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

To Take What is Mine

by Red Hope

Chapter 13

The Conqueror quietly reentered her camp after she'd spent at least two candlemarks out in the woods. She'd spent time with the unusual white wolf until she felt more in control than earlier. She walked through the camp with a purpose, and she went in search of her two most trusted companions. She easily found them sitting around a camp fire with other soldiers. She ordered them to follow her back to her tent, which was dimmer than earlier because the candles were extinguishing.

"What's going on, Xena?" Prostig could tell something was amiss. He sensed Tracker beside him.

The Conqueror debated how much to tell, but she trusted these two men more than most. They knew her in her younger years, and today they were the most loyal to her. "We have a slight problem... that we need to remedy."

Tracker peered up at his partner then back at their leader. "What's the problem?"

Xena neared the pair and lowered her voice. "What I tell you stays in this tent. Is that clear?"

"Of course," Prostig replied.

Tracker quickly nodded.

"Good." The Conqueror crossed her arms and proceeded to roll into the story. "King Cortese has two Amazons, who were kidnapped by Draco."

Prostig grunted and remarked, "This sounds like a sticky situation."

"It is," the ruler agreed. "We need to unstick some of it tonight." She looked between the men then finally revealed, "There's an Amazon here posing as King Cortese's slave. She wants to free the two girls that were taken."

"That's almost impossible," Tracker argued. "She'll get caught."

"But if we interfere," Prostig mentioned, "then we have problems with King Cortese." He narrowed his dark eyes and murmured, "It smells like a double cross."

"It is," Xena confirmed, "but we're not letting Cortese know we have his secret figured out." She walked away and carefully recalled her delicate plan to save the two Amazons and later Gabrielle. "The Amazon that's on the rescue mission is Gabrielle." She kept her back to her men for a moment, but she turned around and saw how Prostig and Tracker exchanged odd looks.

"The same Gabrielle?" Prostig stepped closer.

"You're joking," Tracker protested. "After all this time..." He felt annoyed because he was nicknamed 'Tracker' for a very good reason. He silently cursed at the fact that Gabrielle was right under their noses the entire time. "How long has she been an Amazon?"

The Conqueror neared the pair and simply replied, "Twenty seasons now." She placed her hands on her hips and continued to speak. "Right now, my concern is to free those two girls from Cortese without arousing suspicions."

"That's where we come in," Tracker decided aloud.

Xena nodded then started into her plan. "Most likely the Amazons are tucked away some where... hidden from sight and guarded." She tilted her head. "Tracker, I want you to find the Amazon party that's been following. I suspect they've been following the girls ever since they were taken. Most likely they'll be on the western side of the camps."

Prostig folded his muscular arms over her bronze chest when Xena's glowing blue eyes met him. He smirked and waited for his orders.

"Pro," Xena started in a deep voice, "I'll need you to do some guard duty tonight for King Cortese."

The large warrior deeply laughed at his leader's implications. He nodded.

"What about Gabrielle?" Tracker inquired.

The Conqueror dropped her arms and stepped up to Tracker's side. She glanced at Prostig's curious expression, but she focused back on Tracker. "Leave her to me." She then brushed past and headed for the tent flap. "You should get started, Tracker. Those Amazons are tricky." She opened the flap and merely informed, "I'm going to take a stroll through the king's camp." Then she was gone.

Prostig knew he'd have to wait until late tonight before he could pose as one of King Cortese's soldiers. He'd then have to take over guard duty from whoever was guarding the Amazons. He hoped it would be an easy task.

Tracker quietly left the tent with Prostig. He separated from his friend and began his adventure out of the camp. He broke into a paced run and went west towards the tree line that was faraway. Once he was in the woods, he slowed down and tried to use the little moonlight to help him. He carefully began tracking the ground for any signs of life beyond animals.

Back in King Cortese's camp, the Conqueror casually strolled through and studied the soldiers, who still celebrated. She imagined in a few candlemarks they would be out cold from all the wine and celebrating, which would work perfectly. She finally approached the other side of the camp, and she was none surprised to find a tent that was set aside and guarded by one soldier.

The Conqueror casually approached the tent and looked the guard up and down. "Anything of interest in there?"

The guard had taken notice of the ruler earlier. He straightened out his back and answered, "No, Conqueror... just some of the king's valuables."

