides she had other business to take care of. She still didn't know how she was going to track down those men Evander spoke about without any clues to help her. She figured she was going to have to scout the entire city which was going to take much longer than half a day that she wasted painting.

"Are you leaving for the day?" asked Zenodorus, a bit disappointed to see her go.

Gabrielle grinned and cleaned her paintbrushes and set them on a cloth to dry out. "I'm going to find a dress for tomorrow evening. I can't show up in my smock and dirty pants, now can I?"

"Get a blue dress! You look marvelous in blue," he wiggled his brows.

"I'll…see what they have," she awkwardly said and grabbed her black cloak. "Don't let anyone come near my station! Guard everything with your life. I don't want anything to happen to this portrait or I'll be on the chopping block."

He saluted and hopped onto the ladder to finish the arm of his sculpture. "Will do, Gabrielle!"

She took extreme precaution every single time she stepped out into the Roman world. While her men were busy lurking around the city she played the waiting game and absolutely hated it. She was used to things going her way and happening quickly but that wasn't the case in Rome. She needed to strategically plan her every move or risk being caught.

Dressed in traditional Roman attire, wearing a maroon dress she bought in the market a couple of days ago, she strolled through the city in the dark shadows. Perhaps she was a lurker as Gabrielle said to her. She kept her mind focused on Vindex. She knew she couldn't stay in Rome forever as she needed to get back to Edirne.

Her expectations were lowered once she reached Rome and there was yet to be a rebellion against Nero. She bet all of her money that Gaius Vindex would back out of their deal and she wasn't wrong. He not only reneged on their agreement, he was wasting away in his villa, drowning in alcohol while she was doing all his hard work for him.

She made her men go ahead of her to make sure that nobody was in the alleyway before approaching the Governor's villa. Tildus waved his hand for her to walk ahead and she enclosed the veil around her cleavage and rounded the corner.

A dagger was hidden beneath her gown, strapped to her thigh. She wasn't stupid enough to carry a heavy sword everywhere she went but going out in public was dangerous enough. Romans, she gagged at the sight of them every step she took. They were the bane of her existence. If only they knew they were little marionettes for the emperor to dangle.

Low life, no good for nothing motherfu –

She bumped into a tall young man once she came around the corner. She was so close to the Governor's house and now this inconvenience. He looked up at her with his large icy blue eyes and she narrowed hers.

Evander inclined his head. "Apologies…" he stepped away and was a bit intimidated by her harsh glare.
Xena’s eyes traveled to his chest and relaxed her cinched brows and frown. She reached a hand out and touched the bracelet attached to the leather necklace around his neck. Evander put a hand over hers and snatched the necklace away protectively.

Her stomach felt like it'd been punched severely at the sight of the little charm. "What an…interesting necklace," she says coolly. "Where did you get it?"

He looked down at the bracelet nestled in his palm. "It was given to me."

Evander studied her eyes for awhile and saw softness, confusion and distress wrapped in one emotion that he couldn't quite read. Her eyes were fixated on his necklace so he slipped it beneath his tunic to break her gaze.

"I'm sorry I ran into you. Excuse me, I should be on my way," he side stepped her and ran around the corner.

Xena put a hand over her throbbing chest and leaned her other hand on the nearby wall to steady her balance. She kept the image of his necklace burned into her mind and those eyes –those eyes didn't look as innocent no matter how polite he was attempting to be.

Tildus placed a hand on her shoulder to which he received a growl and a smack to his armored chest.

"Do not dare touch me!" she hissed. "If you touch me again I'll slice off your hand," she adjusted her veil and Tildus immediately distanced himself from her. "Let's get this over with." She marched towards Vindex's villa.

Stay in the tower, she says. Don't leave the tower, she says.

Gölge lounged in the chair, looking through the curtained window, dreading this position she had. Not only was it incredibly boring but it was humiliating. She expected an outright war to strike in Rome, not to sit in a tower for days on end until Xena returned from her daily rounds in the city.

She peeked through the telescope, careful not to let the sun gleam against the copper and cause alarm to the people below. Scanning the entirety of the north side of the city, she gradually moved the scope from left to right and then back tracked to the left.

There, she spotted the artist that Xena had been seeing for days. She followed the artist's every move and smiled faintly.

"What are you doing? Disguising yourself?" she mused.

She swiveled in the chair and threw on her cloak then ran down the spiral staircase.

"How do you like the wine now, Vindex?" Xena laughed as she dunked his head in a basin full of the alcohol the man loved to soil his organs with. She lifted his head out of the wine and he gasped. He tried to open his stinging eyes and she dunked his head back into the basin.

Keeping her hand steady on his head, the Governor gurgled, hitting his palms on the ground and with every move he tried to lift his head only to be pushed further in the dark liquid.

"You're moving too slow for me, Vindex," she says with a soft sigh. "What do I need you for? You waste away in your home, drinking yourself to death!" she growled.
She yanked his head back and he coughed spurts of wine, heaving heavily. With no reply she was about to push his head downward again until he resisted, pressing his hands on the table and screamed.

"Stop!" he begged. "Stop…" he coughed violently. "I told you…I needed more time."

"Wrong answer." She forcefully pushed him closer to the basin, pressing her palm on the nape of his neck.

"No!" he looked down at his reflection in the wine and choked. "There's a document…" he gagged at the sour taste in the back of his throat. "It's in—it's in Nero's office. I can't…take the soldiers without his signature."

Xena let up on him and he collapsed on the ground, shivering. "And why wasn't this mentioned months ago when I wrote you?"

"I didn't know!" he spat.

She lifted her dress and pulled out the dagger strapped to her thigh. "I ought to kill you right now. You've wasted enough of my time."

Vindex panicked and wiped his eyes, scooting away from her as she was about to charge for his chest. "I can't go in the palace! Nero already suspects that I'm against him!" he put up defensive hands. "You—you wanted to get into the palace…" he covered his face. "I know a way for you to get inside…"

She tapped the dagger against her hip and arched an eyebrow. "I'm listening."

"There's going to be a party tomorrow night at the palace. All noblemen and women are invited. You could go into his office…" he suggested. "Sign the document and I'll move forward with collecting the soldiers."

Xena rolled her eyes and slipped the dagger back into its holster. She knelt down and grabbed him by the throat.

"You've saved yourself once again, Governor. As you say, god shines upon you," she threw him onto the ground and stomped over him, waving her hand at her accompanying men.

From afar, Gölge watched the petite artist maze around the mass of people hovering around the market square. With every step Gabrielle took, Gölge shortly followed. She was careful not to show her face and so far nobody had noticed her. Truly, she was a shadow just like her ruler named her.

Gabrielle stopped by a cart filled with several dresses. She thought she wouldn't have much time to have one made for her and she never had extravagant clothes given her job she had. She stood, talking to the woman who was selling the gowns and picked up several, inspecting them.

She shook her head at each gown and then thought of what Zenodorus said. Blue dress. Yes, she definitely needed to find one of those. The merchant presented a light blue dress with a matching veil and Gabrielle rubbed her chin, eyeing the gown. Once the price was relayed to her she was hesitant about the buy.

Never had she bought a dress for a Roman party before or any party for that matter. She didn't have a lot of coin on her and decided to strike a bargain with the woman, knowing that her talkative
tongue could what she wanted from time to time.

Gölge wrapped a scarf over the lower half of her face, narrowing her eyes at the artist smiling and chatting with the merchant. This was worse than sitting in that tower all day, she thought. Finally, Gabrielle left with dress in hand and Gölge smiled, trailing right behind her.

She shoved her way through the crowd, pushing people aside, to get a clear view of the artist's cloaked backside. She reached for the knife on her belt and unsheathed it slowly.

Gabrielle frowned and heard a bit of cursing from behind. She peered over her shoulder and saw a masked person following her. She whipped her head around and as opposed to heading back to the workshop; she took a different direction entirely.

She weaved in between a group of men and pulled the hood over her head, increasing speed. She didn't want to appear panicked and tried to stop herself from running. She skipped up ahead and stood behind a horse-pulling cart and peered over the cart and could no longer see the masked stranger.

She turned around and gasped at the tall, thin hooded figure in front of her. She backed away slowly and then darted down the street.

Gölge snarled and ran after her, jumping over fruit stands and used a man's shoulder as leverage to propel her into the air.

Gabrielle ran around a corner, then another corner, becoming more and more unfamiliar with the area she was in. She cursed herself for not bringing any weapons with her but she didn't think she was going to need any just to buy a dress!

She came to a screeching halt in front of a wall, blocking her path. With baited breath she turned around and saw the hooded figure slowly approaching her with a knife in hand.

Gölge lunged forward and swung her knifed hand around and Gabrielle swerved to the side. She thrust her arm and Gabrielle grabbed her arm and kneed the elbow. Gölge bit her tongue, pressuring herself not to cry out.

She grabbed Gabrielle by the throat and forced her up against a wall. Stomping on both of her boots, she brought the knife upward close to Gabrielle's neck.

With a slow stroke, she cut into Gabrielle's neck, drawing blood. Voices from around the corner were heard and Gölge withdrew the knife and head but the artist's forehead.

Gabrielle slumped down the wall and groaned. She closed her eyes for a moment or maybe a few, she couldn't get a good sense of anything. As soon as her vision cleared she looked around for the attacker and whoever that was, completely vanished.

A hand came to the cut on her throat. A little deeper and I would've been dead, she thought.

Xena waltzed into the palace, following several noblewomen and their husbands. She was alone, as usual. She entered the grand room where the Emperor hosted everyone graciously. A table with mountains of food and wine for days.

She grabbed one of the flutes filled with wine, passing by her on a tray. She casually made her way around, smiling falsely at everyone that looked her way. Several women eyed her dress as she made her way around the room.
Operating on little sleep had become a bad habit of hers. She returned early the following morning after searching the city. She unfortunately was too wrapped up with Vindex's incompetence to make her way to the workshop. She thought it odd that Gölge hadn't said a word to her all day today and instead insisted on staying in the tower, watching the citizens. That's what she was supposed to do but there no was back-talk today.

Xena strolled around with no intention of making conversation with anyone here. She had her men posted outside and her goal was to find Nero's office which was going to be difficult with the amount of people here. She wasn't one for stealth jobs unless absolutely necessary.

As she walked around half of the room she spotted Nero and his wife, Sabina, talking together with an elderly Roman man. He looked to be a politician due to his clothing and the way he presented himself. The Augusta looked very disinterested, Xena smiled, sipping the wine.

"Yes, just keep smiling, Empress."

Across the atrium there was a group of people that looked very out of place. Xena kept her eye on Nero and nonchalantly made her way about the atrium.

Augusta Sabina's attention was sidelined when her hand was grabbed and ushered away from the boring political meeting. Xena frowned and stood behind a large column.

The Empress was very chatty, Xena observed. She kept talking and talking until Nero drew her away from the small crowd. Xena then saw Gabrielle standing beside her portrait of the Empress.

Smiling, she stepped out from behind the column and waited until Gabrielle's head circled around. It wasn't long until their eyes met and Gabrielle's lips widened into a bright smile and Xena returned the smile and raised her hand.

Gabrielle whispered to Zenodorus and left her station.

Xena straightened her posture and smoothed out her dress and kept smiling at the giddy artist.

"You're here!" Gabrielle greeted a bit too loudly. "I should've known you'd be here."

An awkward silence passed and Xena kept smiling warmly.

"Woman of few words," Gabrielle wagged her finger. "I remember." She tapped her head.

"I…want to apologize for not stopping by for our regular meetings. I've been a little… preoccupied," she admits bitterly.

Gabrielle brushed her hair over her shoulder. "It's understandable. I thought you left Rome. I would've felt terrible since I never finished your painting. I've been busy with…" she leaned in close, "Augusta Sabina's portrait," she whispered.

Xena thought as much. She nodded and then frowned at the sizeable cut on Gabrielle's neck. Her fingers grazed the fresh wound.

"Who did this to you?"
Chapter Notes

Do you feel the burn yet?

She shielded the cut on her neck with the veil and took a step away from Xena, holding her breath longer than expected.

"I accidentally cut myself," Gabrielle lamely told her. "I was cutting material for a new canvas and…the knife slipped."

Xena raised an eyebrow. "On your throat."

She was no stranger to knife wounds as she encountered many blade wounds over the years. A quick glance was all that she needed to study the severity of Gabrielle's wound. The angle of the cut, the depth and freshness of the cut was not self inflicted, she knew that much. It would be very tricky to cut one's self with a knife at that angle with such precision.

If there was one thing she was good at it was studying others, instead of looking in the mirror to study herself. She never liked the attention put on her yet she was disturbed, yet intrigued by Gabrielle's sudden apprehensiveness and coyness. She even detected a bit of fear from the blonde's wide eyed reaction to her concern over the wound.

Gabrielle held the veil closed to her exposed neck and chest. Smiling at the tall Grecian she begged for the subject to change. She felt walls closing in on her, the crowd encircling, her chest tightening at the intense blue gaze from above.

"Did you see my portrait of the Empress?" she asked.

Xena blinked, momentarily forgetting about the party. It was obvious that the artist was trying to distract her. She followed Gabrielle across the room while keeping her eye on the Emperor and his wife talking to a couple.

Her wrist was grabbed by Gabrielle who broke her concentration on her targets. She thought to snatch her hand away as she wasn't one to be pulled around by someone else's will but she kept her composure.

Gabrielle pointed at the canvas. "I combined several colors to make sure that I achieved the correct skin tone of Augusta Sabina. I think it still needs some work but I think I'll be able to finish it in a couple of days."

Xena faintly smiled, admiring the intricate brush strokes of the Empress' dark red gown in the painting. This took a lot of time, dedication and patience to paint and from what Gabrielle told her, the Empress was not a very easy client to work with.

"You captured her essence perfectly, Gabrielle."
The young artist blushed at the compliment. "When I'm finished then I will have more time to work on your portrait. You still…want to finish it?" she hinted, hoping she didn't sound too eager.

"I think I can make time out of my busy schedule just for you," Xena said with a playful tone.

Sabina left the circle of politicians and smiled in their direction. Gabrielle froze at the sight of the Empress and Xena followed her terrified gaze and smiled at the small framed Empress coming to greet them. Sabina stopped in front of her portrait to admire it once more as she did earlier.

She noticeably ignored Xena and stepped in front of her to have a conversation one on one with her esteemed personal artist. Gabrielle's cheeks paled, staring at the smirk on Xena's face as she was being blatantly and rudely shoved aside.

"I love what you've done, Gabrielle!" said Sabina. "But I would like to make a few corrections. If you don't mind?"

Gabrielle nervously smiled. "Of course, Augusta. Just tell me when you'd like to stop by the workshop."

Xena's lips twitched into a tight-lipped smile, scanning the pregnant Empress from head to toe. Standing behind her she couldn't stop herself from examining the way the Empress presented herself so arrogantly in front of everyone. Truly, she was Nero's match.

Finally, the Empress spun around and slowly lifted her head to the tall brunette. She flashed a smile that only politicians possessed when they were met with others they weren't keen on meeting. Xena inclined her head and raised her glass flute.

"Augusta Sabina," she greeted and winked at Gabrielle nervously standing by the canvas.

"I didn't see you standing there, my apologies," the Empress placed a delicate hand over her chest. "Of course you saw me. I was just admiring your artist's work. The painting is almost an exact replica of you."

Sabina feigned innocence with a playful roll of her eyes. "Gabrielle always does fabulous work. I don't know what I'd do without her. She is simply the best!"

Gabrielle brushed the veil behind an ear. "You're too kind, Augusta…" she hid her smile at the way Xena was playing along with the Empress' phony exterior. It was so painfully obvious though Sabina had no shame in toying with politicians with that soft smile of hers.

Xena placed a gentle hand on the Empress' shoulder. "I wanted to give my condolences, Empress."

Sabina's smile faded and she stared up at the brunette with doe eyes. "Your friend. I heard she was murdered and crucified in the square. What an insult to be displayed like that." Xena kept a warm smile on her face and her hand slid of the woman's shoulder.

The Augusta swallowed the lump in her throat and smiled meekly. "Yes…it was quite…tragic," she croaked. "Excuse me, I should get back to my husband. He doesn't like it when…I linger with guests for too long."

"It was nice talking to you, Empress."

Sabina frowned, eyeing her as she made her way across the room to join the conversation she left.
Gabrielle covered her mouth, attempting not to burst into laughter. She never felt such vindication until this very moment. The Augusta was speechless and that never happened.

"You tongue-tied her! That was incredible."

Xena sipped the wine and caught her men standing guard by the entrance, dressed in Roman gear. Tildus gave her a curt nod and she lowered her gaze to Gabrielle's obvious gleeful face. She nearly forgot why she was here at this party in the first place.

"Everyone has a weak spot," she said and nudged her head to the side, giving a signal to her men.

They began casually walking around the room, weaving in and out of the crowd then disappeared into a hallway, bypassing Nero's guards with ease. Xena watched until they were completely out of her sight and downed the rest of the wine to quell the empty and uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Evander lingered in the alleyway, waiting for hours until the area was clear. He had his eye on Gaius Julius Vindex's villa since early afternoon. The Roman Governor apparently was never at home during the day and Evander's boredom increased as he sat, peeling apples for hours on end, handing them out to children throughout the day.

So far, he peeled over thirty apples or maybe more. He'd lost count by now. The alley was almost pitch-black and children were all brought to their homes. Women were now forbidden to leave their homes without a male escorting them. A rule surely instilled by the Emperor himself.

He groaned and tossed the scoring knife into his bag and then heard footsteps from afar. That sound of dirt scraping against the sole of a boot was a sound he studied since he was a child. He could calculate how far his enemies were by the sound of their boots.

He slowly stood up, leaning against an apartment building wall, listening for other sounds. He closed his eyes and held his breath.

*Keys.*

Evander wrapped his hand around the corner of the wall and lifted the mask to conceal his face and drew the hood over his head. He proceeded to listen to other minuscule sounds that would mean nothing to an average person. This was his job—his livelihood.

The key entered the lock, twisting slowly.

*A blade.*

Small and narrow but enough to kill someone with a quick strike to the throat.

*The door.*

Creaking loudly but not enough to stir the neighbors and lurkers in the shadows.

Evander's eyes shot wide open and he darted out from behind the apartment building, swinging his cloak behind him. His gloved palm rested on the hilt of his dagger at his belt and came to Vindex's villa door. He knelt down; taking a quick glance around him to be sure he was alone. He picked the lock with his small dagger as quietly as possible.

Success.
Out on one of the balconies, Gabrielle carried a tray of sliced apples and a side of sweet honey to pair with the fruit. She stood beside Xena in the cool summer evening. She offered the fruit to her guest and the Steppe Queen gave a gentle smile and graciously accepted the apples, taking one slice for herself.

Gabrielle set the tray down on the balcony ledge and chomped into an apple slice, sneaking a peek at her raven haired guest.

"These parties go well into the night, sometimes they don't end until the morning," she struck conversation, knowing she might not have any interaction on the receiving end. "You don't like crowds, do you?"

Xena stared at the apple slice in her hand and peered over at the artist. "I can only take listening to so much idle chatter. Politicians love to hear themselves talk."

"I've never seen Augusta Sabina so stunned before. That was really great, what you did back there," she inwardly felt some kind of satisfaction to see the Empress at a loss for words.

A chuckle escaped the conqueror's lips. "You act like I've defeated some great beast, Gabrielle." She took a small bite of the fruit.

"I know I'm not supposed to say this but I really like it when the Empress is put in her place. I can't ever talk back to her."

Xena smiled, chewing quietly. "If you need me to come to your rescue I will gladly come to help you."

She placed her hand atop of Gabrielle's and met eyes with her. Gabrielle's loud chewing slowed for a moment and she glanced down at the hand resting on hers. Unsure of how to respond she couldn't even smile or utter a word. For such a talkative person she always had been, she had nothing to say. Or maybe she wasn't supposed to say anything.

Xena retracted her hand gracefully and picked up the refilled flute of wine and took a small sip. She stared out at the dark city with scattered light from homes all around. While she felt Gabrielle's eyes on her to the side, her mind was elsewhere.

She counted every minute she was inside this forsaken palace. It was too dangerous to remain here for a long period of time and she was counting on her men to retrieve the document Vindex told her about. Once she had Emperor Nero's forged signature then the rebellion could begin. Rome was in her grasp and she needed to tighten the rope to bring down the empire.

Gabrielle set her hand on her cheek and it was hot to the touch. She cleared her throat and swirled her finger along the balustrade to distract her thoughts swimming in her mind.

"How is the sightseeing going? You mentioned you were in the market to buy a villa. My suggestion is to stay away from Eastern Rome."

"Any particular reason why?" Xena inquired curiously and finished off the apple slice, pressing her sticky fingers together.

The blonde shrugged a shoulder. "It's full of…brothels. I don't even go over there. It's crawling with men."

Xena turned with an impish grin. "Do Roman officials go to these brothels?"
Her cheeks flushed bright red which caused the conqueror to stifle a short laugh. "I…I don't know. I wouldn't know. Like I said, I don't go in that area for several reasons!"

Any other party at this hour would have wound down by now but not here. The guests continued to flow into the palace and as the night progressed the wine was consumed rapidly, ensuing boisterous conversations from the Roman nobles. Romans didn't have the need to go to brothels when the palace was crawling with women from Nero's circle entertained guests.

Gabrielle looked over at her shoulder at a few young women probably no older than her, circling around an elderly Roman officer, wearing nothing to conceal her breasts. Painted in gold, the woman stripped herself of her loin cloth and jeweled belt loosely hanging on her slender waist.

She groaned, disgusted by the way these men enjoyed the sight of a naked woman. She wondered if they even cared about the age or shape of the woman. Most likely not.

"Romans disgust you," said Xena.

"What?" she whipped her head up at the brunette. "Oh, well…I'm not really in a position to express my opinion freely like you are."

"I'm not a Roman, Gabrielle."

"Speaking of that." She leaned an elbow on balcony ledge. "Since you won't tell me your name and you don't have to!" she held up an open palm. "I'll call you Delphi. You still never told me what you do in Delphi."

Xena raised her chin and the corners of her mouth turned upright. "I can't tell you all my secrets. My job requires me to move around a lot."

"I guess I can't say you're a woman of few words anymore but you are now a woman of many secrets," Gabrielle teased.

"As are you."

Gabrielle titled her head with a questionable face. "How do you mean?"

She set down the flute and closed the space between them and lifted her hand. Carefully and hesitantly, she pulled the veil away to expose Gabrielle's chest and neck. With a gentle swipe of her hand she brushed the blonde locks behind the uneasy artist's shoulder.

"You don't strike me as a clumsy person, Gabrielle." Her fingers gingerly pecked the fresh wound, causing a flinch from her counterpart.

"It…was an accident," she poorly tried to cover up her lie.

Evander walked through the villa and found Vindex sitting at his desk, writing and drinking wine. The usual, he presumed. He snuck up behind the oblivious governor and grabbed a handful of Vindex's blonde hair and slammed his face onto the desk and drew a blade against his neck.

The governor growled, struggling to grab anything within his reach to attack the intruder. His was cautious of the blade to his neck and snatched the wine glass and smashed it against the table. Several snarls, growls and grunts, he tried to reach behind him to stab the intruder.

Evander jabbed the governor's arm with his elbow and Vindex cried out. He pressed his body
against the squirming Roman and his flesh met the blade, drawing a bit of blood. Vindex winced and wheezed, his heart pumping and head swimming from the hot wine coursing through his veins, distorting his vision and clouding his lack of motor skills.

"What do you want?" he barked.

"Why are you drowning yourself in wine and hiding in your villa?"

The governor grunted and the sting of the blade cutting into his skin caused him to twine. Sweat poured down his cheek and he gawked at the candle with a slow burning flame.

"Who do you work for?"

"Answer the damn question!"

Vindex choked and smiled, wine infused saliva dripping from his lips. "Did she send you?"

Evander paused at the question, almost loosening his grip on the governor. He recovered and slid the dagger across Vindex's throat.

"Yes…I did," he said, sounding sure of himself.

The governor let out a snort and spat, "you can tell Xena to go fuck herself. I did as I was told! It is her who is holding everything up!"

Evander hesitated and asked, "When is Xena going to meet with you?"

"She…" Vindex arched his eyebrow, realizing that this so called intruder was toying with him to gather information. Very sly of you, young man, he thought. "If you work for her then surely…you would know that."

His heart stopped and he took the dagger away from the governor's neck and darted out of the room, slamming the door shut as on his way out. Quiet, he was not. Vindex sat up, rubbing his sore neck and swiveled in the chair, glaring at the entry door.

Her stare was more than intense; it was enchanting in a way. Gabrielle had to hold herself back from telling the truth. She couldn't risk being exposed especially to a woman who barely knew her.

"You should apply a salve so the wound doesn't get infected," Xena advised.

Gabrielle nodded, clutching her throat, reminding herself of that moment she was attacked. She could've been dead. No, she should have been dead. Those dark eyes that she remembered so vividly were burned into the back of her mind. Her job consisted of dealing with several enemies but she didn't understand why she was almost killed. She had someone tailing her at all times. She couldn't open up to anyone, not even her.

"I can prepare a salve for you and bring it by tomorrow evening at your workshop."

"That…is kind of you but you shouldn't worry about me," Gabrielle's eyes shifted and she kept rubbing the throat wound.

Xena gripped the artist's arm firmly. "Next time, be more careful."

She caught a glimpse of her men leaving the palace through the front entrance. She inhaled sharply and turned to the miffed blonde in front of her and quickly took her hand off the artist's arm. She
smoothed out her dress and faintly grinned.

"It's getting late. I should go back to my villa. You should leave too."

Gabrielle fidgeted with her veil and licked her dry lips. "I...have to stay for a little while longer."

Lowering her gaze, she emits a small smile. "Augusta Sabina," she supposed. "I'll stop by and give you the salve. You'll be there, yes?"

"I'm always there," said Gabrielle.

Varinia took the goblet from the Roman soldier she was supposed to entertain for the evening and walked towards the window where she kept a cupboard filled with various types of wine. She could barely listen to the man rant on about how hard his life was in the military. This had to be the worst night this week but he did pay her a hefty amount of coin which she couldn't refuse or she'd be in a lot of trouble with her superior.

She poured a generous amount of sweet Nile wine in the goblet. This was his fourth serving of wine and he was bound to either keel over or continue his ranting, she preferred the former. She took a seat on the bed next to the Roman and forced herself to smile.

"Your wine, soldier." She handed him the goblet.

He nodded and grabbed her by the chin, bringing her close. He felt mild resistance from her and the cup slipped from his grasp. He gripped her slender arms firmly and then lifted her layered skirt, squeezing a handful of her meaty thigh.

Varinia flinched and set her hand on his, weakly smiling. "You've had too much wine..." her eyes glittered in the candlelit room and she traced her fingers along his bare chest.

The soldier took a whiff of her curly wild hair. "Where are you from, girl?"

"Syria, soldier."

He gazed into her green eyes then threw her onto the bed. Varinia yelped and she watched as he climbed on top of her, ripping her blouse open. She put her hands on his chest, trying to push him off. He growled and pinned her to the bed and kissed her neck, pressing his heavy against on her thin frame.

The door was kicked open and the drunken soldier looked over his shoulder at a masked man standing in the doorway. Pants halfway down his legs, he stood and swung at the intruder. Within a second he was knocked off his feet with a kick to his kneecaps.

He whined, rolling onto his back he stared at the icy blue eyes above him.

"Get the fuck out of here and if I ever see you in here again I'll skin you."

The soldier stood up, pulling his pants to his waist and gaping at Varinia on the bed, just as shocked as he was. He tripped over himself and hobbled out of the room without putting up a fight.

Varinia closed her blouse and sat up in the bed, scooting to the headboard. The masked man was revealed and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Evander!" she squealed in delight and hopped off the bed, embracing him tightly.
He cradled her luscious hair and kissed the top of her head. "What did I tell you about letting other men into your room?"

She pulled away. "What am I supposed to do? Only serve you?"

"I don't want another man's hands on you."

Varinia chuckled and smoothed her palms over his vest. "That's not how I conduct my business, Evander. If you want me so badly you might as well just marry me!" she laughed at the idea.

He went to sit on the bed and he ripped off his cloak. He took the ribbon out of his coiled hair and the raven locks tumbled down, resting just below his shoulders. He had his head hung lowly, rubbing the nape of his neck, his eyes set on the floor.

She cocked her head and sat next to him. "I don't like the line of work you're in, Evander. It's too dangerous." She gripped his inner thigh. "I worry about you."

"You shouldn't."

The bitter tone in his voice concerned her and she inched closer. "What's wrong?"

"I…just had something confirm my suspicions today and I feel…" he twirled the necklace in his hand and gripped it firmly, "Sick to my stomach."
Gölge nursed her arm and kept her distance from Xena as much as she could. Living in such a small space wasn't easy for any of them but everyone somehow made it work. While Xena's men scouted Rome, Gölge was put on lookout duty indefinitely. She hated waiting in the shadows and she hated Rome. The longer they stayed here the antsier she got lurking in the tower.

She knew for sure that her arm wasn't broken but possibly had a sprain due to her recent encounter. She hid her pain by keeping her arm close to her chest at all times. Whenever Xena wasn't around or sleeping during the day that was the only time she could bind her elbow with a splint. All the other times she was forced to endure the agonizing pain.

Today was especially difficult to keep watch over the city since Xena was here. She constantly kept looking over her shoulder to see if Xena was asleep or not. Ever since her arrival late last night, she remained awake and more alert than usual.

Gölge caught a pair of blue eyes on her and she whipped her head back around to stare out the window all while clutching her arm to her chest. The footsteps approached closer and closer until she could feel Xena's glare from behind.

"I have the document to start the rebellion," she handed over the scroll tied with a ribbon. "I want you to deliver it to Vindex. He should be in his villa, drinking copious amounts of wine no doubt."

She took the scroll from Xena with her uninjured arm and swiveled in the chair.

"Don't you normally visit his villa? Why are you asking me to do that?"

Xena tapered her eyes. "Why are you questioning me, Gölge?"

The girl turned around and grimaced. She held the scroll tightly, crinkling the thick parchment with a clenched fist.

"You've been very obstinate ever since we came to Rome. If you don't want to do this then you can go back to Edirne."

The color drained from Gölge's cheeks and she stood up, slowly straightening her injured arm. She tried not to cause alarm but of course Xena noticed the twinge of her eyebrow and lip. Her fist tightened around the scroll, crumpling it as she poorly hid her very obvious pain.

"What's wrong with you?" Xena took a step forward and the girl took a step back. "I'm not going to hit you again," she extended her hand. "Unless you prefer I do…" she arched an eyebrow.

Gölge relented and swallowed the lump in her throat and locked her jaw. "I'm fine. When do you want this delivered? I can go now if you wish."

Xena scanned the girl's posture once more and then walked over to a chest of clothes. She pulled out a green gown and held it out in front of her body. She gently draped the gown over Gölge's arm and that gave her a quick opportunity to inspect her apprentice a bit closer. Her eyes roamed over
the girl's body and slowly traced her hand down Gölge's arm and instantly felt tension. She pulled her hand away abruptly.

"Put that on and then deliver the document to Vindex. Make sure nobody sees you."

On the second floor of the workshop, Gabrielle studied the sizeable gash on her neck. She kept going over the moment she was followed, or more like chased, and cornered in an alleyway. Her life was almost taken from her in a matter of seconds and if it weren't for those people who passed by, she'd be dead now.

Recently she was bombarded with so many distractions. She wasn't sure if she could believe anything that Evander said. She didn't know him very well but she supposed discrepancy was part of this job. This was nothing like she envisioned her life would be. Killing people should never be a part of anyone's job description.

She didn't enjoy spying on others and receiving a large sum of money for it either but if she didn't do exactly what Nero wanted then she'd be dead. The thought of going after someone so important and yet so highly feared in the empire was exceptionally tasking on her mental health. Once this was over with she made a promise to leave Rome and never return.

Gabrielle wrapped a scarf around her throat to conceal the wound and scurried down the stairs. She briefly greeted all of the sculptors and then Zenodorus jumped down from the ladder and she jumped back.

"Don't do that," she warned.

The lanky artist clasped his clay covered hands together. "Where're you off to today, Gabrielle?"

"I have some pressing matters to tend to," she shoved him aside gently.

A bit miffed by her sudden dark mood, Zenodorus ran in front of her and walked backwards, trailing her every move towards the exit. He put on a flashing charming grin which she rolled her eyes in response. He finally got her to stop in her tracks so he could continue to converse.

