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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 15

The Conqueror felt extremely worn and certainly not from battle or fighting. She was mentally exhausted after meeting what seemed like the entire Amazon Nation. She'd remained in Gabrielle's room in the healer's hut and in turn, she had to greet every Amazon that came to visit the injured queen. Xena quickly figured out just how well favored Gabrielle was in her Nation.

Gabrielle was stripped of her weapons and boots. She had fainted about six candelmarks ago. The sun had recently set, and the visitors to the healer's hut were finally slowing down. The Conqueror was surprised to meet the only two males in the village, who were visitors. She'd been taken by surprise

when the famous Hercules and his partner entered the room to see Gabrielle. Xena, like many, had heard of the legendary hero and never met him. She remained cordial with him, and Hercules seemed to try and discern her, but Xena didn't allow much room for it.

Currently, Xena rested slumped in a wood chair. She was grateful for the silence and peacefulness finally while Gabrielle slept. Earlier she'd sent word to her commander that she would be delayed in returning to the camp, and he was in charge until her return.

There was a soft sigh off to Xena's left. The ruler gazed over at the bandaged wolf, who rested on his belly on top of a fur that'd been brought in for him. Xena had been administering some medicine to the wolf so that his pain was minimal until the ribs better healed.

Faolan lifted his head then adjusted his muzzle to a comfortable spot. He flickered his dark green eyes to the ruler.

The Conqueror silently regarded the white wolf. She considered what Seven had said about the wolf, and she believed that Faolan was from Artemis. A white wolf with green eyes was not natural, and only the gods would create something like him.

Xena was drawn from her thoughts when there was a low knock at the closed door. She sighed that another visitor was coming, but she gently called, "Come in." She tilted her head when a petite Amazon stepped into the room.

The Amazon carried a tray of food. She first glimpsed at the sleeping queen then focused on the ruler. "I brought you some food. I thought you may be hungry." She approached the table that was beside the Conqueror.

Xena had a closer look at the Amazon, who was older. She noted how the Amazon had similar features such as blue eyes, high cheekbones, and midnight but curly hair. She also took in the healthy display of muscles the Amazon present compared to many others, and she detected a faint odor of fire and metal.

The Amazon settled the tray onto the table then finally introduced herself. "I'm Andra." She held out her arm.

The Conqueror didn't bother to stand because she was so worn. She collapsed the muscular arm and shook. "What do you do here, Andra?"

The blacksmith released arms then answered, "I'm the Nation's blacksmith."

Xena was startled because it was the first Nation she knew of that had a blacksmith. She assumed all Nations had to hire outside blacksmiths to smith their weapons and metal. She also didn't know of any female blacksmiths, but it all made sense too.

Andra turned her head to the left and stared at her sister. She finally went to Gabrielle, grasped the pallet's edges, and leaned over her sister. She visually inspected the wound and noted the beads of sweat on her brow. "She hasn't broke her fever?"

"Not yet," the ruler replied. "She should soon."

Andra silently prayed that Xena was right. She then leaned down and kissed her sister's moist cheek and whispered, "Get well, sister."

The Conqueror heard Andra call Gabrielle her sister. She knew all Amazons considered one another sisters, daughters, or mothers. Each Amazon was a family member to another, but she rarely heard the

titles unless it was blood related.

The blacksmith turned and took in Faolan. She placed her hands on her hips and chuckled. "Did you finally get your fur dirtied, Faolan?"

The white wolf's head popped up, and he glowered at the blacksmith.

Andra smirked, but she switched her attention to Xena. "My sister and Faolan have been friends for several seasons." She dropped her hands and wandered over to the vacant chair on the other side of the table. "He came to her when she was going through her trial in the woods."

Xena was silent, but she noticed how Andra spoke to her as if Xena was suppose to already understand Amazon tradition and ritual. She considered whether or not Andra knew Xena's past with the Amazons.

The blacksmith crossed her legs and stared at her sister. "Gabrielle has spoke a lot about you." She thinned her lips and tilted her head at the ruler. "It's nice to finally have a face for the name."

The Conqueror leaned back in her chair and studied the blacksmith. She finally spoke though after several beats. "How long have you known Gabrielle?"

Andra bit her lip and did the calculations. "It's been about sixteen seasons now." She wistfully smiled at her first memory of Gabrielle. How Gabrielle had been so persistent to recruit her and join the Nation, and it'd paid off. "She's done a lot of growing since I've known her." She watched her sister's chest slowly rise and fall. "She still has plenty left to do, but I admire her. She's managed to survive the bonds of slavery."

"She doesn't seem to be completely free of them," Xena remarked.

"How can she be?" Andra focused in the ruler. "As long as slavery is legal then she, like any slave, is threatened." She sighed and addressed another side of the topic. "I think she's finally figured out she can't live in fear though no matter the stakes."

The Conqueror absorbed the blacksmith's words. She started to agree that it seemed Gabrielle was figuring out that she couldn't keep submitting to her own bonds.

"Gabrielle has a good heart under all her armor." Andra straightened up then stood. "I think you've both been through a lot." She hesitated but turned her head to the ruler. "Hopefully you both still have a lot to go through... together." She walked away while saying, "I'll leave you to eat."

Faolan lifted his head and whined.

Andra stopped by the closed door. She smirked over at the wolf and teased, "I brought you food as well, furball." She opened the door and quietly left without another word.

The Conqueror stared at the closed door and considered Andra's words. She then peered over at the tray of food, and she discovered a leather pouch that most likely had scraps for Faolan. She snatched the bag up and went to the wolf.

Faolan instantly stood up and found the pouch opened wide for him and set on the floor. He quickly ate his meal.

