

Disclaimer & Notices

Copyright: Many of these characters do not belong to me, and we know which ones do not. I, however, own the plot and other certain characters.

Violence: There is violence in this story.

Subtext: Any subtext becomes main text here.

Summary: The sequel to [To Take What is Mine](#). The Conqueror continues her campaign to the Macedon Kingdom, and she already knows the odds are in her favor. Yet without warning, the Romans invade the Thrace Providence and take aim for the Conqueror's hometown. The Conqueror though bitterly holds back from saving Amphipolis. However Queen Gabrielle and Queen Cyane join together at the Siege of Amphipolis and try to stop the Romans before they overtake Thrace.

Feedback: redhope@redhope.net

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

Write a Review: <http://www.redhope.net/xena/review/series9-form.html>

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

Started: June 6, 2008

Series 9: **Destiny of Mine** – Story #3

To Fight for What is Mine

by Red Hope

Chapter 3

The stratègos's heavy, leather sandals pounded down on the cobble stone. He approached the main gates of the city, and he noted his loyal men coming to attention. He could already tell his men were well charged from being nervous and unsure, but they trusted him.

"Good evening, stratègos," a gate guard offered.

Commander Aescalus stopped a step away from the guard. "How fairs it tonight?"

The guard glanced over at his comrade, who was many steps away but could overhear. He focused back on the stratègos. "All is quiet."

Commander Aescalus placed his hands behind his back, which caused his rustling, red cape to remain still. "Is the curfew being enforced?"

"Yes, stratègos... and with full force."

"Excellent." Commander Aescalus moved away half a step, but he stopped and looked between the two guards. He merely stated, "Honor."

The two guards understood the code word. They bowed their heads and simultaneously repeated, "Honor, stratègos."

The stratègos was satisfied and strolled off with his hands still behind his back. He continued his patrol down the walls to check on his men. He passed along the code word to each soldier he passed. Once he made his round, he headed back to the main barrack to confirm the code word with his second in

command.

Afterwards, the stratègos made his slow walk towards the king's fortress. He ascended the guarded steps, which were guarded by soldiers that even the stratègos didn't trust. He ignored them and headed to the closed doors that were guarded too. He ordered a guard to open the doors. Once it was open, he was swallowed into the torchlit flickering entrance.

On the walls, a guard exited a turret and marched along the top of the wall. He passed a fellow soldier and murmured, "Honor."

"Honor," the soldier repeated back.

The guard kept going down the wall, and he stopped halfway. He faced the dark landscape that stretched out before him. He noticed some movement in the darkness, but it was very faint nor was he that sure of himself. Then there was a low whistle far below on the ground on the outside of the wall. He slotted his eyes but saw nothing in the torchlight that lined the walls below.

For a beat, the guard almost dismissed it yet a face formed in the torchlight below. He looked closer and saw vivid blue eyes. He knew his agreement was required so he withdrew his hand from inside his cloak. He held out his palm up.

The stranger flashed a grin then suddenly threw a rope straight up to him.

The guard snatched it, wrapped it around a stone pillar on the wall, and tied it neatly. He watched the person climb up the wall then he offered his hand in assistance. He hefted the tall man over the side.

"To honor."

The guard blinked at the woman's voice then grew wide eye. He realized it was the Conqueror herself before him. "Honor," he replied.

The Conqueror could be easily mistaken for one of the soldiers of the Macedon Kingdom. She wore the proper attire, weapons, and she had the helmet with the Vergina Sun stamped over the brow. She made sure to tie her hair up in a bun and hide it in her helmet.

"Your name?" the Conqueror insisted.

"Sirius of Potidaea," the guard replied.

The Conqueror had a smile curled at the corner of her lips. "What makes a hoplite from a shepherd's village?"

"Family tradition."

The Conqueror dipped her head some then whispered, "Do not fail your ancestry tonight, Sirius."

Sirius bowed his head in agreement. "I will not."

"Go ahead then. I will take it from here," the ruler informed.

"To honor," Sirius swore, and he left with determination. His walk was much faster this time, and he entered the turret. He went to the steps and hastily wound down them until he came out of the wood door. He quickly marched away from the wall and went over to where many of the citizens lived.

By Sirius's walk, he obviously had a destination in mind. He scanned the wood doors of the houses, which were marked with Greek numbers from red paint. He came to a stop on the door that read

twenty-five in Greek. Sirius came to the door, turned, and faced the street. He rested his right hand on his sword hilt, and he waited.

