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**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.

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

## **To Fight for What is Mine**

by Red Hope

## **Chapter 6**

"We should make camp soon," the Conqueror suggested to the Amazon Queen.

Gabrielle glimpsed at the sun, which wasn't far from the western horizon off in the distance in the rolling landscape. Just to her right though were the beautiful Rhodope Mountains that they had to go around to make it to the Thrace Nation.

Xena glanced behind her horse and noticed the hoplites and Amazons were certainly worn from today's ride. Although she suspected despite Prostig's ridged manner that he was worn too. She twisted back in the saddle and looked at her friend. She realized how Gabrielle was captivated by the Rhodope Mountains.

"Did you ever hear the story about the Rhodope Mountains?" the bard softly inquired.

"They're named after Queen Rhodope," Xena simply replied.

Gabrielle focused her eyes on Xena. "She was queen of Thrace and her husband was Haemus. They say Haemus was very vain and thought highly of himself and his wife. He was brazen enough to compare himself and Queen Rhodope to Zues and Hera."

Xena chuckled, but she didn't cut off the bard's story.

"Zues and Hera were furious... especially Hera," Gabrielle continued. "They were so offended that they turned the couple into mountains."

"The Rhodope and Haemus Mountains," Xena agreed.

"But that's," Gabrielle mentioned, "how Ovid told the story at least." She noted the ruler's now raised eyebrow. "A Roman poet that wrote the Metamorphoses... I had to study it at the academy."

Xena wistfully smiled at the mention of the bard's education at the famous academy.

"You think we'll be safe making camp out here in the open?"

The ruler sighed because she didn't much like the idea, honestly. "We don't have much choice. We either break for camp or else keep traveling through the night." She lowered her voice now. "I don't think the masses will be too keen on an all nighter."

The queen dared to look back at her Amazons and the hoplites. She could tell they were worn from the ride, and she had to admit she was tired. "Well," she started as she turned back in her saddle, "we better find some decently flat land."

The ruler agreed, and she already had a location in mind. She recalled the landscape fairly well despite it'd been many seasons since she was last here. But she'd made sure to refresh her memory by looking over a map before they left the Greek camp back in Pella. By her calculations, she figured they'd make it to the Thrace Nation in four days.

"Aren't we close to a village?" Gabrielle considered her memory about this area. She too had memorized a map prior and tucked it away in her saddlebags. "Komotini."

Xena nodded at the village's name. "We'll probably be near it tomorrow night."

"You think we should stay there tomorrow?"

The Conqueror craned her neck and distantly replied, "Perhaps." She tugged on Argo's reins to go off the dirt road and onto the grassy, barren landscape that surrounded them. "This way."

Gabrielle signaled everybody to follow her and Xena off the road. "We're breaking for camp," she loudly called to them, and she heard murmurs of relief.

The Conqueror guided the large group to a flat hilltop that was very wide and open except for two olive trees that had grown in a twisted shape. She halted her mare and turned in her saddle to look at her hoplites. "We'll setup camp here. Dekadarchos, we'll need a corral built for tonight."

The dekadarchos, who was the commander of twenty-five, bowed his head and replied, "Right away, my liege." He then focused on his task to bark out orders.

Queen Gabrielle signaled for her Amazons to dismount, which she did herself.

The Conqueror remained on her horse, who softly whined and huffed. "I'm going to ride down the road a bit further. I want to check on something."

Gabrielle nodded. "I'll get things taken care of here."

Xena tapped Argo's sides and headed back to the road. Once on the road, she urged her mare into a full gallop.

The queen ordered her Amazons to get the supplies off the horses and ready a camp. She instructed for there to be four campfires. She sent a few Amazons off to collect kindle, which was most vital with nightfall coming soon.

The entire group hastily worked to prepare an overnight camp and before the sun fully set. The first two tasks completed were a temporary corral for the horses that a group of hoplites built. The hoplites had brought along stakes, a few hammers, and strong rope to enclose the corral. Prostig and two other hoplites took care of driving the stakes down then the ropes were strung along. Shorty, the hoplites' and Amazons' horses were taken into the corral for the night. Then just as the sun kissed the horizon, three of the four campfires were burning brightly and produced plenty of heat for the night.

Gabrielle was beside Ephiny, and they were figuring out tonight's meal. Gabrielle glanced over her right shoulder in the direction that Xena had rode off. She worried about what was keeping Xena, but she delayed from doing anything too haste.

"I think we should do the soup, jerky, and finish up the bread," Ephiny offered.

The queen nodded. "Is there some cheese still left?"

"I think so. We outta finish it as well."

"Alright." The bard patted her friend's shoulder. "See to it." She had her staff in her right hand. "I'll be right back." She headed away from the camp and aimed for the road.

"Be careful," Ephiny hollered, but Gabrielle waved her off in response. She sighed and shook her head. "Stubborn." She went back to her task at hand to get dinner ready.

Gabrielle found the road, yet she looked back at the camp that glowed in the last of the sun's bright, red light. She sadly smiled at the beautiful sunset that washed shades of red and orange across the sky. She tapped her staff once on the road then walked down it in the direction Xena had disappeared.

The Amazon Queen walked for awhile, but she soon heard a horse trotting down the road and huffing heavily. She naturally assumed it was Xena and called her friend's name. She was none surprised when the golden mare formed several paces ahead of her.

"You shouldn't be out here alone."

Gabrielle shrugged then grinned. "The same could be said to you."

Xena stopped Argo. She swung her boots out of the stirrups and dismounted easily. Her cape rustled behind her, but she took the reins over her horse's head then came up to her friend.

"Find anything interesting out here?"

The Conqueror took the bard's side and started a slow walk back to the camp. "Just a lot of nature."

The queen laughed and flashed a smile at her friend. She was actually relieved to have these next few alone moments with Xena before they were back at the camp. "I'm nervous," she confessed.

"About the trip," Xena concluded. "Anything specific?"

The bard felt the small incline on the road as they went uphill. "Just... everything, really." She peered up at Xena but tried to elaborate. "I've never met Cyane... I hear she's amazing."

Xena gently placed the flat of her palm against Gabrielle's midback. "She's not quite a Queen Gabrielle."

The bard faintly flushed, but she imagined the approaching darkness hid it. "And now there's the added pressure to help you with the relations." She suddenly stopped and turned to her friend. "I mean what if I can't help you convince Cyane to join Greece?" She raised her left hand, palm up. "Everybody says I have a way with words and could persuade a cow to lay an egg."

Xena unexpectedly laughed but at Gabrielle's joke and the mental image. She cleared her throat, yet she still had a faint grin. "I think you're putting too much pressure on yourself, Gabrielle."

"Right." The bard lowered her hand to her side again. "As if you asking me to stop in Pella first to pick you up isn't enough to convince me this is my job to make these relations happen."

The Conqueror went more serious and developed a frown.

"I'm not saying I don't want to help," the bard rambled. "But you know how I am, I just get a little freaked out that-"

"Gabrielle," Xena cut off. She placed her hands on the bard's shoulders just to get her to slow down. "You're right... I do know." She squeezed her friend's shoulders in hopes it'd soothe her. "And maybe I shouldn't have asked so suddenly... I didn't give you time to prepare."

"Oh I'm getting prepared during this little six day jaunt," the queen joked but neither her nor Xena laughed. She slightly developed slumped shoulders and seriously asked, "What will you do if Cyane refuses?"

The Conqueror imagined Gabrielle was thinking war, which would cause all the other Amazon Nations to rally against her. And those Nations, except for Cyane's, were now apart of Greece and worked under the polis, under her rule. But Xena knew that if she betrayed them that they would certainly turn on her. Such an event would tear apart Gabrielle and Xena in an instant, and they would be on opposite sides.

"The Thrace Nation is on the border practically... I would leave them be," Xena honestly replied. She

noticed some weight lifted off of Gabrielle's shoulders. "I'm not going to start up a civil war with the Amazon Nations."

Gabrielle bowed her head and released a breath that seemed to expel some stress.

Xena hooked the bard's chin with her index finger and tilted the bard's head back. She carefully studied Gabrielle's features. "I'm not going to put you and I in a position that we're forced to be enemies."

The bard licked her lips then raised her left hand. She took Xena's hand into hers, and she lowered her voice when she spoke. "I hope Artemis doesn't hear this... but I would chose you over the Amazons."

Xena sadly smiled at the confession, and she felt how powerful those words sunk into her heart. "I know you would," she honestly replied, "but you wont have to make that choice. I wouldn't let that happen."

Gabrielle squeezed the ruler's hand and whispered, "Thank you."

"Come on." The Conqueror continued the walk back to the camp. She had Argo's reins in her left hand, and surprisingly she still held Gabrielle's hand with her right.

The bard noticed it too, but she didn't dare say anything. "I'll do what I can to get Cyane... to lay an egg." She and Xena chuckled together.