Xena returned to the table and quietly ate the meal that Andra brought her. She silently thanked the blacksmith for her kindness, and she reminded herself to say it later to Andra. After her belly was filled, she went to the bard's side and checked on her. She first wiped the bard's brow down with a wet rag. She then ran the rag over the bard's chest and removed the sweat there.

The Conqueror set the rag back in the water bowl. She then picked up a candle from the small table by the pallet. She went around the room and lit a couple of torches for better light now that the sunlight was almost gone. She returned the candle to the table then there was a knock.

Xena sighed, yet she called, "Come in." She then was met by an old, friendly face from her past. She furrowed her eyebrows and questioned, "Yakut?"

The shaman stood in the doorway, and she scanned over the Conqueror's changed features. She sensed that it was safe to enter, so she came in and closed the door. "It's been a long time, Xena."

The ruler stayed at the pallet side. She carefully watched the shaman. "It has been."

The shaman reached up and removed her headdress. She tucked it under her right arm then glanced at the queen. "How is she?"

"She still has a fever," Xena remarked.

Yakut nodded then she carefully neared the ruler but not too close. "You have changed much since I last saw you."

The Conqueror lifted her chin and remained stoic. "For the better."

"Yes." The shaman had a half smile. "Greece fairs well, and it has you to thank." She felt that Xena wasn't tense about her arrival, but just thrown off. "You've kept your word, my friend."

"Everyday has been a struggle," Xena softly admitted.

Yakut felt deeply for the ruler. "I know it has been, but you are stronger than the darkness." She searched Xena's eyes and her two-spirit helped her see deeper to the real Xena under all the armor and weapons. "Everything has its price, Xena but sometimes it is worth it."

"Yes... yes, it is." Xena turned her head to Gabrielle. She watched the bard's peaceful features.

Yakut edged closer, and she lowered her freehand to the bard's stomach. She pressed her palm against the bard's hot skin. She invoked her two-spirit to trace the recent events. Yakut watched the flash of the fight by the lake, which quickly sped past then slowed to the image of Xena ramming the arrow through Gabrielle's shoulder. She then heard Gabrielle's scream and now there was a hot poker burning the queen's skin closed from the open wound. She withdrew her hand and peered up at Xena.

The Conqueror met the shaman's intense gaze.

"She's quite formidable, isn't she?"

The Conqueror took a beat to understand, but she slowly nodded. "Is it possible to stop her, Yakut?"

Yakut considered the automaton that was created by Ares and Hephaestus. "I believe she can be freed from the gods' control." She licked her lips and shook her head. "I cannot tell the light in her real spirit though."

"Or lack of light," the ruler murmured.

"I doubt that she has an evil spirit," the shaman theorized. "The gods wouldn't have chose her if she was. A peaceful, good spirit is easier to control and manipulate."

The Conqueror sympathized with the shaman's assessment. "You will attempt to free her?" She already knew the answer and after Yakut nodded, she mentioned, "You helped me, Yakut."

The shaman sighed and peered up at the ruler. "The subject has to be willing, Xena. Also you weren't controlled by the gods. There are far more variables with Seven."

Xena collapsed the shaman's shoulder and squeezed it. "Where's your faith, Yakut?" She quirked a grin.

Yakut softened and it showed in her brown eyes. "It's never faltered." She then mentioned, "You must talk to Gabrielle about the plans for Seven."

"I assume Hercules has something to do with it."

"Yes." Yakut felt the strong hand leave her shoulder. "I must return to the temple." She offered a smile to the ruler. "It's good to see you again, Xena."

The Conqueror felt quite at ease at Yakut's side. "You as well, my friend. Next time we shouldn't wait so long."

The shaman went to the door, but she hesitated and returned her smile at the ruler. "We won't." She grabbed the door handle, but she wouldn't open it. "Follow your destiny, Xena." She glimpsed at the sleeping, injured queen then back at the ruler. "She's apart of it." She opened the door and stepped out. Once she had the door shut, she put her headdress on again and floated down the dim hallway.

Xena sighed and stared down at Gabrielle. She shook her head and muttered, "What scared you so bad you wouldn't come to me, Bri?" She started to realize that it was actually out of Gabrielle's character for Gabrielle not to come to her. When they were young, Gabrielle never faltered to come to Xena and tell her everything and anything. The honesty Gabrielle showed as a child was something Xena adored because others were so conniving. So exactly what was it that made Gabrielle hold back this time?

The Conqueror grumbled because she wouldn't have her answer right now. She instead walked back to the chair and sat. She lowered her head, closed her eyes, and pondered the possible answers.

Faolan suddenly lifted his head, and he carefully watched Gabrielle's left hand. He twisted his head to the right when her fingers started to twitch. He whined and glanced over at the Conqueror.

Xena raised her head up and gazed over at the wolf. She followed Faolan's line of sight, and she slowly stood up when Gabrielle's fingers curled.

Gabrielle groaned and turned her head to the right. She inhaled the distinct smell of balm then the sharp pain in her shoulder became apparent. She painfully moaned and tried to open her eyes, but the candlelight didn't bother her eyes. She focused on the face that loomed over her.

"How you feel?"

The bard focused on the ruler's distinct face and those beautiful blue eyes. She lifted her hand and touched her forehead. "Am I sleeping in the fireplace?"

"You have a fever," the ruler explained. She reached for the rag that remained in the water bowl. She rung out the water then carefully applied it to the bard's face. "How do you feel?"

Gabrielle lowered her hand back to the pallet. "I couldn't be better," she joked.

Xena sighed and moved the cloth to the queen's neck. She noted the red marks left from the automaton's attempt. "You still need more rest."

The queen shifted on the hard pallet and complained, "Gods I hate these things." She winced at her shoulder pain. "Now I know why you always fussed about a hard bed."