The Conqueror was still on the wall. After Sirius left, she walked away from her rope that she left in place. She calmly walked the wall like she was a regular guard. And whenever she passed another guard, she merely stated, "Honor." The guard would repeat the word and continued.

Back at the rope, another outsider climbed up the rope and came over the side of the wall. He was a hefty soldier and fully dressed in Macedon soldier attire. He started a march down the wall until he came upon another guard.

The guards each stopped, and one spoke, "Honor."

The outsider then replied, "To honor."

The guard that simply spoke honor dipped his head in understanding, turned, and went back to the turret. And just like Sirius, he left the turret and went to a numbered house that he had to guard.

It wasn't long after that a third outsider climbed up the rope. Then on a different part of the wall, another rope was setup and an outsider came up the wall. Within a candlemark, there were six ropes attached to the wall and a steady stream of outsiders dressed in Macedon armor climbed the walls.

In the fortress, Commander Aescalus entered the king's guarded office. He was surprised the king was still up, but he suspected the king was debating future plans.

"Good evening, Aescalus." The king had his back to the stratègos. He gazed upon a wall map of his kingdom that was heavily marked up.

The stratègos slowly neared the king. "You're up late, my lord." He took the ruler's side and also studied the map.

"She's taken it all." King Cortese turned to the stratègos. He had a dark expression and seemed like bitter anger ran deep in him.

"Perhaps, but she hasn't taken our heart." Aescalus deeply sighed then reminded, "She may be the Conqueror, but she cares for the people. It's always her weakest point."

"And what of you, Aescalus?" the king challenged. "Are they your weakest point?"

The stratègos fully turned to the king. "If they had been, my lord then would I have not defied you after I heard about your hire of the mercenaries?"

King Cortese brushed his goatee with his hand then rested his hand on his hip. "You have been loyal for so many seasons, Aescalus."

"And the loyalty has done little to save you from the Conqueror." The stratègos shook his head and glanced back at the worn map. "What of the Romans?"

"They ignore my messages," the king replied, "those bastards. They must think I renegged on the deal... back with Draco."

The stratègos folded his arms and considered a new plan. "If we have to... sacrifice a few people to save the kingdom then we must do it, my lord."

King Cortese walked away from the stratègos. "It is no different than last time, Aescalus. The stakes are

higher but the reasons more just." He went behind his desk and sat down. "If I can defeat the Conqueror then I show she is not so invincible."

"Many have tried and failed, my king." The stratègos remained near the map, but he had his back to it. He studied the ruler.

"Indeed," the king murmured. King Cortese stroked his goatee and considered his options. "I've already lost popularity with the people, Aescalus."

The stratègos lowered his head and held his silence.

"And they're the Conqueror's weakness," Cortese whispered.

"Perhaps a threat is needed to make her completely withdraw."

King Cortese heard the words, but he stared at his desk. He stroked his goatee a few times then stopped. "How many citizens do we have left?"

"The population has dwindled to five hundred."

The king lifted his head to his stratègos. "Five hundred days, Aescalus."

The stratègos sensed his stomach drop, and he carefully asked, "Five hundred days, my king?"

"One citizen will be killed each day that the Conqueror does not withdraw from the kingdom." King Cortese licked his lips and grinned at Aescalus. "We'll test her honor and loyalty to the people. Just to emphasize the point, we'll hang the bodies over the walls."

Aescalus still had his arms crossed, and he tightened them. "It will... lessen the supply consumption as well."

King Cortese chuckled and remarked, "Now you're thinking, Aescalus."

"The people will rebel... we'll need to imprison them."

The king tilted his head. "I'll leave that to you."

"You should sent out a message first to the Conqueror." The stratègos lowered his arms and neared the desk. He stopped behind a chair. "She'll know the blood rests on her hands."

"Yes." King Cortese smiled, and his eyes glowed. "I wonder how many will die while she makes up her mind."

Aescalus shrugged but commented, "I will find a messenger tonight."

"Excellent." King Cortese rose up to his feet. He started to the door once the stratègos took his side. "We'll need to organize plans to build the army after the Conqueror's withdraw."

"There are still plenty of funds," the stratègos promised.

The king did indeed know that already. He nodded and stopped by the main doors. "You're truly a loyal commander... and friend, Aescalus."

The stratègos reached for the door handle, yet he paused. "Always, my king." He started to pull the door open but the king's next words stopped him.

"And I would like for you to kill each citizen." King Cortese developed a faint grin at the stratègos's

hidden surprise. "You... personally, Aescalus."

Commander Aescalus pushed past his shock and managed, "Of course, my king." He then promptly left before the king could say anymore.

