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Violence: There is violence in this story.

Subtext: Any subtext becomes main text here.

Summary: The sequel to To Find What was Mine. It's been almost three years, Xena is now the ruler of southern Greece, and she sets her sights on northern Greece. Gabrielle now discovers herself at a crossroad when the Conqueror, her lost friend, begins her march north and closer to her Nation. Just when Gabrielle decides to seek out Xena, a warlord surfaces near the Macedonia Amazon Nation and threatens to spoil the subtle peace between the Amazons and Centaurs. Meanwhile the Conqueror must keep the Romans at bay before they breach the Greek borders, and her old hatred leads her into blindness.

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Started: April 25, 2007

Series 9: **Destiny of Mine** – Story #2

To Take What is Mine

by Red Hope

Chapter 12

King Cortese's army marched in a westerly direction down the main road that led to Aegae. At the head of the army, the king rode and with full pride on his magnificent black gelding. His golden cape flowed over the back of the horse and his gold plated armor shined brightly in the sun. Then the red, horse hair on the top of his helmet lightly fluttered in the breeze. At his side was a well sharpened sword in his black leather sheath.

Beside his horse rode the commander of the army, the stratègos, who was known as Aescalus. He was a fine man, who was well dressed in his bronze armor. He often kept quiet from idly chitchat as he was a

true, honorable warrior. His sunny blond hair could be bright by day and darkened to a light brown by night. He typically kept a stoic face and only laughed in the privacy of his friends.

King Cortese leaned to his right and gazed down at an accompanying soldier. "Bring the runaway slave." He straightened up when the soldier fell out of formation and waited for the army to pass. He needed to get to the rear where the jail wagon was located.

Aescalus shifted his horse slightly closer to the king's. "Something needs to be done about those Amazons."

The king kept his response low so the men wouldn't hear the talk. "We strip them of their leathers and dress them like normal slaves." He shrugged and further mentioned, "She'll think nothing of it."

"She does not favor slave owners," the stratègos reminded.

"Perhaps not, but she has a history of allying slave owners if she must." The king slightly grinned at his long time stratègos.

"What if she speaks to these girls?"

The king grunted and remarked, "We'll just have to keep the brats quiet." He then heard the soldier return.

"My lord, here is the slave you requested."

King Cortese adjusted the reins into his left hand. He peered down at the branded slave that strolled along side his horse. "What's your name, girl?"

Gabrielle kept her head bowed. "Kassandra, my lord."

"Where are you from, Kassandra?"

The bard licked her lips then softly replied, "I'm originally from Germania, but my... former master is in Aegae."

King Cortese was intrigued and questioned, "How did you come to Greece?"

"My village was attacked when I was a child. I don't remember much, but I was brought here to Greece." Gabrielle peered up at the ruler.

King Cortese, for the first time, saw the slave's amazing green eyes. He instantly fell for them in a heartbeat. "Well..." He cleared his throat then played with his goatee with his freehand. "If you treat me well, Kassandra I will return the favor."

Gabrielle gave a hesitant smile and replied, "I'll do anything you require, my lord."

The king was drawn in, and he leaned closer to the petite blond, who seemed too far for him. "We shall see then." He considered something then softly informed, "Tonight I require my slaves to entertain some guests." He licked his lips. "There will be a dance. Can you dance, Kassandra?"

"I am a fine dancer, my lord."

"Excellent." King Cortese showed a sly smile. "Then you shall join my slaves in the dance and serving." He tilted his head and mentioned, "You must talk to Petra. She will prepare you for tonight."

"Thank you, my lord." Gabrielle bowed her head again, and the soldier took her away. She was taken

back to the rear of the army, but this time she was loaded on a normal wagon where several women relaxed and talked along with a couple of men. They were all obviously slaves.

The Amazon Queen became comfortable in one, open spot in the wagon. She felt all the slaves look her over a few times, which didn't bother her in the least.

"So you're Cassandra?" a woman spoke first.

"I am," the bard replied.

"I'm Petra," the woman informed. She stood up and took a seat beside the newly joined slave. "Where you from, sweetie?"

"Germania," Gabrielle simply replied. She noted that Petra had a Greek name, but she was far from Greek. "How about you?"

Petra showed her bright white teeth in a smile. They showed more than normal because her skin was so dark. "Egypt."

Gabrielle had figured as much. "The king said I'll be dancing tonight."

Petra chuckled at the news. She stood up and came over to Gabrielle's side. She sat down and studied the new slave. "Just how good are you?"

The bard tilted her head then confidently stated, "I'm quite good." And it was true. Gabrielle was never the best dancer when she was younger, and her small crowning as princess reminded her of that time. However over the seasons the Amazons had taught her to dance and in many forms too.

Petra bobbed her head, then she patted Gabrielle's knee. "Wonderful. We need somebody like you."

The Amazon Queen slightly stiffened when she considered what she may have gotten herself into now. Why must she always bite off more than she can chew?

The day wore on quickly. Gabrielle spent the entire day listening to Petra's choreography for the dance tonight. Although Gabrielle was somewhat distracted by her young Amazons. She would discreetly glance over at the young Amazons and make sure they were doing okay. Then later a thought came to mind to Gabrielle; just who was this dance for anyway? She shrugged it off because tonight she'd certainly find out.