"Why the sour mood, Gabrielle? You aren't your usual self. Oh, wait, I know!" he raised a finger. "Augusta Sabina must've given you a hard time at the party last night. Am I right?"

She crookedly grinned. "Yes, that's it. I won't be back until after the shop is closed. Keep an eye on my station, would you?"

"Oh...o –of course, Gabrielle." he took a step to the side and allowed her to pass.

The Romans crowded the streets like insects. It was going to be nearly impossible to find the Steppe woman's men in this chaos. Daily life in Rome was fast paced. Nothing stopped moving in this city, not even a coastline fire was going to stop the Romans from living their best lives.

Look at them, Gabrielle thought. They didn't even give a care in the world. They were completely oblivious to the danger around them at all times. They had no idea that their ruler was a tyrant who'd rather see most of them dead for not adhering to his laws. They were too busy buying materialistic commodities and entertaining themselves to care about anyone in the world.

After last night's party at the palace, all of her thoughts about Romans were confirmed. They were self absorbed and thought their lives were more important than anyone else's. The nobles were far
better at showing their carefree attitude than the common citizens. They flaunted it and she had enough of old politicians ruling the city.

She needed a way out of this place and if she had to kill this one last person on her list then so be it. She had no choice but to do this.

Gabrielle managed to make her way around the crowds and she didn't see anything suspicious. She did overhear a conversation about the coastline fires but it was false information. Evander was right. The public knew nothing and she was sure Nero was going to keep his people in the dark.

But as she kept slinking about the city she kept hearing conversations about the fires. That happened days ago and people were super concerned about it. She too wondered what the point of the fires was. All of the ships that were set aflame were merchant ships filled with food, weaponry and construction supplies that were brought from a foreign land.

She minded her own business and inspected a vendor's fruit stand while she listened to two men carry on their conversation about the loss of supplies. They were affected financially and now the Roman army had forbade anyone to trade overseas. She knew that only because Evander told her but now it was confirmed –the public knew too.

As soon as the customer left, she made her way over to the merchant with the empty stall. She smiled sweetly at the elderly man and he hardly took notice of her. She slammed her hand on the tabletop and he lifted his eyes.

"Hello," he said and finally smiled.

"Hey there," her eyes darted to the onlookers who gave her strange stares. She obviously didn't fit in here. "I couldn't help but overhear your situation. It's such a shame that the merchant ships were set on fire," she played up to her talkative nature, hoping he'd receive her.

He let out a weary sigh. "Many of us aren't going to recover from the loss. We rely on the trade."

She rubbed her chin and picked at the wood chipping off the table. "It's unfortunate," she said seeming to sound interested. "Where exactly did those ships come from, do you know?"

"We get most of our supplies from Edirne."

She wrinkled her eyebrows and cleared her throat. "Edirne?"

Slightly amused by her puzzled face, he let out a soft laugh. "It's a province in the Steppes. Haven't you heard of it?"

A hand distinctively came to her throat. "No…I've never heard of it." Her heart palpitated rapidly and she suddenly became more aware of her surroundings. "I hope your business starts again. Thank you for your time."

She slipped away and flipped the hood over her head. She left the merchant's stall more confused than when she entered the city. If Rome had trade ties with Edirne then why were the ships purposefully set on fire? Why would someone risk all of their supplies for the sake of a fantastical display like that? Was it to get attention? She imagined that the Steppe people were hurting financially too or maybe Nero had done something horrible to the people of Edirne and incited the fire indirectly?

Varinia woke to loud rapping at the door. She raised her head off of Evander's chest and curled her
fingers around his raven locks with a smile. He stirred for a moment and shifted his weight to his side. Gradually, she slipped out of bed and threw a blanket around her body.

Grumpily, she opened the door to put a halt to the incredibly loud knocking. She was met with a short blonde cloaked woman in the corridor. She hung her arm on the door and ruffled her unkempt wavy hair, clearly annoyed her morning was interrupted.

Gabrielle pushed the scarf up above her mouth and nose to block out the smell of wine, sweat and gods knows what else happened in this forsaken place. She regretted ever stepping foot into this building. Frankly, she was shocked she was allowed in.

"Um, is Evander here?" she asked with a muffled voice.

The blanket opened to Varinia's body and exposed her slender tanned abdomen. Gabrielle urged herself to look away but she couldn't. Her eyes were plastered on the young woman's bare flesh.

"Are you a friend of Evander?" she twirled a curl around her finger.

"Sort of…"

Varinia gave a roll of her eyes. "One moment." She closed the door halfway and then swung it open again. "What's your name?"

"It's Gabrielle. He'll know who I am."

The door was closed in her face and she was left out in the hallway. She sighed and looked around to see a few women hanging out at the end of the hall, talking quietly, barely clothed. She chose to keep her eyes forward and focus on anything but the smell. Oh, old wine was not a pleasant smell in Rome's summer heat.

Moments later Varinia opened the door with a much nicer and welcoming face. She allowed Gabrielle entry and even offered her wine which Gabrielle refused.

Evander on the other hand looked annoyed by her presence. He laced his pants and marched over to his partner and grabbed hold of her arm then dragged her to the window.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered.

Varinia immersed herself in their conversation. "It's a little early for wine, I realized. Would you like some tea?"

Gabrielle blushed and turned her gaze away from the woman's exposed breasts. "Ah, um, no thank you." she used a hand as a blinder and looked up at Evander, hoping Varinia would just disappear.

"Again, what are you doing here?"

"You said I could come here if I had information!" Gabrielle hissed. "Do you always hang out with whores?"

"Varinia is not a whore," he said defensively.

Her eyes widened and glanced over at the Syrian who smiled at them. "Well, she's certainly not your wife."

It was apparent by his body language that he clearly did not want her here.
Gabrielle cut to the chase. "I overheard a conversation in the market today. The fires on the coastline that burned all the ships belonged to merchants from Edirne." She leaned in closer, "that's a Steppe province." She whispered.

His stomach bubbled out of nerves. He worked so hard last night to wipe the information he lured out of Vindex from his mind. Now he was forced to come back to reality again. Wine and Varinia wasn't going to magically erase what happened. She was here. That woman was here. She could be anywhere.

"About that," he set a hand on her shoulder. "I found out that Vindex is working with Xena."

"Xena?"

"That's her name. She's here in Rome, Gabrielle. I told you so!" his raised voice alarmed Varinia and he smiled faintly and waved his hand to assure her nothing was amiss. "Did you find out anything else? Do you know what she looks like? She's hiding in Rome and we have no leads! What are we going to do?"

"Evander, relax!" she pinched his arm. "This is too difficult for us to do on our own."

Nervously, he clutched his necklace and fidgeted with the curtains to keep his nerves at bay and wandering mind tranquil. His heart raced and the busy streets below fell deaf on his ears. He could feel the rhythmic thumping of his heart in his throat as he twirled the bracelet around his fingers repetitively.

Gabrielle rubbed his arm and he flinched, nearly whacking her across the face. He took but a second to realize he was in this very room and not elsewhere. He thought of his interrogation in Vindex's villa. The idea of the unknown circling around his city was unquestionably disturbing.

"Are…you feeling okay? You're sweating." she wiped the droplets from his cheek.

"W-we need to find her."

"And we will," she nodded. "But we need more information. Why don't we start with Vindex?"

Scoping out the city wasn't a luxury that she had and she couldn't stay out long otherwise Xena would question her until sunset. She did as told and delivered the message to Vindex. He was able to tell her that someone knew about Xena's presence but he didn't know who it was.

Xena's plan to remain hidden was a risk from the start. Setting the ships on fire was just the first step to get the Romans to notice her. Once the army began to revolt against Nero, Rome will fall and then everyone would know who made their mark on the empire.

Gölge wondered how Xena was going to pull this off and she was already extremely paranoid. Her senses were heightened walking through the streets. She met eyes with everyone and felt she was being gawked at. It's all in my head, she assured herself.

Headed back to the tower she came by the workshop. Smiling, she entered the large building and several artists, all males, turned to her. Dressed in the green gown with a veil to match covering her dark hair she felt out of place.

Zenodorus wiped his hands and nervously grinned at the woman. "What brings you here?"

"Just stopping by." She slinked by and saw an easel with an empty canvas. "I was told by a little
"Yes, yes." He circled around and blocked Gabrielle's workspace. "She's not here right now but she's returning after the shop is closed. She'll be back tomorrow morning if you want to schedule an appointment?"

Gölge noted the expensive paintbrushes displayed on the table. An artist could never afford brushes like that. A frown formed and she was taken out of her element, thinking of Xena's mysterious disappearances which weren't so mysterious anymore.

She momentarily forgot a pair of eyes was watching her.

"That won't be necessary. Would you mind telling her that I stopped by?"

Zenodorus, smitten by her, nodded with a goofy grin. "No problem! What's your name?"

A terrible day this was. Gabrielle searched the city with Evander and they even waited outside of Vindex's home all afternoon. The governor didn't leave his home all day which was very unusual for someone who supposedly was at the emperor's beck and call.

Tired, sweaty from the summer heat, and exhausted from mentally racking her brain all day and not to mention Evander's jumpiness, rendered her drained. She whipped the scarf off her neck and felt the cold sweat dripping down her back.

She flung the scarf on the chair inside the workshop and thought to check on her work station. As much as she trusted Zenodorus, she knew he was clumsy and was busy with his own work. She inspected the area and everything was in place.

Over her shoulder, she spotted the sculptors talking quietly and cleaning up their stations for the day. She grabbed her satchel and pulled out the sketch she had. Grinning from ear to ear, she felt anxious to see her client again. Even though they spent some time together at the party last night, that was the last place she wanted to be. Romans, she was disgusted by every single one of them.

"Gabrielle!"

Her body tensed at Zenodorus' boisterous voice. "Dammit! You really need to stop doing that!" she stuffed the sketch into her bag and turned around, hiding the bag behind her back. "What do you want?"

He wriggled his eyebrows. "You had a delectable guest come by today. She was very interested in your work."

Smiling would give it away. She took in a sharp inhale. "Who was it?"

"She said her name was Xena."

That name. It couldn't be her, could it? Was she really that close? Had she been watching her this whole time? Why would she come here? Perhaps it was a trap. A woman like Xena wouldn't reveal herself to the entire world and she definitely wouldn't come to a public place like this for the whole city to see her. Would she really do that?

Breathless she looked to the sculptor with fear in her eyes. "Is...is she going to come by again?"

"She didn't say. I told her she could make an appointment but she disappeared. Anyway, stay safe,
Gabrielle. See you tomorrow?" he threw the rag at her face and it fell to the ground. "You've got horrible reflexes," he laughed and sauntered away.

The bag she held slipped from her hands. She spun around and leaned her palms on the table. She kept her eyes closed and breathed in and out until her stomach settled. Her fingernails tapped against the table and she listened to the sounds of the city shutting down for the evening.

"You look like you've had a hard day."

She gasped and turned at the sound of a very familiar voice. She put a hand over her throbbing chest and nearly backed into the easel behind her.

Xena raised an eyebrow. "Is there something wrong? You seem flustered."

"I…I…" the bitter taste of bile lingered on her tongue. "No, I'm okay."

"Good." Xena smiled warmly and held a bound of cloth in her palm. "I brought the salve as promised. Did you forget I was coming?" she reached out to brush a lock of hair behind Gabrielle's ear.

"No…I…"

Xena titled her head and focused on the wound. It was beginning to bruise which was a good sign but the gash was still very swollen. Cleanliness was important when it came to any wound especially ones to the throat.

She grabbed the stool and slowly lowered Gabrielle to sit by a gentle push to her shoulders. She grabbed the salve wrapped in the cloth and dug her fingers into herb lotion. She knelt down and gently pulled Gabrielle's cloak off her shoulder.

"I made this myself. If you apply it to the gash twice a day it should heal quickly." She rubbed the salve along the blonde's neck gingerly.

Gabrielle felt the cool lotion on her skin and that had to be the most soothing thing all day. She flinched as the salve began to sting and caused a burning sensation all across her throat and collar bone. Mistakenly, she peered down at the crystalline eyes below her.

"Thank…you," she spoke in a broken voice.

"Are you ever going to tell me what happened?" Xena curiously asked.

"W –what?"

"Your wound," she nudged her head. "I know that wasn't an accident, Gabrielle. Like I said, you're not a clumsy person."

Gabrielle's jaw locked. "You –you don't know me."

"Well…" a hint of a smile appeared, "you don't really know me either."
Going to need some ice for that burn.
Chapter Notes

This story gives me anxiety lol

She stayed awake all night, staring at the ceiling. As she lay in bed she lost track of time and she hadn't realized the sun came out, shining through the cracks in the wooden beams above her. The sculptors below on the first floor were shuffling around and talking louder than usual. Zenodorus was also clapping his hands, chatting with another artist.

Gabrielle rolled out of bed and crawled across the floor boards. She peeked through the slats of the balustrade and grimaced at how gleeful Zenodorus was this morning. Nothing about this morning was joyful but she knew that she shouldn't take her anger out on him.

She sat back against the end of the bed and sighed heavily. Her fingers came to her neck wound and her eyes focused on the salve wrapped in gauze on the table. She reached over and snatched the salve and unraveled the cloth.

Twice a day. She'd apply the medicinal salve twice a day. With a swipe of her fingers she gently spread the salve across the wound and winced. Nearly a week later and the wound still felt fresh. Maybe she wasn't ready for this mission. She could barely handle someone who had a measly knife. She couldn't shake the feeling of being inadequate. She was going to lose her life if she went back on her word to help Emperor Nero.

She was also knocking on death's door now that Xena knew where she worked. Her stomach dropped at the idea of being watched at all times. This woman was always a step ahead of everyone else and nobody knows where she is. Nobody knows what she looks like.

Nobody except Zenodorus.

Gabrielle ran down the stairs and grabbed the ladder which the sculptor stood on. "Zenodorus!" she shouted and he looked down while holding a glob of clay.

"Morning, Gabrielle. Sleep well?" he asked in a chipper tone.

"No…," she shook her head. "The woman who came in yesterday looking for me –"

"Xena?" he interrupted.

"Yes," she held her breath. "What did she look like?"

He smoothed the clay along the sculpture's shoulders and hummed. "She had tan skin, but not too tan," he smiled softly, "hazel eyes, dark long hair. She's gorgeous, Gabrielle! I should take up painting for my next job if I get beautiful clients like you do."

He peered down the tall ladder and scrunched up his nose. "Tall I guess," he recalled. "Taller than you!" he laughed aloud and the other sculptors joined in on the snicker-fest. "She had a nice average physique. Not too thin."

"Thanks..." she mumbled.

She ran to her station and packed up her belongings quickly. She glared at the leather bag with her sketches and looked over her shoulder. You're being paranoid Gabrielle, she told herself. She stuffed her leather bag into a chest of supplies and slammed the lid shut.

Putting a hand over her chest, her breathing slowed to a normal pace the moment she looked out the window. A normal day. Everyone was so oblivious here. They knew absolutely nothing about their surroundings. She also felt completely oblivious. She didn't care what Evander said. They'd never be able to find Xena in this city with a brief description of her appearance. She was in plain sight – right in front of their noses – and yet they couldn't find her.

A boy outside was handing out cups of water to the people passing by. Most noblemen and women gave him money. Gabrielle smiled at the small boy who was trying so hard to sell his water. Roman soldiers completely ignored him for the most part except for this instance. Two soldiers came by and dumped the bucket of fresh water all over the dirty ground.

Gabrielle furrowed her brows and grabbed her cloak and slipped a dagger into her sleeve. She lifted her head when she heard a lot of shouting and cursing. What she saw surprised her. Zenodorus bumped her arm which caused her to flinch.

She muttered under her breath and watched the verbal fight between the Romans and Xena. She raised her eyebrow and smirked at how scared the Romans were of her. A swell of anxiety sat in the pit of her stomach and she side-eyed Zenodorus. She just had to ask.

"That woman over there," she pointed to her client. "Did... is she Xena? Is she the one who came by yesterday?"

Zenodorus studied her and rubbed his chin. "No, that's definitely not her. I said the woman had hazel eyes, not blue! You really ought to pay attention more, Gabrielle." he gently slapped her on the shoulder and walked off.

"Right," she whispered, "pay attention more."

Relief washed over her when he said that. She would've felt horrible if she'd been conversing with the enemy the entire time. It wasn't her—it wasn't Xena. That wasn't her because Zenodorus said so but that only meant that she was still lurking somewhere.

Gabrielle ran out of the workshop and the Romans who bothering the poor boy since disappeared into the crowd. With a smile she made her way over to the boy and slyly hid behind her client.

Xena spun around after paying the boy and helping him clean up the mess the Romans made. She almost bumped into the blonde artist and took a generous step backward, smiling feebly.

"Morning," greeted Gabrielle. "You must have a special skill scaring off Romans."

Xena titled her head, puzzled by the artist's comment.

"I saw you from the workshop. You scared off the Romans who were giving this boy a hard time." Gabrielle ruffled the boy's hair and he blushed.
"Ah," Xena nodded and walked through the street. "I don't like Romans, Gabrielle. I thought we established that at the party."

She continued to follow Xena and kept eyeing every single woman that fit Zenodorus' description of the enemy. So far she found a few women that matched the description but none were of wealthy status. Most were in simple clothing. They couldn't be her.

"Gabrielle?"

"Oh, sorry, did you say something?"

Xena arched an eyebrow. "I asked if you applied the salve I gave you." she grabbed the artist's arm and pulled her aside and tried to look at the gash. "Let me see."

"I…" Gabrielle grabbed the brunette's wrist. "I applied it this morning."

Xena snatched her hand away and noticed the tinge of pink on Gabrielle's cheeks. Her eyes scanned the area and she saw a dark cloaked figure from afar. He was standing by one of the apartment buildings trying his best to conceal himself but she knew he was watching her. She instantly took Gabrielle by the hand and rushed through the crowd.

Gabrielle gasped as she was being shoved and pushed by Romans. She shielded her face from the elbows and arms brushing against her cheek and body. She let out audible groans and puffs of air. Finally, once they were out of the busy square she was yanked forward into an alley.

"What do you think you're doing?" she yelled, a bit annoyed.

Xena's heart raced and she shoved Gabrielle against the wall and eyed the cloaked figure walking through the crowd. She was being followed. Someone saw her and perhaps they knew who she was. The man wasn't one of Vindex's men. No, the Governor wouldn't send someone out in daylight to find her. That wasn't like him at all, no matter how drunk that man was.

"Excuse me!" Gabrielle rubbed her wrist. "I know you might be angry with me because I kicked you out last night but you must understand I was not in the best…of moods." She huffed. "Are you alright?"

Xena snapped her head around with feral eyes. "No…Gabrielle, I'm not angry at you."

"Why did you drag me through that crowd? Is someone looking for you?" Gabrielle's interest piqued. "Maybe the Romans told their soldier friends to come after you. You did assault one of the emperor's elite men."

Xena relaxed for a moment and she released a faint grin.

Gabrielle's cheeks reddened and she pressed her palm against her face. At this second she felt mortified and her client's smile wasn't helping her situation in the slightest. She chose to ignore her flushing cheeks and act as if nothing had happened. She raised her eyes and saw the smug smile on Xena's face.

"I was going to meet up with a friend. It's been awhile since we've worked on your portrait…" she lamely hinted her desire to paint again. "I promise I won't kick you out of the workshop again. Yesterday wasn't a very good day for me." She sighed.

Xena nodded. "Is Augusta Sabina giving you a hard time again?"
Gabrielle snorted. "No, it's got nothing to do with her."

"Who was it then? Maybe I can help," Xena said with a shimmering smile.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes playfully and then stepped out of the alleyway. She looked around the square and found Evander leaning against one of the vegetable carts. She gave a quick nod to him and he lifted two fingers to acknowledge her presence. He didn't have his normal dark attire on but looked like a normal Roman merchant. Blending in with the crowd I see, she thought.

She turned on her heel and stared up at Xena. "I don't think you'll be able to help me with this person." She wanted this conversation to be over.

Evander shifted his weight off the cart as soon as Gabrielle came his way with her guest trailing behind. He locked eyes with Xena and he instantly recognized her from the brief encounter in the alley on the north side of the city. He tucked his necklace into his blouse and put on a face for her and Gabrielle.

Xena stood beside Gabrielle and watched Evander's every move. He clumsily organized the vegetables and fruits on the stand and she raised an eyebrow, silently observing his klutzy behavior.

Gabrielle inspected one of the apples and tried to pretend she didn't know him but she took note of his bizarre behavior.

"You're very anxious," Xena said coolly.

Evander laughed awkwardly and presented a pomegranate. "I'm new here. My apologies."

Xena leaned over the cart and grabbed one of the apples and picked a speck of dirt off the fruit's flesh. While she was occupied inspecting the fruit, she looked out of the corner of her eye at Evander's necklace wrapped around his neck. She turned to him, holding the apple in her palm.

"And how much is this?" she asked, staring into his large blue eyes.

"Take it as a gift from me to you," he insisted.

She let a smile slip and then handed the apple over to Gabrielle. She adjusted the veil atop of her hair and searched the area with a quick glance. She then clasped her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder.

"I should go but I will see you later tonight."

Gabrielle nodded. "Try to stay away from those Roman soldiers."

"I'll try my best." Xena briefly smiled and then looked to Evander once more. She narrowed her eyes and then trailed back into the crowd.

Evander let out a hefty exhale and wiped the sweat from his brow. "You know that woman?" he hissed.

"She's a client of mine," said Gabrielle nonchalantly. "What's wrong with you? You're sweating like a pig."

"I…" he rubbed the nape of his neck. "I just lied to her. She knows who I am."

Gabrielle brought him to a secluded area of the square and spoke quietly. "What do you mean she knows who you are?"
"Not like that." His eyes darted around nervously. "I ran into her a week ago when I was spying on Vindex."

She scoffed and slapped his arm. "Is that all? I wonder why she didn't say anything," she crinkled her eyebrows. "She's nice, Evander," she tried to soothe his nerves while rubbing his arm. "But...I can't help but notice you're really bothered. Did she say something to you?"

"No, I...," his head throbbed and he clutched his tunic, "it's nothing."

"You sure? Did she say something to upset you?"

"No!"

"Then what's the matter with you?"

He groaned and evaded the question. "Why'd you want to meet? Did you find out some new information?"

He definitely wasn't going to get off that easy. She made a mental note to bring up that topic again. He was still sweating profusely. He did the same when she came to visit him in that brothel when he was with Varinia. He was incredibly nervous and it was as if he couldn't control himself.

She was here to spread information, she reminded herself. Keep focus. Pay attention.

"Xena came to my workshop," she whispered.

Evander's eyes widened and he gripped her shoulders and shoved her into a dark alley. "What are you saying? You saw her?"

"No," she pushed him away. "One of the artists spoke with her. She was specifically looking for me!" now it was her turn to sweat. "Do you think she knows I'm the person who carries the order to kill her?"

"How would she know that?"

"I don't know!" she yelped and he covered her mouth.

"Calm down, Gabrielle," he whispered and looked out at the crowd. "She's living in Rome. She's disguising herself as a Roman citizen. She's even bolder than I thought and clever too..." he tapered his eyes. "She can't hide forever. We know she's working with the Governor which means, the Emperor probably doesn't know."

Gabrielle took in a deep breath and smacked his hand off her mouth. She wiped her lips and crossed her arms, breathing in and out faster than usual.

"Should we tell the Emperor? We watched Vindex's villa all afternoon yesterday and nothing unusual happened."

"We're not going to tell him anything," a smile crept up on Evander's lips. "We're going to let the public tell him."

Gölge cornered herself in the tower and rubbed a hot cloth on her elbow. She slowly extended her arm and hissed at the painful movement. The moment she heard the footsteps creeping up the stairs, she threw the cloth into the water basin and shielded her arm. She hoped that it was Tildus with more food and wine for the rest of the week.
What she hoped wasn't true as soon as she laid eyes on her superior. Xena took the veil off her head and searched around the cramped space and smiled faintly at Gölge huddled in a corner like a small child. Her smile disappeared when she saw the swollen elbow of her apprentice.

"What happened?" Xena rushed over and lowered herself to the floor. "You need a splint. How long has your arm been like this?"

Gölge tried to pull her arm away. "It's alright. I don't need your help. Please."

"But you're hurt." Xena traced her fingers along the wound and brought her eyebrows together. "How did you get like this?" her tone darkened. "Did you leave the tower without permission again?"

The apprentice hid her guilty expression and then her cheeks were squished together by Xena's fingers. Her breathing labored and her eyes enlarged at the crystalline eyes inches from her face. The middle of her back began to sweat. She backed herself against the wall. It was too much of a struggle to run away and where would she go—the other side of the tower?

"You disobeyed me again," Xena nodded. "I told you not to leave!" she growled.

Gölge's eyes swelled with tears. "I'm...I'm sorry. I was just so angry that you—you left me..."

Xena snapped her hand away and sat back on her heels. Her mind drifted and a flash of Gabrielle's gash to the neck came rushing back. Her mouth gaped as her head slowly turned to her teary-eyed apprentice. A laugh escaped her lips and she slammed her palm against the wall and honed in on the terrified girl.

"It was you," she hissed. "You attacked Gabrielle."

Hiding it was of no use now. "So, that's her name."

"Gölge!" she emits a low growl and wrapped her hand around the girl's throat. "I told you I was just using her! You let your envy consume you." her grip firmed. "I should've left you in Edirne."

Tildus ran up the stairs with baited breath and frowned at the sight of Gölge being choked right before his eyes. He knocked on the wall and Xena craned her neck, blatantly annoyed by his presence, or rather, interruption. She finally loosened her grip on the girl's throat and rose off the floor.

"Vindex is gathering troops. He should have a full legion in the next couple of days," he reported.

She took in a deep calming breath and glared down at Gölge before addressing Tildus. "Once he has all the men, I want to be notified. I will lead this attack myself."

"Won't you just expose yourself?"

She unsheathed the sword at Tildus' hip and shoved him into the wall. Pressing the sword against his neck, she spat, "not another word from you. I've had enough of people talking back to me."

Gabrielle waltzed through the streets with her eyes hooded from her cloak hood. She overheard several citizens whispering and gossiping. A smile graced her lips after she heard the name of the so called Steppe Queen's true name being whispered across the city. Tired after a long day, spending it mostly with Evander, she wanted nothing more than to go to sleep but she couldn't.
She had to prepare her station for her client. She'd been waiting all day for this. It was the only time she could relax and just be herself. She didn't have to be a snobby artist or a quiet listener or a mercenary that prowled in the dim streets of Rome. She could just be Gabrielle.

Coming close to the workshop she took the hood off her blonde locks and fluffed her flattened hair. She felt a few rain drops fall on her nose and gazed up at the starry sky. It was unusual for rain at this time of year but she guessed it was an omen; a good omen she hoped.

She entered the workshop and stripped herself of her cloak and then saw the rain drops coming down harder. Just in time. Her stomach filled with uncertainty and she couldn't wipe the smile from her lips. Even though she was exhausted and mentally drained she was more than willing to paint.

Gabrielle turned on her heel to prepare her station and she halted mid-step. All the light in her eyes dimmed and the inside of her cheeks soured. A nervous hand came to rest on her fizzling stomach.

"Evening, Gabrielle. Where have you been? I've waited over an hour for you!" Augusta Sabina picked at her fingernails as she sat on her artist's stool.

This night was ruined. Everything was ruined.

"E –Empress," she bowed. "What are you doing here?"

Sabina raised her chin and frowned. "Is that any way to greet me? Are you not thrilled to see me?"

"How can I get rid of her? "No…I…the shop's closing soon. You don't normally stop by in the evenings."

"I was very busy today. I do find it rather odd that you were out all day. Should I tell my husband that you frequently leave your station unattended? I bet he would just hate that," she flashed an iniquitous smile.

Gabrielle bit her tongue and slowly crossed the shop, eyeing the rain pouring outside the large windows. The curtains flowed gently in the hot breeze. The closer Gabrielle came, the more her eyes focused on what was happening outside. The citizens were conversing despite being soaked by the summer rain.

"Where is your head, Gabrielle?" Sabina stood from the stool and placed her hands on her hips. "Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

She turned her attention to the arrogant empress and fiddled with her hands behind her back. Keeping her temper in check wasn't easy as of late and this woman was really trying her patience. The last person she wanted to see was standing before her and she wanted nothing more than to give her a piece of her mind.

"I apologize, empress. It was a surprise to see you, that's all," she managed to say.

Sabina smirked. "Now that I'm here we can discuss my portrait. I wanted to make a few changes to it. I believe we spoke briefly about that at the party."

"Yes…" Gabrielle approached her station. "Excuse me, empress. I need to get to my supplies."

Amid the rain, Xena strolled through the streets wearing a heavy cloak. She had her guards with her at all times but they walked at a fair distance. When she passed a tavern there were two men outside underneath a canopy, drinking wine together and talking loudly. Drunk Romans. Of course.
She stopped when she heard her name escape from their mouths. Her heart palpitated faster and faster until all she heard was the rhythmic organ rapidly sounding through her ears. She continued walking and then heard her name being whispered among others, men and women, as she passed.

Her name was being echoed throughout the streets. Everyone around her didn't notice or even acknowledge her presence as her pace quickened. Every corner she rounded her name was whispered into her ear. Frantically she cut through an alleyway, losing her guards in the process.

Xena shut her eyes and put a hand over her beating chest. She calmly reminded herself that nobody knew what she looked like but that didn't matter. Everyone knew she was here and they knew her name. Her thoughts drifted to Gölge.

This was all her fault.

After she soothed her inner thoughts she slipped out of the dark alley. The more people she passed, the more she felt their eyes on her. She chose to keep her head down. A few more yards and she'd be in the workshop. She grinned as she set her eyes on the lit up building and could see a shadow of a hand painting.

Xena flipped the hood off her hair and entered the workshop. The cloak slipped off her shoulders and dropped to the floor. Her nostrils flared once she saw Augusta Sabina sitting on a chair facing Gabrielle.

Gabrielle's paintbrush stopped mid-stroke and the paint dripped down the canvas. She swallowed upon seeing Xena and Sabina noticed her sudden abrupt stillness.

Sabina looked over her shoulder and turned gracefully in the chair to follow Gabrielle's star-struck gaze.

"A client of yours, Gabrielle?" asked the empress.

Xena felt herself sinking in the floor. She tapered her eyes, honing in on the small empress.

"Y-yes," answered Gabrielle. "She was at the party. You two spoke."

Sabina's upper lip twitched. "Oh yes, I recall." She tapped her fingers on the back of the chair. "I didn't know you two knew one another!" she put on a façade of a smile. "Sit with me. Gabrielle was just making a few adjustments to my portrait."

Xena's eyebrow rose at how kind the empress was being. She knew that Sabina didn't want her here. She didn't want Sabina here either. With a swipe her tongue against the front of her teeth, she flashed a pithy smile at the empress and made her way across the room.

Gabrielle's jaw locked and she dipped the paintbrush into a splotch of red paint, focusing on Xena's mannerisms. They were subtle but very noticeable to Gabrielle: the clenching of her left fist, the fidgety fingers on the right, the slow pace that of a dancer, the raised brow. This woman was incensed if not furious by the Augusta's presence.

Xena grabbed a chair and sat down beside the empress, eyeing her from head to toe.

Sabina began the conversation. "That nomadic woman is here in Rome," she said casually.

"Really?" Xena said calmly.

"It's the talk of the city," Sabina smiled over at the company. "It was just a rumor at first but I
knew she was here. I'm sure the emperor has people looking for her already. I suppose we know who was behind those coastline fires."

Gabrielle felt her palms begin to sweat. Her eyes darted to Xena and she had a difficult time trying to keep focus and paint. If she butchered this portrait she was dead in the Augusta's eyes. She chose to keep quiet and hoped her client was going to converse instead of living up to her nickname as the woman of few words.

"You don't know for sure that was her doing," implied Xena. "That's how rumors start, empress."

Sabina chuckled under her breath. "It was her. I am sure of it."

"Innocent until proven guilty," Xena eyed the nervous artist. "Isn't that the way of the Romans, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle licked her suddenly dry lips and nodded. "Of course."

Sabina turned to the woman beside her with a rutted brow. "And what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't."
Was this night ever going to end?

Gabrielle counted the minutes while she painted. The paintbrush swiped against the canvas and made a scraping sound that both her clients could hear audibly. She tried not to focus on either one of them and concentrated on the portrait.