King Cortese watched the stratègos drift down the long, torchlit hallway. He then focused on the two guards at his door. "It's happened... take care of it."

"As you command, King Cortese," a guard replied. He signaled his partner, and they marched down the hallway.

Cortese closed his door and went to the large window in his office. He studied the dim city far below then he noted two soldiers coming through the fortress's gates and approached the main steps. He just merely watched them.

The two soldiers walked at a normal pace. They slowed down at the base of the steps because of the two guards stationed there. There were also two more guards at the top of the steps that guarded the entrance.

"Evening," the right guard spoke.

The left soldier glanced at his partner then turned back to the guards. He then stated, "Honor."

The same guard furrowed his eyebrow and questioned, "Honor? What the Hades does that mean?"

Without warning, the silent soldier grabbed for his sword and rammed his blade into a guard's stomach.

The left soldier unsheathed his sword and run his blade into the other guard's stomach before he had time to react.

"Attack!" a guard at the top yelled. "We're under attack! Stop them!" He unsheathed his sword and so did his partner. They stormed down the steps.

"Chaaaaaya!" an attacker cried out. He then bolted up the steps to meet the guards.

The other attacker remained at the base of the steps. He twisted around to the gates and cried out "To honor!" He waved his sword in the air then turned in time to meet a guard's blade. Just after he turned, there were several soldiers running through the gates with drawn swords.

An alarm bell sounded erratically and sent the city into a panic. Next, the main gates of the city were starting to slowly open. Voices could be heard yelling about but the words unclear.

King Cortese stepped away once from the window then twice. He was momentarily shocked then he snapped out of it because of the heavy bang on the door. He rushed over and threw open one of them.

"It is the Conqueror... herself," a soldier exclaimed. Another soldier took up his side.

"She has infiltrated the city. There is no way you can stop her, King Cortese." The soldier glanced at his comrade then back at the king.

"She must have gotten to Aescalus sooner," Cortese growled.

"It no longer matters," a soldier remarked. "You must flee."

King Cortese grounded his teeth and fisted his hands. He knew there was no winning tonight. He cleared his head of his anger and ignored the yells and alarm. "Let's go."

"We'll follow you."

King Cortese hurried back to his desk. He yanked open a drawer and pulled out a small satchel. He then rushed back over and left the office with the soldiers. "This way." He picked up the pace and started a run.

"We have to hurry before you're discovered," a soldier commented.

King Cortese went around a corner then he slowed down at a dead end other than a few doors to various rooms. He went to the last door, opened it, and ordered, "Close the door behind you." He then signaled for the soldiers to come with him.

The two soldiers followed the ruler and stood in a huge fireplace.

King Cortese faced the inside of the fireplace. He could barely see, but he felt around on the wall. "If I follow you two, what will happen?"

"We promise you safety... especially from the Conqueror."

King Cortese found what he was looking for, and he kept his hand over it. He twisted around and studied the two soldiers. "I want a chance at the Conqueror."

"There is an army waiting... it rivals the Conqueror's own. You'll be given a chance to reclaim your kingdom."

"Well, I can promise you that she will follow me." King Cortese then darkly smiled, twisted stone in his palm, and stated, "Hail Caesar!" Suddenly he and the soldiers were quickly swallowed by the fireplace and gone. The fireplace returned to normal.

On the second floor of the fortress, there were loud rings of metal against metal followed by a painful howl. Commander Aescalus was cornered by six soldiers that were loyal to King Cortese, and he was bleeding from his side. They'd attacked him after he left the king's office. King Cortese must have known Aescalus turned to the Conqueror.

The stratègos had already killed one guard, but he couldn't match the six others. He had no room to move, and he was losing focus thanks to the pain in his side. Earlier, he heard the sudden warning alarm then he knew that the Conqueror's attack was in motion. He prayed it would be successful.

Aescalus parried away a sword swipe, he saw the next one but couldn't stop it, and he took the blade into his shoulder. He yelped in pain and went down onto his knees. Next his sword was kick from his hands and a blade went under his chin to prick his neck.

The soldiers stepped back and spread out around the fallen stratègos. The one soldier that held his blade's tip at the stratègos's neck, stepped in front. He held his sword hilt with both hands now and coldly stared down at Aescalus.

Commander Aescalus raised his head and slotted his eyes at the soldier.

The soldier pulled his sword away and raised it over his head.

The stratègos fisted his hands and waited.

The soldier yelled then brought his blade down swiftly. A light spray of blood came back at him and coated his leather chest. The stratègos collapsed to the floor at the soldier's feet. He sheathed his dripping sword then bent down. His fingers curled into thick hair. Just then, he heard several racing

steps coming down the hallway.