Xena smiled at her friend and commented, "I'm not worried." She briefly listened to Argo's hooves clip clop on the road.

"Xena?"

"Hmmm?"

Gabrielle tilted her head to the side and glimpsed up at her friend. "Does Cyane know you killed that shaman?" She tried to recall the evil shaman's name.

"Alti," the ruler supplied. "And I'm not sure. The best person to ask would be Yakut, but I suspect Cyane knows."

"I'm betting Cyane wasn't too keen on Alti."

"Mmmm." Xena looked at her friend. "I think Cyane was more willing to get rid of Alti than me."

Gabrielle considered that information then asked, "Do you think Cyane thought she could help you if Alti hadn't gotten to you?"

"Possibly." Xena spotted the camp just ahead but off to the left. "You'll have to ask her."

Gabrielle actually decided she needed to talk to Yakut about it more. She suspected that Yakut knew a lot about the history. Gabrielle stepped off the road, and she let her hand slip out of Xena's now that they were close to the camp.

Xena didn't comment on it, but she had to agree that nobody needed to see it. She, like Gabrielle, wanted to keep things quiet for as long as possible. Although she would bet her month's wage that Solari, the Gossip Queen, was doing everything in her power to definitively conclude whether she and

Gabrielle were a couple.

And it seemed that Gabrielle was reading the Conqueror's mind about the Gossip Queen. "Hey, Xena?"

"Yeah?"

The bard had a devilish tone. "I need your help with something, later. It has to do with a certain Gossip Queen."

The Conqueror's eyes suddenly lit up at the prospect. She was never the one to refuse such tricky, which she could tell was Gabrielle's intent. "Count me in," she swore. She recalled the fact that she needed to get Solari back for the comment moons ago about how Xena's luck would run out. It was a remark Xena had overheard from Solari when Xena was trailing her and two others while they were in search of Gabrielle in Amphipolis.

Gabrielle flashed a grin at her friend and promised, "We'll catch up later about it." She brushed Xena's arm with her fingertips then separated from the ruler once they were in the camp.

The Conqueror headed over to the corral to get Argo settled for the night. Once she came back, she was pleased to find that dinner was almost ready. She also spotted the bard inspecting the dinner to make sure it was done correctly. It made Xena grin to herself.

Soon enough the entire group was spread out among the four campfires and enjoying the hot dinner. And tonight was a bit different than the last two nights because before the hoplites and Amazons sat separated. But tonight the group mingled better and seemed to become more accustomed to each other's company. By the time dinner was over, the night's chill was apparent so everybody remained rather close to the campfires.

Xena had organized a rotational watch that comprised of three guards at a time. She mostly had hoplites rotating through the watch, but Gabrielle insisted that at least one Amazon should also be included. Ultimately two hoplites and one Amazon kept watch throughout the night. But tonight it remained rather quiet besides the passing, stray animal or an occasional horse whine.

In the morning, the group were roused and proceeded to devour a fast breakfast that consisted of a mix of fruit, bread, and a heavy trailbar that was common in the Greek Army. The Amazons, however, couldn't fathom eating, what they considered, a tree branch so they skipped the trailbars and ate extra fruit. About two candlemarks after sunrise, the party mounted their horses and went back to the road for the continued journey to the Thrace Nation. The ride was mostly quiet besides the small conversations amongst the group. But close to midday, Xena made an unexpected detour off the road and headed east towards the Rhodope Mountains.

"Where are we headed?" the Amazon Queen softly asked. She was slightly bent to her left in her saddle, closer to Xena.

"I want to make a quick stop," Xena merely replied. She glanced at the bard then added, "You'll see."

Gabrielle decided not to argue and would just wait. She was rarely ever concerned about Xena's plans because the plans naturally revealed themselves. Besides the fact that she wholly trusted her friend.

Xena followed an unmarked, unseen path that took them closer to the mountain range. She steered the party across a small stream that the horses had to leap across. She then guided them up a twisty ridge

that leveled out to a plateau.

"This way," the Conqueror ordered everybody. "Stay single file." She headed for a cave mouth that was placed into the side of the small mountain's next level. She halted Argo just near the mouth then ordered, "Let's break here for a little bit."

The hoplites and Amazons dismounted despite they were both confused and curious about the Conqueror's plans. They at least would give their horses a small break after the hike up the ridge.

Gabrielle came up to her friend and confusingly asked, "Is there a point to this?" She noted the ruler's bemused expression.

"Besides the charming view." The Conqueror turned on her heels and held out her arms to the amazing view back towards the road.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and remarked, "Really, Xena. You're rarely romantic."

Xena dropped her arms and turned to her friend. "I rarely am, am I?" She gingerly lifted the bard's quill necklace with her fingertips. She then grinned.

The queen ignored it, walked away, and her quill necklace fell to her chest. She went around Argo and curiously studied the dark cave's mouth. "What's in there, Xena?" She knew her friend.

The Conqueror chuckled and folded her arms because indeed Gabrielle had the right idea. She looked over her right shoulder and called, "Cyril?"

Cyril, the dekadarchos, hurried over to his leader's side. "Yes, my liege?"

"Queen Gabrielle and I are going to take a tour of the cave." From the corner of her eye, she noticed how Gabrielle keenly listened in on the conversation. "I want you and the men to wait here. Keep an eyes on things."

"Of course, my liege."

The Conqueror then went to the Amazon Queen's side. "Do you mind asking Seven of Nine and Andra to join us? We'll need their help."

The curious bard furrowed her eyebrows briefly but replied, "I'll get them." She went back into the entanglement of horses, hoplites, and Amazons. She found the automaton and blacksmith.

Meanwhile, the Conqueror gathered up two empty, leather satchels that she had rolled up in her saddlebags. She then fished out a set of flintstone and waited at the mouth. She handed Gabrielle the two satchels and instructed, "Wait here a beat." She disappeared into the darkness of the cave.

Andra edged closer to her blood sister. "What's this about?"

Gabrielle shrugged and casually remarked, "We're going caving." She wasn't surprised when a firelight appeared from in the cave followed by another one. She placed her free hand on her hip and tried to lift her eyebrow at Xena, who returned with two lit torches.

"Andra?" The Conqueror offered the blacksmith a torch.

Andra took it from the ruler.

"Follow me," Xena ordered. She headed into the cave, and she sensed the bard at her side again. "Be sure to watch your head... there are some low spots."

Seven of Nine remained behind the queen and ruler, but she was at Andra's side. She had excellent eyesight even in the darkness. She scanned about the interior of the small cave, but she didn't see or feel any danger. She tried to hypothesize why the Conqueror wished to come in here.

"These caverns branch off in many directions," Xena remarked. "There's rumors that a river flows just under this cave and goes all the way to Byzantium." She paused. "I have not seen it myself."

"That would be incredible," Gabrielle murmured.

"Mmmm," Xena softly agreed. She spotted the fork just ahead, and she went to the left. "Stay close to your right." She suddenly grabbed Gabrielle's arm and pulled her to the right wall. "Everybody stop," she softly ordered. She'd almost forgotten this part.

"What is-" Gabrielle lost her words because Xena placed her hand over her mouth. She remained silent though once Xena removed her hand.

The Conqueror slowly extended her right hand that held the torch.

Gabrielle started to squeal, but she bit her lower lip, turned her head, and shut her eyes. She instantly felt her heartbeat accelerate because of what the torchlight revealed.

Just ahead of the women was a wide open space, but it was the ceiling that was worrisome. There were several large stalactites that hung down in random spots. But then from that were countless large, brown bats, who clung from the ceiling. A few bats squeaked and swung because of the brief torchlight.

Seven of Nine slotted her eyes at the winged creatures and murmured, "Chiroptera."

"Take it slow," Xena whispered to the group. She certainly didn't feel like being covered by what she considered to be winged rats. She quietly went forward and entered a new tunnel. She waited to make sure everybody else made it safely.

Gabrielle did a brief squirm after having such a close encounter. "Blah." She brushed her arms like she could feel the bats there. "Thanks for that early warning," she shot at Xena.

The Conqueror coyly smiled and shrugged. "I wasn't sure if they'd be there still." She then nodded down the tunnel and continued the trip.

The bard huffed, but she still followed anyway. She just hoped there weren't anymore surprises.

"So exactly where are we going or looking for?" Andra questioned.

Xena glanced back at the blacksmith and answered, "Something I tucked away awhile ago. I've been missing it." She started to slow down because she needed to jog her memory. She slightly turned to Gabrielle and silently handed over the torch. She went to the right wall.

The Amazon Queen stood behind the ruler and provided some light from the torch.

Andra stood nearby and offered additional light.

Xena had her hands on the smooth wall. She slid her hands up and down then slowly walked to her left. She knew it was about eye level. Then Xena's nails hooked into a small indent within the rock. She proceeded to run her nails straight up, and her nail dug out some dirt.