The air was thick. The tension was almost obscene.

She was counting on the Empress' chatty tongue to break the silence but for once, the mouthy woman had nothing to say. With each stroke of the brush, she took a large inhale as if to help her ease the pressurized air inside her constricted lungs.

Xena crossed one leg over her knee and folded her hands in her lap. To occupy herself in this time of stillness, she ran a hand over the fabric of her gown. Then she tapped her fingernails together, glaring at Gabrielle a few feet in front of her. She couldn't stay here long but if she left now Sabina would say something. She was in an awkward situation that she couldn't weasel her way out of.

The infernal tapping noise caused the Empress' eyebrow to twitch. She side-eyed the brunette beside her and Xena slowly turned with a crooked smile. Just like that, Xena curled her fingers and Sabina gave a faint sneer.

"When is your child due?" Xena choked on her own words.

Sabina's face brightened ten-fold. "Hopefully by the start of fall but I have a feeling it will be the end of summer." She ran a hand over the swell of her abdomen.

Gabrielle breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, some conversation. She didn't know how long she could take the silence even if it was a topic she wasn't particularly fond of. Her eyes darted to Xena who appeared to be unnerved and irritated by the Augusta's presence. You and me both, she thought.

"Do you have any children?" asked the Empress.

Xena forced a cheeky smile and shook her head. "No, afraid not."

"I'm surprised that at your age you don't have any children," Sabina's eyes twinkled, showcasing a grin.

Xena's eyebrows lifted high into her fringed hair.
This is going horribly. Gabrielle lowered the brush from the canvas and watched the blue eyes of her client enlarge. She was incensed, Gabrielle could tell. She wasn't shocked to hear something like that spew from Sabina's lewd mouth. That woman had a way with words and she knew exactly what to say to rile people all while looking so sweet and innocent.

It would be so easy to kill her. All Xena had to do was wait until Sabina left the workshop and walked back to the palace. She could grab her from behind and snap her neck in two seconds. Her body would fall to the ground and then Xena would drag her off into an alley and stage her death. Sabina would die at the hands of Nero just like his previous wife.

She could put an end to this woman's life by the end of the night. Nobody would suspect her. She'd be in the clear.

No, she talked herself out of the idea. She couldn't kill Sabina. It would be an impulsive kill and people would question everyone who last saw her. The moment she vacated from Rome she would be exposed. Everyone would know it was her.

"You think me old, Empress?" she chose to play the insult off as a joke.

Sabina snubbed her nose. "I did not imply such a thing. I am simply surprised that you don't have any children at your age," she shot the brunette a glare.

"My life is busy enough as it is. Children would just get in the way."

"Gabrielle, are you almost finished with my portrait?" Sabina ignored the second guest, eager to change subject.

The artist set down the paintbrush and glanced at the painting. It wasn't finished and she hardly got any work done with these two women in her workplace. She was too worried about what next thing was to come out of the Empress' mouth to focus on painting.

"I will need to work on it some more, Empress. We can schedule a future appointment for you to come in," Gabrielle suggested and quickly glanced at the scowl upon Xena's face. This night was far too long.

Satisfied with the offer, Sabina made a move to vacate her chair. Xena stood abruptly and while the empress struggled to stand, she extended her hand. Sabina's eyes traveled up to the tall woman and grabbed Xena's hand and slowly got to her feet.

"How nice of you..." she tried to pull her hand away and Xena's grip tightened.

"I wish you a safe delivery and healthy child, empress." Xena's lips curled into a smile and finally let go of Sabina's hand.

An uneasy feeling came over Sabina the longer she laid eyes on the brunette's smile. Protectively, she cupped her belly and felt the child within her toss and writhe. She then put a hand to her thumping chest and her tongue scoped around her arid mouth.

"Thank you," she croaked out. She shortly made eye contact with Gabrielle before exiting with her chambermaids.

Xena followed the empress walking outside in the rain. She narrowed her eyes and heard the blonde artist exhale. She gathered Gabrielle had been holding that in for quite some time now. They were both relieved that the Augusta had left.
"I'm sorry. I had no idea she would be here. She usually notifies me when she wants to come by," Gabrielle felt the need to apologize further. "that little remark she made was uncalled for."

Xena lowered her gaze and let her guard down. "You don't need to apologize for the empress' brazenness, Gabrielle."

"But I want to," she began to clean her workspace. "I feel the need to. She should've never said the things that she did. Who does she think she is?" she tossed the dirty paintbrush into a cup of water. "The minute she opens her mouth it's like she can't stop vomiting nonsense!"

"Gabrielle..." she crept up behind the petite artist. "Gabrielle," she gripped her shoulder. "It's alright. You don't have to defend her actions to me."

Goosebumps coursed along her skin. She eyed the fingers splayed on her shoulder and slowly rounded her body to face Xena's. Subconsciously, she hid the gash on her neck as she knew it would only draw attention and she didn't want to be bothered with it anymore.

"You're a bad liar."

Gabrielle's cheeks soured. "What? You don't know me well enough to say that," she chuckled awkwardly.

Xena stepped closer and felt warm breath brush against her chest. "You tried to get away but they had you cornered." She brushed a strand of blonde from Gabrielle's neck. "They got distracted and didn't finish the job."

Gabrielle trembled, bothered by the accuracy of the description of her altercation with her attacker. She backed away and bumped into the table, knocking over the cup of water. Xena kept moving forward until there was no space left between them.

"They watched you from afar," Xena's voice deepened. "They know where you work. They know your name. They hunted you like prey." She grabbed Gabrielle's chin. "They attacked you."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak but all that she uttered were spurts of labored breaths and her throat closed up instantly. Everything Xena said was spot on which was very unsettling.

"You fought back and that is the only reason you're alive." Xena took a step back, allowing Gabrielle space to breathe. "You injured your attacker and they hesitated but they trapped you." she arched an eyebrow, continuing on, "you had no weapons with you so you used brute force."

Her fingers ran along the gash and Gabrielle let out a shaky exhale.

"The question begs an answer," her voice steady and smooth, "why would someone want to attack a harmless person like you?" Xena titled her head, gaping into the jade eyes.

Gabrielle took a moment to compose herself though her insides writhed. "Maybe...she didn't like the way...I looked."

"She." Xena lopsidedly grinned. "The attacker is a woman," she spoke naively. "Who would want to harm you, Gabrielle?"

"I...I don't know," she spoke the truth.

"The Steppe woman, perhaps?"
A long pause passed between them.

Xena smiled warmly and finally she saw the artist's nerves subside. There was a small flicker in Gabrielle's eyes at the mention of 'Steppe woman'. Everyone feared her. They feared me, she thought. Yet she had nothing to do with Gölge's impulsive attack she felt responsible. She inflicted pain on someone so innocent. It was her fault that Gabrielle was harmed and there was nothing she could do about it except maybe throw Gölge out the tower window. That girl had been nothing but trouble since their arrival.

"Why didn't you tell me you were attacked?"

Gabrielle rubbed her cheek on her shoulder, evading eye contact. "It's not your job to worry over me."

"I could've found the person responsible. I have connections."

The artist wagged her head and put a hand to her radiating cheek. "You're my client. It wouldn't…it wouldn't be appropriate." She turned her back to Xena and closed her eyes, wishing this conversation would end. "I don't like to mix business with pleasure. I shouldn't even be having this conversation with you right now," she mumbled.

A frown graced Xena's lips. "I'm not Augusta Sabina who would turn you into the Emperor for speaking openly."

"Still. It's not right."

With her back turned and eyes shut, she could hear footsteps drift away. Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open and she held her breath, turning around to see Xena gone. She walked along the wall, gazing out the windows. The pitter patter of the rain sounded of hail. She hung her head and her hand clenched into a fist.

The following days Roman soldiers ransacked the entire city in search of the Steppe Queen. They barged into homes and businesses, questioning citizens relentlessly. Nero employed every single soldier within his power to find the woman and bring her forth for the rest of Rome to see.

Every home was tossed upside down and some people were held prisoner for how they looked. Foreigners who resided in Rome were also detained by Nero's orders. The brothels were a hot spot for tourists and soldiers alike. Since the hunt began all brothels were forbidden to cater to eager men who desired any kind of pleasure.

Nobody was to be left out of this search. Nobody was safe here. The search went on for more than three days and Nero had pressured his men to keep looking. There no answers but several questions. More and more people were taken to the palace for questioning all to be released with tattered clothes and bruises on their skin.

No leads guided the Roman army to the intruder in the city. Vindex heard of Xena's name being plastered around the city and he was questioned by four elite soldiers for two days straight. He gave no valuable information but he was constantly being watched.

On the fourth day, Vindex left his villa and when he walked down the street it was surprisingly void of soldiers. Adjusting the gauntlet around his wrist, a hand came over his mouth and he was dragged into an alley and forced into a low apartment in the slums.

Forced to his knees, he looked at the black armored figure in front of him. He inwardly kicked
himself and tightened his face as he expected to be backhanded.

Xena spun on her heel and crossed her arms.

"Why didn't you tell me that people know my name? I can't even step outside without people whispering my name!" she bent down and held his face in her palm.

"I did! I told your maiden!"

Xena whipped her head to Gölte who hid herself in a corner of the room. She rolled her eyes. That girl had caused such mayhem for her that she questioned whether to keep her alive or not at this point. Everyone knew she was in Rome and although that had been her plan from the start, she didn't want her exposure to reveal itself like this.

"What happened?" she hissed. "How did the Romans come to know my name?"

Vindex tried to let himself up and she rammed his body against a barrel of old wine. "A spy...a man, came into my home and interrogated me."

"Go on..."

"I thought he was one of your men," he witnessed her pupils dilate like a hawk.

She sent a swift kick to his gut and he collided with the floor. She took the Governor by his collar and threw him against another wall. Vindex moaned and she pressed her arm against his throat, constricting air. While his cheeks turned bright red with the lack of oxygen, Xena pulled out a dagger and held the blade close to his blonde hair.

"You've been complacent, Vindex," she drew blood from his forehead. "Did I not warn you that this was your last chance? I keep my promises."

She nudged her head to her men, gesturing them to come close. They each held back Vindex's arms and stuffed his mouth with a cloth. He squirmed and wriggled, trying to get free. Xena turned to Gölte who was watching in horror.

Xena took a step back and her men held the Governor, forcefully holding him back so he would not escape. She waltzed across the room and swiveled the dagger to its dull end and held it out for her apprentice to take.

"Now is your chance to redeem yourself, Gölte." She pushed the dagger closer. "Take it!"

The young apprentice cautiously took the blade and clenched her fingers around the leather hilt. Xena's arm wrapped around her and she was pushed towards the squealing Roman. She stood in front of the man with warm breath gliding on the nape of her neck.

"Do it," Xena whispered in her ear. "Scalp him."

Hesitation was not a wise choice at this moment. Gölte saw the fear in his eyes. A pair of hands gripped her shoulders, causing her to tense. She took a deep inhale and the hands on her tightened to the point of it being painful.

"Scalp him or I'll scalp you, Gölte."
was given the orders to kill Xena with absolutely no leads felt impossible. If Nero's men couldn't find her then how in the world could she?

Gabrielle was in a foul mood these last four days and it wasn't just due to soldiers practically tearing the city down. After that night with her clients she feared she might've scared her mysterious Delphi woman away. Sabina ruined everything that night. She had plans to work on the portrait but when she found Sabina waiting for her in the shop, she knew her night was to turn into a nightmare of sorts.

While the city was being turned into a pit of disaster and chaos, she continued to work on the Empress' portrait. The thought of slashing it with a knife occurred to her but if she acted on every single thought she had, she'd be dead by now.

She felt silly for lurking in the shop, staring out the windows. Sometimes she'd see Xena walk by or enter the market but now, it was like she disappeared. There was no trace of her. That's it, she thought, I scared her off. Gabrielle chastised herself for allowing her personal feelings to get in the way. She liked to be friendly with her all clients but this time was different. She was different.

Xena was cause of her stress —the Steppe Queen, the nomadic warrior, the primitive woman —she was the one who caused her mind to scatter. This was Xena's fault and no one else's.

She needed someone to blame and Xena was that blame. If she had never been assigned the task then she wouldn't be so downtrodden right now.

So her mind wasn't to wander further, she worked on Sabina's portrait and after she finished for the day she cleaned her brushes and station. She swirled the brushes in a basin of water and watched the colors blend together to create a black watery color.

Outside the shop she heard a lot of women screaming and wailing. Gabrielle raised her eyes and citizens ran across the street like a flock of birds. She took her hands out of the water and ran outside to see what the disturbance was.

Pushing through the crowd she came to see a man knelt in the center of the square. His scalp was doused in fresh blood that trickled down his face and neck. Gabrielle clamped a hand over her mouth at the horrific sight. His clothing was that of a nobleman but not a senator or politician. He had armor on.

That man was Gaius Julius Vindex. He was nearly unrecognizable.

Gabrielle bumped into several people as she trailed backward in horror. She ran back into the workshop and snatched her dark cloak draped over a chair. With her stomach churning she darted through the empty streets towards the east.

She couldn't get the image of the Governor out of her mind. There was so much blood. And it was fresh. He had to have been mauled minutes earlier which meant Xena wasn't far. She was so near and right under everybody's noses. Everyone was blind —she was blind. It was then that she realized she couldn't do this alone.

Gölge furiously washed her hands of Vindex's blood stained on her flesh. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she tried to wash her sins away. Through a nearby mirror she gazed at Xena sitting in a chair behind her, cleaning the blade so apathetically it made her ill. She scrubbed until her fingers were raw and numb. Tuffs of blonde hair were embedded in her fingernails and she picked and picked until the beds of her cuticles bled.
"For a moment I didn't think you were going to do it," Xena said from afar.

Gölge pinched the skin around her nails to stop the bleeding and hurried over to grab a cloth to wrap around her bloody fingers. Heavily breathing, she looked over her shoulder at Xena who met her gaze.

"Because of you the entire city is searching for me," Xena sprung from the chair and tucked the dagger in her boot. "You put this entire mission at risk."

In attempt to save face, Gölge replied, "Vindex…told you where his soldiers are. You can still – still start the rebellion."

"And how do you suggest I do that hiding in this shack?" Xena laughed mockingly. "After the city dies down I will need to go outside," she sighed.

"Why would you…do that?" her lip trembled.

Xena marched over to her apprentice and cornered her. "Because Gölge," she growled, "I need to know what the public is saying about me."

She reached forth and Gölge flinched, fearful of being hit. She caressed the tepid cheek of her apprentice and gaped into her hazel eyes. She swiped her thumb along the girl's cheek to wipe away the dry tears.

"Anyone else and you would've been dead."

She ran furiously across the city and rapidly climbed the stairs to the upper level of the brothel. She paddled the door several times, breathing heavily. Women crowded the hallway and whispered at her arrival. She chose to ignore the onlookers and banged on the door until she received an answer.

Varinia swung open the door, barely clothed as usual. She closed the robe which exposed her breasts and glared at the blonde she recalled meeting.

"Where is he?" Gabrielle pushed the Syrian woman aside and rushed into the room.

Varinia grumbled and closed the door, glaring at the curious women lurking in the corridor. She folded her arms as Gabrielle surveyed the entire suite.

"Evander is not here," she said in her thick accented voice.

Gabrielle dug her nails into her hair. "Where is he? Do you know where I can find him?"

"I haven't seen him three days. Men are forbidden to come to brothels now." She poured a glass of wine for herself. It was nearing noon and hadn't planned on day-drinking until this rude interruption occurred.

"What about before that? Did he mention where he might be staying?"

Varinia sipped the wine leisurely. "I don't know where he conducts his business outside these walls. The thought of him speaking about his job makes me ill."

She could see that she wasn't going to get rid of the blonde so easily.

"He may have…" she rolled her eyes, "mentioned that he'd be scouting the north." She saw determination in Gabrielle's eyes. "But that was three days ago."
Thrashing noises outside caught Xena's attention. She abruptly pulled her hand away from Gölge's face and listened to the muffled grunts and voices of her men. She exited from the small washroom and one of her men kicked open the door and brought in a masked cloaked man.

She stood in the center of the room and once the alley was cleared by one of her men, the door was slammed shut and locked. All curtains were drawn. Xena walked forward to the cloaked man who was being held by Tildus.

Tildus forced the spy to his knees and wrapped an arm around his neck. "We caught him in the neighboring alley."

She nodded and ripped the hood off the intruder's head, revealing a head full of raven hair. She gazed into the icy blue eyes and scowled. She grabbed the mask off his face and flung it to the side. A smile she once had faded. Her mouth gaped and a lump formed in the center of her chest.

He titled his head upward to meet eyes that mirrored his own. He too, wore the same expression as her.

"Apple boy."
Evander chastised himself for being so careless. He was better than that. He knew better than to expose himself during an assignment.

He waited outside of Vindex's villa all morning. He got lucky when the Governor left and walked down the empty street. When he was snatched by a couple of men, Evander followed the kidnappers and was lead through a series of empty streets and narrow alleyways.

There, he saw Vindex being shoved into a small apartment in what some would call 'the slums of Rome'. He was always told by his mentors to remain in the shadows due to the risk of being caught but he was young. Anyone his age was allowed to make mistakes but not him.

He couldn't afford to make mistakes.

And now he was in the hands of the Steppe Queen.

Evander stared up at her with a snarl. He wriggled his arms that were held behind his back. A knife came to his throat and sweat rolled down his cheek. The blade pressed into his skin and he breathed heavily through his nostrils.

Xena kept gawking at the captive and recognized him from not one but two instances. She was sure that he recognized her too. Their last encounter was in the market when she was with Gabrielle. He was selling fruit and offered her an apple. Their first encounter was in the alley of Vindex's villa. They bumped into each other and he was extremely flustered.

She bent over, coming inches from his person. She reached into his cloak and Evander closed his eyes, fearing that his throat was to be slit in a matter of seconds. Her fingers grabbed onto his necklace and she ripped it off his neck.

In the palm of her hand she stared at the small leather bracelet and looked back at Evander.

"Where did you get this?"

Evander's eyes shot open. He was still alive which was surprising. He recalled her asking the same question from their first run-in. She was so fascinated with the necklace but he told her the truth last time and he was going to tell her again.

"It…was given to me."

She closed her fist around the necklace. "Who gave it to you?"

"I…I don't know."

She held his jaw in her hand and reared his head back. "Now isn't the wisest time to lie, boy."

"What does it matter to you?" he spat.

She hesitated and was nearing closer to his face, glaring into his crystalline blue eyes. Her hand slid off his jaw and she backed away, clutching the necklace in her other hand. Tildus held Evander by the hair and pressed the blade to his throat once more.
"Should I kill him?" asked Tildus.

"No!" she barked. Her men were slightly taken aback by her tone. "Tie him up and put him somewhere away from the windows." She flicked her hand and turned her back.

Gölge peered from behind the wall, listening in on the banter. Her eyes darted to her superior and watched as Xena caressed the necklace in her palm like it was a rare jewel. She frowned and distanced herself from the doorway. Rubbing her sore stilted arm, she sat down on a bench.

Knowing that she might be lectured later, she marched over to Xena and eyed the captive bound by his wrists, legs and also tied to a chair. She interrupted the fixated gaze of her mentor to which she received an unwanted look.

"Why didn't you kill him? He's obviously spying on you," she whispered.

Xena slipped the necklace beneath her blouse. "I might need him later. We've crossed paths before."

Hearing that, Gölge was incensed. More secrets that were kept from her. First this artist and now this child. What was next?

"Why are you so concerned about his charm?" she indicated to the necklace. "Does it have some value?"

Xena pushed the girl into the adjoining room. "When did you think it was okay to continue to question me like I'm beneath you?" she shoved Gölge's shoulder. "Did you think I was going to forget about what you did?"

The apprentice stumbled back and plopped down on the bench. She leaned further away as Xena got closer and closer. Her radiated cheeks put off immense heat the more Xena enclosed on her personal space.

"You will be punished later," Xena said with promise, "when we return to Edirne." She held Gölge's chin in between her forefinger and thumb. "For now I want you to stay in here but do not talk to the boy. Do you think you can handle that?"

She walked into the main room and Evander lifted his chin, sending a distrustful glare her way. She grabbed hold of a chair with her ankle wrapped around the leg and brought it towards her. She swung her leg around and sat down then rested her arms over the back of the chair.

Without breaking her gaze, she reached behind and grabbed an apple from inside a satchel. She took a knife out from within the side of her boot and smiled at Evander.

"You like apples, don't you?"

She scored the fruit and held the slice at the end of the blade to his mouth. Evander turned his nose up and gave her a cold cheek.

Xena slipped the small slice into her mouth and chewed meticulously. Now that she was alone with him she could get a better look at his face and the clothing he wore. By the bulge inside his vest he had a weapon strapped to his chest. Her eyes roamed over his bound legs and there was another weapon strapped to his outer thigh.

"Are you a mercenary?"
Evander turned his head and grimaced. He rubbed his ankles together, feeling very fidgety all of a sudden. He exhaled and looked at the wall, deliberately ignoring her.

Xena crookedly smiled and cut another slice of the apple. "You have two weapons on your person," her eyes drifted to the apple and she pressed her thumb against the dull edge of the blade, "one on your thigh and one on your chest."

He pressed his tongue on the roof of his mouth and narrowed his eyes, keeping his focus on the wall.

"You probably have one on your hip and another located on your shoulder blade."

The knife cut into the crisp apple and Evander closed his eyes. His ears were sensitive to the most miniscule of sounds. Her teeth dug into the fruit and Evander wrinkled his eyebrows at the sound of her teeth grinding against the brittle apple.

Xena noticed he was extremely fixated on something. She twirled the knife in her hand and threw it in his direction. Before the blade stuck into the floor, Evander rolled over onto his side to evade the attack.

She kicked herself up off the chair and walked towards him with heavy boots that caused the floorboards to creak and wane. She knelt down and snatched the knife out of the floor and grabbed Evander by the arm to help him sit up straight.

He panicked and tried to attack her somehow and gathered a glob of saliva in his mouth. Xena's eyes enlarged and she pinched his cheeks together with her fingers. She leaned in closer, boring into his eyes. The bracelet in her tunic brushed against her breast and her gaze softened.

She pulled away and sat back down in the chair, crossing one ankle over the other. She took out the bracelet buried in her blouse and held it in her palm. With a quick glance she saw Evander fixated on the charm and she closed her fist around the necklace.

"I'm going to ask again: where did you get this?"

He licked his dry lips. "If you're going to kill me, just do it but I want that back," he pleaded.

A lump caught in Xena's throat. She dangled the necklace.

"This is very important to you."

"Yes," he croaked. "Please…"

She snatched the necklace back into her palm. "I'll check on you in the morning."

Gabrielle searched all afternoon in the north for Evander but most of the areas that were used for scouting out suspicious behavior or acts were void of his presence. She decided to go to the area where Gaius Julius Vindex's villa was to see if Evander had done some searching there.

After the horrid display of Vindex scalped head in the square, Gabrielle was sure that the attacker was none other than Xena. It was mentioned to her that Vindex was working with Xena and Evander found that out by luck of invading the Governor's home. Gabrielle went to the Roman's villa and there was nothing of use for her there.

She was even so bold to attempt to break into the villa but that wasn't a very thought out plan since
Romans were posted outside the home. News of the harm done to Vindex had reached Nero and now the entire city was swarming with soldiers. They continued the search for Xena and tore homes apart looking for her.

Gabrielle chose not to pull the hood over her head so she would seem less suspicious around the Romans. She acted like a regular citizen and walked in the crowds to blend in. Whispers of Vindex fell on her ears and she took in every detail of the gossip. Romans loved gossip, she thought.

She had her eye on every woman wearing a veil over their hair. She eyed the brunettes especially. Xena was hiding in the sea of Romans in front of everyone's eyes and they had no idea. But she wouldn't have the audacity to show her face now, would she? Gabrielle wondered just what kind of woman Xena was.

How could someone be so stealthy yet so out in the open at once? Xena was able to kill Augusta Sabina's friend without leaving any clues behind. Xena also conducted secret meetings with Governor Vindex which meant she had to make frequent visits to his villa. She also set fire to all of the ships on the coastline but those ships belonged to her.

Gabrielle wracked her brain over the numerous amounts of acts Xena committed while in Rome. She didn't understand this woman no matter how hard she tried. There's no way that Xena's men could roam around the city without being seen. They had to be dressed as Roman citizens too or even…

Her eyes darted to soldiers who were questioning a poor blacksmith in the square. Soldiers. Xena's men were probably dressed as Roman soldiers. Oh Xena, you are good, Gabrielle smiled and wagged her head.

A hand came to rest on her throat wound and she recalled the attack. It felt like a lifetime ago now but the wound had no intention of healing anytime soon. She forgot to apply the salve this morning. Inwardly cursing, she turned around and head back to the workshop.

Wandering around the city was pointless now. She didn't want to be questioned by Romans but she was curious as to what questions they were asking the citizens. She came to the square where Vindex was found earlier today.

The blood of his scalp lingered in the dry soil and Gabrielle's lip curled in disgust. She kept walking to the workshop which seemed so far away. She passed by the large open arched windows of the shop and saw Zenodorus inside. There were a couple of soldiers inside, questioning everybody.

Air trapped inside her throat and she hastily ran inside but not too urgently so she wouldn't cause alarm. When she entered the shop, the soldiers whipped their heads towards her. She took off her cloak and hung it on a chair then smiled at Zenodorus.

The soldiers went back to questioning the sculptor and Gabrielle slinked by, pretending to act normal as possible. She stood by her station and cleaned her brushes, listening in on the interrogation.

"You said that Xena came in here?" asked a soldier.

Zenodorus nodded. "Yes, she told me her name was Xena."

"What did she look like?"

"Medium build, kind of tall, but not too tall," Zenodorus raised his hand just above his head. "Hazel
eyes, tan skin, and she had very long hair. It was black as kohl!" he described and the soldiers frowned in confusion. "Very dark hair."

The soldier questioning nodded, taking notes. "Did she have a group of men with her?"

Zenodorus rubbed his chin. "No, she came alone."

Gabrielle cinched her eyebrows together and wiped her brushes with a dirty rag. She organized the brushes by size and proceeded to grab her leather satchel hidden under the table. Her hand recoiled and she kicked the bag with her boot.

"What was the purpose of her coming here?"

Gabrielle froze. Don't say it, Zenodorus. Don't say it.

"She wanted to speak with one of our artists," he pointed to Gabrielle.

The soldiers spun around and Gabrielle released a deep sigh. She heard the boots approaching and she turned with an uneasy smile. She didn't want to be involved in this. She hadn't even seen the woman nor did have any relationship with her. She also wanted to deter the soldiers because they had no idea she had orders to kill the woman they hunted.

"Why did Xena want to see you? Do you know her personally?" the soldier immediately questioned.

She denied, "no, I've never seen her before in my life."

"Then why did she specifically want to see you?"

She scratched her head. "Maybe she wanted a painting from me? I am the Empress' personal artist you know," she said casually and they weren't amused. "I wasn't here when she came by. I was told after the fact…"

The Romans grumbled and looked at one another before asking another question. "Do you have any reason to believe that Xena might be targeting you?"

Her fingers touched the gash on her throat and she gazed at the floor for a brief moment.

"No…no."

"This woman is very dangerous," he lowered his voice. "She is the most wanted woman in the empire. If you are harboring any information about her then you must report it to the Emperor."

Gabrielle blinked. "I…I don't know anything about Xena." She raised innocent hands. "I swear."

Satisfied with her answer the soldiers left the building, mumbling and whispering about the investigation. Gabrielle found her mouth drier than a desert and she reached for a pitcher of water to quench her thirst.

She chugged the cup of water and her eyes followed the Romans as they walked by outside. Wiping her mouth she let her head hang and her veil of golden locks framed her hidden face. A hand was clasped onto her shoulder which made her flinch.

Zenodorus jumped back. "Sorry 'bout that Gabrielle. I didn't mean to scare you."

She answered with silence.
"You were gone all day! You took off suddenly." He sounded suspicious. "You've been gone a lot lately."

"What's it to you?" she snapped.

Realizing how rude she came off, she sighed and turned to the puzzled sculptor. She brushed her hair behind her ears and made an effort to smile but it wasn't sincere.

"I'm sorry, Zenodorus. I have a lot on my mind."

"Is this about Augusta Sabina?" he quirked his mouth into an uneven smile.

Her heart raced. "Yeah..." she gently paddled his chest, "she's a real pain to work with."

Right now the Empress was the last person on her mind but Sabina definitely did play a part in this game.

"I doubt she will be coming by anytime soon!" he cheerfully said. "With this Xena woman wandering around, there's no way the Emperor will let his pregnant wife outside, so you can consider yourself lucky. You'll get a break from her," he playfully slapped her arm.

She rubbed her arm. "Oh joy..."

The following morning Xena woke before everyone else in the rundown villa. She made sure not to disturb Gölge who slept beside her on the floor. She slept in the same clothes she wore yesterday and walked across the creaky floorboards to find Evander sleeping with his head slumped on his shoulder.

She smirked and kicked the boy's thigh and Evander jolted awake. Startled by her towering over him, he scooted a couple of inches away from her. Xena smiled and walked to grab another apple off the table and sat down opposite Evander.

"I see you got some sleep," she observed.

His eyes were now adjusted to the darkness but a sliver of sunlight crept in from the well concealed boarded windows. His foggy brain hadn't registered that he was still in the same place he was in yesterday. He forgot that he was tied up since his wrists had gone numb.

"Sleeping on the job huh," she sliced the apple with the paring knife. "Not a very good mercenary." She winked and took a small bite of the fruit.

"I could've killed you and you wouldn't have even seen it coming," she added.

Evander scoffed audibly.

"Don't make it look like I'm talking to myself now," she teased, "people will think I'm crazy."

"You are," he barked scornfully.

"That's a start," she continued to score the apple. "About this job of yours," she locked eyes with Evander, "you're barely a man. Why would you want to be a mercenary?"

"I don't need to explain myself to you."

"I think you do." she knelt down and held out an apple slice at the end of her knife. "You've been
spying on me. If you haven't figured it out yet, I'm not letting you go."

His eye twitched. "You'll kill me instead."

"I didn't say that." She shoved the apple to his mouth. "Take it."

Slowly, he opened his mouth and Xena smiled then sat back in the chair. He chomped on the apple and didn't take his eyes off her the entire time. They were having a staring contest of who was to break first but neither of them let up. Not even when Gölge stirred in her sleep from across the room.

"You won't be able to hide forever," he spat.

"I don't intend to."

She slipped her fingers into her blouse and pulled out Evander's necklace. His eyes were fixated on it like a cat that had just discovered its favorite toy. She tossed the necklace on the floor and it was just out of his reach.

"You aren't Roman," she stated as fact. "Where are you from originally?"

Evander caught the lump in the middle of his throat, staring at his necklace. It was so difficult to focus and he lifted his eyes to her intense glare.

"Why do you care?"

She dug the knife into the core of the fruit. "I care."

"I don't remember," he muttered. "I was taken from my home and family."

Xena felt tightness in her chest and the knife slipped from her grip. She quickly retrieved the knife off the floor and avoided eye contact with Evander. She drove the blade into the apple's core to quell her nerves.

He didn't let her clumsiness stop him from telling a sliver of his past but he took note of the blade in her hand. A woman as skilled as her wouldn't have allowed a simple slip of a knife happen if there was a human body at the other end –but an apple?

"I was taken by Romans. I woke up in a ship and then before I knew it I was far from home and on Roman soil," he sighed and wiggled his feet inside the tight boots. At least not all of his limbs were numb yet.

"That necklace is the only thing you have left of your home and family," Xena said, finally meeting his gaze.

"Yes."

She rubbed her lips together and kept cutting into the apple absentmindedly until pieces of it were falling onto the floor. In a distant daze within her mind she momentarily forgot that there was a pair of eyes watching her every move. She retracted the knife and broke the apple in half, or what was left of it and set on the table behind her.

"You've been separated from your family for a long time."

Evander arched an eyebrow, studying her fidgety fingers.
"I'm sure you miss them very much," she flashed a short smile.

"I can't miss something I don't remember," he responded tersely.

Xena cast a frown. She could detect bitterness in his tone. It wasn't his fault that he was taken from his home or family. He was completely innocent yet he felt like his family probably abandoned him. If he was taken at a young age then that would make sense as to why he felt that way at some point.

"You...don't remember your mother?" she asked softly.

He was taken aback by the question and the longer he stared into her eyes, the more intense her glare became.