The Conqueror was focused on her task, but she peered back up into fuzzy green eyes. "You had several visitors stop by."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "How long have I been out for?"

"Almost seven candlemarks."

The queen fathomed the lost time. She then quickly thought of the white wolf. "Where's Faolan?" She received the wolf's low whine from below.

Faolan gave a low bark too. He ignored the pain from his ribs, and he lifted himself up. He managed his front paws onto the pallet, and he licked his friend's burning hand.

Gabrielle lifted her head and smiled at the wolf. "Hello, Fao." She noted the bandages around him. "Who took care of him?"

Xena returned the rag to the bowl and moved it around in the cool water. "I did." She rung the water out again then pressed it against the bard's forehead. "Lay down."

The queen lowered her head, but she kept her hand on Faolan's head. She idly pet him and studied Xena's serious features. "You're still here?"

The Conqueror was silent, and she thought about how to respond. "Yes." She couldn't find the right words.

Gabrielle saw the struggle coming from Xena. She offered a smile and sincerely whispered, "Thank you."

Xena only nodded and continued her administrations.

The bard didn't push it. She instead switched topics. "What about your army?"

"I sent word to my chiliarchèses that I've been delayed." Xena brought the rag to Gabrielle's chest and tried to sooth the heat away.

"You should get back," the bard insisted. "They may think we stole you."

The Conqueror slightly grinned at the joke, but she lost it. "When it's time, I will go." She wouldn't detail it anymore, but she put the rag back in the bowl. "You need more rest."

The bard's eyes fluttered, and she pulled her hand away from Faolan. She did feel weak and exhausted, and the fever didn't help her. "Does this stop?"

"Yes," the ruler replied. She wasn't sure if Gabrielle meant the fever or something else.

The bard reached up and touched her chest. She sought her necklace, and once she felt it, she released it and turned her head to the side. "I never thought I'd see you again... then when I found out you were alive. I instead feared seeing you again." She forced her heavy eyes open, but she couldn't fully focus on Xena's blurry face. "I just want to go back... before Potidaea was attacked."

Xena not only heard, but she felt the painful ache in Gabrielle's words. She often thought the same words Gabrielle just spoke.

Gabrielle closed her eyes as the memories and past bit her coldly. "Gods I miss those days." She felt a warm hand at her cheek. "It was so much simpler. Our lives were about our families and each other."

The Conqueror swallowed, and the emotions came to life in her. She bent over the bard and murmured, "That was a long time ago, Gabrielle."

The queen opened her eyes and finally focused on the ruler's face because it was closer. "But I haven't stopped feeling for you like I did then, Xena."

The ruler searched Gabrielle's face, and she believed those words. She just didn't understand Gabrielle's silence all these seasons. "Why... why didn't you contact me?"

Gabrielle was slipping from her conscious. She couldn't gather the right words, but her mind briefly flashed with an image of Xena's journal. She closed her eyes and murmured, "Your journal." The fever gripped her and weakened her back into an unconscious state.

The Conqueror shook her head after a moment. She straightened up, but she kept her hand on Gabrielle's moist cheek. She wasn't sure at first, yet the bard's words started to sink in deeper. She blinked a few times and whispered, "How could she have..." She was dumbfounded if it was indeed true that Gabrielle read her journal from her days on the Mediterranean. Yet it made sense if Gabrielle knew that Xena had found Lila so long ago. To this day, Xena was still angry that she'd found and lost Lila so easily.

Faolan sighed sadly, and he lowered back to the floor. He sat on his haunches and waited.

Xena ran her thumb across the bard's pale lips. She then withdrew and went back to her chair. She sat down and thought back on her journal. She recalled her old entries and slowly the pieces started to fit together.

The candlemarks slowly passed, and Gabrielle struggled through her fever. Nightmares wreaked havoc on her, and she thrashed her head about during her sleep. A few times she even cried out, and her last cry was Xena's name.

The Conqueror found the latest nightmare the worst yet. She'd gone to the pallet and attempted to hold the queen down before she fell off. She restrained the bard, but she was surprised at Gabrielle's strength. She was use to easily holding Gabrielle down when they wrestled as kids.

Yet Xena observed the muscles hidden along Gabrielle's legs, arms, and stomach. Xena never expected Gabrielle to turnout this way, but it was true that Gabrielle was an Amazon warrior. Gabrielle was no slave that required a hero to save her, and Xena wasn't sure how to accept that facet. She'd spent too many days protecting Gabrielle when they were kids and long nights believing she'd be the one to free Gabrielle from slavery.

Gabrielle suddenly gasped and shot up from the pallet. She gritted her teeth against the pain in her shoulder and the soreness of her body. "Oh gods." The sweat rolled down her body from the fever, yet she felt better than earlier.

"Relax," the Conqueror coaxed. She held Gabrielle still. "I think you broke your fever."

"I feel like somebody... broke me," the bard muttered. She put her hands on the pallet and tried to sit up better.

"I know." The ruler helped Gabrielle get comfortable. She then pulled out the soaked rag from the bowl that'd been freshly supplied with clean water. She rung the water out first then brought the rag to the bard's face. "How you feel now?"

Gabrielle pushed her bangs back and replied, "Better, I think."

"Good." The Conqueror felt the queen's intense eyes on her, but she didn't make eye contact. "Are you hungry?"

"A little," Gabrielle admitted. She gazed past Xena and smiled at Faolan's presence by the pallet. "Still here too huh?"

The ruler glanced at the wolf, but she went back to her task. "I think that wolf is in love with you."

Gabrielle didn't expect the smart comment, and she laughed and regretted the pain that came too. "Oh gods." She settled down and sighed. "What time is it?"

"I suspect another six candlemarks before dawn."