The other soldiers turned around and faced the newcomers. They hesitated as they tried to figure out if the intruders were friends or enemies. They found out once they were attacked.

Down on the ground floor, the yelling was growing stronger and more voices. In the main lobby, several fights ensued, and it looked as if Macedon soldiers were fighting against each other. The word honor was the only way that the Conqueror's hoplites could tell one another apart as well as Aescalus loyal men.

"Conqueror, behind you!"

The Conqueror was off to one side, and she caught the enemy's sword behind her. She quickly face him and grinned at his surprised look. She then came at him fiercely. "Borias?" she hollered.

"Over here!" the stratègos called back from the main entrance. He was busy with two opponents.

"What's the status out there?"

Borias stole a glance out the open doors. He just come from the gates after hearing word from Bastien about the citizens' safety. "Some of Cortese's men are trying to attack the people." He ducked as a sword almost came at his head. He snarled and flashed his white teeth at the enemy. He lunged at them.

"Any casualties?" the Conqueror called.

Borias kicked at his right opponent's chest and sent him flying. "None so far!" He then swiped at his remaining opponent's head.

The Conqueror had already killed several soldiers. She noticed the numbers were dwindling so she ordered, "Deon, take some men, sweep the fortress, and find me Cortese!"

Deon pulled out his sword from his opponent's stomach. He then turned and faced the heavily torchlit lobby. He scanned for hoplites, who were free and started to round them up. He then hurried off with eight hoplites in tow.

The Conqueror sensed another enemy coming up behind her. Suddenly her battle cry rung out, she jumped up, flipped in midair, and landed behind the enemy. She then ran her sword through him and kicked him off it after a beat.

Borias chased an opponent out the doors and managed his blade into the soldier's leg. Then he gave a quick and hard roundhouse kick that sent the soldier tumbling down the steps. He imagined that would crack the soldier's skull open and kill him.

Borias came back into the lobby and noticed that those that remained standing were hoplites. He hurried over to the Conqueror but had to hop over several dead bodies. "We need to-"

"Conqueror?" a hoplite hollered. He and four other hoplites emerged from a hallway and came over to her. "We've cleared the second floor."

"Any sign of Cortese or Aescalus?"

The hoplite shifted his grip on his hilt then replied, "We did find Aescalus... he's dead, my liege."

Xena grounded her teeth, but she could tell there was something else.

"He's been decapitated too." The hoplite flexed his jaw a few times then quietly added, "His head is

missing."

"That bastard," Borias snapped.

"Find it," the Conqueror snarled. She watched the soldiers leave then she turned to her stratègos.

"He means to insult and condemn Aescalus in the afterlife."

"I know," Xena quietly replied. She couldn't believe how King Cortese was this dishonorable. A hoplite never decapitated another hoplite and to do so was dishonorable. And if the head was taken then the dead hoplite could never cross the river to the afterlife. The only way for the soul to make it across was for the head to be reunited with the body and a drachma given under the tongue.

The Conqueror silently vowed to Aescalus that she would rejoin his head with his body so that he could be properly remembered and buried. She knew without a doubt that King Cortese ordered Aescalus death with such dishonor. She could taste the venom she felt for the ugly king.

"I want the entire city swept through," the Greek ruler hotly whispered.

Borias edged closer to Xena so that they could be quieter. "We will find his head, Xena."

The Conqueror shifted her angry eyes to the stratègos. "Yes we will... and I'll have his."

The stratègos grew tense because he saw the old Xena peaking through again. He lowered his voice and reminded, "To do so... to do the same shows no honor either, Xena."

"He is no hoplite," Xena seethed, "He is sick bastard."

Borias clenched his hands. "We haven't come this far or worked this hard to go back to the old days."

The Conqueror slowly raised an eyebrow and stated, "Sometimes the old days made more sense." She then looked over at the hoplites that waited orders. "Follow me, hoplites." She turned back to Borias. "Comb the city... find me Cortese... find me Aescalus's head."

The stratègos lightly bowed and said nothing. He hurried off and left through the main doors. Later, he would have to contend with Xena's anger in a more private setting. He'd learned over the seasons how to ebb her dark anger that could be triggered by specific things. He often too had to seek Xena's help at times when his own darkness reared its head, but as time passed it became easier each day.

The Conqueror motioned for the hoplites to follow her into a main hallway. She was at a fast walk but had to step over dead bodies. Just around the corner ahead, she heard several footfall coming so she called, "To honor."

"To honor," Deon echoed back. He came around the corner and stopped before his leader.