The Conqueror considered it briefly, slipped her hands between her cape and back, and she nodded. "Well... have a good night." She'd easily read the lie hidden behind his eyes. Once from earshot, she muttered, "Valuables... I bet."

Inside of the tent, the two tied Amazons had twisted heads and partially looked at each other. They were stripped of almost everything but their leathers. They were gagged, tied at the ankles and wrists, and they were lashed together with their backs against each other. The tent was empty of anything and the guard would constantly check on them to make sure they didn't do anything.

Cliona had heard the Conqueror first, and she'd briefly hoped the ruler would figure out they were there. She knew though it wasn't possible.

Amarice had growled once the Conqueror's boot steps became distant. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the healer's in a defeated posture.

Cliona sighed and wished that there was something she could do. She wondered what the queen planned now that they were hidden away and guarded.

The Conqueror had continued through the king's camp, but she went to the edge of the camp and found a possible target. She eyed the large, bulky soldier that was quite ungraceful in his steps and stumbled back to this tent. She grinned and casually tailed him.

Xena lengthened her strides once the soldier started to near a tent. She came up behind him and quickly immobilized him with two sharp pinches to his lower neck.

The soldier grunted and began to collapse as if from being drunk.

"Wooo, soldier," the Conqueror quickly moved and easily supported him against her body. She noted that a few passing soldiers saw her.

"Conqueror, do you need help?" The soldier had drank, but he wasn't out of it like most of them. He came over to help.

"Nope, nope I got him." The Conqueror hefted the soldier and pointed at the tent with her chin. "He said his tent is this one. I'll get him in there."

The soldier stopped but kindly doubled checked. "Are you sure?"

"Oh yeah, I'm sure." The Conqueror easily guided the paralyzed soldier into the tent.

The soldier shrugged it off and continued on his way to his tent.

The Conqueror dropped the king's soldier onto the bedroll on the ground. "There ya go, big fella." She then knelt beside him and inspected his armor and stamped helmet. "I think you're the right size." She worked quickly to remove his armor and helmet so that Prostig would have it. She then adjusted the pressure points so that they would wear off before dawn, but not soon enough. She gathered the armor and silently left the tent into the darkening camp.

Out in the woods that surrounded the camp, Tracker was hot on the trail of the Amazon party. He smelled a camp fire on the wind and the horses too. He slowed down his pace and tried to make noise so that they would hear him first and not be shaken by his presence.

Tracker went several hundred more paces then suddenly three Amazons fell from the darkness of the trees and surrounded him. He tensed, but he didn't go for his sword and held up his hands in a gesture to show he was friendly.

"Who are you?" a masked Amazon clipped.

Tracker turned his head to her and replied, "The name's Tracker. I'm with the Conqueror's army."

The Amazon signaled for her comrades to sheath swords. She kept her out but lowered it to her side. She approached the small soldier and asked, "The Conqueror sent you?"

"Yes," Tracker replied, "I'm to let you know that the Conqueror plans to free the two young Amazons."

The Amazon that's been speaking now shoved her mask back. The mix of relief and surprise showed on her face. "How? When?"

"In a couple of candelmarks." Tracker stepped closer. "She's setting up a plan to sneak them out of the camp. I will be bringing them to you."

The Amazon, Page, sighed in relief then something else occurred to her. "Our qu..." She faltered in her words when she recalled her error. She changed her words and tried again. "There's another Amazon in there who's rescuing them."

"The Conqueror already knows," the scout replied. "She's working on a plan to get Gabrielle out too."

Page felt Medora glance at her, but she didn't acknowledge the look. She stayed focus on the conversation so Tracker wouldn't read anything. "How?"

"I'm not sure." Tracker could tell the Amazon wanted more information, and he felt for her. "I'm sorry." He hesitated but promised, "You can trust the Conqueror to get her out."

Page nodded despite she was worried what may happen or not happen. "Tell the Conqueror we appreciate her support."

Tracker merely nodded then stepped back once. "I will return within three candlemarks with the two girls."

"Thank you," Page sincerely replied.

Tracker didn't wait any longer, he turned, and hurried back to camp.

Back in the South Greece camp, the Conqueror was tucked away in her tent again, and Prostig was with her. She spoke to him while he switched from his normal armor to the armor Xena had retrieved.

Prostig adjusted the straps on the armor, but he found it still somewhat tight. He had to hold his breath. "How long do I need to stay?"