King Cortese halted his army about midday. He and his stratègos rode off with several guards to meet somewhere. They were gone for almost a candlemark, but they returned and ordered the army to march a half of a Roman mile. The army did so then were guided off the road and into a wide, open field that stretched past the horizon. There in the center of the field was another army that flew a very distinct purple flag and a lion's head.

Soon enough the Macedon Army made a neighboring camp to the Southern Greece Army. The flag that displayed the Star of Vergina was proudly flown from the Macedon camp. The young Amazon captives were quietly taken from their wagon and hidden into a tent, and that's when Gabrielle lost track of the girls. The Amazons were tied, gagged, and later they would be stripped of their leathers.

Queen Gabrielle was rushed to a slave's tent before she knew what was happening. Petra hurried to get Gabrielle out of her peasant clothes and into something more suitable for the dance tonight. She'd tossed a scanty, sheer outfit on the bedroll and told Gabrielle to quickly change. Petra wanted to practice the dance number a few times with the slaves before they were due to start.

The bard hastily changed into the long white skirt that was long on the right side but was short on the left side. It was cut on a diagonal and was quite sheer in nature. Then her top was a simple halter top that had a sky blue shade to it, but it left her stomach, arms, back, and shoulders bare. What added the sparkle to her outfit was the golden belly belt, gold arm bracelet, matching anklets, and finally her golden sandals.

Petra stood by the tent flap and clapped her hands to get the girls' attention. She called, "Let's hurry to the dining area." She stepped out of the tent and the six girls filed suit. She guided them to where the gigantic dinner would take place tonight.

The dining location was a large, open space that was being cluttered by lined benches. The head of the dining area was designated by a dais and two throne chairs that were basic beyond being well carved from dark wood. Then several tall torches were being driven into the ground, and they lined the benches on either side.

Petra started the dancers down at the opposite end from the thrones. She reminded the slaves what their positions were for the opening dance then afterwards the slaves would need to hand out food and drinks. She was rather pleased with the girls' performance for the first time. She also didn't expect the new slave to be as good as she actually claimed, yet she proved herself. Afterwards, Petra told the girls to go relax and be prepared for the opening dance just after sunset.

Gabrielle debated whether to check around the camp, but she decided it would be best to do it tonight. She could sneak away from the dinner tonight and find the tent that the girls had been hidden. She was worried about whether they were okay, but she had hopes to make an escape soon. She was relying on her Amazons to follow them.

The bard made her way back to the slaves tent that she was assigned. She ducked into the tent and sat down on the bedroll that was given to her. She peered up when a few other slaves came into the tent. She listened to their chitchat.

"I can't believe it."

"You didn't see the flag?" the second slave, Jialin, asked.

The first slave sighed and slumped down into her spot on her bedroll. "I just didn't have a chance to think about it." She stopped and glanced over at the new slave, who was dancing with her and Jialin. "Do you know who we're dancing for tonight?"

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows because she really hadn't thought about it. She'd been so concerned about the girls to really consider it. She glanced between Jialin, the Asian slave, and Saada, an Indian slave. "No, I guess I wasn't paying attention."

Saada smacked Jialin's knee and argued, "See? I'm not the only one."

Jialin ignored the Indian slave's comment and instead looked to the Germanian slave. "We're all dancing for King Cortese and... the Conqueror tonight."

Gabrielle visibly stiffened, and she dropped her eye contact. She tried to control her breathing, but her heart had other plans as it rapidly sped up. "The Conqueror?" she murmured.

Saada leaned forward over her crossed knees. "King Cortese is pretty brass huh? He's having his slaves dance for the Conqueror, who is anti-slavery." She chuckled and looked at Jialin. "I think he's doing it just to smite the Conqueror."

Jialin shrugged and argued, "The Conqueror is no fool." She tilted her head and mentioned, "Do you really think the Conqueror and King Cortese can both rule Greece?"

Saada sighed and shook her head. "They will end up on opposite sides."

Jialin darkened and whispered, "Let's hope the Conqueror wins though."

Gabrielle lifted her head and studied the slaves, who she'd been away from for so long. It was true she'd forgotten how small a slave's hopes were during service. By the gods, the chains could be so short, and they cut through a slave's heart. She could see these slaves hoped the Conqueror would prevail and ruler all of Greece because it meant their freedom. In reality, it also meant Gabrielle's final freedom from her brand.

"She will win," the bard spoke up.

Saada and Jialin snapped their attention to the Germanian slave, who'd been so quiet. They sadly smiled and prayed that it would come true. Just may be the future could turn out well after all the seasons of being in King Cortese's hard, cold services.

The sunset soon came to the neighboring armies, and the rulers of fragmented Greece came to one location together. King Cortese warmly invited the Conqueror to his camp along with many of the Conqueror's men and officers. Once at the dining area, King Cortese ordered that the opening dance ceremony bless the night's dinner.

Gabrielle and her dance partner, Jialin, were the second pair to go down the aisle between the benches. They watched the first pair go, and they mentally ran over their pending dance. The bard tried hard to remain focus, but she had a wild heartbeat. She was already coated in a sheen of sweat purely from being nervous to be so close to the Conqueror, her childhood best friend. She was weak from the fear of being recognized, yet she reminded herself that it'd been so long that Xena would not place her anyway.