"Report."

The chiliarchès was grim. "Aescalus is dead and his head still missing."

"What of Cortese?"

Deon swallowed but looked right at the Conqueror. "There's no trace of him, my liege. I've checked with the hoplites that were ordered to cover the various exits. They haven't seen him." He stopped and shook his head. "It's like he's disappeared."

"People don't disappear, Deon." The Conqueror was losing her patience now.

The chiliarchès lowered his eyes from the ruler. He bit his lower lip, but he willed himself to do his duty. "There's another problem too, my liege." He saw how the Conqueror's lifted her chin in her usual bracing posture. He lifted up his left hand. "This isn't a Greek xiphos." He held it closer to the Conqueror.

Xena took the sword from the chiliarchès, and she instantly recognized the craftsmanship and style. "Rome," she uttered. She focused back on Deon.

"There were a few other soldiers that were carrying them." Deon glanced at the gladius sword in the ruler's hands. He didn't want to say aloud what this could mean.

The Conqueror lowered the Roman sword to her side. "Sweep through every room in this fortress. There will be a hidden passage somewhere that we missed."

"We will take the third floor," Deon agreed.

The Greek ruler nodded then turned to her hoplites. "Let's get to the second floor and sweep through it. Look carefully and don't miss a spot." She and the hoplites followed Deon to the where the stairs were located.

Outside the fortress, the city still buzzed with pocketed fights that were lessening. The city was falling under the Conqueror's control. King Cortese's few, loyal soldiers were either dead or surrendered. Borias hastily worked to secure the city and as well as check on the status of the people. He discovered a handful of homes were burning thanks to a few of Cortese's men that set them ablaze. But only a half a dozen people were injured and four dead.

By the time the city was fully secure, the moon was high in the sky. It would be a few candlemarks before dawn approached and the sun would warm away the cool night. But prior to tonight's capture of the capital, the Conqueror had sent out her best scout, Tracker, two days ago because she'd received a message from Queen Gabrielle. It wasn't long ago that Xena received a message from the Amazon Queen, but the second one followed a day later.

The second scroll told Xena that Gabrielle was traveling into Thrace, and she planned to go to Amphipolis, Potidaea, and the Thrace Amazon Nation, and Gabrielle hoped to see Xena. Immediately, Xena wrote a fast message, handed it to Tracker, and asked Tracker to take five hoplites with him. Xena wanted Tracker to find the Amazon Queen as fast as possible.

And today in the candlemarks before dawn, Tracker prayed he would come across the traveling Amazons. He and the other hoplites were by horseback, which gave them an edge to cover more ground. He'd been studying the road maps and estimated how far the Amazons would travel and where they may be located each night. Tracker and his party only took a few candlemark breaks to eat and rest as well as care for their horses.

Tonight though was a good evening to travel with the moon. Tracker called for a slow ride so their horses could relax. He'd taken a drink from his waterskin when he noticed something. He capped his waterskin and tucked it away in his rear saddle.

"Do you smell that?" a hoplite questioned to the group.

Tracker held up his hand for silence. He sniffed the air deeper this time and picked out the distinct scent of fire. He bet his pay that it came from a campfire, and he prayed it belonged to the Amazons. It was highly possible that the Amazons could be camped not far from this road.

"Halt," Tracker ordered. He dismounted his horse and explained, "I'm going to go check. Wait here for

my return."

"Are you-"

"Stay here," Tracker snapped at the hoplite. He patted his horse then quickly raced into the nearby woods. Tracker moved swiftly, but he stayed light footed so he wouldn't be heard. He followed the scent in the air, and it wasn't long before he spotted a dim glow. Tracker moved slowly now and silently made his way closer to the campsite.

The campfire's glow pulsed then an occasional crackle echoed. The campsite was located in an open area of the woods, and everything was rather quiet. But there was an occasional whine from a horse or two.

Tracker edged closer and closer to the campsite. He was close enough so he squatted down behind a large tree's trunk. He placed his hand against the trunk and leaned against it. He peered around the tree and visually scanned the camp.

There were several bodies that were hidden away in furs. Tracker estimated there were at least eight people in the bedrolls. He then focused on one particular person, who he started to recognize immediately as Queen Gabrielle. He could never forget her face. Tracker carefully stood up and debated his next move.

But his thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the strong hand on his wrist. He was suddenly spun around by his locked arm, and his back slammed into the tree. He groaned heavily, but he was silenced by the pressure on his neck.

"You are in violation and will be terminated," a calm voice stated.