"Until you're relieved from your duty," the ruler replied. She played with the stamped helmet in her hands. "Tracker will take the girls out of the camp."

"Where will you be?" Prostig bowed his head and worked to hook his sheathed sword onto his side.

"I have... other engagements," the ruler informed. She slightly grinned at the warrior's curious expression. "Just focus on your mission, Pro."

Prostig stepped up to the ruler and held out his hand. "I always do." His hand slightly stung when Xena smacked the helmet into his hand. He ignored it and lifted the helmet. He grunted and remarked, "It's a little small."

The ruler smirked and folded her arms. "With your thick head, you'll stretch it out."

Prostig grunted again, but he kept fooling with the helmet anyway. "Just how did you find Gabrielle anyway?"

"She was trying to find me," the ruler mentioned. She walked away and went to the tent's exit. "Come on, we have work to do."

The bulky warrior fiddled with his tight armor again, but he sighed and followed his leader. He came outside into the cool spring night and looked towards the king's camp. He glanced at Xena beside him and mentioned, "Be safe, kid."

Xena studied the warrior's profile. She turned her head away and lifted her right hand. She collapsed the warrior's shoulder, patted once, and walked away. She had plans to carry out tonight.

Prostig watched Xena go, then he decided it was best to get to work. He marched out of the camp and crossed into the king's camp. He followed his mental map that'd Xena had drawn for him. Soon enough he spotted the guarded tent, and he approached the guard.

"Shift rotation already?" the guard inquired.

Prostig grunted and rested his hand on his sword hilt. "Yeah." He nodded at the tent. "They giving you any problems?"

The guard glanced back at the tent and shrugged. "Nothing as of yet." He stepped closer to Prostig. "The Conqueror passed by earlier... she seemed curious."

Prostig slightly grinned and darkly remarked, "She's a nosy bitch, I hear."

"Mmmm." The guard nodded then clapped Prostig on the chest. "Don't fall asleep." He headed off and disappeared into the quiet camp.

Prostig took the former guard's vacant spot. He hoped Tracker would stop by soon. He waited a half of a candlemark before the scout arrived. Prostig said nothing, scanned the local, quiet area, and he lifted the tent flap.

Tracker ducked into the tent and listened to the flap close behind him. He easily picked out the sleeping Amazons that sat on the cold ground. He neared them then knelt down by the one with fire red hair. "Hey, wake up." He gently nudged her.

Amarice was jarred awake, and she startled Cliona too. She gasped at seeing Tracker, but it was muffled thanks to the gag.

"Sssh," Tracker instructed to the girls. "I'm here to get you two out. I'm with the Conqueror." He reached for Cliona's gag first and spoke at the same time. "Keep it down and follow me if you want to get out of this."

Cliona worked her jaw some after the gagged was removed. She then softly asked, "Who are you?"

"The name's Tracker." The soldier worked to untie Amarice's gag.

"I'm Cliona and that's Amarice." The healer listened to Amarice's low spit because of the bad taste from the gags. She twisted her head more towards Tracker. "There's another Amazon that's here."

"We know," the scout replied. "The Conqueror will get her out too." He removed his dagger and carefully cut at the bonds that linked the girls together. "Right now, my job is to get you two to your Amazon party." He cut through the bonds, tossed them aside, and now sawed at the ropes around their wrists.

Amarice stood up now that she was completely free. She realized how great it felt to move her arms and legs. "We have to do something to help Gabrielle."

Cliona rubbed her wrists and waited to hear Tracker's response.

"It's not a good idea," the soldier rebuked. "The Conqueror has her plans, and I have my orders." He looked between the two girls and stated, "Nor do you want to endanger the relations between the Amazons and the Conqueror."

Cliona glanced at the other Amazon, who finally nodded. "We're ready to go."

Tracker nodded, but he told them to stay put for a moment. He poked his head out of the tent flap and peered up at Prostig.

Prostig continued to scan the surroundings, yet he stated, "It's clear to go... and keep to the shadows."

"Thanks, Pro." Tracker signaled for the girls to follow, and he guided them from the tent. He led them through the quiet camp and only stopped to hide behind a tent when a patrol soldier was near. He was rather efficient in dodging the few patrol soldiers, and he was glad the Amazons knew how to be so silent. He decided they'd been well trained.