Gabrielle curiously watched, yet she was making some guesses on what Xena may have done long ago. She back stepped when Xena backed up a few steps.

The ruler extracted her steel sword and quickly cut an 'X' into the wall with the tip of her blade. "X marks the spot." She sheathed her sword then turned to the group. "Seven, do you mind knocking a hole right where I marked?"

The automaton slightly narrowed her eyes, but she glanced at her queen for confirmation.

Gabrielle faintly nodded her agreement.

Seven said nothing but stepped up to the 'X' marker and briefly gauged it. Then Seven lifted her right hand and fisted it, which made her steel markings on her knuckles reflect the torchlight. She pulled back then swiftly drove her fist into the center of the marker.

Suddenly dust and rock spewed around and past the automaton. Xena, Gabrielle, and Andra had to twist around then they coughed a bit too. Just as Gabrielle turned back, she heard heavy stones falling down in front of Seven.

Seven quickly worked to pull back more stone with her bare hands. She'd removed all the stone until a perfect square opening was revealed. She stepped back, looked at the Conqueror, and asked, "Sufficient?"

Xena glanced at the dark opening then back at the automaton. "Very." She knew the single word would rate high with the automaton. She returned to the opening and her hand disappeared into the hole.

Gabrielle moved closer and curiously peered over her friend's shoulder. She tilted her head when a scraping sound came from the hole.

The Conqueror revealed a small, wood box that had a latch on it. She had her hand on a leather handle that was nailed into the side of the box. She removed the box from the hole and knelt down with it. She set it down on the ground and inspected the lock on it.

Gabrielle teased, "Forget the key?" She caught Xena's grin.

"It's somewhere." Xena patted her leather hips and sides as if she had pockets. She then pretended to recall so she reached between her bodice and found the key.

The Amazon Queen grunted and taunted, "What else is in there?"

The Conqueror had the key in the lock, but she hadn't turned it. She peered up with hooded eyes at the bard and shot back, "There's not much room for anything else." She focused back on the chest and popped the lock open.

Andra came closer to the Conqueror's backside and raised the torch above the ruler. She peered over

the Conqueror's broad shoulder and instantly metal reflected back at her. "By the gods," she murmured.

Gabrielle studied the box full of drachmas. "I thought pirates buried their treasure on islands?"

Xena picked up a drachma and lifted it up. She dropped it back in the box then looked up at Gabrielle. "I'll need you to put this money in the two bags... evenly distribute it." She stood up and went back to the hole again.

Seven of Nine took the torch from the queen.

Gabrielle then squatted down, grabbed the box, and pulled it over to herself. She glanced up at Xena's back and asked, "There's another in there?"

"No." Xena stretched her arm much deeper into the hole this time. "Something worth more than drachmas." She scrapped her fingertips around in the hole then she hit it. She quickly grabbed it before it rolled away.

Seven of Nine was off to the side, near Andra. She gradually arched a metallic eyebrow at the scroll that Xena pulled out of the hole.

Gabrielle finished spreading out the drachmas in the bags, drew them tight, pulled the flap over, and tied it down. She let the bags sit on the ground and stood up. "What's the scroll?"

The Conqueror was studying the closed scroll but looked at the bard. She sadly smiled but came over to the bard's side. She stood next to Gabrielle and proceeded to untie and open the scroll. She carefully let the bottom wooden roller go down to reveal striking handwriting.

Andra and Seven shifted over and anxiously tried to figure out what was on the scroll.

"Xena," the bard breathless let out after she read the title at the top of the scroll. She hastily looked up at her friend with wide eyes. She had a stricken face.

Andra had knitted eyebrows and asked, "Isn't that... your handwriting, Gabrielle?"

Seven of Nine glanced at the blacksmith then to the queen. She waited for a response, but she reread the title on the scroll, which merely said 'Sins of Her Past'.

Gabrielle shook her head and stared in disbelief at the scroll again. "You kept... how did you... I thought it was lost." She touched her forehead, but she caught her blood sister's confused expression. "When Xena and I were kids... I use to write stories about Xena and I being older and being heroes. I'd written a few adventures while I still lived in Potidaea." She swallowed and studied the old, worn scroll that was only partially open. "This is the first story."

The Conqueror lowered the upper half then gingerly rolled the scroll up. "I found it on one of my trips back to Potidaea." She faded back to her memory of that day many seasons back.

It was Xena's first time back to Potidaea since Gabrielle was taken away. Xena had already spent time out on the seas as a pirate, but something brought her to Potidaea. Xena needed all her strength to go to Gabrielle's house, and it took far more to just enter the home. Once inside, Xena realized how the house had been left ransacked after the raiders like it was yesterday. Xena spent two days on the property, and she fixed up the interior of the house so that it didn't look destroyed anymore. Xena had happen upon

the scroll while she was cleaning up.

"I don't know what happened to the others," Xena mentioned. She sighed while she tied up the scroll. "I found this one under the dresser."

"Most likely it rolled under there," the automaton spoke up.

Xena picked up the wooden box with her free hand then shoved it back into the hole. She turned around and found Gabrielle was slightly shaken. She came over and lightly touched her friend's shoulder. "Let's go."

Andra came over and picked up a bag. She watched Seven take the other one. She and Seven followed the rulers back out of the cave.

Gabrielle was quiet and tried to comprehend what she just learned. She'd all but given up on her stories about the Warrior Princess because she thought they were just a silly girl's fantasy. Now perhaps that wasn't true considering the subject of her stories now held the first, original story about the Warrior Princess.

Xena stayed at her friend's side. She helped Gabrielle get past the sleeping bats then led the way back to the entrance. On the trek, she securely kept the scroll in her left hand. She sensed that the bard was emotionally shaken by the existence of the scroll, but she knew the talk would need to wait until later.

Gabrielle squinted at the bright sunlight once they were outside.

The blacksmith snubbed out the torch then set it back in the entrance of the cave.

Seven of Nine did the same then handed off the bag of drachmas to Andra. She headed back to her horse.

Andra stood aside and waited for the Conqueror to finish talking to the queen.

Xena stood in front of her childhood friend. She studied the scroll in her left hand then switched her focus to the queen. "I think you've been missing this." She held it out to Gabrielle.

Very slowly, Gabrielle raised her hand up, and her fingers wrapped around the rough parchment. She lifted her green eyes to her best friend. "Thank you, Xena."

Xena revealed a tender smile. "My pleasure... bard." She released the scroll and went to the waiting blacksmith.

Gabrielle, a bard from the Athens Academy of Performing Bards, felt the full weight of the scroll that had survived over time and still held the beginning of the Warrior Princess and her devoted partner. The bard clamped down on her rise of emotions that she felt by merely holding her childhood story that was safely tucked away by her childhood friend. Maybe the stories were not so silly after all.

The Conqueror just finished hiding away the bags into her saddlebags. She had to tightly rolled them up and bury them in the saddlebags. She had plans for the drachmas. "Alright," she called to everybody, "we're going to travel for another three candelmarks. We should then reach the outskirts of Komotini. We'll make camp nearby, and you'll be welcomed to visit the town." She paused and studied the faces of hoplites and Amazons. "I hope you don't mind ending today's ride early."

Several hoplites gave a cheer to the idea.

Xena faintly grinned then ordered, "Mount up." She patted Argo's rump then shifted up to the saddle.

Queen Gabrielle finished tucking away the scroll. She too climbed into the saddle and took Torqueo's reins into her small hands. She and Xena would be the last to make it off the mountain side because the party how to reverse back down.

Officer Cyryl pushed through everybody and took the front. He guided the group back down.

The Conqueror rode beside the quiet bard. She signaled Argo to get closer to the bard. "Are you okay?" She kept her voice low and allowed space between them and the rest of the party.

Gabrielle slightly drooped her shoulders then replied, "Yes." She brushed back her short bangs. "I just..."

Xena tilted her head and waited. She wanted to give the bard a chance to gather herself.

"I stopped the stories about the Warrior Princess after graduation," Gabrielle confessed. She bowed her head and watched the ground pass under Torqueo's hooves. "Occasionally I would try again, and it just wouldn't come back to me. I couldn't see the stories anymore... couldn't find the words." She freed her right hand and covered her chest. "I lost something." She patted her chest once then took the reins again.

"I understand," Xena truthfully revealed.

Gabrielle sadly smiled because she knew Xena did understand it.

"But," Xena softly confided, "the nice thing about something being lost is that it can be found again."

The bard slightly grinned at that and nodded. "It can be, can't it?"

The Conqueror smiled then winked at her friend. She didn't need to say anymore about the topic. She instead leaned to her right so she was closer to the bard. She noticed there were plenty of paces between them and the party. "I have a thought about tonight."

The Amazon Queen was intrigued and leaned in as if they were planning a conspiracy.