Finally it was time for Jialin and Gabrielle to begin their sensual dance. They started out slow and made their way down the aisle, and they performed a few personal, close dances to soldiers near the end of the benches. The beat of the music slowly guided them closer and closer to the dais where the rulers intently watched.

King Cortese was bent to his left, close to the Conqueror. He had his left elbow propped on the arm, and he idly rubbed his goatee. He occasionally glimpsed at the ruler of southern Greece. He noted how the ruler was fixated more by the Germanian slave than the Chin slave.

The Conqueror adorned her golden wire armor, which stood out against her black leathers. A sword's pommel protruded just over her left shoulder while her chakram sparkled from her right hip. The gold in her greaves reflected the torchlight, and her black cape washed over the throne and fluttered on the floor of the dais. What captured anybody's attention the most was the sharp blue of her eyes and the ruby red of her lips. The Conqueror echoed the power that was the Greece she ruled over and loved. She was Greece.

Jialin was directly in front of Gabrielle, and she suddenly danced to the spot before King Cortese.

Gabrielle was left to complete her dance before the Conqueror. She mentally cut away her ramped thoughts so that she wouldn't make a wrong move.

The Conqueror kept her eyes locked on the beautiful, short haired blond that danced at her feet. She hadn't seen eyes that green since her childhood friend. She was drawn down to the dancer's stomach, which showed muscles the rippled under the skin. Slowly her bright eyes traveled up to the dancer's

body, and she noted the recent scabbed marks on her arm.

Suddenly the dancer spun around, and she swayed her hips to the music. The Asian dancer then joined the blond dancer in sensual movements. For a moment, faint and aged whip marks were visible on the blond's back.

The Conqueror lifted her chin when she realized the dancer was most likely a slave. She narrowed her eyes just as the Asian dancer slipped by and revealed the blond's soft face again. From the distance, the Conqueror concluded that indeed these dancers were in fact slaves. She thought to make a cold comment to King Cortese, but she faltered because of the dancer's final performance.

Gabrielle was leaning back more and more so that her muscular stomach was clearly visible. She rolled her shoulders so that her breasts flowed to the beat. She then suddenly straightened up, spun in place, and came to a stop. She gracefully bowed down onto her knees before the rulers, and she mentally promised to never do it again.

Jialin stood to the side of the dais. She slowly snaked out her hand as the Germanian slave stood up.

Gabrielle turned her head to Jialin. She stretched out her arm and laced her fingers through Jialin's.

Jialin faintly smiled at the successful dance. She then suddenly guided her partner away from the dais and out of the dining area.

Gabrielle and Jialin raced off into the crowd while the third dancing partners followed their performance. Jialin explained that they needed to go to the servants' area and prepare to hand out food and drink. The bard conceded and was taken to the servants' location, and she was given a loaded tray of wine cups. She really didn't have a moment to catch her breath or think about what'd happened back in front of the dais.

Petra arrived shortly after and commended the dancers. She also thanked them because she'd feared it'd be her backside if it'd gone wrong. She then rushed all the servants to begin the dinner, drinks, and keep the guests happy.

Jialin and Gabrielle walked together back to the dining area. They separated once they arrived in the loud dining area where every conversation was taking place between the mixed crowd. At the dais, the rulers remained, and they casually chatted away.

Gabrielle realized she had to go up to the rulers and serve them wine first. She swallowed because she'd have to go to the guest first, to the Conqueror. She mentally prepared to go face to face with her lost friend, and she neared the dais. She bowed her head just to be safe and softly inquired, "Wine, my liege?"

The Conqueror was taken away from her boring conversation with the Macedon king. She was drawn to the server, who was the earlier dancer. She arched an eyebrow at the fact the servant called her 'my liege' since it was only required from her soldiers or the like.

Xena reached over and took a cup. She waited a beat but quietly and surprisingly mentioned, "Thank you."

Gabrielle required all her strength not to drop on her face. She knew it was never required for a free person to thank a slave, and it was discouraged even. She kept her head down and murmured, "My pleasure, my liege." Before the Conqueror could say anything, she disappeared into the crowd.

The Conqueror tried to visually follow the blond slave, but the slave was swallowed by all the people.

She then was caught by King Cortese's voice.

"She's from Germania," the king mentioned.

Xena ticked off a back molar. She'd heard the amazing stories about King Cortese, but it was his taste in slaves that repulsed her. Of course Macedon overlooked the king's favor for slaves because it wasn't anything unusual. Xena though didn't overlook it, and she disliked the king for it.

The Conqueror met King Cortese's ink clouded eyes. She darkened as his leering expression because of the blond, Germanian slave. Slowly ice filled her eyes, and her tone was clipped. "How many slaves do you have, Cortese?"

The king leaned back into his throne and waved his left hand in the air. "Too many, Conqueror." He then started to pet his goatee and considered something. He nodded once then mentioned, "I would like to release many of them." He met the Conqueror's dark gaze. "I know our kingdoms can ally better if we're on the same terms."

The Conqueror carefully read the king and gauged his honesty. She slowly turned her head away. "My Greece is a land of freedom, King Cortese. I will not delude the definition of freedom with things like slavery or inequality."