Just as Tracker was about to break into the open field, he spotted the Conqueror. She was walking with somebody else through the camp and ten soldiers were behind her. He only needed a moment, but he quickly realized that it was King Cortese at her side. He decided not to wait around to see what was about to happen so he hurried the Amazons out of the camp.

Cliona stayed close to Amarice just to make sure Amarice didn't try anything. She did though worry about the queen, just like Amarice. She prayed that the Conqueror would do something to get the queen

out of the camp safely. If King Cortese discovered that an Amazon Queen was right under him, then his fun would just begin. Cliona could only imagine what Queen Gabrielle was planing to do.

And Queen Gabrielle was working out her plans. She'd snuck out of the slave's tent once she was sure everybody had gone to sleep. She carefully moved through the camp and went to the dining area. She recalled the way to the kitchen area and hoped to find something sharp like a knife.

The bard quietly rummaged through the supply wagons that'd carried much of the cooking supplies. She started to realize that the knives were actually locked up in a box. She silently cursed and yanked on the large padlock that kept the box closed. She scanned the wagon's other contents and tried to find something pointed that she could use to pick the lock. She smirked and scooped up a Roman fork from a pile of them.

Gabrielle wiggled the fork's point into the lock and quickly picked it. She'd learned how to work them thanks to the Amazons, and she'd become fairly good at it. She popped the lock after several beats, yet she froze when a sword was unsheathed from behind her. She shut her eyes and mentally groaned at being caught, again.

"I wouldn't, Cassandra," a dark voice snarled.

The bard felt her heart in her throat at hearing the Conqueror's voice. She opened her eyes and turned her head to the left. She was completely surrounded by King Cortese's soldiers.

King Cortese stepped through his men and stood beside the wagon. He eyed the petite slave. "Clever girl, aren't you?" He glanced at the Conqueror. "It looks like you were right, Conqueror."

The ruler swiftly sheathed her sword once a few of the king's men had theirs freed. She placed her hands on her black leather hips. "It's amazing what somebody will say during the throws of passion."

Gabrielle coldly stared at the Macedon king. She didn't dare turn any further and meet Xena's gaze. She recalled the Conqueror's prior warning to play along. She considered Xena's current conversation with King Cortese.

King Cortese stepped up to the wagon, reached out, and hooked the slave's chin with his fingertips. "Did Draco send you to kill me?"

The bard swallowed and reminded herself to play along. She narrowed her eyes and filled her voice with anger. "No." Her dark eyes flickered to the Conqueror. "I'm suppose to assassinate the Conqueror."

The Conqueror gradually arched an eyebrow, and she neared the wagon. She tilted her head and slowly smirked at Gabrielle. "And he sends a slave to do the job?"

Gabrielle glared at the ruler and replied, "He'll give me my freedom... and plenty of dinars."

"Well," King Cortese cut in, "it seems you won't find any freedom in this life." He then ordered, "Take her and lock her up."

The soldiers suddenly rushed the slave.

The rulers stepped aside and let the soldiers handle the slave. They were highly amused that she fought them and completely lost. But Gabrielle had a lucky break, and she clobbered two soldiers and made for a fast escape.

"Get her!" King Cortese yelled.

The Conqueror broke into a powerful run, and she easily caught up with the fleeing bard. She gave her powerful battle cry, took two more wide strides, and she launched into the air.

Gabrielle was a mix of fear and being impressed. She sensed that Xena went over her head, and she quickly stopped when Xena landed in front of her. "By the gods," she muttered in shock. She raised her hands and prepared to fight.

The Conqueror was amazingly fast, and she gave a swift kick to the bard's head.

Gabrielle was completely off guard. She took the blow and hit the ground hard. She then found a sword tip at her throat and blue eyes hovered above her.

The Conqueror peered up and spotted the king and his soldiers coming for them. She quickly knelt down but kept the blade against the bard's throat. Now that she was closer, she saw the fear flicker in Gabrielle's bright eyes. She bowed her head and whispered, "You'll be safe, I promise." She then pulled her sword back, brought it around, and sharply swept the pommel downwards.

Gabrielle's head snapped to the right from the hard blow to her head. For a moment, Xena's face spun and blurred until everything went black.

"Sorry, Gabrielle," the ruler muttered. She stood up just as the soldiers surrounded them.

King Cortese shoved his cape aside and peered down at the motionless slave. He gazed up at the Conqueror briefly then commanded, "Get her locked up and double guarded."