"We'll be near Komotini tonight." Xena had a devilish grin playing on her full lips. "We should take the... opportunity to have a dinner together. Perhaps do some shopping."

Gabrielle chuckled and doubtfully asked, "Now do you like to shop-shop, Xena?"

"Is Artemis a man?" the ruler joked.

"Xena!" The bard swatted her friend's knee.

Xena chuckled, but she shrugged. "I thought you'd like to go to the agora." She straightened up in the saddle. "What you say?"

Gabrielle shifted back in her saddle too. She toyed with her response because she could simply answer yes or no. Or she could test whether her friend was ready to step up to the next level. She decided it

was worth a try. "Are you asking me on a date, Xena?"

The Conqueror sensed her pulse quicken at the question, but she remained calm to the bard. "If I were, what would you say to it?" She instantly earned an annoyed look for it.

"Don't answer a question with a question," Gabrielle complained.

Xena chuckled at getting the bard stirred up. She became more serious but there was a warm glow to her eyes. "Yes."

"Oh," the bard softly murmured. She puckered her lips some.

"Well?" Xena prompted.

Gabrielle smirked and teased, "Sorry... I was merely basking in the fact that you asked me for a date."

Xena rolled her eyes, but she had a grin while she shook her head.

But Gabrielle become more serious and honestly answered, "Yes... tonight sounds wonderful." She certainly looked forward to an evening where it was just the two of them without any formality required.

The Conqueror nodded and left it there. She now mentally tried to recall what taverns were in the village, but it'd been some time ago. Regardless, she knew it wasn't about the quality of the food but the company tonight. She couldn't ignore the fact that she was excited despite she appeared to be relaxed.

Eventually the party made it back to the road that went north-east. The Conqueror and Amazon Queen went to the head of the party and led them the rest of the three candelmarks. Once the party made it to the outskirts of the village, the Conqueror picked out a perfect location that kept them plenty far but still only a short ride to town. Luckily, there was a small woodland that allowed for the party to hide away in it for safety. It would also make it easier for the horses to be tied up instead of building a corral.

The camp was setup about three candelmarks before sunset. Certain hoplites and Amazons announced they wished to go to the village for the afternoon but have dinner in the camp. Officer Cyrul took charge and allowed the hoplites to go to town for a visit. Most of the Amazons left to go to the village except for Ephiny, Andra, and Seven of Nine.

Andra decided she wanted to go for a short walk. She kindly invited the automaton, and she hoped it'd give her a chance to check on Seven. Luckily Seven agreed to join her.

Gabrielle just finished organizing her bedroll then she decided to find Ephiny. She knew that Xena was talking to Cyrul about them going to the village later tonight. And Gabrielle needed to tell Ephiny herself.

Ephiny was off to the side of the camp. She was chatting with Prostig and chuckled about something. She then smiled when the queen came up to her.

"Good evening, Queen Gabrielle," Prostig greeted.

The bard smiled at the burly hoplite. "How are you, Prostig?"

"I'm well." The hoplite crossed his muscular arms over his bronze chest. "Do we anticipate to be in the Thrace Nation soon?"

Gabrielle exchanged looks with Ephiny then answered, "I believe in two to three days. I think it'll depend on how early of a start we get tomorrow."

"Well, making camp tonight early puts us back some."

"But I think we needed it," Ephiny argued to the hoplite.

Prostig nodded slowly. He then dropped his arms and said, "I know you didn't come here to chat with me." He flashed a grin at the bard. "And I need to catch the Conqueror." He started off.

"See you, Prostig," Gabrielle called. She then came closer to Ephiny and casually leaned into her staff. "How are you feeling, Ephiny?"

The Amazon sighed and stepped back twice until she could lean against a tree. "I'm a little worn, but pretty good. I'm glad we decided to stop early today."

"I think it was a good idea," the bard agreed.

"So," Ephiny inquired, "what was in the cave?"

Slowly Gabrielle revealed a grin and needled, "Are you asking or is the Gossip Queen?"

Ephiny laughed and folded her arms over her bare stomach. "I'm asking."

Queen Gabrielle rested her right temple against her staff. "Xena had hidden away some drachmas in there."

"Hmmm... I wonder what she plans to do with them?" Ephiny watched Gabrielle's shrug, but she didn't press her curiosity.

The bard lifted her head. "I wanted to let you know that Xena and I are going to go into town later. We plan to have dinner... maybe do some shopping."

The Amazon pushed off the tree and came closer to the queen. "Just you two?" She developed a concerned look.

"Yes... just her and I."

"Gabrielle, that's really not sa-"

"Ephiny," the bard cut off, "we'll be fine." She then decided to pull some rank. "I wasn't asking permission... I was telling you."

Ephiny glowered at the remark. "I don't like it."

Gabrielle decided to not let it blow up. She leaned forward and gently patted her Amazon's taut stomach. "That's okay because I like it." She walked off without waiting for any response.

The Amazon stood miffed because she knew there was little she could do to stop her queen. She really

wasn't too concerned simply because the Conqueror would be with the queen, but still.

Gabrielle returned to her bedroll but knelt beside her saddlebags. She searched for her scroll that had her first Warrior Princess story. She pulled it out then sat down on her bedroll with her staff set next to her. She opened the scroll carefully and proceeded to reread the story. The next candlemark quickly passed for the bard while she read. Just as she came close to the end, the Conqueror appeared next to her.

Xena knelt down beside the bard. She glance at the scroll then at her friend. "Do you feel up to going soon? If we're going to go to the agora then we should get there before sunset." She now had a teasing tone. "That is if you want to see what you're buying."

The Amazon Queen chuckled and set the scroll into her lap. She studied her friend's soft yet strong features. "That sounds like a good idea. Are we going to ride in?"

"I'd prefer to walk," the Conqueror honestly answered.

Gabrielle bobbed her head. "Be easier than getting a stable for the horses." She shrugged and added, "And walk dinner off."

Xena smirked and tormented, "Always weighing the pros and cons."

"You really annoy me sometimes," Gabrielle casually mentioned.

Xena chuckled and offered, "You annoy me most of the time."

"Oh, is that why you asked me on a date?" the bard teased.

"Can you think of a better reason?"

Gabrielle leaned in and shot off, "Maybe because I'm hard to refuse."

Xena huffed and argued, "If you were so hard to refuse then why did it take me this long to ask you?"

Gabrielle became slacked jaw.

"Gotcha." The Conqueror was confident she won that round so she started to stand up, but she hesitated and added, "But I should have asked for a date sooner." She finally stood up and strolled off to get ready.

Gabrielle had a lopsided smile at the last comment. She sighed contently then suddenly hurried to get ready. She rolled up the scroll, tucked it away, and ransacked her saddlebags for her spare satchel she had somewhere. She wanted to take it along with her small purse of drachmas.

Soon the pair were ready to go and met each other on the edge of the camp. Xena slowly strolled up towards the bard, and she had a chance to take in the young queen. Gabrielle stood alert with her staff in her right hand. She still wore her deep red top, dark orange skirt, and black boots. She carried her sword on her back and her quill necklaces always shined.

At some point, the Conqueror had changed out of her usual wire armor and removed her cape. For tonight, she didn't want to wear what most people knew her by. She still wore her black leathers that had the skirt lower half, but instead she'd put on her bronze armor. The bronze armor itself was

strikingly unusual because of the swirling pattern and even her greaves and gauntlets matched.

And Gabrielle truly admired the attire on the ruler. She realized that it was the kind of outfit she envisioned the Warrior Princess adorning in the stories. She took Xena's side as they headed out of the camp. She adjusted the pack's strap on her one shoulder.

Xena guided them to the road. She noticed how quiet the bard was so she asked, "What's on your mind?"

Gabrielle tilted her head and asked, "I like your armor. I know I've seen it once before after the Battle of the Fates... but I just didn't have a chance to study it."

The Conqueror dipped her head at the compliment. She then revealed, "I had it special made, but I rarely wear it."

"Why's that?"

Xena remained silent for a few beats. She sighed. "I based the design off of M'Lila." She spotted the bard's confused look so she better elaborated. "M'Lila wore a top that had this design... it's Gallic."

"The pattern is very fitting for you." Gabrielle peered up at her friend. "You should wear it more often."

The Conqueror had a partial smile and murmured, "Perhaps." She then developed a sly grin and teased, "You don't prefer the cape?"

Gabrielle laughed and shook her head. "I just don't see the... relevance. I mean what does it do for you?"

"I don't look more menacing?"

The queen gave a skeptic look. "Uh, no."

Xena considered this and concluded, "That's because I don't scare you."

"So does that mean everybody else is scared of you?" Gabrielle tested.

"I am the Conqueror," Xena merely explained.

The bard considered her friend's defining words, and she now understood. "But to me... you are Xena." She gazed up at the woman she'd known for so long. "You're my best friend."