"As it should be," King Cortese agreed. "There are too many great minds and skills that are manacled by slavery or inequality."

"Far too many," the Conqueror murmured.

King Cortese stopped rubbing his goatee, and he happily received a bowl of grapes from a servant. "To the futures of our kingdoms, Conqueror." He held out his half finished wine cup.

The Conqueror humored the king and clinked hers to his. She took a full swallow of the sweet, sweet wine and enjoyed the full body of it. She had to admit that Macedon still made fine wines. She then stole a moment to scan the faces of the people, but she could no longer find the Germanian slave.

The dinner grew louder through the night because the wine flowed so thickly. The food helped ebb some drunkards from becoming stumbling idiots. Eventually, the Conqueror and King Cortese descended their thrones and mixed with the crowd of Macedon and southern Greek officers. Everybody spoke about the great pending battle with the warlord Draco, and the future victory that was definitely in sight.

The Conqueror started to become dulled by the repetitive chitchat. She found far more pleasure just from brushing down Argo than doing small talk. She was in a conversation between four military officers, who bragged about the best battle tactics they'd done.

Xena though mentally left the conversation when she'd spotted that Germanian slave again. All night she'd been waiting to find the slave again, but she'd never appeared until now. Xena neatly slipped away from the conversation, and she beelined through the crowd for the slave.

Gabrielle handed the guest a cup of wine. She then turned some, and she gazed off her right shoulder. She sharply inhaled when she spotted the Conqueror, who looked to be coming directly for her. She calculated she had about a hundred heartbeats before the tall, dark ruler was bearing down on her.

"Wine, please!" a guest called from afar.

The bard took the call without a problem. She dissolved into the crowd of nearby people and went to

the guest.

The Conqueror cursed when the slave was gone. She tried to pinpoint the slave's new location, and she was hot on the slave's trail again. She picked out the blond hair of the slave, and Xena quickly dodged around the guests. She came up behind the slave, touched her shoulder, and stiffened at her clear mistake.

"Yes, Conqueror?" The somewhat taller, blond slave held up a tray of grapes. She had sparkling brown eyes, and a nice smile.

The Conqueror wiped away her obvious confusion. "Excuse me." She slipped away and tried to figure out where the Germanian slave had gone. She silently cursed herself for losing track.

Gabrielle sighed in relief when she made it back to the servants' area. She set her almost empty tray down on a messy table.

Petra appeared and patted the young slave's shoulder. "I think you've done enough tonight, Kassandra. Why don't you go get some rest?"

The bard appreciatively smiled. "Thanks, Petra." She said goodnight then made her way through the quiet camp. She disappeared into the tent, but she was far from tired. Actually Gabrielle was quite energized from her excitement filled night. All she could think of was the Conqueror, and those amazing blue eyes she'd missed all her life. Xena had been such a beauty in her younger days, but somehow Xena managed to surpass all that beauty and changed into a woman that would be wanted and desired.

Gabrielle started to pace back and forth in the empty tent. She halted near the tent flap, grabbed her hair, and held it in place. She hotly debated what to do because she needed to rid of her energy. Well, she still needed to find the girls so she decided that would help her settle down and focus on something else.

The Amazon Queen slipped out of the tent and started her walk through the quiet camp. She ignored some of the soldiers' long stares, but she slowly made her way through the camp. She prayed she'd find the girls' tent, and she thought after some time she was fresh out of luck. It wasn't until she spotted a guard at one tent that she knew where they were tucked away.

Gabrielle came by the guarded tent, and she noted how the guard carefully watched her. She realized it was the same guard that'd made that smart comment to her yesterday.

The guard smirked at the passing slave. He hollered, "You want to join your Amazon friends again, slave?"

The bard decided it was best to hold her remark. She waited until she was out of earshot, and she muttered, "Thanks, idiot." The guard fully confirmed her suspicions that the girls were there. As she made her way back around the camp, she spotted King Cortese and his stratègos were just ducking into the royal tent.

The Amazon Queen decided to hedge her luck so she snuck to the king's tent. She ducked just behind the tent and hoped nobody would pass her anytime soon. She suspected everybody would still be at the dinner for awhile longer. She tilted her head and focused on the voices from inside the tent.

"My lord, this is risky business."

"Aescalus, you weren't trained to weigh pros or cons. You're trained to make the outcomes work." King

Cortese stepped closer to the strategos. "It's obvious Draco is in the risky business. We have an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone."

"We have an agreement with Draco," Aescalus reminded.

"And agreements are meant to be broken," the king coldly joked. He stepped closer and hotly demanded, "Do you really think Draco can defeat the Conqueror?" He clenched his hands at his side. "He was suppose to deal with those damn Amazons, but so far all he's managed to do is ruffle their feathers. If he waits any longer then he'll lose."

Aescalus stepped away then turned back to the king. "And what of our agreement with the Romans?"

"We stick with them," King Cortese replied. "The Romans have been kind to Macedon. And like the Romans, Macedon fears the the rise of the Conqueror." He narrowed his eyes and his voice deepened. "I will not be conquered by that slave-loving demon from Hades."

Aescalus pricked at the king's words, but he bowed his head. "She will be a powerful enemy to defeat."