"Have you slept?" The bard peered up into hooded blue eyes.

"I'm fine."

Gabrielle quirked a grin and remarked, "That's a no, right?"

Xena sighed and set the rag back into the water bowl. "Do you want anything to eat?"

The bard leaned on the wall that the pallet was set against. "I think so. I should eat."

The Conqueror felt mutual. She went to the table where she'd set some food aside. A few candlemarks ago, Cliona had stopped in and dropped the food off for the queen. But prior, Xena had requested what food for Cliona to get, and Xena hoped she still knew Gabrielle's taste.

The bard perked up when the ruler carried over a favorite dish. She formed a curious look and asked, "You still remember?"

Xena huffed and handed the bowl to the queen. "How could I forget?" She went back to the table and picked up her chair. "I think eating is an art to you."

"It's a skill," the bard corrected. She happily ate the fish that was seasoned in olives, herbs, and feta.

The Conqueror grunted, set the chair down by the pallet, and lowered down into it. She stretched her legs underneath the pallet and watched the bard happily eat.

Gabrielle paused and asked, "Please tell me you've at least ate."

Xena nodded. "Your blacksmith brought me something."

The bard had filled her mouth with fish, but she quickly chewed her food and swallowed. "Andra?" After Xena's nod, she lowered the bowl to her lap. "Did you two talk?"

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow and remarked, "I've been the greeting receptionist all night, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen softly laughed and bobbed her head. "Next time, just ask Faolan to chase them off. He's fairly good at that."

Faolan whined from his seat beside the Conqueror.

The bard flashed a smile at the wolf, but she went back to her meal. "Thank you for staying. You didn't need to do it."

"No, I didn't," the ruler agreed. "But I wanted to."

Gabrielle nodded, and she polished off her first dish. She balanced the bowl on the edge of the pallet. "Well, I would say the war is off to a good start."

"Mmmm." Xena collected the bowl, returned it to the tray, and collected another dish. She also deposited the piece of flatbread on top. "So tell me how the Macedonian Nation manages to have fish?" She handed over the next bowl then sat again.

Gabrielle sighed and picked up the flatbread. She peered into the new bowl and softly grinned at the pasta, tomato sauce, and sheep mutton mixed together. She met Xena's curious gaze. "You recall our olive fields?"

"Yes." The Conqueror had been impressed by the countless olive trees. It was quite a harvest that the Amazon most likely collected all spring and summer long.

"Well, a few seasons ago I setup a trade pact with Potidaea. We give them olive oil and received various loads of seafood." Gabrielle broke off some bread and munched on it.

Xena considered the information, and her thoughts moved fast. A random thought came to mind, and she tilted her head.

Gabrielle noted how Xena seemed to be thinking out something. She dipped a piece of flatbread into the tomato sauce but asked, "What is it?"

The ruler came back to the present and asked, "Do you still go to Potidaea?"

The Amazon Queen hesitated because she thought of Amphipolis too, but she truthfully answered, "Yes. I was just there before this mess with Draco." She slightly stiffened when sharp eyes locked on her. "What?" She remained motionless.

"Damn," the ruler muttered, "Why didn't I see it earlier?"

Gabrielle's eyebrows drew inward, and she repeated, "What?"

"Do you recall Dardanus?"

The bard racked her memory, then it dawned on her. "The weapons merchant in Potidaea."

"He saw you," the ruler revealed. "He thought it may have been you, but he wasn't sure because you were a warrior."

Gabrielle grumbled at her mistake, but she focused back on Xena. "He told you this? Then you knew... I was..."

"No," the ruler admitted. "I didn't think anything of it. I couldn't put two and two together." She silently cursed herself.

The bard peered into her bowl of uneaten food, and she pushed her fork through the noodles.

"Eat," the Conqueror insisted. "You need your strength back."

The Amazon nodded then started to eat around her last piece of bread. She kept the bowl up close and slowly ate.

The ruler bowed her head and considered what Dardanus had told her. She then recalled that Gabrielle mentioned that she visited with Cyrene and Toris. Xena realized that most likely Gabrielle and her had crossed paths more times than once and just missed each other. Why in the Fates' reason did they keep

missing each other until now?

Gabrielle had quickly finished off her meal because she was so hungry. She set the bowl down, but it still had the last piece of bread. She coated it in tomato sauce then gave a low whistle.

Xena sharply broke from her thoughts. She just spotted Gabrielle's clean toss of the bread to the white wolf.

Faolan snatched the bread from midair and happily gobbled it down.

"You'll make him fat," the ruler taunted.

Gabrielle huffed and argued, "He works it off pretty easily."

Xena couldn't argue the point. She stood up, collected the bowl, set it on the tray, and came back with a mug of water. She handed it to the bard then sat down again.

The bard appreciated the ruler's attentiveness, and she was warmed by it. She considered what brought Xena around so easily. Was it because of Seven's attack and the arrow? She wasn't a hundred percent sure, but she wouldn't dismiss the changes. After she had a drink of water, she decided it was time to focus on a few serious topics.

"We need to figure out how to handle Draco," Gabrielle carefully brought up.

The Conqueror tilted her head and held the bard's gaze. "It can wait until later."

"It is later," the queen reminded. "I have all night." She then scanned about the room. "And I don't see you having any plans." She came back to the ruler's serious expression. "Not unless you plan to sing and dance for me...?"

Xena gradually arched an eyebrow. "As I recall, that seems to be your department."

Gabrielle couldn't quite tell if it was a joke or not, but she knew Xena referenced her rescue mission as a fake slave for King Cortese. She decided to take it as a joke and quipped, "I don't sing... we both know how awful I am." She made the right choice in her words because Xena gave a sly grin.