Xena had no response, but she merely smiled in return.

Gabrielle knew she'd made a good point about their relationship. She felt that no matter where her and Xena were headed in the future that they'd always have their friendship. Gabrielle had learned a lot about not just herself but about Xena. She especially realized how devoted and loyal Xena was not just to her but to their relationship. Many steps in Xena's life often were taken with Gabrielle in mind, somehow.

"You know what I miss," Xena's voice broke into Gabrielle's thoughts.

"Mmmm?" Gabrielle focused on the present again.

"Those little dumplings with the red stuff." Xena tenderly touched her friend's shoulder. "The ones your mother always made."

The bard unexpectedly laughed because she didn't expect what Xena told her. She chuckled a few more times then asked, "Really?"

"Rrrreally," the ruler admitted.

Gabrielle pondered this new information then grinned. "I do know how to make them."

Xena instantly lit up at this news. "Can you make those?" She squeezed the bard's shoulder in earnest. "Oh, please."

The bard giggled and covered her mouth to stop it. She cleared her throat after she dropped her hand down. "Okay I will the next chance."

"Yeah." Xena smiled happily and removed her hand. She already tried to fathom the taste of her favorite treat, but it'd been so long.

Gabrielle shook her head and bowed it some. She didn't realize her friend missed those so much. She lifted her head and spotted the entrance to the town. "Do you know where the agora is located?"

"I believe so." Xena guided them past the entrance and towards the agora as she recalled it.

The bard carefully studied her surroundings and not just out of interest, but to also be careful. She could never ignore the training that Eponin had taught her.

"Just ahead," the Conqueror mentioned.

Gabrielle lit up at the prospect of the agora and a chance to barter. It'd been many moons since she'd made it to any shops.

Xena noticed her friend's excitement so she teased, "Any plan of attack?"

The queen smirked and joked, "Shop them all."

The ruler softly laughed and decided to let Gabrielle lead their fate in the agora. She merely slipped her hands behind her back just as Gabrielle approached her first shop. Xena glanced at the shopkeeper and mentally wished him luck, the poor soul.

Gabrielle rummaged through the items, which were a mix of things such as clothes, housewares, and jewelery. But nothing really interested her.

Xena was at one table. She picked up a pair of boots, but she promptly lowered them back down. She quietly came up behind the bard and peered over her shoulder. "I like it."

The bard held up the silver arm bracelet. "It's pretty plain." She noted the round bands small etched marks that gave it a leafy texture to it.

"It's simple," the ruler argued.

Gabrielle twisted her head around and grinned. "You're simple."

Xena ticked off a back molar, but she quickly twisted on her boots' heels. "How much for this?" She had every intent to get Gabrielle for the earlier remark. And she knew this would do it.

The shopkeeper suddenly appeared beside the pair. "Oh that lovely piece is ten drachmas."

The Conqueror nodded then went to her hip where she had a pouch tied. "It sounds fair." She slightly hesitated because she knew the explosion would be any heartbeat.

"Ten drachmas!" Gabrielle instantly put the bracelet back like it was burning. "That is absolutely ridiculous." Suddenly her hand shot out and held Xena's hand still against her pouch. "There is no way in Hades you're paying that kind of money for..." She glanced at the bracelet. "A simple," she emphasized, "bracelet."

The shopkeeper quickly picked up the item. "This is well crafted, madam." He smiled proudly and held it on display to the protesting woman. "It's a very strong silver. And it's guaranteed to not green."

The Amazon Queen huffed and shifted on her feet some. She lowered her hand from Xena's finally. "My horse's bit is better crafted than that thing."

"But is your horse's bit sterling silver?" the shopkeeper argued.

Xena shrugged and stated, "I think ten drachmas is reasonable."

Gabrielle turned to her friend, and her eyes were almost on fire. "You're not reasonable, and you're not paying it."

"They're my drachmas," Xena refuted.

"I don't care," the bard snapped.

The shopkeeper smiled at the tall, dark woman behind the bard. "Ten drachmas, ma'am?"

Gabrielle spun back to the shopkeeper. "She's not paying for it... she's not getting it."

The shopkeeper frowned at Gabrielle then hopefully peered up at Xena.

Gabrielle saw the look so she imposed herself better. "You're going to at least sell it to her for two drachmas."

The shopkeeper was dumbfounded at the price and almost offended. But he posed his question to the taller woman. "I'll sell it to you for nine drachmas?"

"No," Gabrielle cut in again, "two drachmas."

The annoyed shopkeeper looked directly at the bard. "What are you? Her mouth piece?"

"Yes," Gabrielle definitively answered.

The shopkeeper peered up at the Conqueror for confirmation.

Xena shrugged and stated, "I do whatever she tells me." She then sweetly smiled.

Now, Gabrielle placed her left hand on her hip and leaned against her staff in a proud manner. "Two drachmas."

The shopkeeper glowered at the Amazon Queen. "Eight... that's my limit."

Gabrielle started to feel out the shopkeeper's real limit. "Three drachmas."

"Eight," he declared.

"Three."

"Eight," he snapped again.

"Three."

"Fine. Seven drachmas."

"I want three," Gabrielle shot back.

"Seven."

"Three," the bard repeated.

"Seven."

"Three."

"Six."

"Three."

"Six," the shopkeeper growled.

"Three," Gabrielle fired back. She had him talking really fast now.

"Six!"

"Ten then!" the bard fought.

"Four is my final price!" the shopkeeper snarled.

"Deal," Gabrielle accepted in triumphant.

"Deal!" The shopkeeper then realized Gabrielle's last offer, and he was too late. "Wait, no," he hissed. "You tricked me."

The bard chuckled and reminded, "You already accepted."

The shopkeeper was angry now and edged closer in a menacing manner.

Now the Conqueror was the one to impose herself before the shopkeeper. "I also kill anybody that disagrees with her." Her voice was low, and she had dark eyes that flashed at the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper suddenly paled and back stepped twice. "Four drachmas," he agreed.

Gabrielle nodded then peered up at her friend. "Four drachmas then."

Xena produced the money from her pouch and handed it to the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper quickly handed over the jewelry then innocently asked, "Bag?"

The bard snorted. "How much for that?"

"No that's alright," Xena insisted, and she took the bard's upper arm and hauled her off.

Gabrielle slightly stumbled, but she collected herself and left with her friend. She had the bracelet in her freehand, and she gave it a little toss. Then she held it out to Xena. "Here you go."

The Conqueror suddenly stopped in the middle of the busy street. She took the bracelet as she turned to the bard. She first freed Gabrielle of her staff and leaned it against her shoulder. Xena gingerly took Gabrielle's right arm, and she slid the bracelet until it passed Gabrielle's muscular bicep. Last, she squeezed it into place and handed the staff back.

Gabrielle slightly lifted her right arm and studied the new piece of jewelry. She slowly peered up at her friend and devilishly smiled. "The simple bracelet will always remind me of my simple friend."

Xena rolled her eyes and walked off.

The bard took gigantic steps to catch up to the fast ruler. She caught up and sincerely said, "Thank you."

Xena softened and smiled. "You're welcome."

Gabrielle came closer and quietly inquired, "Do we tease each other too much?"

Xena unexpectedly brought her arm across her friend's shoulder and jerked Gabrielle closer to her body. "Nothing I can't handle." She squeezed Gabrielle tightly.

"Oh... great." The Amazon Queen struggled to get out of the almost death grip. "Xena," she fairly warned.

"Let's go to this shop," Xena happily declared as if she really were excited. She yanked Gabrielle in that direction then suddenly released her.

"Gods damn it." The bard fussed to fix her messed up hair. She brushed it back a few times until it felt right. She huffed but approached the interesting shop that mostly had clothes. She immediately began to pick through the articles.

Xena separated and inspected the clothes too. She concluded that most of the items would just not fit her taller, larger built. But she figured Gabrielle would have much better luck. She then glanced over at the shopkeeper, who was a young woman.

Gabrielle lifted a red top that was rather soft and smooth.

"Is there a matching bottom half?" came Xena's husky voice.

Gabrielle instantly had goosebumps on her skin from Xena's deep timber. Briefly her eyes fluttered until it settled. "Um..." She lowered the top and searched for the matching half. She found it and held up the short skirt that had a black belt attached to it. She studied the square, silver ornaments sewn into the black belt.

Xena stood directly behind the bard, and her cool bronze gently brushed against Gabrielle's back. She stretched out her hand and felt the material. She noted the black trim that ran along the edges of the skirt and even the top. She bowed her head and murmured, "Try it on."

"Xena, I'm not sure how I look in red." Gabrielle licked her dry lips. She noted that the skirt was definitely short, especially compared to her current one.

"Try it on," Xena insisted. She lowered her head a little more so her lips almost brushed the bard's ear. "For me," she huskily whispered.