"Not when we have the Romans' alliance behind us." King Cortese paused then ordered, "See that you keep the relations with Draco looking friendly for his sake. I don't want him to think we've switched sides."

"Of course, my lord."

Gabrielle's head snapped up when she heard soldiers coming near her. She quickly scrambled away from the king's tent and tried to keep a quiet footfall. She made it rather far and slowed her walk down so she didn't look suspicious. She covered her frantic heart, and she debated about what to do.

Now Gabrielle had the missing links that nobody else fully possessed. It was true that King Cortese and Draco were working together to stop the Conqueror. Indeed it seemed though that Draco would get his own when King Cortese crossed him. Although the news about the Romans and King Cortese was something she'd never known about in her entire life. She'd been in the Macedon Kingdom and not once heard of such relations, but that didn't mean anything.

Gabrielle was on her way back to the slave's tent, but she stopped when she realized the trouble that was coming to the Conqueror. She now had information about the betrayal that King Cortese planned against the Conqueror, and it could mean lives. She clenched her hands and closed her eyes. If she didn't warn the Conqueror then it could mean the Conqueror's head. And by Artemis, if she revealed her identity it could sabotage her rescue mission to the girls. It almost certainly could if Xena reacted badly to Gabrielle's aged long hiding in the Amazon Nation.

Gabrielle almost felt sick because of her out of control thoughts. She forced her eyes opened just before a soldier passed her. She turned her head to the left and stared in the direction of the Conqueror's camp. Gabrielle finally made her choice, and she turned towards the Southern Greece Army. She quickly moved through the camp and tried to duck into the darkness between the camps, but nobody would suspect her since the camps were inner mingling.

The Amazon Queen casually entered the camp that flew the lion's head flag. She remained as calm as she could despite how incredibly nervous and scared she'd become by doing this. She had no idea how this would go or what prices would be paid, yet she felt that it was right.

Gabrielle discovered that the Conqueror's tent was well guarded on all four corners, and she silently cursed the security. She wanted to get in there without having to reveal herself to everybody. She went

behind some other tents and considered whether the Conqueror was really there or not. She hunkered down at the corner of a neighboring tent and watched for any shadows.

The bard couldn't quite focus because of the pounding in her veins and head. She swept back her hair and muttered, "Get a grip, Gabrielle. You two were best friends at one point." She breathed in deeply. "She can't be all that different." She swallowed and sarcastically joked, "Not that I am after so long."

Gabrielle decided to wedge forward and see if she could get a better idea about who was in the tent. She went to the tent that was directly behind the royal tent. She leaned into the shadow so that the daydreaming guard wouldn't spot her. She needed a plan, and she debated whether to just walk in anyway.

The Amazon Queen put together a half cocked plan. She breathed deeply a few times and tried to gather her nerve. She stepped forward, but she stopped and felt her knees weaken. She closed her eyes and cursed her fears. Gabrielle mentally yelled at herself for being so terrified by what could come to her.

Gabrielle thought of her best friend's smile from their childhood. She recalled the loyal dedication in their friendship, and Gabrielle realized why she had to do this no matter the costs. She finally silenced her fears and prepared to confront her fate. Slowly she opened her eyes and the resolve showed in her eyes.

Then suddenly there was a warm body behind Gabrielle's back, and cold but sharp metal came at her throat. The bard froze and the color washed from her face because she'd been so easily caught. She willed her mind to stay calm so she could think fast. She then sensed the person bent down to her and the blade at her throat pressed into her skin.

"I typically favor slaves, but I truly hate spies," rumbled a deeply timbered voice.

Gabrielle lost her breath, and her eyes flickered shut when she realized who held the dagger to her throat. The Fates truly found their sweet justice with her. She almost panicked, but she told herself to breathe and that she could work through this.

The Conqueror received no response from the caught slave. She bared her teeth. She hadn't expected this slave to be a spy. How could she be stupid enough to remotely feel for this slave earlier? She was prepared to take answers if she didn't receive them freely soon. She was about to ask a last question, but something caught her attention instantly.

The Conqueror kept her ivy dagger still against the slave's throat. She then reached up with her freehand and collected the necklace's silver chain into her hand. She lifted the necklace up so that the familiar quill charm dangled in the air. She was bombarded by memories of her last time in the field with Gabrielle and gifting the beloved necklace to her friend. She slightly lowered the dagger, yet she stopped and lifted it up again and hotly demanded, "Who did you steal this from?"

Gabrielle bit her lower lip and gradually opened her eyes. She promised she would no longer hide or lie, not to herself and not to Xena. She carefully selected her next words and hoarsely but honestly whispered, "I didn't steal it. You gave it to me on my thirteenth birthday." She waited for anything to happen to her, but her world was still and silent beside the loud boom of her heart. Finally though the dagger lowered from her throat, and her necklace was released. Gabrielle was unsure what to do next, but she made her body turn. For the first time in countless seasons, Gabrielle of Potidaea stood toe to toe again with Xena of Amphipolis.

The Conqueror seemed to stare at a ghost. She loosely held the ivy dagger at her side, and she was

struck by all her memories of Gabrielle until they centered on the Gabrielle that stood before her. This was really and truly her best friend from her childhood, which had been so peaceful until it was all taken away from her. She shook her head once then rasped, "Gabrielle?" Her spiraling emotions hit her hard, and she touched her forehead just when Gabrielle stepped closer to her.