The Conqueror watched her childhood friend be dragged off. She kept passive and focused back on the king. "I want my fun with her tomorrow."

King Cortese darkly grinned and stepped closer. "She's yours to do with. You discovered her."

The Conqueror had a dark look, and she whispered, "Oh she'll find out just what kind of freedom there is for spies." She left the king with no other words. She headed back to her camp. She hoped to hear from Tracker that the Amazons had been safely freed. Xena had another assignment for him tomorrow at dawn.

Gabrielle was tossed into the jail wagon, again. She groaned when her body hit the straw covered floor. She remained unconscious until the sunlight crept between the small space of the bars. The sun's early light painted over her face and brought her awake from her nightmares. The bard sat up in a rush and gasped for air. She whimpered at the abrupt pain to her forehead, and she gingerly touched the wound.

The wound was welted. The blood had scabbed over the split skin, but it was clearly visible. The slight throbbing from the wound was apparent yet not bothersome.

Gabrielle removed her hand from the lump and muttered, "I owe you, Xena." She blinked a few times then scanned the wagon. She sighed at her repeated predicament, and she hoped Xena had an excellent plan.

The guard on the right side of the wagon turned and smirked. "Good morning." He then signaled his partner to go. Once the other guard marched off, he focused back on the prisoner. "The Conqueror has arranged a surprise for you."

Gabrielle was starting to stand, but she paused and locked her darkened eyes on the guard. "Killing me won't stop Draco."

The guard chuckled and remarked, "Perhaps not, but it will send a message to Draco." He turned his

back on the slave and went silent.

The Amazon stood up, and the dance skirt flowed down and stopped at her ankles. She straightened out her top some then scanned her immediate surroundings. She realized she was no longer at the king's camp but in the Conqueror's. She stepped up to the bars, grabbed them, and stiffened when six hoplites marched in her direction.

The six hoplites came to a stop near the wagon. They lined up shoulder to shoulder and stood to the left of the wagon. They stayed still and silent until another hoplite came, but he was toting a wagon that was loaded with sticks and branches. The six hoplites quickly went to the wagon when it came to a stop. Together the hoplites quickly unloaded the wood and carefully stocked it under the jail wagon.

Gabrielle stepped away from the bars when she realized what the plan may be. She sucked in her breath and whispered, "No."

The guard chuckled and kept his back to the prisoner. He slyly grinned because he already knew the Conqueror's plans. He then slowly lost his grin when he noticed an animal was trotting towards them from the open field. He went a few paces away from the wagon and halted. He stared at the white wolf that came into focus.

Faolan cautiously neared the wagon that held his human friend. He smelled trouble, and he snarled at the guard and hoplites.

The hoplites touched their sword hilts, but nobody withdrew their weapons.

Gabrielle saw Faolan, but she feared to say anything to him in case the hoplites intended to attack him. She grasped the bars and fearful watched him. She silently begged her friend to leave.

Faolan stepped closer to the soldiers, but he stopped when the guard reached for something.

The guard extracted a dagger from his side. "I've never seen anything like him."

A hoplite broke away from the ranks and joined the guard. "He's unusual."

"He's going to be unusually dead if he doesn't stay away," the guard warned.

The white wolf edged closer and growled at the soldiers that threatened his friend's life.

The guard suddenly threw the dagger at the wolf.

Faolan quickly raced off to the left and dodged the weapon. He lowered his tail more, dropped his ears back, and proceeded to growl deeper.

The hoplite by the guard removed his dagger.

"Leave him alone!" Gabrielle hollered. She couldn't watch him get harmed.

The hoplite glanced back at the prisoner and smirked at her feelings for the wolf. He focused back on the wolf, lifted his arm, and held the dagger by the blade. He inhaled sharply and threw it with perfect aim at the animal.

The dagger cut through the air at an incredible speed. It was targeted at the wolf's chest, but suddenly the wolf raced out of the way. The dagger drove into the soft ground and only the hilt protruded.

Faolan now came closer and snarled more at the group. The fur on his back lifted up, but he planned to have his prey.

The hoplites all became concerned, and they lined up together. They withdrew daggers and prepared to throw them simultaneously. The guard held up his hand in a signal to prepare to throw.

"Leave him alone, you damn bastards!" Gabrielle kicked at the bars and tried to break them with her arms, but it was useless.

The hoplite that'd thrown his dagger earlier now withdrew his sword.