Gabrielle softly cleared her throat then uttered, "Alright." She picked up the top and turned to her friend.

The Conqueror stood tall before Gabrielle. She enjoyed the shaken features that Gabrielle showed because that meant Xena could impact the bard. A grin played on her lips, and she held out her hand.

Gabrielle wasn't sure why Xena held out her hand. She was still trying to control her body's reaction to Xena.

"Staff," Xena offered.

"Oh." Gabrielle became bashful, but she handed over the staff. She then escaped to the changing tent nearby.

The ruler chuckled deeply. She slowly wandered over to the tent and waited to see Gabrielle in the red attire. She had a keen instinct that her friend would wear it beautifully.

Gabrielle had a beat to catch her breath in the privacy of the tent. First, she set her pack off to the side. Then she took a few deep breathes and quietly lectured herself while she changed. "She's your best friend, Gabrielle." She sighed and muttered, "Who's really sexy, and you've had a crush on her since you were kids." She laughed sarcastically at herself. "She knows she's more than just playfully teasing you. And you've always wanted to go down this road."

The bard had the red skirt on already, and she adjusted the soft straps on her shoulders. She realized that the top was the same concept as her other one, but it did enhance her bust. She softly groaned and took a beat to straighten out her skirt.

"Well," the queen started, "at least my black boots better match this outfit." She then took a deep breath and stared at the tent flap. "I can do this... I don't look ridiculous." She breathed again and whispered, "She won't think I look ridiculous." She frowned as she walked towards the flap. "Please," she prayed and left the changing tent.

The Conqueror stood there patiently waiting for her friend. She gradually tilted her head to side as the shy bard appeared out of the tent. She showed a sly grin and openly admired the sharp red outfit.

Gabrielle took a few steps closer to the ruler. She held out her arms and asked, "What you think?"

Xena lifted her freehand and pointed her index finger to the ground. She proceeded to do a spinning signal.

Gabrielle sighed dramatically, yet she slowly started to rotate in her spot with her arms still held out. She came to face the ruler again, and she dropped her arms to her side. "It's not my color."

The Conqueror neared the bard, and she lowered her voice. "It's exactly your color." She had an appreciative grin and complimented, "You look amazing in it." She admired the soft blush to the queen's cheeks.

The Amazon Queen quietly asked, "It looks alright?" She observed the shine in the ruler's eyes that she rarely witnessed. She then pressed, "You think I should get it?"

"If you don't then I will get it for you."

Gabrielle chuckled but became a bit more serious. She leaned in and murmured, "You warm her up, and I'll get my stuff."

Xena arched an eyebrow and briefly glanced at the shopkeeper. She then scanned over Gabrielle and ordered, "And keep the new outfit on."

The bard just smiled and went back to the tent. She needed to put her other attire into her pack and get organized.

The Conqueror cornered the storekeeper and proceeded the initial price that would be easily talked down by Gabrielle. She didn't plan though on not getting the outfit for her friend. Soon enough Gabrielle arrived and quickly worked the price down to a reasonable amount that they agreed upon. The shopkeeper seemed to be a lot more pleasant than the previous one.

Afterwards, Gabrielle decided she was pretty hungry and asked Xena if she was ready for dinner. They agreed to head towards the street that had most of the tavernas. They either scanned over the type of people going in or the taverna's name. Xena and Gabrielle ended up in a little, busy taverna called the Pyros.

The Conqueror led her friend to a two person table that was set against a wall to the left. She took a seat across from the bard.

Gabrielle first leaned her staff against the wall then set her leather pack down under the table and sat down. She fiddled a little with the right strap of her new top.

Xena grinned and teased, "Self conscious?"

The bard leaned forward and dropped her voice down. "Tell me you didn't notice all the heads turn in our direction when we walked in here?"

"Did they?" The Conqueror glanced over her right shoulder and noted how everybody looked away from them. "I don't notice a thing."

Gabrielle huffed and leaned back into her chair. "You're use to it."

Xena softly laughed and casually leaned back in her chair. "I suppose." She then became more serious

when the barmaid arrived at their table.

"Good evening, ladies," the young woman greeted. "I'm Bridget. Tonight we're serving tyropita cheese pie, makaronia me kima, obeliskos, or pork gyros."

"Any appetizers?" Gabrielle inquired.

"Yes," the barmaid replied, "melitzanosalata or avgolemono soup."

Xena switched her focus to her best friend. She grinned at how Gabrielle was lit up and excited. She merely checked, "Melitzanosalata?"

Gabrielle quickly nodded at the idea. She was dying for some eggplant dip on pita.

"Melitzanosalata to start," Xena ordered. "And we'll each have the house wine."

"Very good." The barmaid then added, "I'll bring your drinks and get your entrée order." She hurried off.

"I haven't had melitzanosalata in a long time," Gabrielle mentioned. "You remember your mother's melitzanosalata? It was just the best ever."

Xena partially smiled at the memory of her mother. "It was very good." She then switched topics. "Do you feel like splitting a big obeliskos?"

"You think it's pork?" the bard checked.

"Most likely," the ruler agreed.

Gabrielle considered it a beat, but she nodded. "Obeliskos sounds good." She then grinned. "You think they have loukoumades? I could go for that." She chuckled at her friend's grin.

The barmaid, Bridget, returned to the table and dropped off the drinks. "Your melitzanosalata will be ready shortly. What would you like for dinner?"

The Conqueror looked up at the barmaid. "We'd like to split a double order on the obelisko."

"Great," the Bridget replied. She then explained, "It's pork tonight grilled with tomato, cucumber, and olives. Also it comes with pilaf."

"Sounds great," Gabrielle agreed.

"I'll put the order in then." Bridget dashed off again.

"Busy tonight." Gabrielle studied the crowd, but she looked back at her friend. "I'll be glad when we make it to the Thrace Nation."

Xena stretched out her legs but off to the right so she wouldn't cram the bard. She crossed her ankles. "We should be there in two or three days. Breaking early for camp today puts us back a bit."

"Not too bad though," Gabrielle argued.

"Mmmm." Xena picked up her mug and drank a sip of the light wine. She enjoyed the fruity flavor and took another drink.

"Xena?" Gabrielle had her friend's full attention on her. She honestly offered, "Thank you for saving my scroll for so long. I didn't expect to see it again."

The ruler set the mug back down and briefly studied it for a moment. She put together her reply then gazed over at the bard. "I know I made fun of you for the stories, but... I knew how much they meant to you." She lowered her eyes then mentioned, "After I found it in your room... I found a window back to when we were kids." She lifted her gaze again. "It was a way to remember you."

Gabrielle stretched out her hand and grabbed her friend's that rested midway. She squeezed tightly and sadly smiled.

The Conqueror returned the squeeze and smiled too. She then let go because she spotted the barmaid from the corner of her eye. She was already surrounded by the aroma of the appetizer.

"Enjoy," Bridget offered before she disappeared like normal.

Gabrielle hummed just at the smell of the food. "This beats the trailbars."

Xena laughed at the joke. She and Gabrielle then reached for a precut slice from the round dish.

"Hot," the bard complained. She blew on the slice then took a bite and proceeded to hum again. "This is really good." She decided the eggplant was just right.

The Conqueror too enjoyed the dish. She ate slowly, but she couldn't say the same about Gabrielle. She finished her first slice as Gabrielle was halfway through her second. She chuckled and shook her head.

"What?" Gabrielle knew Xena's soft laugh was because she was eating it so fast. "I'm a growing bard."

"Still?" the ruler teased.

"Please," Gabrielle muttered between her food. She shook her head at Xena's amused features. She polished off her third and final slice then rested back in her chair. She felt triumphant over the appetizer.

Xena ate her last slice and finished it with a drink of her wine. After she set her mug down, she asked, "How has your nation been doing?"

"Really well," Gabrielle replied. She was pleased that her friend asked. "We've been building a good relationship with the Centaurs."

"That's good to hear," the ruler agreed. "I need to finalize their integration into the polis."

"It'll go well," the bard promised. "They've changed a great deal over the generations... much like the Amazons." She then became quiet for a beat then mentioned, "That reminds me about something I wanted to ask you about."

The Conqueror gradually lifted her eyebrow and waited.

Gabrielle partially smiled at the look, but she leaned forward and crossed her arms on top of the table.

"You remember when we were talking about Gaia awhile ago? Like about the Great Oak tree on the temple doors and so on." After Xena nodded, Gabrielle continued to talk. "I had a chat with our priestess, Maired, about some of this. I've given a lot of thought about Gaia and whether or not the Amazons should worship her."

Xena now leaned back in her chair and carefully considered this idea. She stretched out her hand and toyed with her mug's handle. "Will you stop worshipping Artemis?"