"Yea." Gabrielle heard her own voice tremble, but she kept speaking anyway. "It's me, Xena."

Xena took on a glister in her eyes from the tidal of emotions. She stepped back once and desperately tried to take in the reality of things. She stared at Gabrielle's aged face, but those eyes were just as green as ever, and it burned that ache in her heart again. She glanced at the quill necklace, which reminded her that this was indeed the real Gabrielle.

"My liege, is there a problem?" The soldier that'd been posted at the corner of the royal tent finally approached. He'd noticed the commotion and voices after some time.

As if somebody had lit a candle, Xena had become the great Conqueror again, and she hardened her emotions. She glanced between Gabrielle and the soldier.

Gabrielle stopped breathing and waited for Xena's pending words.

"No," the ruler replied, "everything is fine."

The soldier clapped his fist across his bronze chest. He then marched back to his post and pretended to ignore the pair.

The Conqueror centered back on the slave, on Gabrielle. "Come with me." She realized she still held her dagger in hand, and she silently cursed herself for almost harming the woman she'd been searching for over the seasons. She sheathed it at her side and quickly stepped around Gabrielle.

The bard turned on her heels and ordered her legs to follow the ruler. She thought they'd go into the royal tent, but instead they went into the tent she'd been ducked beside. When she stepped inside, she realized it was actually Xena's personal tent and that the royal tent was most likely a decoy.

The Conqueror wasn't sure what to do or say. She obviously fiddled for a moment by lighting a few more candles in her tent and kept her back to her former friend.

Gabrielle was a bard. However she was betrayed by her words tonight because they'd ran away from her. She was at a loss, and she nervously folded her arms over her chilling body. She always became cold under nerve racking situations, and she would sweat just like she was now.

Xena turned away from her desk and carefully approached the silent slave. She stopped a few paces from Gabrielle, and she scanned over Gabrielle's very changed features. She had to admit despite the recent wounds that Gabrielle was an overly muscular slave. She met Gabrielle's bright green eyes and just like they were kids again, she was able to easily read the fear held in them. Her old desire to ebb Gabrielle's fears quickly were charged to life like they never died.

"You're King Cortese's slave?" The Conqueror expected a confirmation to her opening question, but she noted how Gabrielle hesitated. She thought it was for other reasons like nervousness.

"Yes... and no," Gabrielle honestly replied. "There's a lot going on that you don't know about."

The Conqueror crossed her arms like Gabrielle, and she fought against her feelings. On the outside, she remained the very ruler that everybody saw her. She even managed to keep the quaking from her voice. "If it has to do with King Cortese, it wouldn't surprise me."

"That's... apart of it." Gabrielle wasn't sure where to start this because it was so complex. She dropped her arms so she didn't show a protective mannerism. "There's so much I have to tell you.... but I can't right now. I came to warn you about what's happening."

Xena felt her heartbeat was erratic, and she wanted to disappear to somewhere quiet with Gabrielle. She wanted to share what'd happened to them since they'd been forced away from each other. The reality of it was that she couldn't do that, and she had a nation to rule and protect.

"What is happening?" the Conqueror encouraged.

Gabrielle stepped closer to the ruler, but she only stopped just a pace from her childhood friend. "I don't know... where to start."

Xena tilted her head and slowly lifted an eyebrow. "The start is always a good place."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to reply, but she found no words because Xena suddenly looked away from her.

The Conqueror briefly narrowed her eyes at the tent flap. She dropped her arms and lunged forward to the slave. She jerked Gabrielle's body into hers until they were molded together.

Gabrielle was shocked, but she found her head tilted back. Then she was being coaxed into the most passionate kiss she'd ever experienced in her life. She swore if it wasn't for Xena's sure hold on her back that she'd been on the ground. Gabrielle naturally slipped her arms around Xena and moaned into the searing kiss.

The tent flap loudly sounded and a man greeted, "My lie..." He faltered at the passionate scene between the two women that he hadn't expected. He clearly blushed and looked away then cleared his throat for added effect.

The Conqueror slowly ended the kiss and inclined her head until her hooded eyes met Bastien. She curled her lips and snarled, "What is it, Bastien? Can't you see that I am... busy?" She didn't release Gabrielle and kept her left arm across Gabrielle's waist while her right hand blatantly cupped Gabrielle's ass.

"I... uh..."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and bowed her head. She held tightly to Xena's hips and was thankful her back was to the soldier. She let Xena handle the situation entirely while she recovered from the shocking yet hot kiss.

"Well?" the ruler coldly clipped. "My patiences are-"

"It can wait until tomorrow, my liege," the chiliarcheses cut in hastily. "Have a... uuuh, see you tomorrow, my liege." He did an about face and scurried out of the tent before his life was forfeited.

"Idiot," the Conqueror muttered in annoyance. Just as quickly as she'd taken Gabrielle into her arms, she was now gone and put space between them. She turned around and witnessed how Gabrielle was trying to recover.

The bard settled her heartbeat a few notches, and she met the blue stare of her former friend. She clenched her hands at her sides in hopes it'd make her body stop shaking. She inhaled a few deep breathes and tried to pretend that the entire kiss didn't happen.