Gabrielle briefly fell into a memory about her childhood. She slowly smirked.

The ruler slotted her eyes and questioned, "What?"

The bard giggled and focused in the ruler. "You remember that time we were up in the loft, and you were trying to teach me how to sing?"

Xena resisted a laugh, but her grin couldn't be refused. "I recall."

"Oh gods that was so funny." Gabrielle started to laugh. "I think I woke up half of Potidaea with my screeching."

"Only after you got your father's horses whining like death was approaching because of your singing," Xena retorted.

Gabrielle dropped her head back and laughed louder. She shook her head. "I thought father was going to kill me for that." She snickered and muttered, "It's a good thing they didn't break lose."

"Hmmm." The ruler bowed her head and grinned devilishly at the memory. There were so many tales like that one about her and Gabrielle. They were the duo that was well-known throughout Potidaea and

Amphipolis, although typically Xena went to Potidaea more often. It was fairly hard for Gabrielle to make it to Amphipolis unless Cyrene took her.

The bemused bard shook her head, but she sipped on her water. She tried to shake her memories and return to the present situation. She could reminisce later with Xena. "Xena, I refuse to side with King Cortese."

The Conqueror lifted her attention to the Amazon Queen. She sighed and stretched out her long legs under the pallet for the pending talk. "He's a feather in your hair, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle disliked Xena's remark. She reached over and set the half full mug onto the small table by the water bowl. She laced her fingers together and settled her hands on her stomach. "He took Cliona and Amarice, Xena. I refuse to ally with the enemy."

"Sometimes your enemy is the best ally," the ruler argued.

"Not in this case," Gabrielle snapped. "Don't forget he's after you too."

"I haven't," the ruler promised. "He's using me, and I'm using him. I think it's a fair arrangement."

The queen held her silence and thought out a few angles. She then questioned, "If you side with him then does that make you my enemy?"

The Conqueror darkened at the question, and she didn't like the implications.

Gabrielle saw the look, and she quickly explained, "He's after you too, Xena. Why play the charade? You can't count on him through the war... you can't trust him." She waited a beat then added, "He's going to figure out quickly that the Amazons know he took Cliona and Amarice. As soon as that happens, there's going to be changes."

Xena calmed herself and considered the bard's words. It was true, and she'd already considered it back when she freed the Amazons from the king's camp. She inwardly sighed.

"We don't need him," the bard argued, "between your army, my Amazons, and the Centaurs. We three can stop Draco from doing anything."

The Conqueror's eyes darkened from her thoughts. She weighed Gabrielle's words carefully. She drummed her fingers on the chair's arm. "He's well regarded in his kingdom, Gabrielle." She pegged the bard with a stern look. "It won't look well if I refuse his help."

"And it'll look worse if you do accept his help, and he later turns on you." The queen read deeper into Xena's eyes, and she saw just how stubborn Xena had grown over the moons. "I don't think he's as honorable as people think. For gods' sakes, he's cutting deals with Draco and the Romans and getting hung up on which deal to honor. He's nothing but deceptive and conniving."

Gabrielle's words were true, Xena decided. Xena only trusted King Cortese as far as she could throw him. She sighed and questioned, "What would you have me do?"

The bard was shaken by the question. She hadn't expected it, but she honestly replied, "It's up to you, Xena. I know what I have to do. I will go to him personally and refuse his help. If he so much as comes near my Nation, we will attack him."

"You could spark very bad politics, Gabrielle. Not just for your Nation but for Cyane's too." The Conqueror knew that the Thrace Nation was on the edges of the Macedon Kingdom. "He holds relations with the Thrace Nation too."

"And I don't think for a beat that Queen Cyane would keep relations with him if she knew the truth."

Xena tilted her head, but she knew it was true. She understood Queen Cyane after her time in the Nation, and Cyane would undoubtedly null any relations with the Macedon Kingdom if she heard about any of this.

What concerned Xena most was if she refused King Cortese what he may do. She had over a thousand hoplites with her and Borias wasn't that far away. Her men were far better trained than King Cortese's, and they were far more driven by loyalty and a belief. King Cortese's men were merely driven by greed from what Xena could discern.

If King Cortese retaliated on her, then she'd have to face Cortese and Draco mutually. She knew the Amazons would back her, but she wasn't so sure about the Centaurs. What was a peace of mind was that huge forces of hoplites were marching north from Corinth and Athens under Xena's orders. Xena estimated by the end of the fight with Draco, she would have forty thousand Spartan hoplites from Corinth and ten thousand hoplites from Athens, and Thebes's was sending five thousand hippeis. She would have a hefty army behind her and one that surpassed anything King Cortese could muster. And if the Romans were involved, then she would indeed need her army.

Gabrielle waited for Xena to speak again. She saw how the ruler was carefully thinking out the various scenarios. She hoped Xena would agree with her or else it could get messy. She tensed when Xena's intense eyes shined at her.

"Alright," the Conqueror started, "I'll send King Cortese packing, but only if the Amazons back me." She noted the Amazon Queen's curious and slightly confused expression. "King Cortese won't be so thrilled that I've rejected him. He may be dumb enough to attack, and if he does I'll need the extra support."

Gabrielle now understood, and she slowly nodded. "You'll have our support." She tilted her head and curiously wondered something. "How exactly are you going to scare off King Cortese without starting a fight?"

Xena smirked and casually remarked, "I have many skills." She listened to the bard's low laugh. "As far as Draco is concerned, he'll meet his fate on the battlefield. I'm more concerned about this automaton."

The bard sighed and nodded. The shoulder pain reminded her how concerned she was too.

"Yakut stopped in here," the ruler mentioned. She saw how Gabrielle stiffened so Xena immediately knew that Yakut and Gabrielle most likely caught up on the past. She inwardly sighed but decided to stay away from the topic for now. "She said you have a plan to stop Seven."