"No not at all. I want the nation to worship both Artemis and Gaia, but I worry about how it'll be received." Gabrielle paused and tried to decipher Xena's attitude about the topic. "I can't be sure how my nation will react to the idea. Then there's the other nations that may react poorly to it." She hesitated but added, "And I worry about how the Greek polis will view us for worshipping a Titan."

"There are still a few priestesses and followers of Gaia," Xena reminded.

"But they're small pockets." Gabrielle shrugged. "And they seem outcasted... my nation doesn't need that."

"It is risky," the ruler agreed. "What did your priestess think of the idea?"

"Maired supported it," the queen answered. "But she agrees that it's risky, and she asked me to think more about it."

"Well," the Conqueror pointed out, "if your priestess supports it then that's your biggest hurdle."

Gabrielle tilted her head and considered that statement. And it was true because the priestess's blessing could make all the difference in her nation accepting the concept or not. She didn't have a chance to say anything more because the barmaid showed up with their dinner. She pulled back her arms just as Bridget placed an empty plate in front of her. "Thank you."

Bridget nodded. "I'll stop back in a bit."

Xena briefly watched the barmaid go. She adjust her plate in front of her, but she picked up a skewer that was loaded with vegetables and pork. She still considered Gabrielle's idea while she took a beat to push the food off the skewer.

"I really want to do it," Gabrielle told her friend. "You think it's a bad idea?"

The Conqueror set the skewer aside then looked at the bard. "I think it's a good idea, and it can be even better if you plan it out carefully." She seriously studied her friend. "If it can be done, Gabrielle then I suspect you're the queen to do it."

Gabrielle smiled at the compliment, but she slowly lost her smile. "A lot of people have confidence in me as queen. It's like I'm suppose to have some magical power over the nation, and I can get them to follow me to Hades and back."

"You inspire them, Gabrielle." The Conqueror picked up a square of pork and popped it in her mouth. She chewed on the tasty tidbit. "It's not much different than how I run my army. My hoplites would follow me to Hades and back if I asked them."

"And why is that?"

Xena picked up a slice of tomato but held it for a beat. "It's because they respect me." She put the slice into her mouth. "I use to think that fear was the same thing as respect. I figured if anybody feared me that they'd respect me."

"I thought you said everybody does fear you," Gabrielle pointed out from an earlier conversation.

"They do in a certain light," Xena agreed. "It depends on the situation and the person." She picked up another pork cube. "My army respects me, but they know I have limits... especially on patience."

"So they fear your limits then," Gabrielle concluded.

"They fear pushing my limits," Xena argued.

The bard chuckled and muttered, "I like pushing your limits."

Xena easily heard the comment. "Lucky for you, you can get away with it."

"No," Gabrielle debated, "lucky for me, you like me pushing your limits."

Xena laughed at that deduction and murmured, "Nice come back." She popped the pork into her mouth.

Gabrielle smirked, but she took a sip of her wine. She was pleased so far by tonight's events between her and Xena. She could feel much of their relationship mending and even developing.

Xena was munching on a couple of olives. She gazed off to her right and studied the people. She thought about how much she was enjoying her date with Gabrielle. Just the thoughts made her smile.

"What's that smile for?" Gabrielle quietly asked.

The Conqueror turned her attention back to Gabrielle. "You... tonight." She picked up another skewer after just finishing the contents on her plate. She proceeded to push the food off the skewer and onto the plate. "I forgot what it was like to just be myself."

"Too much playing ruler and conqueror huh?" Gabrielle also took another skewer. "You always liked to hide yourself from most people."

"Mmmm," the ruler agreed. "But I don't with you... I can't with you."

The bard had her head slightly bowed so she peered up. "I rather you not anyway."

Xena grinned. "I rather not either." She set her empty skewer aside.

"You know," Gabrielle mentioned, "I have noticed one thing about you, lately."

"Hmmm?"

The bard was about to respond, but she was stopped by Bridget's arrival.

"How is the food?"

"It's very good," the bard replied.

"Great." Bridget then asked, "Do you need more drinks?"

"I'm fine." Gabrielle then glanced at her friend.

"I'm fine too." Xena waited for Bridget to go then she looked back at the bard. "You were saying?"

Gabrielle devilishly grinned plus her eyes gleamed. "I've noticed these past days that you're as practically giddy as a schoolgirl."

Xena very gradually arched her right eyebrow at the statement. She then casually checked, "Giddy?" She lifted her eyebrow even higher. "How so?"

"Come on," the bard fought. "Admit that you're never this playful with anybody." She then picked up a pork cube and pointed it at her friend. "You're happy."

Xena shrugged then diverted her eye contact. She studied the people in the taverna and softly explained, "Everybody knows me as the Conqueror." She returned her attention to the bard. "They expect me to act as the Conqueror... I am to have no emotions except satisfaction and anger depending on the situation. All that people know me is by my conquests and my rulership." She gave a grin but it was weak. "I sometimes feel like the automaton."

Gabrielle tilted her head, but she sensed that Xena wasn't finished speaking so she held her tongue.

"But with you..." Xena picked up a tomato slice and held it still near the plate's edge. "I'm just Xena." She smiled at her friend, and she received one back from Gabrielle. "You know my past... you grew up with me. I may be different than when I was a kid, but I already know you only expect me to be myself." She lifted the slice to her lips but added, "How can I not be happy after so many moons of only being the Conqueror? I have my best friend again." She slipped the grilled, juicy tidbit past her moist lips.

Gabrielle nodded and bowed her head for a beat. She finished chewing on two olives she'd popped in earlier. She put her thoughts together. She peered up despite she still hung her head some. "I do understand. I can be myself to some extent with certain Amazons like Andra or Ephiny." She straightened up and locked eyes with her best friend. "But neither of them have what's always been between us."

Xena grinned at that truth. "Nobody will." She was confident in her deceleration.

Gabrielle chuckled and picked up a cucumber slice from her plate. "At least we agree." She thoughtfully ate her slice and considered some wandering thoughts in her head. "Do you think that we're just fated? I mean what if we didn't meet as kids... do you think we'd meet later on?"

The ruler tossed the idea around and replied, "I think so."

The bard grinned. "I think so too." She picked up her last pork square on her plate and promptly ate it.

"Although," Xena continued in a husky voice, "if we didn't meet as kids then you'd probably grow up to be this naïve, bumbling blond."

Gabrielle suddenly joked on her pork and proceeded to cough. She hastily grabbed for her wine cup and took a heavy gulp to clear her throat.

Xena chuckled a few times and remained rather smug.

The bard lightly patted her chest as she set her mug down. She then glowered at her friend. "You do realize on dates you're not suppose to insult your date?" She rolled her eyes at how Xena just grinned back at her. She shook her head and picked up another skewer. "I don't recall my Warrior Princess being this charming," she muttered.

The Conqueror's grin curled wider, and she reminded, "I can be very charming."

Gabrielle had finished pushing the food off the skewer. She slowly set it down because she was thinking then she looked up at her friend. "Yes, you can be, honestly." She then added, "And you're always thoughtful."

"Sometimes." Xena decided on one more skewer too. She picked up one from the small stack and proceeded to push the tidbits off it. "I learned to be very viscous overtime."

Gabrielle didn't seem concerned about the comment. She just shrugged and reminded, "With people who deserve it." She seriously looked at her friend. "You've always been very giving and caring with those that are loyal and love you. But those that cross you or harm the ones you love then yes you get vicious... you get protective. It's a simple concept with you."

"Is that so?" Xena arched an eyebrow.

The bard suddenly came up with a metaphor and explained, "It reminds me of a dog." She noted how Xena lifted her eyebrow even higher so she argued, "Not you but the concept." She waved her pork square in the immediate air then went into the metaphor. "A domestic dog is loyal... like Faolan was loyal to me. I know he loved me as much as I loved him. But a dog has fangs... has claws. And if you start to beat a dog, he may take it for a little bit, but he will bite back."

"He may never trust you again," Xena reminded.

"Probably not," Gabrielle agreed. "Much of that same concept applies with you." She then lowered her eyes and muttered, "I don't think it really applies to me though... I could be beaten to death before I bite back."

"That's why somebody like you has somebody like me."

Gabrielle focused back on her friend, and she genuinely smiled.

Xena returned the warm smile.

The barmaid suddenly appeared from behind Xena and asked, "Dessert, ladies?"

The bard breathed deeply at the idea of dessert now that she was so full.

"We have loukoumades tonight," Bridget informed.

Gabrielle now groaned and pitifully looked at Xena for help on what to do.

Xena briefly nibbled on her bottom lip but looked from Gabrielle to the barmaid. "Can we just get four?"

"Of course." The barmaid then picked up the center plate that had a skewer left. "I'll take these plates too." She grabbed everything up along with the skewers. "I'll be back shortly with dessert." She quickly left the pair.

"Gods I love loukoumades," Gabrielle mentioned. "Our cook in the nation really makes some good ones."