"I...no, not really," he swallowed. "She gave me that bracelet. That's why it's important to me." He was hoping that she would give the necklace to him. "I need it back."

Xena's softened face hardened in a matter of seconds. She stood and the chair scraped against the floorboards. She took the necklace up off the floor and held it in her clenched fist. Wrapped up in her own emotions she was reminded why she kept Evander here in the first place.

"You won't be getting this back until you tell me why you've been spying on me." She turned her back to him and looked at the small bracelet fit for a child's wrist.

Evander gaped. "I told you who gave it to me!" he screeched. "You won't get any more information out of me!"

Xena ignored him and walked off briskly.

"Are you listening to me?" he barked. "I'm not telling you anything!"

Gölge awoke to his loud voice traveling across the villa. She rolled over onto her side and scowled at the captive who was heaving and whispering to himself. She peered down at the empty spot beside her and searched the villa for her mentor.

It was a chore to move around without harming her injured arm but she tried to get off the floor and did it so clumsily. She rose to her knees and ruffled her long messy hair and caught Evander glaring at her from afar. She remembered that Xena told her not to engage in any conversation with him. She didn't want another lecture from Xena so she paid no mind to him.

After she got out of bed she went to wash her face and peeked out one of the windows to see Tildus guarding the alley. She groggily made her way out of the washroom and then turned her head from left to right, searching the villa. The place wasn't too large but it wasn't small either.

She dragged her bare feet along the floor and saw Xena sitting in adjoining room by herself. She crept inside and heard sniveling and soft whimpering. By now, Xena would've said something to her since Xena knew when people were behind and around her at all times.

Gölge knocked on the side of the doorway to grab her mentor's attention.

Xena frowned and wiped her cheeks then turned around to the young apprentice. "Why are you standing there like that?"

"I...woke up and you weren't there," she said. "I thought you might've gone outside."
"As you can see, I'm here." Xena dismissively combated.

Gölge nodded. "What are you doing…in here?" her eyes roamed around the empty room.

"I need Tildus to give me a report about what's happening outside. Could you tell him to come inside?"

"Alright, sure Xena." She trailed away, cautiously eyeing her superior.
The Roman citizens were restless and the harm inflicted on Vindex was still being investigated. Soldiers were going around the entire city talking to people to gather information. This meant that Xena couldn't go outside to scope the city just yet. She waited in the shadows since she arrived and she was going to continue to do so.

She needed to plan this rebellion very carefully and with Vindex out of the picture it was going to be a very daring task. Gölge had been very disobedient and defiant lately and while this irritated Xena, she was the best person for this job. Gölge didn't know it yet but she was going to play a large role in starting the rebellion but for now, everyone would remain dormant.

Xena stared at Evander from across the room. She twirled the leather necklace around her fingers while her mind wandered. She had her suspicions about Evander ever since they bumped into each other in the alley. The minute she laid eyes on that necklace he wore she thought he might've stolen it.

As she continued to gawk in the darkness, she realized she was blind to the features they shared. He had the same eyes, nose and hair as she did. Her eyes drifted the necklace in her palm and smiled softly. She remembered when she gifted him the bracelet.

The day of his birth was a day she suppressed in the back of her mind but she remembered it vividly. It was a scorching hot summer in Edirne and the crops were failing that year. She woke one summer's night drenched in sweat and called for help. She fought through the pain for two nights and three days.

She spent those nine months carrying her son alone. Evander's father went off on an expedition and never came home and she was told later that he was killed by Roman invaders. Once she saw her son for the first time the fear of loneliness ceased to exist.

They spent three short years together. She didn't know that the years they had were so few until Emperor Tiberius' army raided her city. She'd never forget the sickening feeling when she returned home to find her son's bed empty.

It was easier to think him dead but she always wondered what kind of man her son would become. Now that he was before her she was distraught by the path Evander chose. He killed people for a living. How much time had gone by? He couldn't be any older than eighteen or nineteen summers old.

Tiberius was *lucky* that he was dead. Xena had seen Rome governed by three rulers: Caligula, Tiberius and now Nero. She faced off with Tiberius numerous of times. It wasn't until that her
home was ravaged for the final time that she hid from the public's eye and hadn't resurfaced until Nero assumed the throne.

Nero was inexperienced and had several officials doing his work for him and apparently a league of assassins too. Xena closed her fingers around the necklace and tapered her eyes, staring at her son wiggling in his bound position.

This made it a whole lot harder to focus. Her son wanted to kill her and she wanted nothing more than to take him back to Edirne away from this filthy place. She couldn't release him nor could she kill him. She didn't have the heart to do that. Evander wedged her into a tough spot that not even she could get out of.

Trapped in a vortex of flames, her stomach swelled with butterflies that clung to her insides as if drenched in hot tar. The inability to breathe was just another plague that overcame her the more she had to think of facing Evander.

She needed to treat him like a regular prisoner so she marched over to Evander who gave her an icy shoulder. She clutched the necklace in her palm, suppressing her desire to caress his cheek.

"I'm not going to kill you."

Evander brought his lips to a firm line. Surprised by her words he still kept his cheek turned from her, unsure of how to answer. He was expecting to be killed the moment he was kidnapped. Maybe she was lying and toying with him.

"But I'm not going to release you either," she wanted to keep him close. "I know you aren't working alone. There are many people who want to kill me but you should know that the Romans attacked my land first. They stole a lot from me."

Evander hid his smile and finally lifted his gaze to meet hers. "My job doesn't allow me to pick sides. I don't like Romans either."

She dropped to a knee. "Yet you work for the most powerful Roman who told you to assassinate me."

"And I've failed."

Xena's hand trembled and there was a strained resistance to keep from reaching forward to brush the dark strands of his hair from his forehead. She found her lips curling into a smile and Evander gawked at her peculiarly.

She caught herself in her slip-up and rose promptly from the floor. She couldn't face him now.

"What would you do if I released you?" she twirled the bracelet around her finger.

Evander gaped. "What?"

"Don't make me repeat myself."

"You wouldn't do that," he snickered. "You'd kill me the moment I left this villa. I would expose you immediately but you wouldn't give me the chance to do that because I'd be dead. That's what would happen."

Xena tapered her eyes. "I could give you a new life away from Rome. You wouldn't have to kill for a living. You could be free."
The offer was tempting but he knew that what she offered wasn't true to word. He'd be killed if not by her then by Nero's men the moment he left Rome. He had eyes on him at all times. He thought of Varinia. He didn't want to leave her behind. He often thought of leaving Rome but he was bound to the emperor.

"You are working for the Governor of Rome," he steered the conversation elsewhere.

She wore a malicious smile and turned on her heel. "He's dead. He wanted to start a rebellion against the emperor. I wasn't behind that. I simply supplied him the funds."

Evander's cheeks soured and he held his breath when her hand came close to his face. She grabbed his jaw and titled his head back gently, glaring down at him from above.

"You see? Romans are corrupt. They turn on each other. You're working for the wrong side, boy," she whispered. "Who else works with you?"

His lips pulled into a snarl and he attempted to bite her hand. Xena pulled her fingers away as if she touched hot coals.

She tucked the charm into her blouse and presented a fresh apple from the bag which Tildus delivered this morning. She sat down on the floor opposite of her captive with a soft smile.

"Apple?" she offered. "I know you're very fond of them."

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A little break from Sabina was like an overdue blessing from the gods. Gabrielle thought to keep searching for Evander but after she searched all of the hot spots yesterday she knew she'd never find him. It was like looking for a needle in a hay stack. She instead decided to investigate the city by herself.

The soldiers were still searching homes but they moved away from the main market square. Gabrielle stood by a large building where Vindex was found. With her hood draped over her eyes, she was able to remain discrete but nobody paid any attention to her anyway. They were too worried that the soldiers would tear their homes apart.

She eyed the alley behind her and went down the narrow street. It was incredibly desolate but there were women above on the second stories of their homes, beating rugs and hanging wet linen on laundry lines. Frowning, she walked ahead, tracing Vindex's steps.

He couldn't have gone very far with his wounds. She hadn't heard anything about the scalped governor but that only meant Nero was hiding valuable information. He harbored it like mountains of coin. He didn't want the public to know the truth.

Everyone was in danger here. Nobody was safe as long as Xena was here. Gabrielle rounded a tight corner and found harsh lines in the dirt. She scraped her boot on the soil and gazed ahead. There were no footprints here and haven't been in the last two days.

Roman soldiers definitely didn't walk this alleyway. She kept walking, following the markings. It rounded around in a labyrinth and then she came to a dead end.

"Damn," she muttered.

It could've been anything; a wagon coming through this way or a horse carrying items to the market. This was an incredibly narrow space, she observed. Vindex had to have been dragged and then walked the rest of the way to the square to show the wicked harm Xena inflicted upon him.
Yet, this only led her to a dead end. He must've been attacked somewhere else and brought there before he made his way to the square. Gabrielle narrowed her eyes, quickly scanning the area before making her way back to the area where Vindex dropped to his knees, soiled in his own blood.

So far she had nothing but this wasn't new. She had nothing to work with in the beginning either. Xena is far too good at this game of hide and seek. Gabrielle circled her way around a fruit stand and then a glimmer of light flashed in her eye.

She winced and lifted her head slightly to see a flickering light from a tower on the opposite side of the street. She took a step to the left and eyed the tower that overlooked almost the entire inner city. She slipped through the crowd and found herself outside of the tower, glaring up at the open window.

A knife slipped down her arm from beneath the cloak sleeve and she ascended up the spiral staircase. Her heart hammered in her throat. At the top of the tower she stood outside of the door and took in a hefty breath.

The door creaked open and she took a swift step inside and pressed her back to the wall. Her eye caught the telescope device by the window that caused the flickering light she caught from outside. She gripped the hilt of the knife and inspected the inside of the small tower room.

There was a basket of bandages in the corner of the room as well as a black cloak hanging on a chair. She raised an eyebrow and held up the cloak. There was a scarf attached to the cloak. The memory of being attacked came rushing back and Gabrielle flung the cloak onto the floor. Breathing unsteadily, she gripped her throat. She backed herself into a corner and the telescope jabbed her spine. She jumped back with a breathy yelp.

Gabrielle steadied her breathing to a slow pace and then curiously, peeked through the eye of the scope. She maneuvered the scope around and her jaw dropped. She could see almost the entire city, including the coast which was miles away.

"Oh Xena," she said just above a whisper, "you've been watching everyone this whole time." She abruptly pulled her eye away. "You've been watching me."

Gabrielle ran out of the tower swiftly and bumped into a gaggle of young women. They rudely snubbed her and she looked at their faces, studying the color of their eyes. All had dark brown eyes. She put a hand to her throbbing chest.

Hazel eyes. *Xena* had hazel eyes.

Her attacker also had hazel eyes. She hadn't thought of it before but it all made sense now. She was hunted and watched this entire time.

With no luck over the last couple of days interrogating her captive, Xena left the hidden villa, clad in a burgundy dress and pastel veil. She slipped out just before sunset and eyed everyone in the market. The city was still very busy and people roamed around.

She weaved her way through the streets going undetected. Not a pair of eyes was set on her. She didn't put off the scent of being the least bit suspicious to anybody around her. While she had her mind on the end goal she had trouble focusing with her son in such close quarters.

She searched for him for several years and she hated to admit that she gave up on the search. She
wasn't sure if Evander felt like he had been abandoned or not. It was a daunting task to understand how Evander felt. He cut off his emotions as best as he could. Xena wished she could do the same.

A wine merchant was packing up his area and Xena sauntered over. She tapped on the merchant's shoulder and he jumped. Startled by her, he spun around with a case of wine and set it on the ground.

"May I help you?" he asked.

She put on her best smile. "I want to buy one of your bottles."

He eagerly pulled out a corked bottle and told her the necessary amount. Xena raised an eyebrow at the price. Very expensive, she noted. She grabbed the bottle and the merchant continued packing up for the evening.

She stared at the bottle and frowned. "Where do you get your wine from?"

"Oh," he rubbed his sweaty forehead, "they're shipped in from Edirne. I'm afraid this is my last shipment. As you know, the emperor has cut off all trade to and from the Steppes."

Xena nodded and stuck the bottle underneath her arm. "How unfortunate for you."

"I count on the shipments from Edirne. The best wines come from there. Now I suppose I'll have to settle for wine from Egypt," he shrugged with a snort of a laugh.

She hummed quietly and briefly smiled. "You don't mind selling wine from your emperor's enemy? I hear Xena is in Rome."

"Ah, yes!" the merchant wagged his finger. "I do not believe she is here otherwise the army would've found her already. Either that or she is here and is great at hiding! Enemy or not, Romans love wine from Edirne."

"I'm sure they do," she backed away slowly and thanked him for the wine with a curt nod.

Gabrielle thought she must be going insane. She applied the salve given to her every day, twice a day, just as instructed but looking at the wound, it didn't appear to be healing correctly. She swiped her fingers along the gash and winced. The bumpiness of the gash was unsightly. It was going to turn into a nasty scar, she just knew it.

She washed her hand and pulled down the collar of her blouse to examine the crude wound a bit closer. In her reflection she saw a shadow emerge from down below. All of the other artists left for the day and she wasn't expecting anybody to come by. She hoped it wasn't Augusta Sabina. Gabrielle had no patience for that woman today.

"Gabrielle!"

Her breath snagged in her throat at the familiar voice. Frozen on her bed, she wasn't sure if she should answer back right away. She couldn't stay up here either. She was too embarrassed to face her. Their last meeting didn't go very well and she basically told her client to leave and never come back yet…she's here.

Gabrielle willed herself to rise and walk towards the balustrade. She smiled seeing Xena on the first floor. With a swipe of her hand, she fixed her messy fringed bangs.
"The mysterious woman of Delphi appears yet again!" she called out.

Xena held up the bottle she purchased. "I brought wine."

Several minutes later Gabrielle managed to find some cups. She had to rummage through a lot of shelves in the back. She never needed glasses in the workshop other than to fill them with dirty paint water. She awkwardly sat down opposite Xena and handed her a cup.

Xena smiled warmly and uncorked the bottle, pouring a large helping of the wine into the two cups. Gabrielle held the cup with a shaky hand which Xena took note of but didn't comment.

"I…want to apologize," Gabrielle felt her mouth dry.

"For what?"

"For the way the last night went between us. Augusta Sabina ruined everything and I made it worse. I don't want you to think that I pushed you away but I practically did," she spoke too fast to register her word vomit. "Oh gods," she put a palm to her clammy forehead, "I'm sorry. I didn't think you were going to come back here."

Xena, amused by the artist's behavior, sipped her wine with a wily grin.

"What I'm trying to say is that I'm glad you came by," she received a silent stare. "Woman of few words again. I guess you're upset with me."

"I didn't say anything," said Xena, casually sipping wine.

Gabrielle set down the cup and attempted to rise from the chair. She was grabbed by her arm and slowly, she settled down in her seat, staring into Xena's alert eyes.

"Do you…want to work on your portrait? I promised you a painting and I've yet to deliver."

"I just want to sit here," Xena's fingers trailed down the artist's sleeve, "with you."

Gabrielle nodded, shielding her flushed face. She took another gulp of the wine to ease her empty stomach that was doing cartwheels. The silence continued for another few minutes which felt more like hours. She fell speechless which was very odd for her character.

"So, the soldiers have been ransacking homes. I hope you weren't questioned by them."

Xena caught a lump in her chest. "No, but I don't think I could provide any useful information for them if I was." She poured more wine into Gabrielle's half empty cup.

"Oh, uh," she tried to pull the cup away and chuckled nervously. "I don't normally drink wine."

"And I don't normally spend my evenings with artists. We should all try new things," Xena winked.

The burn of the wine settled in her stomach and Gabrielle's vision waned slightly. After two glasses she was beginning to lose her grip on Xena sitting in front of her. The need for more wine was the only way to satiate how she felt lately. She felt lost and alone as well as confused. She tried her best to focus on her mission but everything she had fell flat.

Gabrielle reached for the bottle which was now almost empty. She fell forward and Xena grabbed her by the arms to hoist her back onto the chair. Great, she thought, now she thinks I'm a person who can't hold her wine.
"Did you eat at all today?" asked Xena, brushing blonde strands from the artist's face.

"Eat…" Gabrielle rubbed her forehead, "no, I, no…"

Xena searched the room and found a fruit bowl on a table by the sculptor's station. She gently rested Gabrielle against the back of the chair and walked towards the large unfinished statue of Nero. A hideous snarl appeared on her lips and she grabbed the apple, gawking at the Emperor's clay face from below.

It was so tempting to break off a piece of the enormous piece of art. She willed herself to step away before she did just that. Only a moment later she handed an apple to Gabrielle. While she sat she watched Gabrielle take slow and small bites. She had only a glass of wine and kept pouring more into Gabrielle's glass.

"Better?" she asked, peering into the jade eyes across from her.

Gabrielle wiped her mouth and nodded. "Thank you. Sorry, this is so embarrassing," she mumbled.

"There's no need to be embarrassed, Gabrielle. You should take better care of yourself." She said, brushing Gabrielle's hair behind a shoulder. "For an artist you sure have a lot on your plate. Does the Empress keep you occupied all the time?"

Oh that woman. The mention of Sabina made Gabrielle's stomach churn. The apple had done the trick for now but her mind was in a fog.

"I…" she rubbed her throat. "I was doing some thinking," she swallowed the half eaten apple, "I think I know…who attacked…me."

Xena's heart dropped. "Oh?"

"Hazel," she pointed to her eyes, nodding her head slowly, "hazel eyes. She had…hazel eyes."

Parched, she searched her work station for the pitcher of water. She rose from the chair, dropping the apple core and leaned against the table for balance. Picking up the pitcher she groaned and flipped it upside down. It was dry as a bone.

She flipped her body around and the room spun for a moment. She spotted a woman dressed in a colorful cotton veil standing at the entrance of the building. She squinted to get a better look and recognized the woman to be Varinia.

Xena frowned, following Gabrielle's gaze, and swiveled around to the mysterious guest waiting just a few feet in the building. She hadn't noticed it was raining outside, not furiously, but it was more than a sprinkle.

"Were you expecting someone?" asked Xena.

"I…" Gabrielle slammed the pitcher on the table a bit too loudly. "Excuse me, this will take just a second," she whispered and left her station, trying to sober up before speaking to Varinia.

Varinia kept her eye on Xena sitting in a corner of the room. She brought the soaked veil to a close and averted to Gabrielle who was now standing in front of her. Xena gawked from afar thus making Varinia very uncomfortable.

"What are you doing here?" Gabrielle whispered and looked over her shoulder at Xena. "How did you find me?"
The Syrian licked her dry lips. "Who is that?" she asked of the brunette sitting by herself.

"It's…it's not important. You can't be here, Varinia."

"I…I followed you yesterday and saw you worked here," Varinia's voice uneven and shaky, she continued, "have you heard from Evander? He's been missing for five days! It's not like him to disappear like this!" tears were brimming in her eyes.

Gabrielle grabbed the woman's arms and guided her away from Xena's penetrating stare. "I can't discuss this with you right now and…" she felt her stomach begin to revolt, "I…I searched for him. I couldn't find him."

"But I need to know what happened to him, Gabrielle!" she sobbed.

Xena appeared from behind a wall. "Is there a problem?" her smooth voice startled the two.

"No…there's no problem. She was just leaving," Gabrielle tried to push the unwarranted guest out of the workshop but Varinia broke down in uncontrollable tears.

Wailing loudly, she gripped Gabrielle's shoulders and muttered in a language that neither of them could understand. It was obvious that she had no intention of leaving. Gabrielle wrapped a hand over her queasy stomach and turned away from Xena and Varinia then retched onto the ground.

Xena arched an eyebrow and gently took the blonde's arm and led her into the workshop. Her eyes tapered at the sobbing girl and motioned for Varinia to come join them inside away from the heavy downpour.

After awhile Gabrielle fell into a deep sleep and was laid on the ground. Xena went upstairs to find a pillow and suitable blanket. She sat down in the chair and draped the blanket over the slumbering artist. Another night interrupted. This was a pattern and expected at this point.

Varinia took the wet veil off her curly wild hair and set it on the back of the chair. She sniveled and wiped her cheeks dry. She found Xena glaring at her and rested a hand over her thumping chest.

"Why are you so upset?" asked Xena.

Varinia composed herself and in between labored breaths she spoke, "someone I…someone I love is missing," the tears threatened to surface again.

Xena tapped her fingers on her knee impatiently waiting for the woman to tell her story. She had an itch to drink the rest of the wine that went unfinished by Gabrielle.

"He's never gone for this long!" Varinia clenched her fists. "I fear something happened to him."

Xena dismissed the topic with a wave of her hand. "I am sure that he will turn up soon," she made a poor attempt to sympathize with the weepy girl. "You shouldn't be out this late. A pretty girl like you could be taken advantage of."

"I told him several times to stop this," she muttered. "He never listens to me!" she reached forward and firmly gripped Xena's arm, causing alarm. "He could be dead for all I know!"

Xena widened her eyes, frozen in place. She eyed the hand wrapped around her arm which was sure to leave handprints from the firm hold. She pried Varinia's fingers off her arm and her upper lip twitched almost as if in disgust. She gently placed the hand back into Varinia's lap.
"Are you friends with Gabrielle? Could she possibly help you find this man?"

Varinia shrugged her shoulder. "I don't think so. I don't have anyone else in Rome. What am I supposed to do without him? He's all I have!"

This girl is really trying my patience, thought Xena. She took in a deep calming breath, eager to get this frazzled woman out of here.

"You seem to be in a very unlucky situation, child," she ran her tongue over her top teeth. "I would tell you to ask the Roman soldiers for help but –"

"I would never!" Varinia interjected with a ferocious snarl. "This would have never happened if that Steppe woman stayed out of Rome. She has no business being here! Look what she's done to everyone? She's caused nothing but fear!"

Xena anxiously rubbed her fingers together, focusing on the girl's vile expression. Her presence in Rome had caused fear, yes, but also unrest. This wasn't her plan –to be exposed so quickly –but she needed to start the rebellion soon. There was no opportune time to act. She continued to wait in the shadows. She needed to plan this very carefully.

She wondered if Gabrielle had the same thoughts about her. Somehow she didn't want to know Gabrielle's inner thoughts concerning this subject.

"And…what does this Steppe woman have anything to do with this man?"

There was a long pause before Varinia answered. "I cannot say."

"I don't see how she could be the cause of your distress, girl."

Varinia frowned and abruptly sprung up from the chair. She wrapped the veil over her hair and glanced over at Gabrielle sleeping soundly through the storm outside.

"I should go."

It would've been polite for her to offer the girl to stay amid the storm but Xena wanted nothing more than to see the girl leave the premises. She flashed a satisfactory smile and held out an open palm, gesturing to the exit.

"I do hope you make it home safely," her voice flat and unsympathetic.

Varinia padded across the room and took one last look at Xena who followed her every step. She paused just before stepping out into the rain and furrowed her eyebrows.

Just before sunrise, Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open. Rain poured down on the rooftop which caused her head to throb immensely. She glanced at the familiarity of her surroundings and sat up too swiftly and her vision blurred.

A hand cupped the side of her head and she let out a muffled groan. Once her vision returned, she recognized she was in bed underneath the blankets. In the darkness there was a figure sitting at the foot of her bed.

"Morning." Xena leaned forward into the candlelight.

Gabrielle snuffled a laugh and winced at the dull ache in her front lobe. She folded her legs and yawned audibly.
"I guess I've made a fool of myself last night," said admitted bashfully. "You stayed here all night…with me?"

Xena faintly smiled and inclined her head.

"That's so unlike you," she chuckled. "You usually disappear."

"I couldn't leave you like that. It was my fault."

Gabrielle rubbed her neck, "you didn't force me to drink the wine."

"But I didn't stop you either," Xena took a quick look at the throat wound. "Do you know that girl who came by last night?"

"Girl?" her mind was foggier than she thought."Oh, oh…her," she grunted. "No, I don't know her."

"She seemed to know you or do you always have weeping women at your doorstep in the middle of the night?" Xena suspiciously asked.

Gabrielle swallowed. "We…we met a couple of times but I'm not friends with her."

Xena tapped her thumbs together in silence. Gabrielle began scratching her throat wound and instantly, Xena stood from the chair and looked for the salve. She found it by the bedside and then sat on the edge of the bed, enclosing on Gabrielle's space.

"You shouldn't scratch that," she said softly. Dipping her fingers in the salve, she pulled Gabrielle's hair back. "May I?"

Gabrielle gave a slow unsteady head nod. The salve was applied to the wound and she flinched at the soft touch of her client's fingers. She was so used to touching her clients' faces or hands to position them for portraits. She wouldn't have guessed that it felt so personal but she recalled when she touched Xena's face during one of their painting sessions.

Xena was so taken aback by the touch that she snatched Gabrielle's hand firmly. She never forgot about the reaction she received from Xena that night. Perhaps she didn't like to be touched by someone. Perhaps it was too personal or an invasion of privacy. Gabrielle began to feel those exact same feelings the more Xena encroached.

She closed her eyes and turned her cheek away as Xena kept applying the ointment to her wound.

"You were going to tell me something last night," Xena spoke softly.

"I was?"

"About your attacker. You believe you know who she is." She gently smoothed her fingertips on the blonde's neck.

Gabrielle rubbed her lips together and took a long pause. "You're going to think this is crazy."

Xena smirked. "Try me."

"I…think that Xena attacked me," she blurted out plainly and the fingers halted on the middle of the wound. Her eyes enlarged for a moment but she added, "I think she's been watching me."

Gabrielle turned her cheek to her client and grabbed her hand. Xena held her breath, staring at the fingers intertwined with hers.
"She came by the shop asking for me. She was here, looking for *me.*" She sighed heavily. "I know she is the one who attacked me. I know it doesn't make any sense. I don't know why she'd come looking for me! I have no idea what she looks like."

Xena heard white noise as Gabrielle kept talking. Her slender fingers pressed against the hand which held hers. Her mouth gaped and she met eyes with Gabrielle.

"I don't know why I'm telling *you* this," she wagged her head with a mock of a smile. "I take back what I said about you being hard to talk to. You're a good listener."

"She…she came in *here,* asking to see you?" Xena was barely able to speak and she wasn't sure if she could hear herself.

Gabrielle nodded. "I wasn't here at the time but she spoke to one of our sculptors. I don't know why she wanted to speak with me. She never came back by."

Xena eyebrow twitched and she squeezed Gabrielle's hand tightly until her knuckles turned white. She now understood why Gabrielle was so flustered lately and unfocused. Her blood boiled within and her heart hammered rapidly.

*You're dead, Gölge.*
An overwhelming urge to slice Gölge in half entered her mind. She wanted to strike that girl down. It appeared that her apprentice was doing a bit of spying on her own time. She never once thought Gölge could betray her like this and to attack Gabrielle, who was innocent, was just one strike. But now that she found out that Gölge impersonated her without consent, she couldn't let Gölge continue this charade.

Her hands trembled as she held Gabrielle's. She cursed herself for not being more in control of her emotions. She saw red the minute Gabrielle told her everything.

"You're shaking," Gabrielle observed with a small frown.

"I'm…just worried for your safety." Xena loosened her grip and her fingers slithered out of the hold.

Gabrielle coiled her hands in her lap awkwardly. "You don't have to worry about me. I can take care of myself."

"*Xena* sounds like a pretty dangerous woman," she hinted, smiling softly. "You're sure that it was her?"

"I'm sure. I remember her eyes," Gabrielle pointed to her eye, giggling lightly.

"I'm sure. I remember her eyes," Gabrielle pointed to her eye, giggling lightly.

Xena nodded. She wanted to leave but she also wanted to stay and it was very tempting. She couldn't trust Gölge anymore especially since she left Evander there with her. The trust she had in her apprentice was void now that Gabrielle revealed she supposedly knew the attacker. She was once again wedged into a tight space and neither Gabrielle nor Evander knew who she really was which was painful in of itself.

"Gabrielle, if you didn't live in Rome working for the empress, where would you be right now?"

Caught off guard, her mind went blank. She hadn't thought of how her life would've been like if she didn't live in Rome. Sometimes she wondered what would happen to her if she abandoned her jobs in Rome. She thought that she'd never make out of the empire alive and that was probably true. Nero would kill her. There were men everywhere watching her.

"If…I wasn't in Rome," she paused, "I would probably be with my family."

Xena cast a small smile. "And why aren't you with them?"

"I…," Gabrielle's gaze lowered. "I don't know where they are," she painfully admitted. "We were separated from each other when Emperor Tiberius raided my village. I haven't seen them in ten years."
Everything that man did during his reign felt like a thorn in Xena's side. She wasn't the only person affected by the deceased Roman Emperor. People feared him and he was probably one of the worst emperors to rule the empire. He caused a lot of damage throughout the world. Xena was convinced that if Tiberius was still alive that she would've found herself on a crucifix by now.

Xena grabbed the blonde's hand. "I'm sorry. I know what it's like to lose people close to you. I hope you find your family again one day."

Tears threatened to surface and Gabrielle wiped her nose. "Tiberius attacked your home too?"

She licked her lips. "Yes," she choked out. "He hurt a lot of people and tore many families apart."

"I didn't know Tiberius expanded his campaign all the way to Delphi."

She still thinks I'm from Delphi, thought Xena. The truth was that she'd never been to Delphi in her life. It was the only place she could think of from the moment she met Gabrielle. She chose to most auspicious city there was for a cover but now she regretted ever mentioning she was from there in the first place.

"I…am not from there originally."

Gabrielle wagged her finger. "I knew you weren't from Delphi!"

Xena's heart stopped. "You did?"

"First of all, you're wearing the wrong clothes and second, you don't look Grecian at all," she said confidently. "But you mentioned you travel a lot so where are you from originally?"

"I don't have a specific home. I've traveled my whole life." Oh, what a terrible lie, Xena inwardly slapped herself. Gabrielle was too smart to fall for such a farce. She could tell the gears were turning in the artist's mind.

"Everyone has a home," she snorted. "You must have family somewhere. You were born somewhere. I'm originally from Potidaea. Now, it's your turn," she playfully rolled her hand around.

Xena arched an eyebrow. "Potidaea is a nice village." She could tell she wasn't going to get out of this. "I'm originally from Amphipolis."

"Oh! That's my sister village. So, we're from the same area," said Gabrielle cheerfully. "How come you said you were from Delphi instead of Amphipolis?"

Xena folded her hands in her lap and her eyes danced around the area. "I…I haven't been there in a very long time. I don't consider it my home anymore."

Down below there was a lot of chatter and rustling around. They were talking for so long that they lost track of time. Xena was grateful for the interruption for once and stood up, looking over the railing. Several of the artists were talking about the night they had and preparing their stations for the day.

Talk of Roman soldiers could be heard and Xena frowned. She couldn't believe she stayed here for so long. It was a poor decision on her part even though she did enjoy talking and spending her time with Gabrielle, she just couldn't be wandering around in the daylight.

Gabrielle sat up, rubbing her aching head. "I think I've kept you here long enough. I'm sorry about
last night. I've never had wine that strong before," she groaned and the more she moved the more her head throbbed. "That definitely isn't Roman wine. It must be from Egypt or something."

"It's from Edirne," Xena thought aloud and her eyes widened with her back turned.

"Oh really?" Gabrielle inched off the bed to grab her boots. "How do you know that?"

"The merchant I bought it from said it was from there," Xena quickly saved herself from further explanation. She spun around with a gentle grin. "I enjoyed talking to you, Gabrielle."

Struggling to put her boots on, the artist rose from the bed and clumsily walked over to Xena and rested an elbow on the balustrade. She peered down and heard the artists making inappropriate jokes and rolled her eyes.

"So, you are no longer a woman from Delphi but a woman from Amphipolis," she raised a finger. "Maybe I should drink wine more often when you're around so you will tell more of your secret life."

Xena smiled and began making her way down the stairs.

Zenodorus mixed fresh clay into a bowl and in the middle of pouring water into the dry mixture he saw Xena striding across the shop. His jaw dropped and he immediately looked up to the second floor where Gabrielle spent her nights.

"Good morning…" he bowed his head as she passed by.

Xena raised a hand and briskly walked out of the shop causing all of the male artists to pause their morning routine. Once she left all heads were turned upward, staring at Gabrielle in awe. She awkwardly smiled and waved at her fellow colleagues and slithered her way back into the darkness to finish getting dressed.