Xena neared the shaken bard, but she ignored it too and ordered, "Tell me what's happened... from the

start of this mess."

Gabrielle peered up into crystal blue eyes, and she realized her entire future depended on this conversation and so did her Nation. She finally nodded and gathered her words. "I am really not a slave," she gently explained, but she shook her head. "I mean I'm a branded slave."

The Conqueror held up her hand and replied, "I already know you're branded." She thought of Gabrielle's slave deed that she had safely tucked away. "Explain to me about the part that you're really not a slave."

"Right," the bard whispered. She focused on the topic and her bardic skills came back to life. "I'm actually an Amazon now... I'm with the Macedonian Nation." She waited for the information to sink in with Xena, then she kept going with her story. "I know Melosa told you that Draco attacked some of our young Amazons and some Centaurs too."

The ruler faintly lifted an eyebrow at the direction of the talk. "Yes, she told me he planned to trade them."

"And he did," Gabrielle explained, "to King Cortese."

The Conqueror's features started to darken at each word Gabrielle told her.

"Draco is using the Amazons as a favor. He's planning for King Cortese to betray you on the battlefield."

Xena became amused, and she crossed her arms. "Somewhat clever."

"That's only half of it," Gabrielle pressed. "It also seems that King Cortese has an alliance with the Romans."

The Conqueror reacted the same whenever she heard anything about the Romans. She stepped closer and questioned, "How did you hear all this?"

"I was passing King Cortese's tent tonight, and I heard him talking to his stratègos." Gabrielle swept back her hair and stared off in the distance for a moment. She came back and dropped her hand to her side. "King Cortese plans to double cross Draco in battle then later fight you with the Romans."

The ruler controlled her anger, and she walked away a few steps. She had to think for a moment.

"There's more to it than that," Gabrielle urged. She watched Xena turn her head sidelong to her. "I found out why Draco is attacking the Nation."

"I was told Ares promised him a legion of automatons if he succeeded in destroying the Nation."

Gabrielle nodded, but she held Xena's gaze. "That's only half of it. He's also after me... personally."

The Conqueror's old, protective streak was brought to life. She turned back to Gabrielle and hotly questioned, "Why?"

"Do you remember Dan... from Amphipolis?" Gabrielle waited for the ruler's nod then explained the mystery that eluded the ruler. "Draco and Dan are the same person."

Xena barely hid her surprise, but her eyes deceived her. She never thought she'd face that bully from her hometown again, yet she felt her past was repeating here before her eyes. However this time there were no wood swords, and Gabrielle was more than a damsel in distress. She let it all the puzzle pieces

sink into the entire picture, and she growled, "That bastard still hasn't learned his lesson."

Gabrielle was faintly amused at Xena's unintended joke. She shoved her amusement away and came back to the conversation. Then she stiffened when Xena gave her a cold look.

The Conqueror turned to the slave finally. Her tone dropped a pitch. "How long have you been an Amazon for?"

Gabrielle knew she'd have to face this at some point. She kept her back straight and chin up despite the hurricane of anger that would come at her shortly. "This is my twentieth season as an Amazon."

Xena's fast mind quickly pieced together all the implications. She became darker, and she stalked up to Gabrielle. "And during this entire time, you have not been under your bonds as a slave?"

The bard held her ground and amazingly kept the tremble from her voice. "I haven't been under my bonds." She gave no excuse and no lame reason, but she merely answered the question straightforward.

The Conqueror started to breathe heavy because of her mounting anger. She clenched her teeth then pointed a finger at the woman she'd called her best friend. "You could have contacted me long ago, and... and you never did it." She dropped her hand and sharply demanded, "Do you know how long I have tried to search for you? And you... you couldn't even contact me."

Gabrielle finally looked away and stared at the space off to her right. She closed her eyes, but she refused to let her angry and upset emotions override her.

Xena stared at Gabrielle as if she were an enemy that'd stabbed her directly in the heart. She quickly moved away so that she could try to calm down despite it'd do nothing to help. She suddenly spun around and hotly yelled, "Well at least I can count on Dan to be true to form. It seems I can't count on my best friend to be though." She lowered her voice. "Just when you think you have somebody's character figured out, they show a completely different side."

The Amazon had no words to fight back. She had no reason to argue because it was true. She swallowed against the forming lump in her throat. Oh gods, why had she been so stupid not to contact Xena much sooner? She opened her eyes and saw the deep rage in those blue eyes, and it broke her heart to know she was the cause of it.

Xena reminded herself that she was the Conqueror and the ruler of Southern Greece. She was an honorable warrior and earned the legacy of Warrior Princess because of her deeds. She would not detour from her mission and the vision she saw for Greece. She rammed down all her anger and other feelings she felt towards Gabrielle and returned to the controlling Conqueror that she was known for today.

"I suppose you want help to free these Amazons," the Conqueror spoke in her formal tone.

Gabrielle almost lost her resolve at Xena's business like attitude. She chided herself and forced herself to face the responsibility she had to hold now. She locked away her emotions and returned her focus to the ruler. She finally replied, "No. I came here to rescue them myself."

The Conqueror crossed her muscular arms over her chest. She tilted her head. "And how do you expect to do that when these camps are swarming with soldiers?"

Gabrielle eyed the ruler's challenging look. "I have my plans."