Xena softly laughed. "You're not going to get bouncy from eating these?"

"Please... two couldn't even get half a bounce out of me," Gabrielle joked. She then spotted Bridget coming back with them, and her eyes lit up.

The barmaid set the dessert down between the women then quickly left.

Without warning, Gabrielle's hand shot out and scooped up the round, gooey ball. She popped it into her mouth and happily hummed.

Xena blinked then looked down at the three left behind. She decided she better have one before they were all gone. She picked up the honey glazed treat and decided to bite into it instead of eating the whole thing at once like Gabrielle. She had to admit they were quite good too.

"Those are really good," Gabrielle declared after she finished her first one. She went for her second and last one. "We should have gotten more."

"You don't need it," the ruler warned.

The bard evilly laughed then popped the whole thing into her mouth.

Xena shook her head and took her last one too. She bit into it and savored the flavor unlike her friend.

Gabrielle finished off by drinking the last of her wine. "That was a really good dinner."

"It was," Xena agreed. She too finished her wine.

Bridget soon returned and reported the bill. She kindly took the drachmas from the Conqueror along with her tip. She wished the pair a good evening then went back to her other tables.

Gabrielle put her pack on but this time had both straps on her shoulders. She snatched her staff from the wall then proceeded to follow the tall, dark ruler out of the taverna.

The Conqueror deeply inhaled the cool night's air once she was outside. She hurried down the steps then waited for the bard to catch up. "Any other place you want to stop at? Back to the agora?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, I think I'm okay." She and Xena started to head to the main road that led out of the village. "Thank you for dinner, Xena."

"My pleasure," Xena honestly responded. "You enjoyed it?"

"Yes... very much so." Gabrielle then peered up and softly added, "And my date was even better."

Xena smiled and walked a bit closer. "I'm glad. Thank you for coming."

Gabrielle lightly touched her friend's forearm and returned the soft smile. She truly felt amazing tonight because her and Xena were simply spending time together.

The Conqueror guided them out of the village and down the moonlit road. She and Gabrielle remained quiet for a little while and enjoyed the walk together.

"Xena?" Gabrielle was a bit tense because of her pending words.

"Hmmm?"

"I never stopped loving you... not even for one heartbeat," Gabrielle confessed in a quiet voice. "I could never stop even if Aphrodite stole my heart away." She prayed she hadn't said too much.

Xena swallowed hard because her deeper emotions were stirred to life. She brought her right arm up and across the back of Gabrielle's shoulders. She pulled her friend in closer and emotionally murmured, "I know, Gabrielle." She pressed her lips against Gabrielle's temple and whispered, "I have a heart because you love me." She pulled back but kept her arm in place.

The queen managed her arm around Xena's waist, and she noticed they were walking slower. She took a moment to listen to her staff hitting the dirt road. She felt a certain peace in the silence that her and Xena shared.

The Conqueror unknowingly started to rub her thumb across the bard's shoulder. She listened to the various sounds that floated around them. And she noticed how her and Gabrielle walked the same pace.

Gabrielle estimated they were a bit less than a quarter of a candlemark from the camp. She almost wanted to stop and find a spot for them to sit and talk more. But she knew they needed to appear back in the camp before anybody worried. She was about to make another comment, but Xena's abrupt stop confused and worried her.

The Conqueror slotted her eyes at the dark road ahead. She grew very tense.

"What is it?" the bard murmured. She was released from Xena's grasp so she pulled her arm free. She then picked out the sound that may have alarmed her friend; it was galloping hoof beats.

"Who gallops at night unless they mean to be somewhere in a dangerous haste," Xena whispered. She went for her sword just to be safe.

Gabrielle tightened her grip on her staff, but she didn't place it into her left hand yet.

The horse's beats grew closer.

"Ho there," Xena called to the rider just to warn him. She then pushed Gabrielle off to the side of the road with her.

The horse's beats slowed, and the rider called, "Ho." He and his horse now developed in the moonlit because they were closer. "Who goes there?"

The Conqueror had her sword at her side. "We're just travelers. You, sir?"

The rider scanned the women up and down. "I'm headed to Komotini. Is it not far?"

"Just a short ride further," Gabrielle answered.

The rider looked to the blond, short woman then pointed out, "It's not fit to be out here at night, ladies."

Xena signaled the rider with her sword. "We're equipped... but thank you."

The rider nodded then tapped his horse's sides for a walk. "Safe journey then."

"You as well," Gabrielle called as he passed. She briefly watched him go then she and Xena continued down the road.

The rider forced his horse to gallop now.

The Conqueror glanced once over her shoulder at the rider then she focused on her walk back.

"Strange," Gabrielle muttered. "People do weird things like galloping in the dark... there's barely enough moonlight." Xena stopped suddenly again, and she went two steps further. She turned back to Xena, who had her head cocked to the side. Now she could tell Xena was far more tense than earlier. "Xena?" she said in worry.

"I don't hear the horse anymore," Xena uttered. She turned back in the direction the rider had gone.

"He's far away then," Gabrielle concluded.

"No," the ruler argued, "he stopped." Then she sharply looked up to the trees because of an unnatural creek noise above them. She suddenly surged with adrenaline at what may happen next. "Gabrielle, move!"

Gabrielle raised her staff, but just as she moved her feet they were taken out from under her. "Xena!" She was ripped off the ground and swooped up into the air.

The Conqueror hadn't expected the trap either, and she was hooked into a different net. She was on her back as she was hastily lifted into the air. But she spotted the two men that had a hold of the rope for the end of the net, and they fell to the ground as a counterweight.

"Xena," Gabrielle hollered in fear. She'd never been snared in a net trap and became frantic. She almost lost her staff in the process. She tried to get her footing but it was impossible in midair.

"Get the blond on the horse," a voice barked out.

Xena was already in action. She knew her sword would be too slow so she grabbed her chakram. She growled and swiftly cut her chakram through the net's heavy ropes. She gave out her battle cry as she fell out of the trap and came to the ground. She neatly landed just as the earlier rider returned at a full gallop.

The rider turned his horse some then yelled, "Get the Conqueror! Attack!" He backed his horse away.

The Conqueror still had her chakram in her left hand, and she glanced up at the struggling Amazon Queen. She then looked to her right and left as armed men emerged out of the surrounding woods. She bared her teeth and threw her chakram up towards a tree.

Suddenly the bandits charged the Greek ruler, but they made no yells or cries.

Xena inhaled deeply, sheathed her sword, calculated another heartbeat, and proceeded to do a high flip just as her chakram cut open Gabrielle's net. She twisted in the air, caught the bard, came at a tree trunk, pushed off it with her feet, and she landed behind the bandits.

Gabrielle was still shaken between the trap and Xena's amazing catch. She slid out of the Conqueror's arms and mentally focused on the problem at hand. She readied her staff and nodded at Xena's raised eyebrow.

The Conqueror took a step forward and stretched out her hand as the whistle came right at her. She caught her blurry chakram and swiftly hooked it to her side. She slotted her eyes at the bandits that came for her and Gabrielle.

Gabrielle repeatedly spun her staff rapidly just to gain focus. She stepped forward just as her opponents came at her, and she brought her staff's end up to a sickening smack into one opponent's chin. She proceeded to effectively fight her enemies.

Xena cut down one attacker and continued with the other five. She was fast and far superior with her sword.

The rider grew angry at the sudden change of tide. He looked up to the trees and gave a signal.

Gabrielle was wearing her opponents quickly, and she found holes in their defense. She took down another opponent, and she started to bring her staff around to hit another in his side. But she suddenly was slammed from above by a rock solid weight that took her face first into the ground. Her chest slammed into her own staff and caused immense pain to shoot through her.

The Conqueror glanced to see the fallen bard. "Gabrielle," she yelled. She was going to go for her chakram, but she didn't have a chance. She was suddenly hit from above too and taken hard to the ground. Then her four remaining opponents converged on her and proceeded to kick her erratically. She lost her sword in the scuffle and each time she tried to get up, she was beaten back down.

"Xenaaa!" Gabrielle struggled but her staff was locked into her chest, and she couldn't get her sword because of the heavy men that sat on her back. She fought against their weight, yet her hands were hastily tied behind her back. "Xena!" Then her ankles were also bound.

Gabrielle was relieved of the weight from her, but she couldn't move against her bonds. She became extremely frantic as childhood memories from being a slave washed over her. "Oh gods, no please." She was hauled up and taken to the rider on the horse. She was thrown on the back of the horse then lashed down by the same men. "Xena!"

"She's tied," a bandit ordered.

"Meet you there," the rider swore. He then spurred his horse off.

Gabrielle had a view of her staff in the dusty road. She then caught a brief glimpse of her best friend, who struggled to climb to her feet but was only beaten back down by almost a dozen men. She fearfully screamed, "Xenaaaa!"

**To be continued.**