Gabrielle softly sighed then collected her mug of water. She toyed with it for a beat but answered, "We do." She drank her water first because she felt parched. She set the mug back down. "Hercules is here."

"I met him," the ruler confessed. "I take it he's apart of the plan."

"Yes. Yakut seems to think she can free Seven from her bonds." Gabrielle dimmed and whispered, "If it doesn't work, we plan to kill her."

"How?"

The bard glanced at Faolan, and she frowned at his injury incurred by the automaton. She peered back up at Xena. "We plan to lead her away from the battlefield. Hercules will be hiding in a ground trap and hopefully will catch her. He plans to hold her while Yakut works her magic."

The ruler decided the plan was simple enough. "And if Yakut can't free her?"

Gabrielle softly sighed and answered, "We'll be near the Axius river... she'll be thrown in to drown."

Xena carefully considered the idea and murmured, "With bones of metal, she won't be able to swim."

"She'll be a dead weight," the Amazon agreed.

The ruler grunted at the ironic words Gabrielle used. "She's smart, Gabrielle."

"I know." The bard was worried already.

The Conqueror then rethought Gabrielle's plans, and it occurred to her. "You're setting yourself as the bait."

"Yes." Gabrielle knew it wasn't a question, but she still confirmed it. "It's the only way to draw her away from the battle. She'll do less damage if she's not there, and she's after me."

Xena stood up and walked over to the open window. She clutched the windowsill and stared at the peaceful village.

The bard watched the tension run through the ruler's shoulder muscles. She peered down at Xena's knuckles, which were white. She waited to see if Xena would say anything, and she hoped so.

The Conqueror dipped her head and closed her eyes. She felt so much going through her. She was a mix of anger for Gabrielle's silence, yet she feared Gabrielle could die any day with this war. She cursed Draco for it, but yet if it wasn't for him she may have not happened upon Gabrielle. She debated whether Gabrielle would have kept her silence if it weren't for these recent events.

Gabrielle bit her lower lip and tried to guess what was running through Xena's head.

Xena lifted her head and studied the quiet village again. She softly stated, "If it wasn't for Dan, we would have never met again."

Gabrielle twisted her features then remarked, "Well that's kind of you." She watched Xena twist her head to the right, and she had a nice view of Xena's profile. "I wouldn't credit him with that, Xena."

The Conqueror turned her head away again. "You would have never contacted me if this hadn't happened."

The bard pondered it and shook her head. "No, you're wrong. I planned to find you, but Draco showed up so I couldn't come to you. I didn't expect to become queen, and I was scared that if slavers heard I was queen that they'd be after me." She hesitated and whispered, "I don't want to put the Nation between me and the slavers."

"It wouldn't have mattered, Gabrielle whether you were queen, princess, or not in the royal line." Xena licked her lips and mentioned, "The Nation would have still protected you from the slavers."

"I know... but I don't want them to do it." Gabrielle sighed and dipped her head. "It's not their place or fight."

"It wasn't mine either," Xena reminded, "but I made it my place." She straightened up but kept her back to the bard. "It's my fight now." She turned around and folded her arms. "The Nation would feel the same way. I can see how loyal they are to you."

"I'm sure I've lost some after my recent escapade," the annoyed queen muttered.

"We all falter at some point," the ruler pointed out. "At least the Amazons are reminded you are human afterall."

Gabrielle frowned and brush her bangs back. She gazed down at Faolan, who had returned to his blanket but watched her and Xena carefully. She then peered over at Xena. "Should I take this as a good thing? You're trying to boost my confidence."

Xena folded her arms and leaned back against the window's side. She regarded the queen, who was injured more than just physically. "You read my journal."

"Yes," the bard whispered. She stared down at her laced hands and thought back on the journal that was tucked away in her desk. She let out a deep breath and lifted her head. "I bought it from a merchant in Stageria. I didn't know it was yours until I was able to match your handwriting to a scroll you left behind in your old room."

The Conqueror swallowed as it started to make sense. "You know more about my past than I do of yours."

"I suppose so," Gabrielle granted. She blinked a few times as she recalled the dark entries in the journal. "I just... I couldn't understand." She met the ruler's gaze. "It was like reading about a stranger. The death... the darkness... I feared what I read."

"I was a different person then," Xena debated.

"A person I never knew," Gabrielle commented. "How did it happen?"

"I don't know." Xena didn't have all the answers herself, not yet anyway. She sadly sighed and explained, "It happened little by little... I didn't even see it happening." She looked back on her memories of those days when she started to slip deeper into the anger and hatred. "You were taken from me... then Lyceus died because of me."

"Xena, his death isn't-"

"Yes it is," Xena sharply snapped. "If I made him stay behind in Amphipolis then he'd still be alive."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to fight Xena's words, but she darkened at the anger floating in those blue eyes. She silenced the fear she felt at seeing Xena's temper. "He would have followed you, Xena. You know that."

"I could have made him stay."

"No, you really couldn't have." The bard shifted on the hard pallet. "I knew him too, Xena. He was just as stubborn as you, and he would have followed you to the ends of the earth."

Xena grounded her teeth and tried to ignore Gabrielle's honest words. She hated to think it was Lyceus's destiny to die at a young age. She turned back to window and desperately fought her rising emotions. She'd spent too many seasons training as a great warrior to break down to her emotions that were so old.

Gabrielle swallowed at her thoughts of Lyceus, who was a brother to her too. She stared up at the thatch ceiling that flickered in the firelight. She closed her eyes and choked her feelings. She never once blamed Xena for Lyceus's death, but she thanked Lyceus for following Xena. She was almost sure that Lyceus kept Xena safe during that time despite it'd ended so badly.