Due to the heavy downpour last night Varinia was unable to return to the brothel. She didn't want to be there anyway since no men were allowed there and Evander was gone. She decided to sleep underneath a canopy at a winery for the night. Her slumber was rudely interrupted when the woman who owned the winery woke her up just before sunrise.

She was forced to leave but not without arguing with the woman briefly. Varinia went out into the market to walk around for awhile. She felt lost and didn't know if it was a good idea to go back home. As everyone began to prepare for the day she sat down on one of the benches outside a tavern. The rain slowed to a trickle in the early morning.

The air was thick with heavy fog and her clothes were mildly damp from last night. She felt her throat closing up the longer she stayed outside. The tavern owner recognized her and was about to tell her to leave but she left before he scolded her.

Varinia walked through the empty street and spotted Xena leaving the workshop. She ducked down behind a cart and watched Xena scan the area before flipping the veil over her hair and stroll along. Varinia frowned and held the colorful cotton veil tucked underneath her chin and set out to follow Xena at a fair distance.

She weaved in and out of the people who were slowly coming out of their homes to adhere to their morning routine. She could see that Xena was cautious of her surroundings and chose not to remain in the crowds. Xena rounded the corner into an alleyway and Varinia ran ahead and looked down the narrow alley.
She waited a few moments so Xena could get a few paces ahead until she continued following her. Xena rounded another alleyway, increasing her speed. Varinia huffed and picked up her dress and came to a four-way corner. Her head turned from right to left and then she circled in place, unsure of which direction to go in.

Varinia muttered in her mother tongue then decided to head down the alley on her right. She trailed down the desolate area and found nobody was out and about. Most of the homes here were abandoned and in poor condition compared to the rest of the city.

When she stopped in the center of the alley she knew that she lost Xena by now. She decided to turn around and head back until a hand wrapped around her mouth from behind and she was pulled into a small space in between two apartment buildings.

She muffled a scream and her body slammed against a wall.

Xena spun the young woman around and frowned at the same girl who had visited the workshop last night.

"Do not scream," she whispered and Varinia nodded. Her hand slipped off the Syrian's mouth.

"Why are you following me, girl?"

Varinia's mouth parted and she gazed into the piercing blue eyes. She cocked her head to the side, furrowing her eyebrows. She continued to study Xena's facial features in silence thus causing Xena to arch an eyebrow and lean in closer. The familiarity was haunting; so much so that she reached out and touched the raven locks.

Xena flinched and grabbed the girl's hand. "What do you think you're doing?"

"S-sorry," Varinia tensed her body, glaring into the woman's blue eyes. "You…you look like… someone I know."

"You shouldn't follow strangers," Xena let go of the girl's wrist and took a step back. She was met with the doe eyes gawking at her still which made her feel uneasy. "You should go home."

Varinia was gently pushed out of the alley and she stumbled backward. "But I have nowhere to go!"

Xena pinched the bridge of her nose. She had no time to deal with this young woman a second time. She was so exhausted that she wanted to curl up in a ball and go to sleep but she knew that when she returned to her hideout that wasn't going to happen.

"I'm sure you must stay somewhere."

Varinia brushed the tears from her cheek with a heavy palm. "I…live in the eastern side of the city."

"The east –" her words trailed off and she sighed. She recalled Gabrielle mentioning that area twice before. "Do you have anywhere else you can go?"

The Syrian looked to her sandals and Xena rolled her eyes. She brushed her veil over her shoulder and pulled out a pouch of coin strapped to her belt. Varinia raised her head and eyed the dagger attached to the woman's hip.

Xena walked out of the dark narrow pathway and put the coin in the girl's open palm.
"Why are you giving this to me?"

"Go stay in a safe place," Xena closed the girl's fingers around the pouch."And don't follow strangers into dark alleys. You never know who you're dealing with."

Gabrielle took most of the morning to recover from last night and when she was ready to face the nosy colleagues of hers, she went downstairs to prepare her station. She cleaned her brushes in hopes that she wouldn't be bothered.

Soon, she would have to leave to search the city but at least she could look like she was doing something normal. She pulled the sheet off the unfinished painting of the Empress and grumbled. She positioned the easel in the sunlight. After taking in a deep breath she sat down and distributed the mixture of paints into small containers.

She looked over the top of the canvas and Zenodorus was speaking to a cloaked man at the entrance. She squinted to get a good look at the brief conversation and then the man disappeared. Zenodorus turned and headed directly towards her.

She put on a smile and brushed her hands on her apron and walked around to meet Zenodorus. He held a small rolled up parchment. She took the letter and was hesitant to open it in front of everyone. Nobody was paying attention to her but she felt a wave of anxiety hit her, clutching the scroll in her palm.

"That's for you. You know some odd people, Gabrielle," he chuckled.

She smiled awkwardly. "Odd is relative, Zenodorus." She turned her back to him and opened the small letter. She heard footsteps drift away and frowned, reading the message.

Instantly, she grabbed her cloak and flung the sheet over the canvas.

Zenodorus climbed the ladder and saw the artist scurrying out. "Where are you off to now?" he called and she ignored him, running out of the building. "My goodness." He shook his head.

Xena slept for a few hours but she was too angry to sleep. She sat on the floor sharpening a sword, glaring at Gölge from across the room. They briefly made eye contact and Gölge gave a nervous smile to which Xena narrowed her eyes. She scraped the stone along the blade and forced a dishonest smile towards her apprentice.

Evander had been promoted to sit in a chair though still bound; he was free from the floor for now. While Xena was away he had been stripped of his weapons and clothing. He sat, shirtless, barefoot and in a fresh pair of black trousers.

He squirmed and hung his head. His veil of dark hair covered his face as he glared at the floorboards.

"You can't keep me in here forever you know," he said in a worn voice. "People are looking for me."

Xena's attention towards Gölge was thwarted by his voice traveling from the other side of the room. She set the stone aside and rose from the floor. She stopped in front of Evander and lifted his chin with a gentle hand.

"I'm not going to keep you here indefinitely."
He grimaced. "You'll just kill me instead, right?"

"I already told you I wasn't going to kill you," she pinched his chin. "You don't believe me?"

She grabbed a chair and sat down, straddling her legs. Smiling, she twirled the sword around. The two challenged each other with a staring contest and Xena cleared her throat, shifting her weight with her elbows on her knees, widening her eyes. Evander finally broke the stare and turned his cheek.

"I'm going to send you away from here," she picked at the leather tied to the sword's hilt. "You won't have to work for Nero again."

Evander laughed. "You don't get it do you?" he rolled his shoulders back and met her gaze. "If I don't kill you then the emperor will kill me. That's how this works."

She slowly bobbed her head. "Yes, I've come to realize that," she spun the tip of the blade on the floor. Her eyes drifted to Gölge sitting in a corner, polishing boots.

She then took the bracelet out of her blouse and threw it onto Evander's lap. He tried to hide his smile and wiggled in the chair, desperately trying to break free to grab the small bracelet attached to the necklace. Xena took the necklace and came into close contact with her son.

Evander held his breath as the necklace was tied around his neck.

"You said you want to send me away," he stated, "I don't trust you."

"I know you don't." Xena sat back down and swiped her thumb across her nose. "I haven't given you any reason to trust me." She crossed a leg over her knee and leaned back. "If I send you away I want something from you."

"And what's that?"

"Give me the names and locations of who else is working with you."

He rolled his eyes and snorted.

She leapt forward and grabbed his jaw, forcing his head backward. "Tell me."

"Fuck you," he spat.

"Xian!"

His eyes widened as did hers. Xena's fingers slowly slipped off his jaw and she backtracked. She turned around and folded her arms. She rubbed her forehead and couldn't stand still nor could she turn to see his chalk white face either.

He shifted and the chair creaked in the silent room. He licked his dry lips and breathed heavily, hearing his heart beat ringing in his ears. He kept glaring at her long tresses and fidgety hands down by her sides. He didn't expect her to be clueless of who he was but he was more than shocked to hear a name that he hadn't heard in such a long time. He completely abandoned that persona long ago.

"What did you call me?"

Xena chewed on her fingernail nervously, refusing to answer.
"Where did you hear that name?"

She arrived at the temple that was written in the message and walked inside. Gabrielle flipped the hood off her hair and looked around at the empty temple. She didn't have a good feeling about this place. There were no witnesses here if she were to be attacked. At first she thought the message was from Evander since he'd been missing for days but now that she was here alone, she knew it wasn't him.

Her mind immediately went to Xena. Had she been watching this whole time? Did Xena want to meet her secretly and kill her? She no longer trusted anyone around her even more than before. She slipped her hand over the dagger strapped to her hip and stepped through an archway.

Out on the terrace she saw a woman wearing a light blue gown. Hesitantly and cautiously, she came closer to the woman and scanned the area. When she stepped out onto the terrace there were a few Roman guards hidden in the hallways.

"So good of you to finally grace me with your presence, Gabrielle."

She halted mid-step and took her hand off the weapon. "Augusta Sabina…" she bowed her head.

The Empress slowly turned around and leaned against the balustrade, smiling at the blonde. She flicked her wrist at the guards and they dispersed so she and Gabrielle could be left alone. She pushed herself off the rail and walked down the steps to greet the artist.

Gabrielle lifted her chin, forcing herself to smile. "Why did you want to meet here?"

Sabina circled around the artist, inspecting the cloak she wore.

"The Emperor takes many precautions," she frowned, feeling uncomfortable at the way Sabina was circling around like a vulture. "Is there…something I can do for you?" she brought her arms close as the Empress picked at the cloak.

Finally, they met face to face and Sabina crossed her arms. "You didn't tell me you led a double life, Gabrielle."

"Pardon?"

"I've been quite bored in the palace. As you know, it's very unsafe for me to go outside," she casually said and Gabrielle nodded. "I was looking through my husband's office the other day and it just so happens that I found your name written in one of his journals!" she clasped her hands together.

Gabrielle clenched her teeth together. "Oh?"

"Oh, yes," Sabina raised her eyebrows, "why didn't you tell me that you are ordered to kill that savage woman?" she asked, genuinely excited about the task.

Gabrielle's cheeks reddened.

"Don't be shy, Gabrielle!" she placed a hand on the blonde's shoulder. "You can tell me. I want to know everything. Is it true that nobody knows where she is? Are the Emperor's men really as daft as everyone says? I am having doubts if she is here."

"Oh, she's here. "I can…assure you that she will be found, empress. Do not worry."
"I do hope so, Gabrielle. I would hate to see you suddenly unemployed. I really do enjoy our sessions together," she winked and squeezed her artist's shoulder then sauntered away.

Gabrielle loosened the cloak around her neck and ripped it off over her head. She turned over her shoulder and found the Empress and her guards gone from the temple. She dropped to her knees and felt the world collapsing onto her. The Empress openly threatened her life and now she was supposed to act like everything was normal.

She lost all motivation to search the city today for Evander or Xena otherwise. She wanted to be alone and sat on the coast for awhile before returning to the workshop. Now she definitely wanted to slash that canvas with a knife. She was being watched by everybody and every single thing she did was under Nero's eye.

With the weight of the world on her shoulders, Gabrielle Waltzed into the shop just a few hours after sundown. Her cheeks were kissed by the sun and she was dehydrated especially from last night's embarrassment of her drunken state. She couldn't win these days, she thought.

She took off her cloak and flung it on a chair and paused at Zenodorus speaking to Varinia by her station. Another problem, she thought, just what was not needed. Varinia caught her walking in and ran to her.

"Gabrielle, you're finally here!" she beamed and almost hugged her until Gabrielle put a hand up.

Zenodorus washed his clay caked hands. "She's been waiting here for you all day."

"You shouldn't be here, Varinia. Before you ask, no I don't know where Evander is." She walked to her station and kicked over the easel and the painting fell to the floor. She plopped down on the stool and dug her nails into her face.

Varinia eyed the sculptor who gave a shoulder shrug. She pulled up a chair and lolled her head on her shoulder, trying to grab Gabrielle's attention.

"I followed that woman who was here with you yesterday."

Gabrielle's head lifted. "You what?"

"I followed her," Varinia wore an uneasy smile and pulled out the hefty bag of coin. "She gave me this. She is very wealthy. What is her name?"

"Why are you here?"

The Syrian sighed, "you know, Gabrielle, she…well, I don't know if I am going crazy but…" she hesitated.

Gabrielle grunted. "What?"

"She looks so much like Evander! I can't believe you haven't noticed!" she spat and Gabrielle raised her eyebrows. "They have the same eyes, hair, nose, lips –everything!"

"You're right, Varinia," she gave pause and saw the Syrian's green eyes light up. "You are going crazy."

Loud horses galloping through the streets caught their attention. They moved to the large open windows and a horde of men dressed in black armor and masks rode in front of the shop. Gabrielle
poked her head out the window and saw a cloaked woman on horseback leading a second group of men.

A flaming arrow was directly aimed at her and she ducked down. Varinia screamed and held her head as the arrow flew over Gabrielle's head and slid across the marble floor. Thinking quickly on her feet, Gabrielle grabbed the water basin and threw it on the flaming arrow and stomped her boot on it to snuff out the fire.

"Stay here! Go up to the second floor!"

Gabrielle ran outside and snatched her cloak. She leaned against the wall when more horsemen passed by her. She flipped the hood over her head and ran down the street, listening to the citizens screaming and running around the market.

She hid behind a building, her chest heaving, and watched as the invader set fire to all the carts, merchant shops and apartment buildings. Many of the citizens were calling out Xena's name, warning the entire city that she was in the vicinity.

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows and walked through the chaos calmly, setting her eyes on the masked woman with dark hair who led the attacks. She ran to the nearest horseman and stabbed his leg and pushed him off the horse.

She climbed aboard and steered the wild horse through the crowd focusing on the woman in the thick of the flames. The knife slipped down her arm and into her hand.

*Now if I can get close enough…*
She was in the eye of the storm. Chaos surrounded her and fire spread throughout the city. People ran out of their burning homes seeking refuge. Gabrielle had her eye on the woman ahead in the crowd, shooting arrows at the Roman soldiers who were trying to push back the horsemen. She sat on the horse, weaving in and out of the market, stomping on bodies to get closer.

Even though there were horsemen around she was able to make her way through the sea of people as if she were a ghost. She clutched the knife in her palm and took in several deep breaths. The noise around her became a muffled nuisance as she steered the horse, approaching the cloaked woman.

Gabrielle bit her inner cheek, fearing she would hesitate for too long. It only took one second to jeopardize the entire mission. She searched for this woman for a month now and there she was, right in front of her.

If she waited too long, Xena would disappear and this opportunity would go to waste. Xena would be free to terrorize Rome and Gabrielle would be dead. Nero would find her and kill her when she least expected it.

A few feet away and her skin would be under this knife and the world would be rid of her. People wouldn't have to worry about her lurking anymore.

I am doing the world a favor, thought Gabrielle.

Taking someone's life in order to survive wasn't exactly what she had in mind for a career but she had no choice. It was either this or be sold as a slave in the market. She lived comfortably even if she hated working for both the Emperor and Empress, she could do almost anything she wanted.

Although she wasn't working in the fields as a slave or tending to the Empress in the palace, she was still considered a slave of Rome. She did everything she asked of Nero even if that meant disposing of one his greatest enemies.

If she missed Xena's throat then she'd have to make a run for it and leave Rome. She couldn't show her face in the city anymore. If she missed this chance then she was as good as dead. She couldn't afford to miss.

She wouldn't miss. She can't.

Gabrielle tapered her eyes and leapt forward over the horse's head and landed on the Steppe woman's horse. She wrapped her arm around the woman's throat and yanked her backwards and drew the knife. She pulled the cloak away and felt bare skin then slid the blade along the throat with a quick swipe.
She jumped off the horse and watched as the Steppe woman gurgled, clutching her throat to clot the blood flow. Gabrielle stood, mouth agape, hesitating to run. She took a step back when the Steppe ruler collapsed and fell off the horse and onto the ground.

A hand came to her throat as she leaned over to see if the woman as alive. There was no possible way that she could still be alive but Gabrielle checked anyway. She kicked the woman over with her boot and stared at the lifeless eyes.

She staggered backward and pulled the hood further over her face. She wiped the knife on her dark cloak, breathing heavily. She lifted her head, scanning the area and then saw three hooded Steppe soldiers staring at her from afar.

Gabrielle put a hand to her thumping chest and then the three assailants ran across the square. Her eyes widened and she took off running through a neighboring alley. If she wasn't going to be killed by Nero then she was going to be killed by Xena's men.

She darted through several small pathways and then came to a four-way intersection. She looked over her shoulder and saw the three men continuing to follow her. Panicked, she chose to run down the left path.

Never before had she ever been chased so rabidly. She felt like she was prey for a wild animal. They were relentless and didn't even stop to take a breath while they darted in and out and around the city. Gabrielle felt her legs about to give out but due to adrenaline pumping through her body, she kept onward.

She climbed the stairs leading up to a building’s roof. She knew this city better than Xena's men. That was the only advantage she had. She hopped from one to building to another, soaring over the flaming streets below. A quick glance over her shoulder and there she saw the men, too tall and large, were slowing down, unable to catch up.

She smiled and jumped to next building and took off running towards the west. As she kept running she felt something sharp scrape her right arm. She dropped to a knee and the knife slipped from her grasp and slid over the side of the building.

She clutched her arm and saw blood on her palm and an arrow soared over her head. Gabrielle got to her feet again and turned around to see one of the soldiers preparing the bow to shoot again. She was either going to stay here and die or she could jump down.

Gabrielle blinked, judging how far up she was. She wouldn't die but she'd definitely be hurt for awhile. Breathlessly she mistakenly met eyes with the soldiers a couple of buildings away and backed her way to the edge of the building.

The assailant lowered the bow once Gabrielle jumped over the ledge.

Evander lolled his head over and glared at Tildus who was in charge of watching him for the time being. He was alone in this dark place, trapped. The last conversation he had with Xena had been short and sweet. He wanted answers from her but she wasn't willing to talk and ignored his pleas.

Alone in his confinement he was able to think and he wasn't sure that the best idea right now. He hated thinking in silence as it often led to absurd conclusions and paranoia. At this point he wanted to die. He no longer wanted to be a part of Xena's game anymore.

His life had no value to her anymore. He should've died the moment he arrived but she wanted him to reveal who else was after her. Xena was so paranoid yet she had the gall to show her face in
public without a care in the world.

Evander thought of Gabrielle and inwardly kicked himself. Xena was close to Gabrielle all this time and yet Gabrielle was just as blind to it as he was. He wanted to tell Gabrielle everything but he couldn't. There was no way for him to leave this place.

He could also tell Xena that Gabrielle was the one who carried the order to kill her but then if he did that, Gabrielle would most likely die. Was Xena truly unaware of Gabrielle's true intentions? Had Gabrielle been sloppy and exposed herself by accident? Or was Xena just as blind as Gabrielle?

So far from what he gathered over the last week spent here, Xena was clueless to the fact that her killer was right in front of her this whole time. He had to give it to Gabrielle for being so sneaky but at the same time he wanted to slap her for not putting the pieces together.

If he couldn't put the pieces together then Gabrielle would never find the missing puzzle piece right in front of her eyes either.

Evander groaned, wiggling in the chair and Tildus gave him a quick distrustful glance. He sighed and heard people outside screaming from afar. Loud horse hooves galloped rapidly throughout the city and swords clashed together. He heard it all –he heard the chaos –he heard death.

"Where is she?" he asked in a growl.

Tildus frowned and stuck close by the window and peeked outside to see if anyone had come back yet.

"Where is Xena?" he demanded. "What is she doing out there?" he yelled.

"Quiet, boy!" Tildus walked over and stuffed a cloth in Evander's mouth. "You won't be here for long."

Hours went by and Varinia stayed on the second floor of the shop, watching the Romans push back the Steppe invaders. She was tempted to wait downstairs by the windows to see what was happening up close. She was too afraid to go downstairs in case the shop was invaded and destroyed.

She chewed on her nails anxiously waiting for Gabrielle's return. In the back of the loft she heard a loud thud on the wall. Varinia crouched down, backing herself into a corner and hid behind a wall of clothes hanging on a rack.

She peeked through the clothes and saw Gabrielle crawl through the window and fall onto the floor, cursing loudly. She smiled and leapt out of the hiding spot and grabbed Gabrielle's arm to hoist her up.

"Where did you go for so long? I've been waiting for you!" she saw blood trickling down the artist's arm. "You're hurt! What happened?"

Gabrielle collapsed on the bed and held her bleeding arm. "It's a long story," she tossed the knife on the pillow. "Dammit," she lifted her pants and saw another gash on her calf.

She knew taking that leap was very risky but she didn't have anywhere else to go. She wasn't going to just stand there and allow her body to be pierced with arrows. That was a horrible way to die and today wasn't the day. As soon as she landed after her grand jump her leg was met with a Roman's
sword as she swiftly ran across the city.

Varinia looked for some gauze and poured water into a small bowl. She sat, tending to the wounds, dabbing them with a wet bound of linen. Once the bicep wound was cleaned she noticed shards of wood splintered inside the pit of the wound itself.

"I'm going to need to pick those out," she muttered.

Gabrielle peered down at the large wound. "Pick what out?"

"Wood," she pointed to the deep scrape, "how did you get this?"

Gabrielle preferred not to talk about it. She lived through enough today and she wanted to put it behind her but she thought she could trust Varinia. After all, Evander trusted her and he told her about his real job. He apparently told her a lot of things which also included Xena.

"Someone…shot at me," she paused at the look of concern from Varinia, "with arrows. I was chased and ended up jumping off of a building."

Varinia wagged her head, picking the bits and pieces of the arrow out of the wound. "Who were they? The Steppe woman's men?"

She gave a silent nod. "I…killed her."

Varinia gasped. "You did? You really killed her?"

"You can't tell anybody about this."

"Secret is safe with me, Gabrielle," she cast a faint smile and washed her fingers. "Do you think Evander will come back?"

That was a subject that Gabrielle didn't want to touch. She knew that Varinia cared a lot for him but he'd been missing for so long that she began to believe that he was dead. He might have had some kind of encounter with Xena and was killed instantly. Although from the people that Xena's killed, Gabrielle did notice a pattern.

Whenever she killed someone she did it quite openly so the people of Rome could see she was here. Xena killed the Empress' friend and displayed her body on a crucifix for the city to see. She also killed Governor Vindex and forced him to the streets. She wanted everyone to know she was here.

She didn't do that to Evander. The only explanation that Gabrielle could come up with was that Xena could've been questioning Evander this whole time, torturing him even, to get information on those who'd been trained to kill her. Another scenario could be that Xena killed him and dumped his body in the sea because she didn't care about him and why would she?

Now that Xena was dead there was no reason for Evander to come back unless he fled Rome. Gabrielle came to the conclusion that Evander was dead and she didn't have the heart to say that to his lover.

"I hope so," she said with an uneasy smile then hissed at the stinging in the wound.

Varinia sighed and wiped her fingers on a cloth. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to hurt you. I think I got all the pieces out."
Gabrielle waved her hand, shooing her little assistant away. She grabbed the gauze and wrapped it around her arm and tied a knot with her teeth. She relaxed on the bed, staring up at the ceiling and listened to the Romans clash swords with the Steppe men outside. She didn't know if it was going to be safe to stay here but she had nowhere to go.

Nowhere to go; just like Varinia.

"You can stay here for the night," she said, lifting her sore arm over her head. A poor choice, she realized, once her muscles twitched at the slightest movement. "But you should really leave Rome, Varinia. Don't come back here."

"I'm not going to leave Rome without Evander. I love him."

Gabrielle sighed, gnawing at her bottom lip. "I know you do but this place is like a deathtrap. You should take the money that was given to you and leave. Go far from here! Go back to Syria."

Varinia wrinkled her eyebrows, washing her hands and then sat opposite the artist. "I don't know where my family is anymore. I haven't been to Syria in over five years!"

"It's probably a better place than Rome," she grumbled.

"Gabrielle..." she twirled a curly strand of hair round her finger, "what is that woman's name? Your client, I mean."

"I…um, I don't know her name."

Varinia stifled a chuckle. "You've been employed by her yet you do not know her name? That is very strange."

Yes, indeed it was but that didn't really bother Gabrielle. It did at first but now she understood why she didn't know her client's name. A smile crept up on her lips and she nearly forgot that Varinia was sitting by her, watching her intently. Her cheeks radiated and she brushed her hair back with her fingers.

"She's a very strange woman."

"I'll say."

Come morning, the Roman soldiers were able to push out the Steppe horsemcn for the most part but now they were crowded around the borders of the city. The Romans barricaded the entire city which meant nobody could come in or go out. Everyone was trapped but there was a victory to be had in the empire.

The body of the Steppe woman had been found by Nero's elite guard and she was brought to the main square in front of the palace. Nero wanted to see the woman with his own eyes and once her body was thrown onto the ground that was proof enough for him.

Still, the citizens were restless and forced to stay away from the borders and portions of the city that weren't burned and ravaged. The invaders were insistent on staying in Rome until the entire city was a pile of rubble.

It didn't seem to matter that their ruler was dead. They continued to pillage through the areas and mow down Roman soldiers with brute force. Nero had no intention of going out to give a speech to his people to assure them of their safety. Instead, he hid in his large palace with a mountain of
guards surrounding the large fortress.

After his enemy's body was burned in the square for the citizens to see, Nero knew that the people would feel some type of relief. The real issue was going to be getting rid of Xena's men for good. They weren't going to leave anytime soon. Nero expected there to be another coastline fire at this rate.

In the square, citizens crowded around the pyre in silence. There were whispers and murmurs in the crowd, talking of Xena's death. They were more concerned for their well being as the military wasn't doing a very good job protecting everyone.

In the center of the crowd, among everyone to see, Xena stood in front of the pyre. She listened to all of the gossip about her. They spoke of her death not as a celebration but as a bad omen. The Romans truly hated her and she knew that but if they only knew that their ruler didn't give a second thought of their lives, they might change their tune.

She watched as Gölge's body was engulfed by the pyre's flames. Her eyebrow twitched at her name being repeated around her. She stood in silence, smoldering. She wiped her cheek and pushed her way through the crowd.

She took in a deep breath to calm herself before she was to strike anyone that came near her or spoke of her again. Her eyes narrowed at the path ahead where a few of her men were fighting off Nero's soldiers.

Xena smiled as she passed by and gave a slow incline of her head.
Evander fought sleep for two days waiting for Xena to return. He refused water and food as he told his personal guard or babysitter as he called him, that he wouldn't eat or drink until Xena came back. On the third day, his vision began to blur from dehydration and self-inflicted malnutrition. He forced his eyes open and kept his eye on Tildus.

He closed his eyes for a split second, but that turned into about half an hour. His chin touched his chest as he fell into a deep sleep until a loud door slammed shut, and he jolted awake. Evander's eyes shot open, and he stared at Xena, who had finally arrived.

She took the veil off her head and slipped her sandals off. She drew the weapons tied to her thighs and set them on the table with her back turned to Evander. As she cleaned her weapons she noticed the plates of untouched food and several cups filled to their brims.

Evander's gaze burned into her backside. He was barely able to keep his red eyes open, but he fought this long. He would continue to fight. There were answers that he needed, and he wasn't going to let her just slip by without asking her some questions first.

"Where have you been?" he demanded to know.

"Why haven't you eaten anything?" she asked, turning around slowly.

"You answer my question first!"

Xena's lips were brought to a firm line, and she gently set aside her knives and approached her son, carrying a cup of water. She attempted to give him the water by pushing the cup to his mouth. Evander pursed his lips and turned his cheek.

"Drink it."

He leaned back in the chair, and Xena grabbed his jaw and pinched his cheeks together to force his mouth open. The muscles in his face tensed, and he kept glaring up at her. The flesh of his inner cheeks pressed against his teeth, and he let out a muffled moan.

Irritated, she set the cup on the table and took a step back, folding her arms.

Evander huffed and puffed once his face was released. He smoothed his tongue over his top teeth and massaged his cheeks with the back of his tongue.

"I won't eat or drink anything until you answer my questions."

Xena fluttered her eyes and grabbed a chair to sit. She flicked her wrist and forced a smile. "Ask away."
"Where did you go? I heard fighting outside for two days straight. I know you're the cause of that chaos."

Very good, she thought, he's very intuitive. Maybe a little too intuitive. He was also very aware of his surroundings, but he was still a child. He shouldn't be involved in the line of work he is in.

"You told me that the emperor would kill you if you didn't kill me." Her lip twitched into a cunning smile. "You don't have to worry about that anymore."

Evander wrinkled his eyebrows. "What does that mean?"

"As of now, Rome thinks I'm dead."

His face contorted into a swirl of confusion. She was standing there before him, and he didn't understand what she meant by her statement. Suddenly, after a couple of moments, it finally hit him. His blue eyes enlarged twice their size. That poor girl, he thought. Gölte was merely a pawn for Xena's plan this entire time. He didn't want to be associated with that young woman's death. The thought of him being involved caused his mouth to sour.

A lump caught in his throat, and he coughed. "How...how do you know...my name?" he spoke quietly, almost inaudibly.

Xena's lip quivered for a split second. She lied to him thus far. He'd probably never believe her if she told the truth anyway.

"I knew your mother," she said, "in Edirne."

"The Steppe province?" he choked out.

She confirmed with a nod. She saw the look of betrayal plain as day reflects in his eyes. Now she knew that she couldn't tell him the truth. He would resent her forever.

"Do...you know what happened to her?"

Xena tried not to express emotion. "I don't know. I assumed that the Romans took her."

He let his head droop down. He wondered if he'd ever see his family again. He used to think as a child that he'd one day reunite with them, and now that he came by this information, he knew that his dreams would never come true.

"Do you have anything else to ask me?"

Evander sat in silence and sniveled, gaping at the floor.

She furrowed her eyebrows. Was he crying? She rubbed her lips together and placed her hands in her lap.

"You don't have to worry about Nero coming for your head now. I told you that I'd send you far away from here. I intend to keep my promise," she said, smiling.

Evander lifted his eyes and grimaced.

"Where would you like to go? Pick any place you like, and I will send you there."

The corner of his lip quirked up into a smile. "You're not going to send me to Edirne and keep me as your prisoner?"
She desperately wanted him to come back with her, but she knew that wasn't possible. "I said anywhere you want. Name the place."

"I can't... leave Rome."

"Nero won't bother you anymore, Xian," she slipped up by calling him by his birth name again, and he shot her a distrustful glare.

"It's not about him."

Xena could tell by the faraway look in his eyes that he didn't speak of the emperor but of a woman -- a woman that he cared for here in Rome. She knew that look so well from her own experience a long time ago. It'd been quite a while since she shared those same feelings her son possessed,

"It's a woman you're talking about," she assumed.

Evander's lips parted. There was no denying it, and he replied with a couple of head nods.

"Tell me who she is, and I'll find her. She can go with you."

He continued to gawk, wary of her intentions to 'send him away'.

Despite the injuries, she endured Gabrielle was in a great mood. There was a weight lifted off her shoulders. She no longer had to be worried about Rome's enemy looming over everyone. The fear of a pair of eyes watching her was no more. She was free of worry.

All she had to be concerned with now was finishing Augusta Sabina's portrait. When she was finished with that, then she was going to have a lot more free time. After an incredibly long month, she desperately needed the time off to recuperate. The realization of her completed job had yet to sink in.

This morning, two days after the assassination, she woke up in a pool of her own sweat. The paranoia that someone was going to come in and attack her was very prevalent. She had several sleepless nights ever since Xena came to Rome. She lived in fear just like every other person here, but she couldn't allow this fear to conquer her.

As much as she hated painting the Empress, she had a job to finish. Gabrielle sat at her station for the entire day, completing the portrait and touching up areas in the painting's background. She was mindful of the wound on her arm, and unfortunately, it was the arm she used to paint with. She held her elbow most of the time while she worked.

That became old very quickly, and it was why it took three times longer than it should have to finish this commission. Once she thought the painting looked nearly perfect, she set it aside to let it dry. She knew Sabina would come by any day now, and Gabrielle really hoped that there wouldn't be any complaints.

She stood in front of her table, cleaning her brushes. She dropped all of the paintbrushes into a bowl of water and transferred them to a cloth to dry them once she rinsed off the excess paint. Gabrielle's eyes lifted, and she saw her client passing by the windows.

Xena smiled and waved her hand, briskly walking outside the workshop. She had less to fear when she walked outside in the daylight. Everyone, including Nero, thought her dead. Her days here were numbered. Her time spent in Rome was coming to an end.
The plan to get rid of Gölge came sooner than expected. She didn't plan to have her apprentice killed, but she also didn't plan to find her son that she hadn't seen since he was a toddler. Gölge, unfortunately, was caught in the crossfire, and Xena didn't hesitate to use Gölge as bait.