Tracker gagged but focused upward at the cold face above him. He instantly realized it was the automaton that the Amazons had captured during the Battle of the Fates. He gripped her strong arm and tried to push it away, but it was impossible.

"State the nature of your violation," Seven of Nine ordered.

Tracker honestly wanted to, yet he was only concerned with breathing. His eyes started to roll back but then the weight against his throat was gone. He gasped for air and coughed.

Seven of Nine corrected her earlier mistake by pulling away her arm some. She then quickly ordered, "State-"

"Conqueror," Tracker rasped, "The Conqueror... sent me." He coughed a few times.

The automaton slightly narrowed her eyes.

"I have to speak to Queen Gabrielle." Tracker swallowed lightly then added, "I have a message for her from the Conqueror."

Seven of Nine finally released the hoplite, but she wearily studied him. "Surrender your weapons, and I will escort you into the camp."

Tracker tried to hide his irritation at the order. He unsheathed his sword and pulled his dagger from his hip. He handed them over.

The tall Amazon collected them then added, "Your concealed dagger too."

Tracker pretended to be confused.

"Or perhaps you prefer to dangle upside down?"

The hoplite grumbled, but he knelt down and extracted his hidden dagger from his boot. He gave it to Seven of Nine and waited.

"Follow me." The automaton escorted the small hoplite to the camp.

Tracker was a bit surprised that once he entered the camp that he found the Amazons already up. It was as if he never saw them curled up in their bedrolls earlier. He noted they were all seated around the campfire, fully clothed, and weapons in reach.

But off to the side of the bonfire, the Amazon Queen stood and with folded arms. She watched Seven of Nine lead the intruder into the camp then she focused on the familiar hoplite. She glanced at Seven and quietly said, "Thank you."

The automaton dipped her head then explained, "He stated that the Conqueror sent him."

"I know." Queen Gabrielle looked to the hoplite. "I'm Queen Gabrielle."

The hoplite dipped his head in respect and replied, "I'm Tracker."

Gabrielle was familiar with the name despite she'd never met him. She now recalled that Page had mentioned his name during the time she posed as a slave for King Cortese. "Are you alone?"

"I traveled with five other hoplites." Tracker briefly glanced at the Amazons that sat around the camp then looked back at Queen Gabrielle. "I have a message for you but it's back with my saddles."

Gabrielle twisted to her right. "Ephiny, can you and Seven escort Tracker and his party back here?"

The Amazon, Ephiny, stood up and approached the queen. "Right away." She nodded at Seven and looked at the hoplite. "Lead the way." Ephiny and Seven followed Tracker out of the camp. On the way, Seven returned the weapons to the hoplite.

"I can't imagine what the Conqueror wants," Andra quipped.

Yakut stood up and went over to the queen. "You sent her a message before we left the Nation?"

"I did." Gabrielle sighed and brushed back her hair. She had a slightly sinking feeling.

"I think I'm going to use my own shamanism," Solari joked, "I see a detour trip to see the Conqueror." She received a glare from Yakut.

"Solari," the queen softly warned.

"Well it doesn't take an alchemist to guess," Solari honestly replied.

"She could be just checking up on us." The bard walked away from the group and went to her saddlebags by her bedroll.

The blacksmith glanced at Solari.

Yakut came back over and sat down beside Andra. She noted how Gryta, Teresa, Adonia, and Medora remained silent out of the group.

Solari let out a small yawn then stood up. She went over to her bedroll and sat down on top of it. "We

would have been in Potidaea tomorrow."

Gabrielle looked over at Solari and remarked, "We still will be." She sighed and closed up her saddlebag. She straightened up upon hearing the arrival of the hoplites.

Tracker asked one of his comrades to care for his horse. He fished out the Conqueror's message then came over to the queen.

Seven of Nine did a visual once over of each hoplite and decided they were no threat. She and Ephiny went back to the center of the camp.

Queen Gabrielle accepted the message from Tracker.

"Perhaps we can go to a... private spot," Tracker suggested.

The bard ignored the request and broke the leather strap around the scroll. "I don't hide anything from my Amazons." She unrolled the scroll and proceeded to read it in the firelight.

Tracker now started to understand what attracted the Conqueror to the Amazons Queen. He imagined that the Amazon Queen rivaled the Conqueror's own stubbornness. He took a deep breath and informed, "The Conqueror wishes for you to return with us to the capitol before you continue on your journey."

"So... I see," the queen murmured. She still read over the scroll but finally came to the familiar signature. She rolled the scroll back up. "It's not exactly in our travel plans to go to the capitol." She then slightly lifted her right eyebrow. "Besides, I do recall a war."