Xena tried to will her heart to slow down again. She clutched the windowsill again and practically

strangled it. She felt the sting comes to her eyes, and she desperately fought it.

Gabrielle glanced over at Xena, and she saw the mounting tension about to explode from Xena. She gritted her teeth and urged her body to move. She painfully slid off the pallet and silently stood up. She was weak and in pain, but it was nothing to what pain she felt for Xena. Gabrielle steadied herself and willed her legs to carry her to Xena.

Xena was so caught up in her emotions that she never heard Gabrielle's movements. Yet soon she felt a warm hand on her shoulder, and she opened her eyes. From the corner of her eye, she caught Gabrielle's worried face. She willed her voice to be even when she spoke, "You need to lay down."

"I think I've done enough of that lately," the bard remarked. "Xena?"

The ruler turned her head away from the bard. She refused to be read by Gabrielle.

Gabrielle stretched out her hand and pressed her palm against Xena's right cheek. She turned the ruler's face back to her.

The Conqueror fought by removing Gabrielle's hand and turning her head again.

"Don't be so gods' be damned stubborn, Xena."

"I'm fine," the ruler snapped. And she decided space was needed, so she turned and walked away. She only got a step away before Gabrielle had her by the wrist.

"Xena, his death isn't your fault." The bard clung to the ruler's wrist despite it used much of her strength.

"You weren't there." Xena turned back to the bard, and she was full of anger again.

"But I know what happened," the bard fought. "You didn't kill him."

"He wouldn't have been killed if I left him in Amphipolis," the ruler snapped coldly. She tried to jerk her wrist free, but Gabrielle held true.

Gabrielle stepped closer. "And you could blame me for the entire thing." She searched Xena's confused face and explained, "If I'd stayed in the woods during the raid like you told me to, I'd never been captured. You'd never searched for me, and Lyceus would have never followed."

Xena hated when she and Gabrielle played the fault game; she always lost this game. She recalled the one in the barn loft when Gabrielle had almost fallen off the side because they'd been wrestling carelessly. "I hate when you do this."

The bard smiled crookedly at the ruler's defeated tone and words. "I always win."

Xena stared at the younger woman that'd meant the world to her and was apart of her family. She shook her head and hoarsely whispered, "I killed our brother, Gabrielle." The emotions hit her hard finally, and she began to tremble.

Gabrielle lost her control and tears struck her. She moved her hand off Xena's wrist quickly and took Xena's hand into hers. "You didn't, Xena." She felt the deep ache in her heart, and she begged, "Please believe me." She shook her head and emotionally uttered, "Nobody blames you."

"Mother... she..." Xena felt the tears rise, and she fought them desperately. She could barely control them because of Gabrielle's own tears.

"Cyrene doesn't blame you, Xena." Gabrielle squeezed the large hand in hers. She stepped closer but carefully. "She's so upset and angry that she wasn't there for you after it'd happened. She would take it all back if she could."

The Conqueror released Gabrielle's hand, and she had to escape. She started to turn away, but Gabrielle was faster than she expected. There were nimble hands on her that turned her back. "Gabrielle," she growled. She feared to hurt the injured bard, but she wanted her space.

Gabrielle placed her hands against Xena's cheeks and forced Xena's head down. "Look at me." She found blue eyes upon her that brimmed with unshed tears. "Lyceus's death isn't your fault. Stop blaming yourself."

Xena tried to fight the words, emotions, and Gabrielle's hold. She felt suffocated and desperate to run from the bard. She pushed Gabrielle away by her hips.

"No," Gabrielle fought. She choked on her tears, but she wouldn't give up. She stopped Xena's escape by grabbing Xena's leather covered sides.

Xena managed a shove that broke Gabrielle from her. She stepped away and wanted to make it to the door.

Faolan was on his feet. He was worried something would go wrong.

The bard jumped and stopped the ruler yet again. She jerked the proud warrior back to her and hotly warned, "Stop it."

Xena stiffened at the tone and the tears on the bard's face. She shook her head and halted Gabrielle's arm from coming around her waist. "No, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle wasn't convinced by the weak words. She kept trying despite she was growing weak and the wrestling caused her shoulder to hurt more. "Xena, let it go." She peered up into emotion filled eyes and begged, "Please just let it go."

Xena closed her eyes and turned her head to the side. She felt the small yet sure arms around her, and she started to cave into her emotions. Her throat burned, and then the tears no longer could be held back. She opened her eyes and turned back to the bard that wouldn't back down. Xena finally gave in, and she slipped her arms around Gabrielle.

The bard quickly adjusted her arms around the tall frame of the ruler. She listened to the whimpers that came from Xena. Gabrielle began to cry harder at the sound of Xena's pain.

Xena tightly held the bard in her arms, and she hid her face in the sunshine hair. She let her tears cleanse her emotions that she'd hid for so long.

Gabrielle wouldn't let go of Xena, who Gabrielle knew needed her support. She also felt the raw pain from the loss of Lyceus, Cyrene's rejection of Xena, and now this recent mess. She still hoped, like always, that her and Xena's lives would find some peace.

Xena and Gabrielle stood in each other's arms and released some of the angriest and coldest memories that was locked in them. Gabrielle came to terms that her best friend was indeed still inside this changed woman, and it would take time to coax Xena out of her armor. And as they shared their tears, they knew it was a new start to their friendship that'd been almost lost by fears. Never again would Gabrielle hold back from Xena because Gabrielle now believed they could work through anything.

Gabrielle settled some of her emotions. She then was struck by the physical pain from her shoulder because Xena's weight was somewhat against her. She didn't know how much longer she'd be able to stand or the pain could make her faint. "Xena," she urged.