Then there was Gabrielle. She never predicted to find someone quite like the blonde artist. At first, she wanted to use Gabrielle to get close to Augusta Sabina, but now that her death was spread around the city, there was no possible way to use Gabrielle in that fashion. Xena was used to thinking quickly on her feet, but she was forced to make some drastic decisions with all the extra entities that thwarted her plans.

Now she found herself about to make yet another risky decision: seeing Gabrielle. She stood outside the entrance and inhaled sharply before entering. As soon as she strolled in, Gabrielle could be seen with a smile illuminating her entire face. She didn't want to admit it, but she enjoyed her time with Gabrielle. The young artist was a very interesting character and quick to open her mouth to speak her mind.

"It's chaos out there!" Gabrielle wiped her paint-stained hands on her apron. "I hope you didn't bring more of that dangerous wine."

Xena hid her smile. "No, not this time."

They walked together back over to Gabrielle's station, and Xena frowned upon seeing the Augusta's painting lingering in the corner. She turned her focus to the paintbrushes drying underneath the window sill.

"I see you're putting the brushes to good use."

Gabrielle, startled, turned with a lopsided grin. "Yes. It was very nice of you to buy them for me. I need to think of a way to pay you back."

"You could finish my painting for me," Xena took a seat on the empty chair and brushed her long hair behind her shoulders.

Gabrielle paused and gaped for a moment. She stuttered and muttered under her breath then reached for her sketchpad she kept below the table. Nervously, she sat down on the stool and flipped open the pad and looked at the unfinished sketch. It felt like a lifetime ago since she looked at it. She had yet to grace a paintbrush to a canvas.

"Hopefully, we won't have any more interruptions," she commented with an added muffled laugh. Before she began sketching, she gazed at her client. "Are you going to disappear again?"

Xena twisted her mouth and rubbed her thumbs across the backs of her hands settled in her lap.

"I have all the time in the world. I'm not going anywhere."

Gabrielle nodded and began scraping the charcoal on the parchment, occasionally looking up at the face she was etching. Luckily, she was near finished with the sketch, and she could begin to paint it on a fresh canvas.

"I don't like to sit for a long time," said Xena.

"I remember."

Their eyes met, and Gabrielle's cheeks tinged an obvious shade of pink. Her eyes dipped down to the sketchpad.
"Were you able to find a villa to purchase?"

Xena's stomach fizzled at the question. She didn't want to answer that, but she knew that Gabrielle would continue to pester her if she remained quiet.

"No, I didn't find anything to my liking."

Gabrielle snorted. "I can imagine, especially with everything happening around here." She blew the charcoal dust off the sketch and tilted her head, examining her work. "You heard that the Steppe woman Xena is dead now."

At that moment, Xena's piercing eyes darkened two shades. Her body stiffened. "How could I not? Everyone is talking about it."

"She caused a lot of damage with her men the last couple of days," she spoke casually, indirectly inducing her client's internal anger. "She killed a lot of people."

"I'm sure you feel relieved that she is no longer watching you."

Gabrielle lifted her head, seeing the wide eyes staring right back at her. "Yes...I feel more at ease now," she cleared her throat. "Could you turn your head to the left?" she asked.

Xena's jaw clenched, and she slowly turned her head. She didn't like being studied like a subject and was already getting impatient sitting here, despite her good company. She also didn't like having a conversation about herself with Gabrielle either. It only reminded her of how her plans changed in the spur of the moment.

Gabrielle rose from the stool and walked over to her subject. She titled Xena's chin upward towards the little sunlight they had left to work with. She smiled softly, and Xena lowered her gaze immediately. Gabrielle's smile faded, and she backed up slowly to take her seat.

"I've been to Edirne before," Xena said coolly.

The artist crinkled her eyebrows, continuing to sketch. "You really do travel all over the place," she lightly said. "Is it pretty there? I didn't know that we had several merchants that sell goods from Edirne until recently. Not to mention that the deadly wine you gave me is from there."

The corner of Xena's lip quirked upward. "There are lots of mountains, plenty of lush green fields, and the summers are much cooler than this terrible heat Rome has."

Gabrielle agreed about the unbearable summers in Rome. The moment you stepped outside, the back of your neck was drenched in sweat.

"It sounds like a really beautiful place. Maybe I could visit one day now that Xena is gone."

Xena dug her nails into her thigh. "What does that mean?"

Gabrielle guffawed. "Well, it's obvious that she hated Romans. I don't think she would've allowed Romans to come into her land."

"You aren't Roman." It took every ounce of willpower to prevent from ousting herself and lash out at Gabrielle. "You shouldn't judge people you don't know."

"You're right," Gabrielle agreed with a head nod. "But it's hard not to, especially since she tried to kill me."
Xena ran her tongue against her top row of teeth. "And you're sure that it was her?"

"I'm positive." She could tell by the tension that this conversation was heading south very quickly. "Enough about Xena. I don't want to talk about her anymore. She's the talk of the city right now. I want to talk about you. Tell me more about what you do, the places you've been."

You're just confused, Gabrielle, she thought, and it isn't your fault. She played possum for a long time now with Gabrielle and several other people she came into contact with who were now all dead, all except her son. She put on quite a show for Rome, and now due to extenuating circumstances, everyone knew she was dead. They saw her body burned in the square.

Her work here was not complete, but she couldn't stay much longer or be caught. Xian was just another bump in the road that she had to hurdle over. Xena didn't want to act bitter towards Gabrielle, but it was hard not to. She lied about who she was from the very beginning. Gabrielle had no interest in knowing who Xena truly was given her tone and dismissive attitude.

Xena pondered what Gabrielle's reaction would be if she told her who she was. Would she hate her just like every other person in Nero's Empire? How would she feel if she knew that she was befriendng the enemy? These were questions that Xena would probably never receive any answers to.

But she still liked the zany artist and wanted to spend what little time she had left in Rome with her.

She swallowed her bitter resentment. "What would you like to know about me?"

Gabrielle swiped the charcoal across the parchment, sketching the strong jaw of her subject. So far, she really liked how the sketch was turning out. Once they were finished here, then she could begin painting. It was the first time she was eager to paint someone other than Augusta Sabina.

"I know you don't really like to talk about your life, but you said you don't have anywhere to be, so I want to know everything about you!"

Xena wore a frail smile. "I'm not that interesting."

"I don't believe that for a second," Gabrielle combated playfully. "You travel a lot. I've always wanted to travel to places. If I ask some questions, will you...answer them?"

"I'll try my best to answer your questions." She shifted in the chair, becoming very antsy sitting for so long. She didn't want to be asked hard-to-answer questions, and she hated being the center of attention.

Gabrielle hummed as she thought of a list of questions scrolling in her mind.

"First question!" she held up a finger and met Xena's gaze, "why did you leave Amphipolis?"

Xena sighed heavily. "You really like to get to the meat."

The response caused Gabrielle to stifle a laugh.

"I was really young when I left, and I was in a dark place. I thought I could achieve my goals quicker by leaving my home and family."

"And did you achieve those goals?"

"Some of them." Xena looked down at the fidgety hands in her lap. "It took me a long time to
survive on my own, and I had a few…obstacles along the way," she thought of her son that suddenly popped up in her life unexpectedly.

Gabrielle could tell by the tone of Xena's voice that there was a lot of pain behind her words. The life that Xena had didn't sound very easy, and it was apparent that the hurt lingered even after so many years had passed.

"You don't sound very happy about the choices you've made."

Xena, surprised by the insightful comment, was taken aback. The quick tongue she normally had seized up, and all she could do was gape at Gabrielle. Happiness was not something she thought of often in her life. She never sought out happiness. Gabrielle was right; she was unhappy with several decisions she made, especially the recent ones.

Her wandering mind was interrupted by Gabrielle's shimmering face. The sketchpad was turned so she could see the finished product, and she titled her head, unsure of what to think, seeing her own image reflected right back at her. A hand came to her face as if she saw and felt her facial structure for the first time.

The painting looked a bit off to her, and she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She kept staring at it and then realized the issue: she was smiling in the portrait.

Gabrielle expected a more enthused reaction, but she was reminded that this wasn't Augusta Sabina, who was very talkative and simply loved to look at herself. This was the 'woman of few words'.

"You have a wonderful smile. I wanted to capture it."

At that, a grin crept up on Xena's lips without her realizing it. Normally, she would've caught the slip-up, but Gabrielle didn't know who she was. She wasn't in Edirne talking to one of her people. She wasn't obligated to put on a show for Gabrielle. She could just be herself, except she wasn't herself with Gabrielle.

She lied about who she was and had been this entire time. The smile faded, and Xena recoiled, suddenly intent on leaving. The sun had set, and time slipped away from her. How long had she been here?

"You don't like it," stated Gabrielle.

Xena shook her head vehemently. "No, I do! I do like it."

"You should smile more often." She set the sketchpad down and turned to stare out at the dark city. "Oh, I didn't realize how late it was. I kept you here too long, didn't I? I knew this was going to happen. You probably have somewhere to be."

Another smile graced Xena's lips, and she stood from the chair. "You didn't keep me, Gabrielle. I enjoyed my time with you." she rubbed her fingers together anxiously.

"When do you want to start on the painting? I shouldn't take too long, maybe a couple of days."

Xena gnawed on her bottom lip. "I could come back in two days. We should change the scenery. We could go somewhere with more light."

Gabrielle traced her fingers along her chin. "Well…we could go to the coast. We'll meet up here and then –"
"No need," Xena said with a raised hand. "I will find you."

"Are you sure? It's no trouble. I could –"

"Gabrielle," she took the artist's hand and gave a firm squeeze. "I am good at finding people. Trust me," she whispered.

Gabrielle cast an awkward smile, and she watched the hand slowly slither away. She pulled her hand close to her chest and looked into her subject's piercing eyes.

"One more thing before I go," she said, and Gabrielle nodded. "That girl who came in here when I was last with you – do you know where I can find her?" she could see the questionable look about her and added, "she and I ran into each other a few days ago. I wanted to see how she's doing. She didn't tell me her name," she waved her hand and feigned innocence through a forced smile.

"Oh, that would be Varinia."

Varinia. That was the name her son spoke of when she questioned him earlier. It was true then. Her son was cavorting with a Syrian whore, and he wasn't going to leave Rome without her. He wasn't the least bit concerned about Nero decapitating him as long as he had the Syrian girl with him.

Still, Xena kept her promises, and she had her suspicions about Varinia the moment her son began to describe her appearance. Gabrielle confirmed her suspicions with a simple name.

"A very lovely name," she said softly and gazed out the windows. "Do you know where she is?"

There was always that chance that Varinia took her advice and fled Rome. Xena didn't want to return to her son and tell him that. She already put him through so much.

"Hmm," she crossed her arms, "I'm not sure, but you will probably find her in eastern Rome. You remember what I told you about that particular area…" she hinted with raised eyebrows.

Xena inwardly groaned. "Yes, I remember." She didn't want to go there but if she had to, then she would. "Thank you," she extended a warm hand to Gabrielle's shoulder. "Two days then? I'll see you on the coast."

"Y-yes…" she held her breath. "Two days."
Varinia had no choice but to return to the brothel. Since the Steppe woman was no longer an issue for Rome, the city had somewhat returned to its normalcy. Varinia was forced to either pay for her room or allow soldiers to trickle in. In the last few days, she refused anyone's entry and instead received a mouthful from her superior about the lack of payment.

She sat on her bed most of the day and difficulty falling asleep at night. She kept wondering if Evander was ever going to return. When she spoke about him with Gabrielle, she got the feeling that Gabrielle was protecting her feelings. Evander could be dead, but she knew he wasn't. She could feel it deep within her core that he was alive.

It was tempting to leave Rome. The thought occurred to her the moment she received the large sum of money from Xena. She wanted to leave. She never liked Rome, and she was forced to live here because she was sold to a Roman slaver who took her from Syria. She learned to forget about her life and family in Syria, but she thought about them often.

One morning, just before dawn, she walked around the eastern side of the city by herself. Being in her room in the brothel wasn't home. It never was and never would be. It was pointless to stay there since she wasn't bringing anything to the table, and she was tired of being yelled at.

Walking around the city wasn't the wisest for someone like her, but she no longer cared when people ogled her. The city had yet to wake, and she enjoyed the foggy summer mornings. It was very quiet, maybe eerily quiet, but she enjoyed it nonetheless.

She passed by two young men sitting around a campfire and briefly smiled at them. She shielded her face with the cotton veil she wore daily. When she rounded a corner of a tall apartment building, she was accosted by two tall men dressed in animal pelts and furs.

Varinia gasped and tried to back away to run in the opposite direction. The two men grabbed her by the arms and wrapped an opaque cloth around her eyes and tied her wrists together with a tight rope.

A normal reaction would be to scream and cry out for help, but those cries for help were often ignored in this area of Rome. Varinia screeched loudly, shouting to the slumbering Romans in their homes. She was thrown over one of the men's shoulders and carried off down a dark alley.

Today was the day Xena was going to meet Gabrielle on the coastline. She needed an entire day to spread the word to her army to begin to vacate Rome. She could only stay for a couple more days to make sure her soldiers returned to Edirne.

The port was just beginning to allow foreign ships to dock, which was a good sign for her. She was able to buy a ship from a merchant on the coast, and fortunately for her, no questions were asked as to why she needed the ship. It most likely due to the amount she supplied the merchant. Greedy Romans could never resist a gold coin waved in front of them.

To minimize suspicion, she was going to have to take the long route home by horseback. That
meant she would travel throughout Italia and then up through Roman territory until she reached the Steppes. It was going to be a long couple of weeks until she arrived in Edirne.

In the small place she'd been hiding out for a while, she stared at her son, who was sleeping on the floor with a blanket draped over him. She looked down at the empty vial in her palm and set it down gently on the table.

Since last night, she slipped a serum into his food and water to induce a heavy sleep. She removed the ropes around his wrists and ankles for the first time since he was captured. Xena sat on the floor with her back against the wall, watching him sleep.

She smiled softly and ran her fingers through his hair. She pulled the blanket further over his body and traced her fingers along his slender arm. They had a limited time together, and now that he was about to be sent away and unable to talk to her, she cherished this moment with him.

When they last spoke of a place Evander wanted to go, he never mentioned a specific place. Xena wanted him to go to Edirne to keep an eye on him, but she couldn't do that. He wouldn't like to live in a place where he thought his family died, but the fact was that at least one person in his family was sitting right next to him.

She thought of the next best place to send him where she could watch over him from afar. They were both strangers to each other. The least she could do was send him to a safer place where Nero couldn't find him or think to look for him again.

Footsteps approached from outside, and Xena stood up, brushing her hair away from her face. She folded her arms, and the door opened slowly. Tildus walked in, scanning the outside alley before closing the door.

"The ship is ready," he said.

She nodded and turned to her slumbering son. "You were able to get the girl?"

"Yes. Can I take him now?" he asked.

Xena stepped aside and allowed him to lift her son into his arms and whisk him away. She clasped her palms together and tapped her mouth gently, following Tildus outside the rundown apartment home. Her eyes lifted to the sky that was lightening by the minute.

They didn't have much time to hide here any longer. She understood why her son didn't want to leave Rome without Varinia, even if he despised the city as much as she did. But he didn't have a reason to stay here anymore.

And neither did she.

Gabrielle woke up later than she normally did. Perhaps her body was more tired than she thought. The last couple of nights had been the best sleep she's had in a long while. She trailed down the stairs, humming softly and stopped at her station.

She removed Sabina's portrait from the sunlight and examined her work to look for any imperfections. Sabina needed to be satisfied with this portrait; otherwise, she would be stuck working on this forever, and continuing to look at the empress' face was tiresome.

Zenodorus arrived later than all the other artists and threw down his leather satchel. He waltzed over and looked over Gabrielle's shoulder and wrapped an arm around her casually.
"It looks great, Gabrielle! I knew you would be able to finish it."

"You think so?" her eyes turned upward.

"Mhm." His arm slipped off her, and he skipped over to his station and drew the sheet off the unfinished sculptor. "You're going to have so much free time! I am a little bit jealous. I'm not even halfway finished with this."

She chuckled and set the portrait underneath the table to ensure that it wouldn't be ruined by her or anyone else here. This morning she was going to make a long trek to the coast, and she made sure she packed her brushes ahead of time. The canvas she needed as just small enough to fit in her bag.

In the last two days, her arm was bothering her, and she applied the salve given to her. That medicine had proven very useful over the last month. She didn't expect to obtain multiple injuries, but now she was about to be injury-free. Gabrielle just wanted to focus on one thing today. Nothing was going to trump her good mood.

A Roman soldier entered the workshop and took off his helmet upon entry. All of the artists paused and ceased conversing with one another. Gabrielle was too preoccupied with organizing the items she needed to take with her to notice the obtrusive soldier stalking towards her.

He cleared his throat loudly, and Gabrielle turned around, hiding her supplies behind her back. The soldier pulled out a large bag of coin, and Gabrielle graciously took the coin pouch from him.

He briefly smiled with a head nod and left hastily.

Zenodorus's jaw dropped at the overfilled pouch full of coin. He ran over to her with clay-covered hands and nearly gripped Gabrielle's shoulders, but he refrained. Unable to contain himself, he expressed his excitement, bursting at the seams.

"Wow! Gabrielle that is a lot of money!" he marveled. "Augusta Sabina pays you that much for a painting? I need to learn how to use a paintbrush!"

Gabrielle held the weight of pouch in her palm and furrowed her eyebrows. As much as she wanted to be excited about being paid off, she didn't want the money. Each time she received coin from Nero for her jobs, a piece of her was ripped away. It was becoming increasingly more difficult to do these jobs as the years went on.

The worst part of this was that everyone she worked with thought the money given to her was directly from Augusta Sabina. She was trapped in a cycle that she could never break free from. She was tied to Nero by the hip. He had her wrapped around his finger, and she complied only because she wanted her head attached to her body.

She threw the heavy coin pouch onto the table and continued organizing her satchel for her departure. The knife she carried with her everywhere was stuffed at the bottom of her bag. A hand wrapped around her bicep wound, and she hissed at the stinging pain. She hid her wounds from her colleagues. They didn't need to know what her life was truly like.

"I'll be back later, probably in the evening," she said aloud.

Zenodorus rubbed the nape of his neck. "Oh…okay, where're you going this time?"

"Somewhere far from here," she mumbled.

"Let me guess; you're going to ask me to watch your station."
She winked and snapped her fingers. "That's right. You're a good friend," she nudged his arm playfully.

Zenodorus rolled his eyes and backed away closer to his station. "I hope you have a good time…wherever you're going."

She threw the satchel over her shoulder and snatched the bag of coin. "Oh, I will." She waved goodbye and grabbed her cloak at the entrance before leaving the shop.

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Varinia was brought blindly to what she thought might've been a ship. She sat on the floorboards for a good while with her sight obstructed by a blindfold and hands tied behind her back. She was briefly told what place she was going to, but truthfully she had no idea what that area was.

For what felt like an eternity, she felt the floor rock beneath her. Hours she sat, not knowing where she was and who took her and why. When she first arrived on the ship, she sobbed with no one to hear her cries for help.

Memories of being brought over to Rome on a ship years ago came rushing back. She didn't want to be taken from Rome like this. She knew what awaited her on the other side, and she didn't have the energy and mental willpower to go through that for a second time.

Across the aisle, Evander was situated on the floor. He finally awoke when the gently rocking of the ship stirred him. His eyes fluttered open, and he sat up, rubbing his aching head. Once he was able to get a clear view of his surroundings, he began to panic.

"What…" he mumbled, "what the…no."

Varinia heard a voice nearby and gasped. She inched further away from the distant voice and fell over onto her side.

Evander, startled by the loud thud, turned around and saw a mound of curly hair sprawled on the floorboards. A smile appeared, hopeful that it was the hair he had grown accustomed to seeing every day. He crawled across the floor and heard muffled cursing.

On all fours, he came over to the struggling woman and flipped her over onto her back. He lifted the blindfold from her eyes, and Varinia's mouth parted.

"Evander!" she squealed.

He untied her bound wrists, and then Varinia threw her arms around him. He lost his balance and stumbled backward with his back hitting one of the large posts. She pulled away and cupped his cheeks and kissed his nose and forehead.

"I was so worried! I knew you weren't dead," she said, smiling from ear to ear. "Where have you been? Why did you disappear? Did someone hurt you?"

His eyes danced around, and it took a while to realize that he was on a ship. He jumped up, gently pushing aside Varinia and ran to the nearest window. With a clenched fist, he let out a throaty growl. They were indeed on a ship, and they were in the middle of the ocean. The coast was no longer visible, and he wondered how long they'd been sailing.

"Dammit!" he punched the wall.

"Evander…" she stood up slowly and grabbed his shoulder. "I was told we were going to dock in
Abydos, but...I don't really know where that is."

He was too angry to make sense of this little plan she concocted. He knew that the food he ate last night tasted a little bit off, and now he knew why. She drugged him. She got rid of him so quickly, and he was left defenseless. She didn't even give him the chance to put up a fight.

"I finally have you here with me!" she draped her arms over his broad shoulders. "We're no longer slaves to Rome! Maybe we can get married," she hinted, "we can have a baby too."

Evander brought his thick eyebrows together. "She did this," he whispered. "Did Xena bring you here? She kidnapped you, didn't she?"

Her face scrunched at the question. "Xena?" she laughed, "Evander, she is dead! Gabrielle told me so."

"No, she's not, Varinia!" he held her face in his palms. "She is alive! She has been right in front of us the entire time! She is Gabrielle's client," he spat.

Varinia widened her green eyes. "No...but..." she stammered and dug her nails into his hair. "Oh no... Gabrielle," she inhaled sharply, "her life is in danger!"

He sighed, too frustrated to concentrate. "Xena doesn't know that Gabrielle was hired to kill her. Gabrielle thinks that she killed Xena, but she actually killed another woman who was posing as Xena," he pinched his nose's bridge.

She held his chin in between her thumb and forefinger and gave his chin a gentle lift. She gazed into his piercing blue eyes, studying his facial features. She titled her head from side to side, and the corner of her mouth twisted into a smile.

"I see it now," she said just above a whisper. "See what?"

"You look just like her," she said. "You bear the same face as her. I recognized you in her when I saw her."

Evander's heart hammered, and he slowly trailed away from her and bumped into the wall. He clutched the necklace in his palm. He slid down the wall and plopped down onto the floor. It was all making sense to him now. Xena didn't kill him for a reason he was blind to, but now he knew why. He refused to believe what Varinia was trying to insinuate.

Varinia smiled softly and knelt. She took his hand and pressed her lips to his knuckles. "You have me now. I won't ever leave you."

There weren't many ships that sailed from the port, but she made sure to see the ship off. Xena lingered on the docks longer than necessary. Many people passed by her, and her shoulders were bumped more than times than she could count. She waited until she could no longer see the ship from the port.

For the safety of her son and Varinia, she allowed a few of her men to board the ship to the port city Abydos. It wasn't too far from Edirne so she could keep an eye on them. She didn't know whether Xian and Varinia would stay there or not, but she sent a messenger on the ship to tell a few of her soldiers stationed in Abydos to keep a watchful eye on the two.
For now, it was the best plan she could come up with. She knew her son was smart, and he'd probably figure out everything eventually and possibly come looking for her. Another part of her wished that he'd stay far away from her because she didn't think she'd have the patience or courage to explain herself to him. This was far from the life that she was supposed to give her son.

Once she left the docks, it didn't take long for her to stumble upon Gabrielle. The coast wasn't very large, but some pockets were more crowded than others. A swell of nerves formed in the pit of her stomach as she walked along the coast. She pressed a palm over her stomach, and the temptation to turn and go the other way was incredibly strong.

She already had to do something very difficult today, and she wasn't prepared for more disappointment. Gabrielle caught sight of her and smiled, waving her hand. Xena planted a forced and anxious smile on her lips.

Her original plans for Gabrielle were tossed out when they spent more time together. It was definitely a contributing factor to Gölge's envious behavior. Xena couldn't blame the artist for the stilted relationship she had with Gölge. That girl's death had yet to sink in. There was no time to process anything, and the worst part of it all was that she didn't have anyone to talk to – anyone to share her feelings with.

She was alone. She'd always been alone, but now she truly felt it. She was going to be alone, and she partially blamed herself for the life she had. She chose to be alone, and now she began to regret pushing several people away. The list was too long to dwell on.

Gabrielle stood from the spread on the sand and greeted her client. "Welcome," she motioned for them to sit.

Xena smiled, looking down at the blank canvas, the assorted brushes, and two empty glass flutes. She sat down and tucked her legs underneath her and fixed the blue dress she wore around the area. She brushed her hands along the sand and pointed to the flutes.

"What are these for?"

Gabrielle pulled out a bottle from her bag. "I brought wine, but don't worry, I ate this time."

She poured a generous amount of the viscous red wine into the glasses and handed one flute over to Xena, which was accepted cautiously. Xena sniffed the wine and took a small sip.

"This is definitely not from Edirne," she concluded just by the liquid's bitter taste.

"I'm not going to make that same mistake again." Gabrielle sipped the wine, and her face contorted at the sourness. She coughed. "It's not the best. I'll admit that."

Xena raised her eyebrows, agreeing silently. She took another sip and then set down the glass. Though she was in the clear of being spotted, paranoia was very much there. Her eyes continuously scanned the area, but nobody seemed to be paying any attention to them. This was a rather secluded part of the coast luckily.

Gabrielle began to mix her paint and eyed her client, studying the dress and blue veil to match. She rummaged around in her bag and grunted.

"I didn't bring any blue paint," she said, disappointed. "I can use red instead. Just between you and me, blue really isn't your color."

Xena raised an eyebrow. "Is that right?"
"Red looks better on you and maybe green too, but not blue." She opened a small jar of paint that she packed and took a long feathered brush.

"I'll keep that in mind the next time I go shopping in the square," Xena said jokingly. "This is a very nice spot you chose."

Gabrielle settled the canvas on the sheet and took out her sketchpad. She slowly stroked the brush across the blank canvas, eyeing the sketch and lifting her eyes to meet with Xena to make sure she represented the colors correctly.

"It's nice, but it's even nicer in the fall. There's not really a breeze in the summer. As you know, it's really hot here!"

Xena nodded and pulled her hair stuck to the corner of her mouth. She gazed out at the calm ocean and sighed heavily.

"So, are you up to answering more questions?"

Xena turned slowly and peered down at the sketch being transferred onto the canvas effortlessly. More questions meant more answers that she dreaded. She reminded herself that her time here was limited and needed to make the best of it.

"Sure, but don't get too personal."

Gabrielle smirked and dipped the brush into the paint, tapping the shaft's edge on the brim of the jar. "You mentioned some of the places you traveled to, but you never actually told me what you do."

At that, she tapped her fingers on her thigh and pondered for a while. "I transport weapons."

There was a long pause, and Gabrielle lifted the wet brush off the canvas. "Sorry, did you say weapons?" she clarified, and Xena smiled, nodding her head. "That's very…unusual. I would've never guessed, but then again, you're a woman who has many secrets."

"Secrets that are now pouring out of me as we speak."

"Your secrets are safe with me. You don't want to know what kinds of things Augusta Sabina tells me! They would make your ears rot off."

"I can only imagine…" Xena muttered. "Are you happy with your life, Gabrielle?"

"Ah…" she continued to paint, "it could be better. But…I'm happy right now, spending time with you."

Xena wore a warm smile. "That's a nice thing to say to someone you hardly know."

"I'm getting to know you. I told you when we first met that I like to get to know all of my clients. You're no different. You've given me a hard time."

Xena nodded, toy ing with the hem of her dress' sleeve. "I've been told that I am not easy to get along with."

"I think we get along pretty well." She cocked her head and studied the outline of the face she painted so far. "Are you happy with your life?" she spat the question right back.

At this moment, she wanted to renege on the question she asked Gabrielle. This woman was very
talkative and not afraid to speak her mind. She should've known that Gabrielle was going to ask a
tough question like that, and it just so happened to be it was the question she asked first. She didn't
like being on the receiving end of anything, but she played along.

"For the moment."

Gabrielle puckered her lips. "Who's the bad liar now?"

"I am learning to live in the moment. I am happy right now," Xena winked.

"Alright, I see what you did there," she let out a short snort. "To answer your question, no, I'm not
happy with my life. I wish I could do so much more."

"Then, why don't you?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "I'm trapped here. I work for Augusta Sabina. I am forced to stay."

Xena's eyes dipped down, and she clutched a handful of sand. These people were trapped and
forced into Nero's hand –Xian, Gabrielle, Varinia, and so many more. She could probably say that
she was bound by Nero as well since she was here in his territory. She wanted to destroy Rome,
and she was going to, eventually. This wasn't the time to do so yet.

"What about you?" asked Gabrielle.

"What?" she blinked, widening her eyes.

"You're not happy either. You seem like you live a good life, and you're very wealthy."

The sand trickled out of her palm slowly. "An abundance of wealth doesn't grant happiness," said
Xena. "There is a lot that I wish I could've changed, but I can't. What's done is done."

Gabrielle wrinkled her nose, a bit bothered by the soreness of her wounded arm. "That's a grim way
to approach life."

"Unfortunately, you can't change your past. You can only learn from it."

Gabrielle nodded, agreeing silently. She winced audibly and set the brush down for a brief
moment. She rolled her shoulder back and clutched her right bicep. This summer heat was doing no
favors to her wound even with the salve she applied this morning.

Xena was occupied by the crashing waves hitting against the rocks until she heard a few grunts.
She turned her head and sat up straight. She leaned in and saw blood seeping through the willowy
sleeve of Gabrielle's tunic with a furrowed brow.

"You're bleeding…"

"Oh, yeah," Gabrielle nervously chuckled, "so I am..."

Xena crawled across the sheet and rolled up the sleeve to inspect the wound. It was poorly
bandaged and treated. She gently took the bandage off, and her mouth parted at the large wound.
She gazed into Gabrielle's jade eyes, peeved by the lack of care for the wound.

"This is infected," she stated. "How do you manage to hurt yourself so often?" she chided with a
playful smile. "How did you get this?"

Gabrielle bit her lip at the breeze, grazing the open wound. "It was just an accident in the
"You get into a lot of accidents." Xena dabbed the wound with her finger, causing Gabrielle to hiss. "Sorry. Do you have any bandages with you?"

She pointed to the satchel, and Xena reached over. She dug through the bag in search of some bandages. She found a knife at the bottom and frowned. She looked back at Gabrielle, who was busy picking at the pus of the wound. Xena pulled out the knife, examining the hilt.

It was a very interesting design. The hilt was unique. There were small flowers etched in the metal, and the blade itself looked worn as if it had been used several times before. Her fingers glided along the dull blade, examining it silently.

"Did you find the bandages? I know I left some in there this morning before I left."

Xena gripped the knife and found a small clump of loose bandages in the corner of a pocket. She clutched the bandages and narrowed her eyes, fixated on the short knife.

This weapon looked so familiar to her. In fact, it looked like the knife the assassin held when Gölge was murdered on the day of the raid. Raising a suspicious eyebrow, she set the knife back into the bag. She closed the satchel flap and went over to tend to Gabrielle's wound.

She unwound the bandages and gazed at the wound on Gabrielle's right arm.

Right arm. Just the same as the assassin. During the raid, she was, in fact, with her men, masked and cloaked, watching the chaos unfold unto the city. She wanted to be there when the killer decided to strike. She wanted to be the one to catch the killer.

She followed the assassin through Rome's labyrinth and climbed the stairs to the rooftops. When she discovered that she was too slow to catch the person responsible for Gölge's death, she resorted to using a bow to slow the assassin down.

She shot the arrow, scraping the assassin's arm –the right bicep to be exact. It wasn't enough. The assassin kept running despite the injury. A knife was dropped and slid off the rooftop, and then just as she was going to take another shot, the assassin disappeared.

Xena ripped the cloth in half and held Gabrielle's arm gingerly. She began wrapping the bandage around the wound and made brief eye contact.

"How did you get this wound?" she asked in a cool tone.

Gabrielle fumbled, "a…simple knife slip. I was helping one of the sculptors. He's very clumsy," she laughed lightly.

A horrible lie thought Xena. This wasn't a knife wound, and it was also days old. It was also infected because there were probably splinters inside the flesh. The clues were all there. The pieces were now being put together. The longer Xena contemplated the idea of Gabrielle being the one in charge of this assassination was almost asinine.