The guard grew tense and prepared to give the signal to throw the daggers.

After a beat, there was a low whistle sound that became louder, and it captured everybody's attention. Suddenly the whistle was loud and came for the hoplites. The Conqueror's famous chakram came into view, and it came right at the raised daggers.

Gabrielle watched in pure awe as the round weapon cut through the blades of the daggers one by one. She followed the chakram's trail and watched the Conqueror neatly catch the weapon.

The Conqueror brought the weapon back up and aimed it at her hoplites. "If anybody wishes to try for that wolf again, then I'll skin you first." She eyed each hoplite carefully and dared them to move.

The hoplites carefully dropped their broken daggers to the ground.

The guard stepped closer to the Conqueror and argued, "He's going to attack us."

Gabrielle glanced between the Conqueror, hoplites, and Faolan.

Faolan stood still, but he was hunched and showed his teeth. He kept his sights locked on the eight soldiers that threatened him and Gabrielle.

The Conqueror hooked her chakram and casually strolled up to her men. "If you give him a reason to attack, then he will." She regarded the beautiful wolf, who she'd met early last night. She then turned her head sidelong and studied the prisoner. She read the worry coming off Gabrielle, and she knew somehow the wolf and Gabrielle were connected.

Xena turned to Gabrielle, but ordered over her shoulder, "Just keep an eye on him." She neared the cage and kept her eyes on the bard. "Comfortable in there?"

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes and snapped, "Why don't you join me?"

The guard and three hoplites broke away and came to the Conqueror's side.

The ruler was amused, but she ignored the remark. She glanced off to her right and grinned. "Good morning, King Cortese. You're just in time for the morning event."

King Cortese approached with six soldiers. He glanced at the white wolf that was being watched over. His dark eyes flickered back to the Conqueror. "I didn't want to miss anything."

The Conqueror's grin deepened, and she turned her head to the guard. "Get the torch ready," she whispered. She then lifted her head and focused on the bard. "Kassandra," she drew out. She strolled up to the wagon and walked around to the side that was furthest from the soldiers and king. "If there's any information you want to volunteer about Draco's plans... then I may be persuaded to make your death less... painful."

The Amazon went to the side of the wagon and grabbed the bars. "Go to Hades, bitch." She felt a sting in her stomach for saying the cold words, but she had to play her role. She saw the glint of amusement

in Xena's eyes, and she swallowed. "Draco has his surprise for you."

Xena chuckled and strolled around the wagon and stopped in front of the slave. "And I have mine for him." She then tilted her head. "You chose the wrong side, Cassandra."

Gabrielle slotted her eyes and bared her teeth at the ruler.

The Conqueror stepped up to the side of the wagon. She lowered her voice and claimed, "I do appreciate last night." She stretched her hand between the bars, and hooked the bard's chin with her fingertips. "And I know how you loved it too." She drew Gabrielle's face to the bars, and she leaned in for a kiss.

Gabrielle couldn't fight Xena, and she realized she didn't want to either. She moaned at the soft feel of Xena's lips to hers. She parted her lips, and Xena's warm tongue brushed across hers. Then there was something hard but slim between their mouths. Gabrielle defocused from the pleasure and worked to receive the tiny object that Xena passed to her in the kiss.

The Conqueror slowly withdrew once she'd passed the metal object between the kiss. She kept her head close to Gabrielle's and kept her hand between the bar. She ran her thumb across the bard's sweet lips, and she murmured, "I will find you. Don't disappoint me again."

Gabrielle had no words, but her emotions shined in her eyes. She witnessed the instant Conqueror mask fall back over Xena's face, and she held her breath.

Xena straightened up to her full height, and she pulled out her hand. She walked away from the wagon for several paces, stopped, and turned her head sidelong. "Tell Hades that I'll be sending Draco to him shortly." She turned her head back and nodded at the guard to carry out his duty.

The guard smirked and quickly walked to the wagon with his lit torch.

"No," the bard gasped, and grabbed the bars.

The Conqueror stood beside the king. She folded her arms and waved for the guard to proceed.

The guard lowered the torch to the branches under the wagon. He carefully lit some, then he went to another side and lit those branches. He continued his way around the wagon until everything was on fire.

Gabrielle backed away from the side and stood in the middle. She inhaled the distinct smell of fire, and she lifted her head in the rulers' direction. She clenched her hands at her side.