"Indeed." Tracker cleared his throat and placed his hands behind his back. "But by dawn, the Conqueror will have secured it and any threats minimized."

Gabrielle lowered the scroll to her side.

"My queen, we do not have time to stray from our trip." Ephiny was standing near the group of seated Amazons. "Queen Cyane will be expecting us soon."

Tracker glanced at Ephiny then back at the queen. "We can have a message sent to Queen Cyane to explain your delay. I'm sure she will be understanding."

Gabrielle bit the inside of her mouth. She wanted to see Xena, badly. But she couldn't detour from the travel plans that she'd setup with both her Nation and Cyane's. "Ephiny is right that we've already made arrangements... I can't stray from them." She hesitated but politely added, "But I do appreciate the Conqueror's offer."

Tracker hated to resort to this, but he had his orders too. "On the contrary, Queen Gabrielle it was less of an offer and more of a... command. I, myself, have been ordered to return with you, and I do not disobey the Conqueror's orders."

Gabrielle wasn't sure how to take Tracker's words at first. She then grew angry and shoved the scroll into Tracker's chest. "Perhaps you do not, but Macedonian Amazon Nation does not answer to the Conqueror." She started to shift away yet halted at Tracker's voice.

Tracker took the scroll, but he coolly remarked, "The Macedonian Amazon Nation is now governed by the Greek polis therefore you do answer to the Conqueror." He waited as the Amazon Queen turned back to him, and he read the hidden shock in her features. "You have been summoned by the Conqueror. My party and I will escort you to her, and we will leave tomorrow morning."

Queen Gabrielle couldn't believe how Tracker was giving her orders now. She neared the hoplite, and her voice dropped deeper. "I don't respond well to threats."

Tracker lowered his head in an apologetic manner. "It was not intended to be a threat, but merely a reminder about your allegiance to Greece, Queen Gabrielle." He raised his head up. "We all must answer to our allegiance in some fashion... even the Conqueror."

Queen Gabrielle still had some annoyance about Tracker's words. She knew a response was required from her so she tilted her head and replied, "Alright."

"My queen," Ephiny started, and she stood up.

Gabrielle held up her hand at the Amazon. She shot a warning look at Ephiny then looked back at Tracker. "The Amazons do have an obligation to the polis." She lowered her hand. "We'll abide by it."

The hoplite bowed his head briefly. "My men and I will settle down for the night. We'll leave in the late dawn."

"Acceptable," the Amazon Queen consented.

"Goodnight, Queen Gabrielle." Tracker broke away and went over to his men. He gave quiet orders to get some rest.

Ephiny debated whether to dispute with the queen. She held her tongue and peered up when Solari sat beside her.

"You know, it is true." Solari became comfortable on the log beside her friend. "We are under the canopy of the Greek polis now."

Queen Gabrielle heard Solari's low words. She was knelt beside her saddlebags again, and she picked up her sheathed sword. She straightened up and focused on the automaton. "Seven, accompany me." She strolled off, and Seven of Nine followed behind her out of the camp.

Gabrielle adjusted the strap across her chest so that her sword seated on her back properly. She slowed her walk so that Seven took her side.

The automaton's long strides easily caught up to the queen. She studied the queen's profile then made a conclusion. "You are worried."

"I am," the bard agreed. She wanted to put some distance between her and the camp. She needed a quiet moment with Seven.

"About why the Conqueror has summoned you?"

Gabrielle shook her head and honestly replied, "I think I know why she wants to see me. I told her that we were going to the Thrace Nation... she may want to tag along."

Seven of Nine arched an eyebrow and murmured, "Indeed."

The bard finally felt she was plenty far. She came to a stop by a tree and turned to the tall, blond woman. "What I'm worried about is you."

The Amazon turned on her heels so that she faced the queen. She placed her hands behind her back. "I do not understand."

"I'm concerned about you and the Conqueror." Gabrielle tried to read the automaton's cool features.

"Now that you know about your past with her, I worry about how you will act around her."

Seven of Nine remained stoic and calm. "I will not endanger the relations, my queen."

"And what of your emotions?" the bard countered.

"They are irrelevant," the Amazon fought.

Gabrielle folded her arms and gave a doubtful look. "The loss of your family that's partially due to the Conqueror... I find it hard to believe you feel nothing."

"It was many seasons ago," the automaton logically stated.

"I lost mine many seasons ago too," Gabrielle reminded. "But if I were to meet the warlord that killed and enslaved my family... I would want to kill him."

Seven of Nine remained quiet and still for a beat. Then she argued, "However you would not because it is not who you are."