But then there was Gölge. She went after Gabrielle and attacked her with a knife. There was intent to kill. Gabrielle was convinced that Gölge was the person she was supposed to kill all this time. She was terrified that Xena watched her –terrified that she'd be attacked again and possibly killed.

Xena clenched her jaw and tied the bandage into a knot. Inches from Gabrielle's face, her eyes continued to narrow to slits, studying the jade pools' apprehension.
"Thank you," Gabrielle placed a hand over her wound. "You're always patching me up."

"You ought to be more careful," Xena retracted and never took her eye off the artist. "Knives are very dangerous."

"They can be if you don't know how to use one," she lightly said, smiling.

She was met with another conflict. Gabrielle was oblivious as to who she was. If the truth came to light, then she could be killed right here. No, Gabrielle wouldn't do that. It would be a stupid move on her part. No, Xena chastised herself for being so careless. The mercenary who had the order to kill her had been right in front of her this whole time.

This trip to Rome had been full of unexpected and unfortunate events. They just kept trickling in, thus making her blood boil from within. To ease her nerves and urges inside, she set her hand on the dagger strapped to her inner thigh.

Gabrielle met her gaze and smiled innocently. The hand slid off the concealed weapon and traveled to the sand. Gabrielle kept painting now that her arm was tended to for the time being.

"You should really see a healer for that."

"Probably."

"I strongly advise it."

Gabrielle cinched her eyebrows, a bit taken aback by the curt tone. "I…I definitely will since you told me to."

Silence passed between them, and Xena watched as the painting was slowly coming together. The heat was simmering down as the hours passed, and the afternoon approached. It would be so easy to get rid of you, Gabrielle, she thought. But she couldn't bring herself to do it just like she couldn't bring herself to harm her captive, which turned out to be her own flesh.

"Gabrielle."

The blonde lifted her eyes.

"I know that I told you that…I wasn't going anywhere but," her fingers traced in the sand, "I do have to leave Rome soon."

"Oh," Gabrielle said in mild disappointment. "How soon do you have to leave?"

"By tomorrow. I should have told you sooner, but…I was enjoying my time with you," at least that wasn't a lie. Her departure was coming sooner than anticipated.

She needed to leave before she did something she would regret.

"That's so soon! I won't be able to finish your portrait."

Xena cast a faint smile and stood up, brushing the sand off her dress. "You can keep it as a reminder of our time together. I should go. I have many things I need to take care of before I leave."

Gabrielle stood to see her off. "I understand," she sighed. "Will you come back to Rome in the future?" she asked, hopeful. "We could write to each other."
Xena smoothed her hands down the front of her dress and stared down at the petite artist. Her eyes flashed, gaping at the wound once more.

"I'm sure we will see each other in the near future, Gabrielle."

"How will I know where to look for you?"

"As I said, I am very good at finding people," said Xena with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

*EXHALES*

But it's not over yet...
A week later, the ship docked in Abydos, and both Evander and Varinia wandered around the unfamiliar territory. Evander was skeptical of Xena's men, who escorted them throughout the journey from Rome. All this time, he thought that he was going to be murdered the moment he and Varinia stepped off the ship, but in fact, he was allowed to roam the city freely.

Varinia, on the other hand, was very eager to explore the area. It was a beautiful port city, Evander observed, but he didn't trust Xena's men. They walked through Abydos, admiring the tall buildings and the lush green mountains on a separate island not far from the port.

They were given an abundance of money that Evander didn't want. He wanted nothing to do with Xena, and he couldn't stop thinking about what Varinia said. She made a connection that didn't seem fathomable right now. Xena as his mother? No, that couldn't be. He refused to believe it to be true.

He tried to put aside his conflicting thoughts and enjoy Varinia's bliss. She was so happy here, he thought. They were free from Rome, free from Emperor Nero. It was just as Xena promised. She freed them, but why would she do that? Was it possible for her to show an ounce of compassion?

Evander didn't know what to believe anymore. A part of him wanted to find Xena and tell her off, but another part of him wanted to stay far away from her.

His arm was snatched, and he was pulled to a jeweler's shop. He smiled and grabbed Varinia's hand, squeezing it tightly.

"Evander, can I get this?" she asked. She pointed to the emerald jeweled necklace.

In Rome, there was no way either of them could afford a beautiful piece of jewelry such as this. Evander kept reminding himself that they weren't in Rome. Nobody knew who they were here. They were able to start anew.

But there was one small problem; this money wasn't theirs. It was Xena's money. Evander felt like he was thrown to the water like a babe who couldn't yet swim, though he didn't want someone else he hardly knew to take care of him and Varinia, he didn't have any funds saved. He was barely able to fend for himself back in Rome.

"Do you really need that?" he asked, implying the jewelry.

Varinia frowned sadly. "But Evander...I've never had the chance to buy jewelry before! I just want to buy this just once." She clasped her hands together and batted her eyelashes.

He rolled his eyes. "Alright, go ahead."
Once the necklace was paid for and wrapped in a linen package, they went on about their way. Xena's soldiers kept a watchful eye from a few paces away. Evander occasionally looked over his shoulder and groaned inwardly.

"They're following us," he whispered.

Varinia turned and smiled at the soldiers. "Just try to ignore them. You should be grateful! Xena is providing food, funds, and shelter for us."

"She held me captive, Varinia," he reminded her.

She sighed, "I know, but...she didn't harm you. She obviously cares about you. If she is your mother then maybe you –"

"No!" he barked. "Xena is not my mother and stop saying that she is!"

She recoiled and hooked her arm around his. That topic was obviously untouchable even still. Varinia didn't know if that was the truth, but it made the most sense. Evander could've been killed, and he would've been, but Xena didn't and wouldn't, kill her own son.

Suddenly, Evander jerked away and stalked over to a fisherman by the coastline. Varinia chased after him with the soldiers shortly following her. Evander cleared his throat loudly, which alarmed the young fisherman.

"Morning, sir!" the fisherman greeted with a smile.

"How far is Edirne from here?"

The fisherman scratched his head and answered, "oh, it's about a two-day boat ride, sir. But, I gotta say, you just missed the last ship in the channel. It left at dawn."

Evander grunted and felt a hand wrap around his arm. He turned to Varinia, who was breathing heavily after her quick sprint. She didn't look too pleased that he took off so abruptly.

"That's the city where the Steppe Queen resides, right?"

The fisherman stifled a laugh. "Steppe Queen? Who is that?"

Evander's eyebrows tapered. Everyone in Rome called Xena by that title. Undoubtedly, the people in her territory must've also called her by that name too.

"Xena?" he said in a questionable tone.

The fisherman's eyes engorged. "Oh, you mean the Conqueror," he corrected.

"Conqueror?" he whipped his head towards Varinia with a frown.

"Say, sir, you shouldn't be callin' the Conqueror by her name," the fisherman whispered. "But anyway, ya, she lives in Edirne. It's a huge city! I'd love to live there someday. Only the wealthy live there."

Evander nodded. Figures, he thought. He thanked the young fisherman for the information given and went on about his way.

Varinia firmly gripped her beloved's arm and pulled him aside into an alleyway.
"What are you trying to achieve? Forget about killing her, Evander," she advised. "You're no longer a mercenary, so stop thinking in that mindset."

"I…I wasn't thinking of killing her," he alleged. "I don't know what to think anymore."

Varinia smiled and caressed his arms with a tender touch. "It's okay to be curious. Maybe one day you could go talk to her and seek the answers to your questions if she really is…your mother," she tread cautiously.

"She only brought us here so she could spy on me. You heard what the man said, Edirne is only two days journey from here."

Varinia let out a heavy sigh, "you're really eaten up over this. Let's talk about something else!" she pulled him through the crowded streets. "We should find the villa we're supposed to live in."

It was hard not to think about Xena. Everything revolved around her. They were spending her money, walking on the soil she owned, and they were also given a place to stay. Everything that they had belonged to Xena. She even claimed the sea they sailed across!

For now, he wanted to spend his time with Varinia. And they had all the time in the world, free of worry.

Gabrielle finished the portrait of her client less than a week after their meeting on the coast. It was easier to paint a live subject, but Gabrielle had the image of Xena firmly planted in her head. She remembered every detail about Xena's facial features, mannerisms, the crinkling of the corners of her eyes when she smiled, and creases around her mouth.

It was her job to notice every detail of her clients, and yes, this included Augusta Sabina, whom she hadn't seen in the last two weeks. She was grateful that she was spared from Sabina for the time being. She, too, could only take so much of the Empress, as she was tired of the one-sided conversations.

Since her client's departure and her completion of Augusta Sabina's portrait, Gabrielle had nothing to do. Aside from the Empress' permanent commissions, she hardly had any outside work from the citizens.

As days passed, she grew bored with her extra spare time. Mostly, she stayed up in the loft. She was all alone in Rome. A few days ago, she went in search of Varinia, but she eventually concluded that Varinia probably left the pit of filth she lived in.

Good for her, Gabrielle thought. She wanted Varinia to leave a long time ago. Evander was also on her mind. She hoped that he was able to leave Rome as well, but since she hadn't heard from him in over a month, it was highly unlikely that he was even alive.

She hated to admit that she was hoping that Xena would write her. It was strange that she didn't ever find out the name of her client, especially since they spent several days together talking. Gabrielle never met a woman quite like her. That certain alluring behavior that Xena possessed was enchanting in a peculiar way. It made Gabrielle want to know more.

That uncertainty was something Gabrielle craved. She loved embracing the 'unknown' and was always seeking new knowledge whenever given the opportunity. Xena was that unknown. She was that opportunity that Gabrielle sought for.

Questions that Xena proposed were often circling in Gabrielle's mind. She wanted to do more with
her life, and the fact that she wasn't able to, tore her up inside. The longer she remained in Rome, the more of her humanity and humility she lost. Xena was absolutely right. She needed to get out of Rome.

Another lonely day passed by, and Gabrielle lain waste up in the loft. She sharpened her knives and cleaned her brushes more times than she could count. She didn't bother to buy new supplies to stretch a fresh canvas because there was no point.

Sometimes, she wished Sabina would come to pester her for a while. At least it would give her something to do. Down below, she heard several of the sculptors talking about the idiotic things that men usually conversed about.

She didn't know how much longer she could take listening to men talk about female anatomy. Balancing a paintbrush in the crevice between her upper lip and nose, she jolted up at the sound of drums outside the shop.

Gabrielle jumped off the bed and ran downstairs to see what the commotion was. She ran to the open windows, and Zenodorus shortly joined her with a smile on his lips.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, which she shrugged off and gave him a jab to the ribs. He grunted and stepped away, chuckling.

"What's all this?" she asked.

"Oh, you haven't heard," Zenodorus said. "Augusta Sabina gave birth yesterday. Looks like the Emperor is finally announcing it."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes dramatically. She was so eager for any kind of excitement, but as soon as she heard that the celebration was due to the birth of the Emperor's child, she became very disinterested.

The birth of Rome's royal child was a sign that fall was right around the corner. Summer was ending soon. Usually, Gabrielle would be ecstatic about autumn, but she wasn't because she was still stuck in Cerberus's den.

"Where's your tall, dark, and mysterious client at?" Zenodorus asked.

"She had to leave Rome."

Evident disappointment crossed Gabrielle's face. All the questions she had were never going to be answered if Xena didn't come back to Rome. She lied on sheer faith that she'd be contacted eventually. Even if it was a short letter from some far-away place, she'd be satisfied with that.

Upon arriving in Edirne, Xena quickly came to the conclusion that she was forever alone. Everything she had was due to her hard work and determination. She ruled over the entire Steppe region and fought several times when her position and land were threatened. Through a stranger's eyes, they could assume that Xena had everything in the world to grant her everlasting happiness.

When Gabrielle asked her if she was happy, her immediate reaction was to guard her emotions. There was always a need to place a shield between her psyche and feelings. Emotions were a dangerous tool that could wreak havoc on someone's life. She found this to be true when her son was taken from her.

He was snatched out from beneath her nose, and she couldn't prevent it. She tried her best to protect
her land from Emperor Tiberius, but she always felt she didn't try hard enough. If she placed more guards around her son's room, maybe the kidnapping could've been prevented. Perhaps if she stayed closer to home, she could've saved her son.

Would it have made a difference? These were the thoughts and questions that burdened her for years. It took all of her strength to hold back from revealing the truth to Xian when he was in her hold. She already caused him a lot of pain and suffering. Telling him that she was his mother would be like digging a hot blade into the infected wound.

Xena didn't know her son since she didn't get the chance to, but she did know that he was smart. He would figure it out in time, and when he did, she was sure that he probably wanted nothing to do with her.

Denial was always the first step in the process of acceptance. Her son was a complete stranger to her. He even changed his name to one with a Greek origin. He completely ignored his roots, and he should, right? Xian wasn't from Edirne. He didn't grow up with the traditions and customs that Xena wanted to teach him.

It was a nice name, Xena acknowledged that. Evander. It meant 'strong warrior.' It wasn't too far off from his birth name's meaning of 'immortal warrior.'

Xena relied on good faith that her son and Varinia would stay close to her. It was far-fetched, but she hoped he would remain in Abydos. Again, he was a smart boy, and it was apparent that Varinia loved him more than anyone. It was a love that Xena wished to share with her son, but that was just wishful thinking.

She thought she could fill that void when she found Gölge. That relationship was unhealthy from the beginning. Gölge was too old to be controlled. Xena always had difficulties with that girl. She knew that the girl always had hidden feelings for her. Gölge also had no shame in expressing those feelings as time went on.

Xena deduced that she was looking for companionship in all the wrong places. Gölge's death didn't become imminent until Xena walked by the bedroom, where her apprentice resided in. She knew that Gölge's death was in vain. Maybe a few years ago, she wouldn't have felt remorseful over ridding someone in her life.

She didn't love Gölge. Using people as bait wasn't love. She was just using her to reach her goal. Her son also played a massive role in that hasty decision. Xena so desperately wanted her son to be free from the horrible life he led that she would do anything for him, and that meant murdering Gölge so his freedom could be granted.

Today was the first day of autumn. Xena returned home five days ago, and it consisted of sleepless nights. She spent most of the day sitting on the balcony of her room, refusing food from time to time. Consuming food seemed like such a chore. Often she desired to be a deity, so food and drink were no longer a requirement to continue living.

One of Xena's doting chambermaids, Erva, who had been there for the birth of her son, as well as many campaigns, expressed her concern for Xena's lack of care for her health and well-being.

Erva walked into the bedroom and found Xena sitting on the balcony for the fifth day in a row. She carried a tray of fresh linens and set it on the bed. Cautiously, she made her way over, and Xena didn't need to turn her head to know who was behind her.

"I told you I wanted to be alone," she said sternly.
Erva had grown accustomed to Xena's moods and mannerisms over the last two decades. She knew when it was time to leave and when it was time to intervene.

"And I told you that you need to get out of this room," she combated.

Xena frowned and swiveled around. "Are you hard of hearing?"

The brunette smiled faintly. "Are you?"

"Fair enough," Xena's upper lip twitched into a smile. She didn't have the energy to fight.

Erva was very aware of the situation regarding Xian. After all, she was there for his birth. She kept tabs on his and Varinia's location as per Xena's request.

"They're in the villa that you set up for them," Erva needn't say the names for Xena to understand.

Xena nodded in silence.

"What would you like me to do with Gölge's belongings?"

She didn't want anything of Gölge's to remain in her home. A side of her wanted to be rid of the girl, but lately, her emotions regularly left her conflicted. She told Erva to donate all of the clothes and furniture to the charities spread across Edirne. She thought it was a fair way to dispose of Gölge—decent enough to cease her endless guilt building within.

While Erva disappeared into an adjoining room to put away the linens, Xena lost herself in thought again. Her mind focused on her son and Gölge, then guided its way down to Gabrielle. She left Rome with a sweltering colliery of fire in her stomach.

She was so engulfed with rage when she saw the wound on Gabrielle's arm. She made the right choice to leave when she did. If she lingered in Rome longer, she probably would have reacted irrationally. That moment had to have been the hardest decision in her life. At one point in her life, she wouldn't hesitate to end Gabrielle's life.

Now, she felt differently about the matter. She chose not to kill Gabrielle even though she could've. But she wouldn't. And couldn't. Xena decided not to give in to her impulsive behavior at that moment on the coast.

The saying, 'the older you are, the wiser you become,' was utter rubbish in Xena's mind. She was older than Gabrielle, older than Gölge, but she didn't feel the tiniest bit wiser as she aged. She allowed her anger and resentment to haunt her for years. She could count on her hand of the times she truly felt happy in her life.

She recalled what Gabrielle told her back in Rome. You don't sound very happy about the choices you've made.

Gabrielle didn't know her that well, but she could see right through her. She didn't realize she was so transparent, or maybe Gabrielle was just good at reading people. Either way, Xena didn't like that.

She opened herself up just enough for Gabrielle to read in between the lines. But there was a fall there. Neither one of them knew they were alleged enemies.

Gabrielle, in a way, killed her.
Xena thought she was pretty adequate at reading people, but she failed miserably when she tried to analyze Gabrielle's emotions concerning the assassination. And maybe that was the problem. She was studying Gabrielle. She couldn't bring herself to hate Gabrielle for what she did. Gabrielle was just following orders, albeit terrible orders, but orders nonetheless.

That's all she did ever since she returned to Edirne. Aside from thinking about her son, she thought of the correct approach to deal with Gabrielle. She couldn't leave that situation to the wind. She liked to finish what she started, and she always had the last say.

This was no longer a matter of surviving an assassination attempt. This was no longer a game or a war with Nero. This was a test, and Xena was definitely tested. She willed herself to not murder Gabrielle. And she won.

She won the battle but not the war. She contemplated over the last two weeks of how to handle the tight spot she, essentially, wedged herself into.

She finally came to a decision.

"Erva," she called.

The chambermaid came rushing to Xena's side. She hoped that all of the persuasion of talking Xena into leaving her room had finally come to fruition.

"I want you to write a letter for me."

"Sure, of course."

Erva quickly grabbed a quill and parchment. She made herself comfortable at Xena's desk and dipped the quill into the ink well and waited for instruction.

"You will write down everything I say without question, do you understand?"

A new wardrobe called for the change of season, and Gabrielle went in search of new gowns to purchase in the market. There was a desire to stay inside the workshop because the birth of Augusta Sabina's child was celebrated for more than seven days. It was day eight now.

Gabrielle would've stayed inside if she had something to occupy herself with, but she didn't. She was bored stiff and needed to go out to keep a sane mind. Once she gathered her satchel and money she collected from her job, she headed out to the square.

So far, she was already regretting her decision to brace the public. All she heard were words of adoration for the Empress's child. Apparently, she heard from the grapevine that the baby was a girl. Great, Gabrielle thought, the child was going to be just as spoiled, arrogant, and conceited as Augusta Sabina.

Close to the winery, she was able to find some suitable gowns. Typically, she bought pants and boots, but every once in awhile, she had an urge to purchase gowns. Maybe she would need them in the future, just like the time she was invited to a party at the palace. She had no appropriate attire and had to go buy something. This way, she could be prepared for future gatherings.

In the middle of the purchase, a Roman dressed in polished armor, approached Gabrielle. A gentle shoulder tap caused her to whip around. Her eyes traveled up to meet the soldier's stoic face.

Her heart sank to her stomach. She dreaded seeing Roman soldiers. This could mean that she was
given a new assignment, and of course, she was forced to take the task, no matter how hard it was going to be.

The soldier presented a letter with a Roman royal seal. This is it. She has a new assignment. Someone's life was going to be taken away.

Hesitantly, she took the message, her heart hammering in her chest. The Roman soldier jaunted away, and Gabrielle curled her fingers around the rolled parchment. Given the explicit nature of the message, she couldn't open it in the public's eye.

Too nervous to concentrate, she threw the coins onto the merchant's table and took the gowns she purchased then whisked away from the crowds. Finding a quiet place near the workshop, she broke the wax seal and unrolled the message.

Her eyes skimmed the words, and she was pleasantly surprised and a bit relieved. A piece of her remained intact. She clutched the message to her chest and took in a deep breath to calm her whelmed nerves.

When she collected herself, she continued to read the rest of the letter. It was a strange letter, but at least she wasn't assigned to execute someone again. She didn't know if she could go through that a second time. She barely recovered from the last assignment.

At the bottom of the letter, there were two addresses given. This was the first time Gabrielle received a request to leave Rome. But no matter what, she was obligated to comply, especially after Augusta Sabina openly threatened her life weeks ago.

Her life was valueless in Nero's eyes, and apparently Sabina's too. She did want to leave Rome, but she didn't think it would be for this specific reason. This meant that she had to prepare to leave soon, and she needed to purchase more than a couple of gowns.

Aside from the terrible atmosphere of Rome, she was going to miss Zenodorus and the rest of her colleagues. Then Gabrielle remembered that every assignment and task she was given was temporary. She would come back to Rome or have her head served on a platter.

Traveling across the ocean wasn't anything that Gabrielle was used to. She preferred to remain on the land. Throughout the journey, Gabrielle had to take a ship to get to her destination, and she was sick the entire way. As soon as she set foot on solid ground, she had the urge to kiss the soil beneath her feet.

During her trek through the unfamiliar territory, Gabrielle asked for directions several times. Once she reached the massive city, Edirne, someone was able to guide her. She thanked the man reverently over and over again. She was sure that the man found her annoying after a while because he stopped responding and acknowledging her chatter.

After she was helped by the kind man, she came to one of her destinations. Upon entering the large building, plenty of eyes turned to her. She was in a workshop, much like the one back in Rome. Of course, she would be sent to a place like this.

Gabrielle smiled at all of the artists, most of which were painters just like her. There was also something refreshing about this place; all of the artists here were women. She was glad that she wasn't going to be around copious amounts of men all day long.

She tried to approach these women with a friendly attitude. "Hello, my name is Gabrielle," she introduced herself.
The women all looked at each other confusedly and then smiled faintly at the newcomer. They continued to work at their appointed stations, and Gabrielle stood in the center of the room. So far, she didn't feel very welcomed here.

Gabrielle went ahead and spotted an open space in the room and set down her belongings. She plopped down in the chair and ruffled her hair, exhaling deeply. Her long journey had really exhausted her, and she didn't intend to stay here long. She still had to find the other location, which apparently was the place she was going to live for a while.

Being in the same city that Xena used to live in was eerie. Gabrielle felt like she didn't belong here, but she came here on orders. There was the thought in the back of her mind that she was being watched. Even though she knew Xena was dead because she killed her, she still felt like there was a pair of eyes burning into her backside.

Absentmindedly, Gabrielle rubbed the nape of her neck. A chill ran up her spine, and she swiveled in the chair and gazed out the window. Nobody was there. Of course, there was nobody there, she inwardly chastised herself.

She desperately needed to befriend these women.

"So, do you all work for Augusta Sabina?" she asked aloud.

The artists gawked, and a few chuckled at the question. Gabrielle nibbled on her lower lip and regretted ever opening her mouth.

"You must be in the wrong place," one of the women spoke up, "this is Edirne, not Rome."

Gabrielle rubbed her itchy throat. "I –I know. I was asked to come here on Augusta Sabina's orders."

"Well, we've never seen the Augusta before. I doubt the Conqueror would allow that woman to step foot into Edirne," she said, chuckling with her colleagues.

Gabrielle's eyebrow arched. "Conqueror?"

"Truly, you must live under a rock!" the artist said jokingly.

An overwhelming sensation of bugs crawling across Gabrielle's skin emerged. She peered down at the goosebumps and hairs standing up on her arms. She recoiled and wrapped her arms around her body as she felt the need to protect herself; from what or whom, she didn't know.

"The Conqueror of Edirne," the artist spoke again, slightly irritated with the ignorance of this newcomer.

"Oh," Gabrielle felt a sense of relief wash over her. "You mean Xena."

The room fell silent, and the brush strokes halted mid-way on the artists' canvases. They all gaped at her with wide eyes, and Gabrielle licked her lips. They looked like she had said something so blasphemous.

"I…um, I heard she was killed in Rome," Gabrielle added.

"You're mistaken. The Conqueror is very much alive. She passed through here yesterday."

A lump formed in the center of Gabrielle's tightened chest. Her face turned a shade of white that
not even the buildings in this city could reflect light off of.

"Gabrielle, right?" the artist asked and continued, "word of advice; don't call the Conqueror by her name."
Well, y'all are probably going to hate me, but I'm extending the story by another chapter yet again! I didn't want to ruin the flow! I didn't expect this to happen lol.

Xena was alive. She is here right now.

At that moment, when the truth was revealed, Gabrielle felt like retching all over the floor. She worked so hard to get rid of that woman back in Rome. And now she comes to find out that Xena wasn't dead at all. For the rest of the day, Gabrielle sat in the shop, unable to process anything.

The women weren't concerned about her well-being. If Zenodorus was here, he'd surely ask if she was alright, but these women were different. Gabrielle observed that the female artists didn't show any malice towards Xena. They didn't fear her like the Romans did.

There were so many questions that Gabrielle had. Was Xena here in Edirne this entire time? Did she send an imposter to Rome? Was Gabrielle being watched by Xena the whole time? Did Xena know who she was? Had she come in contact with her while in Rome, or was Gabrielle hunted by the imposter?

Who attacked her? Was it Xena or somebody else? Did Xena actually come into the workshop looking for her? This was all a game, a very sick game, Gabrielle might add. If she didn't feel hunted before, she certainly felt hunted now.

She came to Edirne with the idea in mind that she was working for Augusta Sabina. Now that she came to find out that Sabina wasn't the one who sent her here at all, wracked her nerves. Or maybe Sabina didn't send her here. Perhaps it was Nero who asked her to come to Edirne because he thought Xena was dead.

If Xena wasn't the person who Gabrielle killed, then who was it? Was it the imposter? Or maybe these artists didn't know that Xena was dead at all. The imposter could be posing as Xena in Edirne.

No, that didn't make a lick of sense, Gabrielle thought. Xena had to be alive because the artists mentioned that she came by the shop just yesterday. If that were true, then the woman posing as Xena was burned on that pyre in Rome. Emperor Nero was so arrogant to think he could eradicate Xena.

Xena is highly intelligent. Gabrielle knew this to be true.

Thinking back at the riot in Rome, Gabrielle began to stitch the quilt of lies together. Xena wasn't stupid enough to reveal herself to be assassinated. She would've known people were out to kill her from the moment she set foot on Roman soil.

Yes, of course, that had to be it. Xena knew she was going to be murdered, so she sent someone else in her place. She wanted the world to think she was dead. That only gave Xena more time to
devise a new plan to attack Nero again. That riot was a simple ploy to reveal the assailant set to kill her.

Gabrielle barely escaped death that day. She had the scar on her arm to prove it.

After going through all the scenarios in her head numerous times, she didn't come to a reasonable conclusion of what was true and what was false. She couldn't believe anything anymore. She felt she underestimated Xena. They *all* underestimated her.

Being stuck in a foreign land where she didn't know anybody put her in a terrible predicament. She most likely was lured here by the woman she was supposed to get rid of, yet here she was. She was the one who was going to be killed now.

Gabrielle thought of the worst possible scenario, which didn't make her feel any better. She begged for her first day in Edirne to end. She didn't even want to go to the villa where she was assigned to stay in.

When she entered the villa that evening, she checked behind every door. It was a nice place, and perhaps she could appreciate it more if it didn't belong to Xena. She was on Xena's turf now. Gabrielle was unfamiliar with her surroundings, and she doubted that she was going to be given a chance to explore. It wouldn't help anyway.

By the time it was time to lay her head on the pillow, Gabrielle's senses were heightened at every minuscule sound. The leaves rustling outside caused her to flinch, and the young men walking out late at night, throwing stones at the neighboring villa, made her heart race.

That's it. She decided she wasn't going to stay here. She just couldn't do it. This was a death sentence. She wasn't brave enough to play Xena's game. This was way out of her league.

Leaving wouldn't be easy, and it could be impossible, but she was willing to take that chance.

The following morning, Gabrielle strolled through the streets of Edirne, cautiously eyeing every woman passing by her. The description of Xena back in Rome could be wrong. Zenodorus claimed to have seen and even talked to Xena.

Xena wasn't so bold as to show her face. Gabrielle knew that now. That woman that Zenodorus met couldn't have been Xena. It was the stand-in. The image of the woman that she killed, that woman she thought was Xena, was burned into her mind.

Those lifeless hazel eyes staring right back at her. The olive-toned skin, long silky dark hair, narrow nose, and chiseled cheekbones. That was the image Gabrielle thought was to be Xena, but it wasn't. This meant that Xena didn't look like that at all. She could be blonde for all Gabrielle knew.

Gabrielle clutched the veil close to her chest and narrowed her eyes. Staring at all the women in the square, she took a mental note of their appearance. Most had dark hair and fair skin. Only a few people here had golden hair like her.

Her mind kept reverting back to the hazel-eyed woman she murdered. She didn't assassinate Xena. She killed an innocent woman. That made her sick in of itself. There was something odd she realized, now that Gabrielle was able to process everything. That woman was fairly young. Gabrielle was probably around the same age as her.

Xena couldn't have been *that* young. She had to be older, especially since she established herself as the ruler over this sovereign province. That took a lot of time and dedication, not to mention self-
perseverance. Xena must be a middle-aged woman by now. Not too old, not too young.

Gabrielle then scanned her surroundings, eyeing every single woman who didn't fit the description. She weeded out every young woman in the crowd. Xena must be tall, or at least Gabrielle thought she would be. There weren't many tall women here, and the few that were didn't fit the description. Chewing on her cuticles, she felt a hand grab her shoulder from behind. Gabrielle squealed and turned to one of the artists.

"I'm sorry," she exhaled, "I didn't know you were standing there."

The only woman who spoke to her yesterday, named Fatma, seemed kind enough. She looked younger than Gabrielle, in fact, she looked younger than most of the artists in the shop altogether.

"I was going to buy some fruit. Would you like to come with me? I saw you walking alone earlier," Fatma said.

Gabrielle put a hand over her chest and smiled nervously. She walked with Fatma through the crowd, very wary of her surroundings. Several women passed by her, bumping her shoulders, which she thought was done on purpose, but her nerves got the best of her.

"How was your first night in Edirne?"

Gabrielle blinked, caught off guard by the question.

"Oh, umm, I didn't sleep very well." That was definitely an understatement. If only Fatma knew the nightmare she was stuck in.

"You'll learn to like it here. I'm sure life was different back in Rome. You said you did work for Augusta Sabina."

"Yes…"

"What is she like? Everyone always gossips about her, but I can't really believe any of it."

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder and rubbed the scar on her throat. "Umm, she's probably everything you would expect her to be."

"Conceited?"

"Oh, definitely!" Gabrielle chuckled nervously.

"Is she attractive?"

Gabrielle didn't want to talk about the Augusta, because she was too focused on Xena. She felt a pair of eyes were watching her every move since she arrived. She couldn't let her guard down now, but would Xena really strike in broad daylight? Why wouldn't she? Xena was capable of doing anything.

"She is, but her rotten attitude makes her less attractive, especially if you talk to her all day like I do."

Fatma smiled, nodding her head. She picked out a few decent sized apples and walked with Gabrielle back to the shop. She slung her bag over her shoulder and noticed that Gabrielle was a bit distant. She didn't want to call attention to it just yet, but the women they worked with weren't always easy to get along with. They gave Gabrielle the cold shoulder yesterday.
Once inside the shop, Gabrielle tried to seem less anxious than yesterday. She knew not to say hello to these women as they would just ignore her, but today they were more friendly towards her. A few of the women actually greeted her.

She sat down in the spot she claimed yesterday and stared at the blank canvases spread across the table. Frowning, she didn't think she could muster up the courage to paint today. She wanted to gather information on Xena while she had the chance.

She walked over to the table in the back of the room and laid out her brushes. Fatma was busy cleaning the fruit she just purchased, and her eyes drifted over to the brush set Gabrielle had.

"Those are very nice," she said.

Gabrielle lifted her head and emit a soft smile. "Thank you."

"They look expensive. You must be treated very well in Rome," Fatma smiled, setting the washed fruit in a bowl. "You should keep those away from the others. They will be jealous."

"Really?" Gabrielle suddenly felt the need to protect her prized paintbrushes.

Fatma laughed, "they won't steal your brushes, Gabrielle!"

"Oh…" her cheeks tinged pink.