The Conqueror believed it too, but she didn't trust that the plans wouldn't flop or backfire. There was

too much risk involved and despite she was furious at Gabrielle, she wouldn't let harm come to Gabrielle. She couldn't deny that endless moons of being protective about Gabrielle had just merely faded away to nothing.

The ruler stalked up to the bard and stopped by her side. She leaned closer to Gabrielle and coolly whispered, "I'll get you and those girls out of here." She waited a beat then whispered, "Just be ready to play along when it's time." She didn't wait for any response and left the tent. She desperately needed space from the woman she'd missed for so long and now wanted be away from because she broke her apart.

The Conqueror hurried out of the tent. With purpose, she walked through her camp and came into the open, barely moonlit field. She suddenly broke into a powerful run and echoed out a battle cry.

Gabrielle had come out of the tent and watched the tall, dark ruler hurry through the camp. She'd thought her enslavement robbed her of Xena so long ago, but she realized she was truly the one, who robbed herself of Xena because of her silence and fears. Just what did she have left now beyond her Nation and Amazons?

The Conqueror ran hard and long through the wide open field that had a few rolling hills. She worked much of the energy off, and she entered a woods. She unsheathed her sword in midstride and came at a woody opponent.

The tree was defenseless against the ruler's savage, raw anger. It took every slash, kick, and punch that the angry woman could give at it. Then after the ruler was finished, the tree kindly allowed the ruler to lean against its hacked trunk.

Xena bowed her head and closed her eyes. She hadn't felt this rage since Julius Caesar, but she felt how different this rage was from then. This rage brought her to her knees in the soft grass, and she finally wept because it drove through her heart. She'd searched so hard for the woman that'd meant everything to her, and the entire time Gabrielle hid in silence. What other lies did Gabrielle keep from her?

The mighty Conqueror dropped her sword at her side, and it loudly clanked against the ground. She then fell to her hands and squeezed her eyes shut against the dark anger. She'd worked too hard over these seasons to hold back this darkness, but it called her again tonight. The darkness bubbled harder and fought against Xena's iron grip that she'd built up since her days with the Amazons and Yakut.

Xena clawed the ground then suddenly gave a piercing cry that reflected all the madness in her. She lowered her head after she ran out of air, and she gasped. She shook her head and hotly rasped, "Gods why?" She wanted everything to be silent in her head, but it wouldn't quiet. "Why did you... do it, Gabrielle?" Xena wanted answers, but then she didn't care to hear the excuses.

Xena lost her thoughts when she sensed another presence not far. She raised her head up and found an intent set of green eyes level with hers. She stiffened at the sight of a white wolf only a few paces from her. Why hadn't she heard him sooner?

Faolan stretched out his neck so that his nose was a bit closer. He sniffed and made his final confirmation, but it was indeed true. This female human had the exact same smell as that dagger, which his human friend greatly favored.

The Conqueror carefully moved her hand closer to the sword's hilt. Any fast moves would probably cause him to attack her.

Faolan glimpsed at the woman's hand close to the hilt. He then focused back on those eyes that

reminded him of the sky on beautiful spring day. He detected that the woman was nervous about him. He decided to remedy it quickly so he merely sat back down on his haunches, and he became cute by hanging out his tongue. He figured if Gabrielle was willing to keep a dagger that smelled like this human, then she must be safe.

Xena was confused by the wolf's strange movements. She pulled her hand away from her sword and instead sat back on her legs. She stared at the beautiful wolf, who regarded her back.

Faolan tilted his head to the right then wagged his tail across the ground. His tail shot off a few leaves to his right and left, but he kept wagging it.

The Conqueror was stumped and dumbfounded by the rare wolf. She'd never seen anything like him, and she wished he could talk. She cautiously picked up her sword and kept her movements slowly so he wouldn't be scared. She sheathed the weapon first then stuck out her right hand, palm skyward.

Faolan tempted fate, and he stood up. He stepped forward once then again, and his third step brought him to the woman's hand.

Xena brought her long fingers through the wolf's fur on the top of his head. She felt how soft it was and again felt amazed by him. "Where did you come from?"

The wolf simply answered, "Rrrruh." He now sat down right in front of the ruler.

Xena cautiously lifted her other hand and now was able to run her hands through his coat. The wolf's company brought some peace to her, and she sadly smiled. "You're gorgeous though."

"Rrrrrr." Faolan seemed to agree, and his eyes sparkled.

The Conqueror moved her legs around so she sat cross legged. She remained seated in front of the wolf, and she pet him for awhile. It'd been a long time since she'd found this kind of peace in her life, and it was this beautiful, rare wolf that brought it to her tonight. She considered it the calm before the raging storm that would brew soon.

Faolan faithfully stayed with the emotional ruler. He could tell something had gone wrong in her life, and he felt much the same way since Gabrielle had left him behind. He'd stayed with the Amazons in hopes that Gabrielle would soon return, but she had yet. He watched the camp and followed her scent as much as he could. He'd only been drawn away when he'd caught Xena's familiar scent on the winds, and he had to see for himself who fit the scent. Faolan was more than happy he'd come to the distraught woman's aide despite he knew little about her. He could sense the solace his presence brought Xena, who almost had fallen into something quite dark.

To be continued.