King Cortese chuckled at the Conqueror's brilliant idea. He clapped Xena on the back. "I like your style, Conqueror." He peered up and smirked. "And here I thought you were so honorable."

Xena folded her arms and remarked, "I'm only honorable when it serves a purpose." She then focused on her men and ordered, "Return back to camp."

"What about the wolf?" a soldier asked.

"Leave him. He won't follow us." Xena glanced at the white wolf, who snarled and wanted to approach. She glanced back at the wagon and saw the flames lapped at the wheels. She knew time was precise so she turned to King Cortese. "We need to mobilize our armies."

King Cortese understood the subtle hint. He nodded and turned. "You are right." He slipped his hands between his cape and back. He signaled his men to follow suit.

The rulers nonchalantly strolled off with their soldiers following tow. The last soldier was the guard, who gazed back at the burning wagon, and emotions showed over his face. He silently prayed the woman could free herself as the Conqueror mentioned. He then glimpsed at the white wolf, who was going to the wagon now.

Gabrielle finished her act and gave a piercing yell for help. She only received a response from Faolan.

The white wolf tried to near the burning wagon, but he jumped back from the flames. He howled because he couldn't do anything to help.

The Amazon Queen quickly removed the object from her mouth and held it up with her hand. She smiled at the lock pick that Xena had given her. She jumped to the rear of the wagon and stretched her hands through the bars on either side of the lock. She turned her head away when the smoke came over her face.

Faolan started to pace and whine.

"Hold on, boy." Gabrielle rotated her head back and squinted. She managed the pick into the keyhole, and she closed her eyes against the smoke. She hastily tried to work the lock despite the rising heat against her hands. "Yeah, real clever, Xena." She grounded her teeth against the pain. "Next time the key would be a bigger help," she grumbled then coughed.

The bard thought she was going to choke any moment. She then heard a ping, a snap, and the lock whined open. She hastily ripped the loose lock off, and she kicked the door open. "Watch out, Fao."

Faolan backed away to give room.

Gabrielle backed up to the middle of the wagon. She breathed in some air until she had a good chest full. She then made a sprint for the mouth of the wagon, came to the edge, and pushed up. She gave a brief cry, flipped in midair, and landed on her feet with her back to the wagon. She then collapsed onto her side and started to cough.

Faolan rushed over and licked his friend's dirty face. He sneezed at her smoky smell, but he kept nuzzling her anyway.

The Amazon sadly smiled and reached up. She happily petted the wolf. "I missed you too, boy."

Faolan nuzzled Gabrielle's cheek and licked her other cheek. He lifted his head some then inspected her face.

The bard smiled at those forest green eyes above her. She adored the depth to the wolf's eyes, and he seemed more human than animal. Gabrielle sat up and held her body up with her hands behind her. She stared at the burning wagon and coughed some. She shook her head and muttered, "What a woman huh, Fao?" She turned her head to the wolf. "She knows how to show an old friend a good time."

Faolan sat down and tilted his head. "Rrrrrrr."

The Amazon Queen wiped the dirty from her forehead. "I have a lot to make up for now." She swallowed at her bitter emotions from last night. "Let's hope I get the chance too." She sat quietly and tried to catch up to everything that's happened. Then something dawned on her, and she muttered, "Oh Hades... she doesn't know I'm the queen."

Faolan twisted his head the opposite way and sadly murmured, "Rrruhh rrrrr."

Gabrielle turned her head to the wolf. "Rut roo is right." She touched her forehead and whispered, "She

thinks Melosa is queen." She slumped forward and tried to think about the problem. "Oh gods... this is really bad." She closed her eyes. "Now what, Fao?"

Faolan would have suggested something, but he couldn't very well talk. He huffed and shook his head.

The Amazon Queen dropped her hand from her head, and she stared at the burning wagon that was quite ablaze now. "Oh Artemis, what have I done now?" She silently cursed herself, but she climbed to her feet slowly. She felt the ache in her body, but she ignored it, and turned around towards the woods. She saw that the woods was rather far, but she had enough time for a stroll to it.

"Let's go, Faolan." Gabrielle picked up one foot then the other foot. She made the walk to the woods where she hoped her Amazons waited for her. Once she made it back to the woods, she wouldn't notice the Conqueror's scout, Tracker, following her path back to the Amazons and eventually to the Amazon Nation.

To be continued.