"Stealing is against the law here. If you steal, you get your hands chopped off."

The color in Gabrielle's face drained, and then after a few silent moments passed, Fatma snuffed a laugh. Gabrielle tried to smile and find the situation amusing like Fatma did, but her loss of limbs wasn't all she had to worry about.

"That was a joke."

"Ah…I see."

Fatma raised an eyebrow. "You seem a bit on edge. Is it the women? They're not that friendly, I know, but don't worry, I'm sure you'll fit in soon."

"No, it's not them." Though, she wished it was that simple. "You said that Xena –the Conqueror," her breath hitched, "came by yesterday. Does she stroll the city often?"

"Well, I didn't see her. She sent her envoy out into the city, that's how I know she was here."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "Her envoy?"

Fatma nodded. "The Conqueror doesn't actually come out of her home," she whispered, "I don't know if she ever leaves her home, but I heard she strolls the city incognito."

Oh great. So, she's a master of disguise at all times, Gabrielle concluded.

"You mean to tell me that you don't even know what she looks like?"

Fatma shook her head, unaffected by the oddity of the question.

"That isn't strange to you?"

Xena, what sort of woman are you? You hide even in front of your own people. Is this how you
instill fear into everyone around you? Is this why Rome was so fearful of you? Because they couldn't see you?

Gabrielle was beginning to become more and more confused by Xena's approach to life. Everything Xena did was a secret, but she exposed herself so openly that nobody gave a second thought about it. Gabrielle's original idea of Xena being in Edirne the entire time didn't seem so far-fetched now.

"Does everyone in the Roman Empire know what your Emperor and Empress look like?" Fatma asked.

"Well, no, but –"

"My point exactly."

Gabrielle huffed. "That isn't the same. You live in the same city as Xena –I mean, the Conqueror! Everyone in Rome knows what Augusta Sabina looks like. She walks around all the time, yet you can't put a face to your leader's name."

Fatma could see the anger seething through Gabrielle.

"You sound like you really hate the Conqueror."

"I…I don't know her. I don't hate her."

"She's not a terrible leader, Gabrielle. She treats us well here, but I wouldn't want to be on her bad side. I heard that she executed a few people last year who didn't pay their taxes."

Gabrielle's eyes enlarged. That was going to be her if she didn't leave this place.

Normally, she wouldn't be painting right now. She would've been out in the city, scouting and searching for clues. Gabrielle managed to put her mind at ease and finally pick up a paintbrush. She sat for hours, painting the image of the city she absorbed so far.

This was the only way she could get herself to relax. She wouldn't mind slugging down an entire bottle of wine right about now. While humming, trying to paint, her tranquility was interrupted by Fatma hitting her lightly on the thigh.

"There she is," Fatma whispered.

Gabrielle spun around in the chair so quickly that she nearly toppled over. She searched in the crowd and frowned.

"Where?"

Fatma pointed to a woman with quaffed chestnut-colored hair, wearing a black and gold robe draped over her willowy pants. Gabrielle raised an eyebrow, studying the way the woman was talking to the citizens.

"That's her envoy."

Ah, so this is the woman that Xena sends out to spy on the public. This meant that Xena probably wasn't far. You're hiding in the crowd, aren't you? Gabrielle wanted to go outside and scout the area for herself, but that would just make her a target. If Gabrielle was correct, Xena already knew she was here, and she probably saw her walking in the square this morning.
Gabrielle inhaled sharply when she saw the brunette walking towards the shop. She swiveled in the chair and pretended to act busy. Fatma averted her gaze and dipped her head downward, suddenly finding herself very busy rummaging in her satchel.

All the chatter in the shop quieted down as soon as Erva walked inside. She smiled at everyone and waltzed around leisurely, inspecting all of the work painted on the canvases. She halted in front of Gabrielle.

Gabrielle kept her eyes glued to her canvas and gripped the brush tightly until her knuckles turned white.

"Hello," Erva said aloud. "You must be new here. I don't recognize you."

"Ah…" she lifted her eyes, staring at the thin brunette. "I just arrived yesterday."

"Where from?"

"Rome."

Erva nodded, "a very nice city, I'm sure. And what is your name?"

"Don't you already know…" she muttered.

Fatma's mouth parted slightly, gaping at Gabrielle, worried for her safety. There was a certain confused look about Erva, yet she remained composed in front of everybody. Nobody else in the room heard the conversation and continued talking.

Gabrielle lifted her eyes and stood up from the chair. She grabbed her bag and left the shop in a hurry. Erva stood, folded her arms, and cocked her head as she continued staring at the petite blonde walking through the streets.

"She has a temper," Erva said.

Fatma smiled anxiously. "I'll go with her…just to make sure she doesn't get lost."

________________________________________________________________________

She couldn't stay in that workshop anymore. She needed to get out of there. That woman was supposedly Xena's spy who commonly walked the streets of Edirne. It was clear that everything that woman did anything Xena wanted. These were orders directly from her.

Gabrielle was being spied on from the moment she arrived in Edirne. Xena was watching her from afar. That woman was Xena's eyes and ears. Xena was a woman who operated from behind closed doors. Gabrielle was slowly beginning to figure out just what type of woman Xena was. She was secretive, maybe a bit paranoid, cunning, and someone who was always a step ahead of everybody else.

It was no wonder that Rome feared her. She was a phantom in the world, yet she was very open to her intentions and acted without consequence. She had plenty of chances to be caught in Rome, but she planned meticulously so she would continue to hide in the shadows.

Gabrielle was no longer a mercenary right now. She wasn't hunting her prey anymore. She became the prey. It wasn't sheer chance that brought Xena's envoy into the shop. Clearly, Gabrielle's identity was known to the woman.

She was in the eye of the storm now. Gabrielle was inside Xena's territory, yet she was still alive.
Xena hid from the public's eye, and she had no intention of showing her true self to anyone, not even to Gabrielle.

Fatma ran through the streets, circling around the square. Heaving, she finally spotted the small blonde wandering through the streets openly. Grunting, Fatma pushed her way through the crowd and shoved a few men who cursed at her under their breaths.

"Gabrielle!" she yelled, waving her hand.

She turned around at her name being shouted. Rolling her eyes, Gabrielle continued walking. She wasn't going to go back there as long as Xena's eyes were watching her every move. If Xena was out in the crowd, Gabrielle wouldn't know where to look or what to look for. She was lost.

"Gabrielle, stop!"

Fatma caught the blonde's arm, and with her chest rising and falling, she showed a small grin. "Why'd you run off like that? I don't want you to get lost, so I followed you."

"I can't go back in there."

"Why not?" Fatma coughed, barely able to catch her breath. "Are you worried about the Conqueror's envoy? She's harmless. She's never armed."

That bit of information wasn't of any use to Gabrielle. It didn't make her feel safe, but in actuality, her safety was always an issue, even back in Rome. But, at least in Rome, she could run and hide. Here in Edirne, she had no place to run or hide.

"We should head back now. I have a lot of work to do, and a client of mine is coming this afternoon."

Fatma held out her hand, and Gabrielle sighed, staring at the shop from afar. She couldn't play this game forever, but so far, Xena had to have known of her whereabouts. She was still alive. That was a good thing, but being continuously watched was bound to affect her sleep.

"Alright."

It was a relatively quiet night. Xena stood on the south balcony of her home, watching the city wind-down for the day. Her fortress was situated in a secluded part of the city, settled in the crevice in between two mountains. Her home was by no means the same size as Nero's lavish palace, but it was significantly larger than every other place in Edirne.

She did own several other villas across the provinces that she stayed in when she traveled. One being a villa that she allowed Varinia and Evander to reside in. At one point in time, she didn't always live so far from civilization. After Emperor Tiberius raided her territory, she moved away from the heart of Edirne.

Ever since then, her home was guarded and protected by mountains. The rough terrain made it incredibly difficult for enemies to ambush her. Sometimes she missed living close to her people. They used to see her regularly, but ever since her home was continuously raided, she chose to protect herself and relocate.

She was on such high alert that someone was going to attack her, or kill her, that she refused to walk in the city unaccompanied. Living alone for such a long time had damaged her in a sense. She never thought one could suffer so much from loneliness, but she found that out recently when she
returned to an empty home.

At least, when Gölge lived here, she had someone to talk to daily. Now, she had nobody here, aside from the help, and they rarely uttered a word to her, perhaps out of fear.

Lingering on the balcony longer than expected, Xena turned around and jumped at Erva standing in the center of the room. She grumbled and frowned, grabbing the cup of water that had gone stale.

"Why are you standing there like that? You scared me."

Erva half-smiled. "I scared you? That's a first. You must be very distracted."

Xena held the water in her mouth, narrowing her eyes at the woman. She swallowed and set the cup on the table, then walked around the chambermaid.

"What do you want?"

Erva said over her shoulder, "I found her. She is in the shop with the others."

Xena paused, gawking at the hairbrush in her hand. She gripped the handle and sat down in front of the mirror, combing through her long locks. Her eyes locked onto Erva's reflection behind her and spoke coolly.

"And has she been staying in the home I provided?"

"Yes," Erva nervously twiddled her thumbs. "She knows I work for you. I think one of the women told her who I am."

Xena smirked, "those women and their big mouths."

She set the hairbrush down and swiveled to meet Erva's dark eyes. Smiling, she draped her arm over the back of the chair.

"Eylül Bastillia is behind on her taxes again. I have a favor to ask of her. If she does this for me, then I will…" she swayed her hand, "forgive her debt."

Erva rolled her eyes, "Xena, that woman is unbearable. I absolutely do not want to deal with her."

"This is an offer that she can't refuse. She is up to her neck in debt," Xena grinned cheekily. "I think you can put your differences aside just this once."

Disliking Eylül Bastillia was an understatement. Erva hated talking to that pompous woman and actively avoided her. She never understood why the woman never paid her dues to Xena on time, considering her family was one of the wealthiest in Edirne.

Erva contemplated for a minute, even though she knew she couldn't refuse any orders. She desperately wanted to run from this impending disaster.

"Okay, but you owe me."

Three days passed since her arrival, and Gabrielle was starting to feel more at ease. She kept her ears and eyes open, but she hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. That ugly feeling of being watched slowly dissipated as the days went by.
She was able to talk to the artists more, and though some of them were very prudish, she tried her best to act civil towards them. Her new-found friend, Fatma, was willing to show her around Edirne. Gabrielle was looking forward to scoping the city out, and it was rather large from her understanding. It was probably larger than Rome.

Outside the shop, just half-passed noon, Gabrielle sat with Fatma, eating apples, bread, and an assortment of dried fish. Gabrielle steer-cleared of the fish, but she enjoyed the apples. They were lusher than Rome's apples by far.

Fatma kept drinking small doses of wine, and Gabrielle couldn't think to drink that dangerous liquid so early in the day. The last time she drank Edirne wine, she was laid up in bed for two days with a mean headache and rolling stomach.

"How can you drink that stuff?" she asked.

Fatma lowered the cup from her lips and said sheepishly, "it tastes good?"

No doubt about that, but just smelling the wine made Gabrielle want to hurl. She had to turn away. As she scored the apple, she lifted her head and noticed a group of people parting a path for somebody, or rather, an entourage of people.

Emerging from the human pathway, a woman wearing a dark burgundy long-sleeved dress came walking through. She also donned an elaborate black and gold headdress decorated with gold beads that lay nicely across her forehead.

Gabrielle chewed on the fruit, raising a curious eyebrow. "Who's that?"

Fatma swallowed the last bit of wine and turned to see what her friend was talking about. She gasped, almost choking in the process. She fist her chest and let out a throaty cough.

"What?" Gabrielle began to panic. "What is it?"

Hurriedly, Fatma began putting away the bottle of wine and stuffed the apples into her bag. She looked up and saw the entourage approaching the workshop. She grabbed Gabrielle's hand and darted back into the shop.

"Fatma!"

"She's coming!" Fatma announced to the artists. "Eylül Bastillia is coming!"

Everyone began to hurry and clean their stations while Gabrielle stood, watching the women scatter and scurry about. She crossed her arms, chuckling under her breath. Apparently, this Bastillia woman was a force to be reckoned with.

Suddenly the room fell silent, and all the women paused. Gabrielle swiped a thumb across her nose, giggling. She turned around and gasped, bumping into Eylül Bastillia. Her eyes drifted upward, examining the woman's soft pale features. She doesn't look that frightening, Gabrielle thought.

"Good day," Gabrielle greeted, smiling from ear to ear. She couldn't stop herself from expressing her inner feelings. She wanted to laugh so badly.

Eylül frowned and inspected the messy workshop. "Good day to you too," she said in her thick accent. "I want a commission for my home," she announced.

All of the women began making their way back to their stations. They all hung their heads,
unwilling to work for the woman. Gabrielle could finally laugh now that this woman's back was turned. She clapped a hand over her mouth, inwardly laughing at how fearful these artists were.

Eylül heard the soft chuckles and spun around, glaring at Gabrielle, who cleared her throat, biting her lower lip.

This woman was like a Steppe version of Augusta Sabina. Gabrielle knew her type so well. She didn't know if it was the lack of sleep or nerves getting to her, but she wanted to burst into laughter again. Eylül had such a look of disdain about her.

"You," she pointed to Gabrielle and sauntered over. "Can you paint well?"

Gabrielle licked her arid lips. "Yes, I work for Augusta Sabina in Rome. I've painted dozens of portraits for her."

"Fascinating," Eylül emit a sneer of a grin. "Tomorrow, you will come to my villa. No need to bring your supplies. I have plenty."

Well, this was unexpected. Gabrielle suddenly didn't find this situation amusing anymore. Now, she had a new client to work with, and judging by the artists' reactions, she wasn't an easy woman to please.

Bastillia exited quickly, and Fatma ran over to her friend, nudging her arm.

"Gabrielle, I wish you the best of luck! Eylül is the most difficult client in Edirne!"

"I gathered that…"

The following morning, Gabrielle woke up earlier than usual. It didn't really matter because she could hardly sleep anyway. Yesterday she was given an address to go to, and she thought it strange that she didn't have to bring any supplies with her, but this wasn't Rome.

Before the city was up and running, Gabrielle wandered the streets, looking for her destination. She wasn't given very explicit directions and had to ask a few people for guidance along the way. The weather here was a lot colder at the start of autumn than Rome. She realized she should've brought a shawl or light coat with her.

About two hours since leaving her temporary home, she came to stand outside a large villa decorated with ivy on the walls. There weren't any people to greet her, so she allowed herself in. Walking through the tall archway, she peeked around the corner and nervously dove further into the large building.

Gabrielle stopped in the middle of an atrium and spotted two people sparring with swords in an adjoining room. She raised an eyebrow and quietly entered the room, watching the spar from a fair distance.

One of the fencers was clearly a woman judging by her lean physique. Gabrielle ran her fingers along the strap of her satchel, genuinely intrigued by the mock fight. The male counterpart was having a difficult time keeping up. Both had masks covering their faces, and Gabrielle assumed that it was for mere protection.

The woman met her counterpart's height and easily knocked him down with a swift swipe of her leg. She knocked him off his feet, and he fell to the ground with an audible thud. She pointed the end of her thin blade to his throat, and then he raised his hands for surrender, dropping his sword.
Gabrielle clapped her hands, and the two turned their heads at the echoing claps. She nodded and then wrapped her arms around her, feeling a bit out of place here. The two fencers said nothing to her, and her cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

The male swordsman was helped off the floor, and he walked over to Gabrielle. He extended the sword to her to which she gawked at in bemusement.

"She wants to spar with you," he told her, whipping the mask off his head.

Gabrielle's stomach knotted. "Me?"

She began to think she came to the wrong place. She was supposed to paint for this Bastillia woman. Was she the one wearing the mask? Why would she ask her to do such an odd thing?

"I –I, you must have the wrong person. I'm here to paint. I –"

He shoved the sword into her chest and walked off.

Gabrielle fumbled and grabbed the blade before it dropped to the floor. She stared at the masked woman, twirling the sword around in the air. She set her bag on the floor and gripped the hilt of the sword, taking in a deep breath.

The female fencer waved her hand, gesturing for Gabrielle to come forth. Gabrielle walked down the four steps cautiously. She stood a few feet away and raised the sword with both hands. She studied the woman's stance of bent knees and elbows, holding the sword with one hand.

In less than a second, a sword thrust towards her face, and Gabrielle swiftly turned to evade the attack. The edge of the blade sliced her sleeve open and drew blood on her left bicep. She gasped and looked at the trickling blood seeping through her tunic's sleeve.

Gabrielle was barely given enough time to recover when the blade jumped forward again. She inhaled and curved her back, evading the tip of the blade nearly ramming right through her midsection. She wasn't skilled enough to handle one-on-one combat like this. It was one of the skills she had as a mercenary –to kill blindly –to stab people in the back when they least expected it.

She took a sharp inhale and turned to the right. Her opponent's sword slit her sleeve open. The sleeve attached her tunic fell to the floor. Now her entire right arm was exposed bare.

Their swords clashed, and Gabrielle bit her bottom lip. Her body was slowly lowering to the floor with the immense amount of weight applied to the sword atop of hers. She kicked her opponent in the shin and was able to take a few paces backward to compose herself.

She peered down at her right arm. There was blood drawn beneath the scar she obtained back in Rome.

"Your wound has healed nicely."

Gabrielle's heart stopped, and a chilling shiver traveled up her spine.
Chapter Notes

We made it, guys!

If y'all haven't figured it out yet: Evander/Xian is the raven, Gölge is the songbird, Varinia is the sparrow, Gabrielle is the magpie, and lastly, Xena is our nightingale.

There, Gabrielle stood, blood trickling down her arm, gaping at her opponent. The beat of her heart rang in her ears, clouding her thoughts and vision. She was so unfocused, so out of her element.

This woman was definitely not Eylül Bastillia. This woman was Xena. The little comment about her scar gave it away. She was lured here to die, lured here to fight to the death. She had Xena right in front of her. Gabrielle's stomach churned, and her grip tightened around the fencing sword as she gaped at the black mask staring right back at her.

*I can't see you, but I know it's you.*

Xena paced back and forth, tapping the edge of her sword on her thigh impatiently. She stared at the look of horror plastered on Gabrielle’s face. That genuine fear was so painfully evident in those jade eyes. She almost didn't want to keep attacking, but she needed to. She wanted to.

Stopping in the center of the atrium, she thrust her sword forward, which Gabrielle then blocked the blow. She was holding back on purpose. She could've driven her blade directly into Gabrielle several times already, but she didn’t. Xena was surprised at the lack of self-awareness Gabrielle harnessed.

*Irresponsible.*

Xena grabbed Gabrielle's arm, pulling her forward, and threw Gabrielle onto the floor.

*Careless.*

As Gabrielle lay on her back, she groaned at the pain coursing through her body. She looked up to see her masked opponent, sword in hand, ready to plunge the weapon into her chest cavity. She rolled out of the way before Xena rammed the blade into the stone ground.

*Thoughtless.*

Xena smiled beneath the mask, backtracking to her designated spot. She stood in a stance that was to be seen as the offensive. Gabrielle wasn't even trying. Its almost like she wants to die. She wants to get this over with. Have you given up already, Gabrielle? Is this how you want to be remembered?

Is this how you want people to find you? Your carcass on the ground, mangled with bruises, gashes, and broken limbs?
Something sparked inside Xena. She studied Gabrielle from afar, all the way from Edirne. She studied Gabrielle on the coastal beach in Rome. She saw two different Gabrielles. What kind of person are you, Gabrielle? You hide who you truly are. You are mercenary by night, artist by day. But who are you really?

You're just confused, Gabrielle. You don't know how to fight me. You thought you killed me, and you were happy to be rid of me or were you? You were caught in the middle of the storm just like Xian was –just like Varinia. You're all part of the same puzzle and you –Gabrielle– are the missing piece.

I was just as blind as you. I couldn't see beyond the serenity of your eyes, the talkative mouth of yours, the light that illuminates around you when I'm with you. A simple girl from Potidaea, a killer in Rome, and now, you're a prisoner in Edirne.

There were plenty of chances for you to run, but I doubt you'd get very far. There must be some sense of courage deep inside you, Gabrielle. You're willing to have your flesh slashed and your dignity stripped from you.

Yet, there is just one little problem. You still don't know who I am, because I am hiding from you as we play this little dance around each other. I've been in front of you this entire time, and what will you do when I finally reveal myself? Will you run?

Xena stalked forward, twirling the sword, lowering her stance. She attempted to grab Gabrielle by the arm and was pleasantly surprised when Gabrielle jabbed her in the elbow.

Excellent, Gabrielle. Just a little more force and you could've broken my arm. Defend yourself. Show me that you want to live. You're fighting on the defense, yet when you murder someone, you go for the kill.

I saw you. I saw the way you slit Gölge's throat. There was no hesitation, yet you hesitate to swing the blade towards me. Are you afraid that you will miss?

Spineless.

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes, staring at the faceless opponent. She felt her head rattle from each blow that she took. There was no possible way that she could kill Xena. She realized that now. This was now a game of survival, and she didn't like the way it was going so far. She was forced to defend herself in a way she didn't think was possible.

Xena, you are intelligent, but you are also a gifted swordswoman. Gabrielle came so far from her home only to be met with another one of Xena's many masks. She couldn't leave now, and she didn't plan to. She wanted answers.

"You sent me that letter."

"Why go through all the trouble? Surely, you've had multiple assassination attempts throughout your life?" Gabrielle said with a sneer. "You're obviously a very wanted woman."

And there it is. There is that witty mouth of yours that has come out to play. Where were you earlier? Is this another face of yours, Gabrielle? Or are you showing me the person you want me to see?

"What makes me so special?"
Xena hesitated for a moment at the question. She felt the blood pumping through her veins as she glared at Gabrielle. For a brief second, she forgot that her face was concealed. If Gabrielle could see the dumbfounded expression on her face, it would haunt her forever.

You think you can talk your way out of this, but you can't. Yet, you are clever, Gabrielle. You've caught on to my little game. You know that I won't kill you right away because you know for a fact that you could've been dead five times already.

Lost in her own web of thoughts, Xena was ultimately distracted and thus was attacked by Gabrielle's blade. Blood was drawn on her end. Slowly, she peered down at the gash on her left arm.

You know that I am unfocused by you, Gabrielle, and now you've used it against me.

Reacting quickly, Xena lunged forward, and holding her blade away from Gabrielle's face, she rammed both of them into one of the stone columns. She pinned Gabrielle's shoulders to the stone, inching closer and closer to her face.

Breathing heavily, hot breath escaped the linen mask she wore. In a split second, her eyes flashed a narrow glint. There wasn't fear in Gabrielle's eyes anymore, but anger instead. Xena could say, she was *almost* impressed at the sudden willpower emerging from her blonde artist.

The blood streaming down her arm was an irritating reminder to keep her mind focused. Xena took a step closer, dissolving the space between them. She glided her fingers along Gabrielle's neck, tracing her nails on the scar that Gölge gifted her.

Her skin was so supple, youthful, and nearly perfect *except* for that small scar.

"I wore red just for you," she whispered.

She heard Gabrielle's breathing accelerate as she tightened her grip.

"You said I would look nice in this color, don't you *remember*?"

Her breath hitched. Gabrielle felt her stomach knotting. She couldn't move, paralyzed from the neck down. Her fingers gripped around the sword until her knuckles paled. Slowly, her eyes followed her masked opponent drift further away.

Xena pulled the mask over her head, and her hair tumbled down her back. Gabrielle swallowed the large swell in her throat.

"Did I not tell you that we would see each other in the near future?" she said, grinning slyly.

Gabrielle's lips parted, choking on inhaled breaths.

She lifted the blade, turning it from side to side, and pressed the dull edge against Gabrielle's cheek.

"I told you I am good at finding people."

This couldn't be real, Gabrielle kept telling herself. She was staring at the woman she came to know somewhat well enough in Rome. Xena was right in front of her this entire time. How could she be so blind? Had Xena known this whole time? Or was she just as blind?

"You were so curious about my name," she snorted, "well, I don't think I need to introduce myself."
"Xena..." her name slipped off Gabrielle's tongue with ease.

She brushed her thumb along the blonde's lip, examining the petrified look in the green pools. She retracted the blade from Gabrielle's cheek and pulled back a few blonde strands. She cupped Gabrielle's face, and the smile dissolved into a frown.

She headbutted Gabrielle's forehead and stood back, watching her body fall limp and collapse onto the floor. Xena raised an eyebrow, lifted her arm, examining the gash, and tossed the sword aside.

Gabrielle woke to a throbbing headache. She lifted her head, squinting from the bright sunlight shining in her face. A dark figure blocked the sun, and she blinked, allowing her vision to return to its clarity. She gaped at Xena's towering presence in front of her.

She tried to move and then realized she was strapped to a chair. Her ankles bound by metal chains as were her wrists. Another chain was strapped across her chest as well. She wriggled in the confined chair, tirelessly.

Panting, she gazed into Xena's blue eyes. So many conflicting feelings were scattered in her mind. She had known this woman to be someone else, and now that the woman was actually Xena, she wasn't sure how to feel.

She was being hunted by this woman this entire time without knowing it. She expressed her fears of being watched by Xena to...Xena –the real Xena. She told Xena how she felt about being attacked, but who she now knew was the stand-in for Xena. She told her so many things about her life. But none of that mattered anymore because she was going to die.

Gabrielle brought her eyebrows together, heaving from her effortlessly trying to work her way through the unbreakable chains.

"You're going through an awful lot of trouble to kill me."

Xena frowned and said, "you love to make assumptions about me."

"Isn't that what you're going to do? Otherwise, why keep me here, chained? Is this how you killed Evander?"

Xena's face softened at the mention of her son. And now, there was another piece added to the puzzle. She had her suspicions that her son and Gabrielle were linked in some way. She wished that weren't the case, but Gabrielle spoke plainly, revealing everything. This also meant that Varinia knew Gabrielle. The triad operated individually, yet all collaborated in some small way.

She had to make a choice: tell Gabrielle everything, or keep everything locked away inside her like she had been doing for so many years.

"I didn't kill him," she spoke calmly.

"So, it was you who kidnapped him," Gabrielle scoffed. "And you...Varinia...you obviously killed her too!"

"I did not kill them!" Xena screeched, startling Gabrielle.

She had to remind herself to keep her emotions in check. She was already failing.

Xena grabbed a chair and took a seat opposite of Gabrielle. She slouched down, spreading her legs
apart, smiling softly. Gabrielle kept her gaze ahead, directly glaring into the piercing eyes a few feet from her. Xena tilted her head from side to side, tapping her fingers on her knee.

"It's fascinating."

Gabrielle huffed, "what?"

"Your change of attitude," she quirked her mouth upward, "you confided in me that you enjoyed being around me back in Rome. You even expressed such sorrow when I told you I was leaving. And now…"

Gabrielle tapered her eyes.

"You can't stand to look at me. Its as if I disgust you."

"What sort of reaction were you hoping for? You lied to me!"

"I never lied." Xena, insulted by the accusation, leaned forward, pressing her elbows on her knees. "Everything I told you was the truth, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle was thankful to be alive, but she didn't know how long that was going to last. She felt confused, hurt, and betrayed. She felt hurt the most, but she then realized that maybe, possibly, Xena might've felt the same as she did. Although, her view of Xena was stunted right now. This wasn't the 'Xena' she knew back in Rome. The Xena in Rome was a mysterious killer, and here, she was making light conversation with her hostage.

She watched as Xena reached behind her and pull out a weapon. She relaxed when she saw it was her knife from her art supply bag. Xena held the blade up, waving it back and forth.

"Look familiar?"

Gabrielle's jaw clenched.

"You killed my apprentice with that blade. I watched you do it." She threw the knife, and it landed in between Gabrielle's boots. "I was the one who chased you. I was the one who shot at you. I was the one who gave you that scar. But…"

She let a smile slip and added, "I was also the one who cleaned, not one, but two wounds. I was the one who worried about your safety."

Gabrielle didn't know if this was just another game, so she kept her guard up. But, everything that Xena said was true. Analyzing the tone of her voice, Gabrielle could tell that Xena was just as oblivious as she was. They were hunting each other, running circles around one another. Gabrielle assumed that her position must've been compromised when Xena saw the bicep wound. Xena pieced the puzzle together first. Of course, she did. She's Xena.

"Now that you know my name, you've developed this hatred for me," said Xena.

Gabrielle's gaze drifted to the floor. "That isn't true."

"Isn't it? You've been taught to hate me, Gabrielle. You've been trained to hate me –trained to kill me. How does it feel to have me sitting in front of you, alive and well?" she smiled.

Gabrielle bit her inner cheek. She didn't know whether to be upset at herself for getting into this mess or that Xena was actually making sense.
"There was one thing I did lie about."

Gabrielle lifted her head.

"You mentioned that Emperor Tiberius raided your home and separated you from your family," she said, her heart palpitating rapidly. "He raided my home too. And he took...someone special away from me." She nervously tapped her fingertips together.

Studying the blonde, she knew that empathy was something that couldn't ever leave Gabrielle's genetic makeup. That was definitely not a skill that a mercenary could hold. You are a horrible mercenary, Gabrielle, she thought.

"That someone was my son. I never saw him again."

Gabrielle felt a twinge in her chest.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

"I guess that is one of the things we have in common."

At that, the blonde narrowed her eyes. "We don't have anything in common."

"Except killing people," Xena stated flatly. "That's no way to live your life. You can't go around killing people in cold blood for the rest of your life."

"That's what you do."

"No!" Xena barked, lunging forward. She pressed her palms on the arms of the chair and spat, "I don't murder people for payment. Let's get that straight."

"Yet..." she licked her parched lips, "yet, you have me chained to a chair."

Xena smirked, inching closer to the artist's face. "What makes you think I'm going to kill you? Oh, that's right, you assumed I would."

This woman stood before her—a woman of many faces—and she still couldn't figure her out. If she wasn't going to kill me, then what is she going to do? Is she going to set me free?

Gabrielle didn't know if she could trust anything that came out of Xena's mouth now. Evander and Varinia have been said to be alive, but she didn't know if that was true. Xena could be lying, but why would she lie about that? Better yet, why would she reveal that she kept them alive? So, then, they must be alive, right?

"I'm going to offer you a deal, Gabrielle."

"W-what do you want?"

Xena yanked the dagger out from the floor and held it in one hand. She pulled out a key from her pocket, which was essentially the key to freedom from bondage. Gabrielle frowned, gawking at the two items which Xena had.

"I'm going to give you a choice," she half-smiled. "You can go back to serving Nero," she waved the dagger. "Or you can have your freedom and stay with me," she presented the key. "Choose."

Gabrielle's eyes darted back and forth between the items. If she chose incorrectly, according to Xena's mind, she could be killed anyway. She wasn't sure if either choice was for the better. It was
like flipping a coin.

"Why would you want me to stay with you? Why me?"

"I want you to be free."

Gabrielle gnawed on her lip, swallowing the lump in her throat. Of course, she was more inclined to choose to be free, but would she truly be free? She would be in Xena's custody. Was that freedom? It was better than being dead. It was better than serving Nero and Sabina. But would she be assigned to new tasks? Would she work for Xena?

She didn't want to make a hasty decision, but either way, she needed to choose.

Xena took a step forward, gazing down at the blonde artist. Gabrielle opened her mouth, feigning words. Xena's eyes widened, gripping the dagger tightly while clenching the key in her palm until her nails dug into her skin. Patience was not one of her best skills she obtained over the years.

"I…"

With another step forward, Xena took a sharp inhale, dropping the dagger and key on the floor. Gabrielle's cheeks paled, staring at the arrow plunged through Xena's breast. She whipped her head around the atrium, looking to see where the arrow came from.

"Xena!" she yelled, wiggling in the chair. "Give me the key!" she begged. "I'll stay here! I choose to stay here!"

With a subtle smile, not even trying to hide her fervor, Xena dropped the key into Gabrielle's lap. She broke the arrow shaft, wincing. As she tried to pull the arrow through her chest, she felt another arrow drive into her thigh.

She dropped to the floor, biting her lower lip, groaning lowly.

Gabrielle frantically tried to unlock the chains on her wrists, staring at Xena in agonizing pain on the floor. Panting, she freed one wrist and began working her way to the other wrist, then her chest, and finally her ankles.

Dropping to her knees, she inspected the wounds, crinkling her eyebrows.

"You should leave, Gabrielle. I have men outside. They will take you somewhere safe," she said in between labored breaths, sweat dripping down her forehead.

"I'm not leaving you here alone."

Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned for Part II

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