Gabrielle sighed deeply because the automaton was right. She dropped her arms and tested, "And who are you when you meet the Conqueror?"

"I am Anke of Cirra," the automaton stated, "And I am Seven of Nine." She bowed her head some and looked deeper at the queen. "I am governed by my logic, my queen therefor the emotions I often feel are well controlled."

"And that doesn't work forever," the bard muttered.

"Perhaps," the automaton remarked. She straightened up and honestly declared, "What has happened between the Conqueror and I will remain between her and I. You nor anybody else can cease my resentment until I discover peace with it."

Gabrielle had thin lips as she seriously thought about Seven's words. She knew it was true, and she was impressed that Seven understood it already. She had to admit that many people didn't give her credit for understanding herself. "Alright," she started.

Seven of Nine took a deep breath at the simple word.

"I trust you," Gabrielle explained, "to not endanger the relations. I'm not concerned there." She tilted her head back some and watched Seven's face. "But I'm asking you to either confide in me or Andra... even Ephiny if you feel you need to discuss anything. Is that clear?"

The Amazon nodded then promised, "I will comply, my queen."

"Thank you." Gabrielle felt some relief. She then nodded back towards the camp. "Let's head back." She started a slow walk.

"May I ask why you take special care with me when you do not for the others?"

The bard was caught off guard by the blunt question. She blinked then glanced up at the Amazon. "I guess I do, don't I?" After Seven raised her metallic eyebrow at her, Gabrielle considered it. "I guess I feel I can relate to you... to having your life all but destroyed. Then you're given a second chance." She came to a stop and looked at Seven. "I want to see that your second chance was as amazing as mine."

"Why do you concern yourself with something that trivial?" the automaton questioned.

The queen lightly grasped the automaton's arm. "Because it makes all the difference in the person." She then softly smiled and added, "And you deserve it, Seven." She let go and continued to the walk back to camp.

Seven of Nine stood still and whispered, "Indeed." She moved her legs into a wide stride so she could catch up. She said nothing nor did the queen. She and the queen reentered the camp, and Seven continued her guard shift. Hers was the longest because she required the least amount of sleep.

Eventually, everybody settled back into their furs. Seven of Nine remained in the camp and watched over the fire. She occasionally left the camp and checked the surrounding area for any problems, but she found nothing. It wasn't until four candlemarks before dawn that she shook Ephiny awake. Once Ephiny took up shift, Seven had some needed rest.

By dawn, Ephiny knelt down beside the queen. She had a moment to watch the bard's calm, peaceful features. She was about to stir the queen.

"Yes, Ephiny?" the groggy queen muttered from under the blankets.

Ephiny softly grinned. "It's dawn."

The bard groaned and murmured, "Another candlemark." She tugged the fur back over her head.

"You don't want to be the last up, my queen." Ephiny chuckled at the heavy sigh from the queen. "I'll get breakfast started."

"Thanks, Eph." Gabrielle pushed the fur down and turned her head towards the campfire. She watched Ephiny prepare breakfast for everybody. She released a small yawn then sat up in her bedroll. She started by first getting her boots on then lacing them up slowly. Next, she put her sword on her back and tucked her ivy dagger into its home in her boot. She then rolled up her bedroll and furs so that they could be stowed away later.

Eventually, the entire camp was buzzing between the Amazons and the hoplites. Everybody ate a quick but warm breakfast thanks to Ephiny. Then it was time to tack the horses and load up the supplies. Last, Seven of Nine made sure to douse the campfire, and she was the last one to mount her horse.

Queen Gabrielle direct her horse, Torqueo, to go over to Tracker. "Lead the way."

Tracker clicked his tongue at his horse then tapped his sandals. The other hoplites followed him immediately.

Gabrielle signaled for the Amazons to follow, but she headed the group. She tapped her horse's side and hurried up so she could ride next to Tracker. Once at his side, she asked, "How long will it take?"

The hoplite ducked under a low tree branch then answered, "Hopefully we will make it tonight, but it will be late."

The queen nodded. She decided to settle into her saddle for the long ride. She now had time to contemplate what exactly could be going on with Xena. She figured it had something to do with the Thrace Nation or at least she was fairly sure of it. She didn't like how Tracker pulled out the card about allegiance and that she and her Nation were under rule and orders. Later, Gabrielle would need to have a talk with Xena about it and hopefully it wouldn't lead to a fight. Gabrielle couldn't imagine how their friendship and political relations would tie together when they technically were not allowed. She just hoped that their friendship wouldn't crack and break apart due to politics.

To be continued.