The Conqueror was able to regain control. Then it quickly registered that Gabrielle was slipping from her grasp, and Xena cursed at her lack of care. She snatched up the bard into her arms and adjusted her comfortably. "You should have said something sooner."

"I didn't notice until now," the bard shyly admitted.

Xena raised an eyebrow, but she went to the pallet.

"I could have walked... it's not that far." The queen found herself back on the pallet. "Gods I hate this thing." She tried to get comfortable on the hard wood, but it was fairly difficult. "I really don't understand how the healers expect a patient to get better while on one of these things."

The ruler softly grinned, but she reclaimed her chair. She brushed her bangs back and sniffed after all the crying. "Damn it." She wiped her face.

Gabrielle wiped her face too, and she teased, "You were always good at crying." She received a dark glare. "Don't worry, I won't divulge your deep secret about crying."

"Funny," the ruler chided.

The bard smirked and reached for her mug of water. She first handed to her reclaimed friend. "I won't forget that time you cried like a baby when you got your foot hurt."

Xena was in the middle of her drink. She almost choked, but she lowered the mug. "That damn horse stomped my foot. Did you expect me to start laughing?"

Gabrielle snickered and recalled how much crying Xena did after the injury. "It's a wonder you ever learned to ride."

"You know how relentless I am." The Conqueror handed over the mug.

The bard lifted the mug but before she drank, she muttered, "Relentless as a mule." She took a draw from the mug.

"I heard that," Xena snapped. She caught Gabrielle's twinkle from her seated position. She sighed and declared, "You've always picked on me, Bri."

Gabrielle had luckily finished her drink. She swallowed after hearing her old nickname, and it made her smile. "Oh you do your fair share, Xena." She set the empty mug onto the table. She sighed when Xena devilishly laughed at her words. Gabrielle groaned and shook her head, but she was amazed how much better she felt emotionally. She could also tell that Xena was getting there if Xena was tormenting her like nothing had ever changed between them.

"So," Gabrielle cheerfully started, "it's me and you against Dan again." She rolled her shoulders and the pain struck her. "A little more painful this time. I prefer the wood swords." She caught the glint in Xena's eyes. "What?"

"How do you always manage to get into the middle of this, Gabrielle?"

The Amazon Queen grumbled and chided, "It's apart of the job with being your friend."

"You sure you still want the job?"

Gabrielle was taken aback by the question. She tilted her head and studied Xena, who was quite serious. She considered Xena's question, and she leaned towards humor. "Can you find anybody better for the job?"

Xena hadn't expected the question to be turned on her. She decided it was time to cut the humor out, and she honestly replied, "No."

Gabrielle thinly smiled, and she nodded. "I was made for the job, and I want it."

Xena very slowly revealed a bright smile, and it was the first one meant for Gabrielle in a long time. She suddenly stood up and announced, "Well, I think it's safe to say you're ready to go to your hut."

The queen had wide eyes, yet she was excited for only a beat until she grumbled. "I need Etana's permission."

"The queen needs permission?" the Conqueror mocked.

Gabrielle slotted her eyes at the taunting ruler. "You don't know Etana. I need a healer's permission to leave or she'll have my feathers and mask."

"Well you're in luck then." The Conqueror strolled over to the wall and collected her sheathed sword, which had her chakram locked in the cross-guard. After she had the chakram hooked, she turned back around while she hooked the sword to her back. "I happen to be a trained healer." She strolled back over to the pallet and chuckled at the bard's dubious look.

"Trained by who?" Gabrielle was amazed that Xena had so many skills, but yet it didn't surprise her. Gabrielle always thought Xena was clever, resourceful, and smart ever since they were kids.

"By the Amazon healer in the Thrace Nation... and some self training." The Conqueror put her hands on her hips. "I would say you're well enough to sleep in your own bed."

"You were trained by..." Gabrielle was bug eyed and tried to catch up to the facts. "I thought..." She shook her head and brushed back her damp bangs. "Sweet Artemis. We have a lot to catch up on, Xena."

"Mmmmm." Xena didn't argue the point. She dropped her hands from her hips and mentioned, "We can do this two ways. I can carry you or you can attempt to walk."

"Please leave me with some dignity here," the bard fought. She swung her legs off the edge of the pallet, but she remained seated. She tilted her head back and peered up at the ruler. "If we walk out, I have no doubt that one of the healers will hear us."

The Conqueror pucked her lips and glanced at the door behind the bard. "Well, not all the exits are cut off from us." She lifted her right hand and pointed her thumb back at the window behind her.

"Xena," the queen warned. "They're liable to think I was taken."

Xena chuckled and joked, "They'll most likely assume it was me."

Gabrielle crinkled up her nose, and she chuckled because she suddenly felt like a kid again with her best friend. Here they were planning a sneak out plan to leave the healer's hut without getting caught. She started to laugh more and lowered her head.

The bemused Conqueror tilted her head and questioned, "So, are you walking then?"

The queen shook her head and replied, "Yes. You'll have to help me out the window though."

"Mmmm." Xena padded around the pallet and collected Gabrielle's boots and sheathed sword. She came back and set the boots on the seat, which was in front of Gabrielle. "Come on."

Gabrielle bent forward and put her boots on easily. She tied one boot while Xena took care of the other one. She then noted that Faolan was wagging his tail happily. "I think Fao is ready to go too."

The Conqueror glanced over at the wolf and sighed because she'd have to haul him out too. "I see Faolan and Andra have quite the relationship."

"Oh gods." Gabrielle laughed and straightened up after lacing her boots. "Andra still blames Faolan for a certain something to this day. I'll have to tell you someday."

"Mmmhmmm." The Conqueror decided to hook the bard's sheathed sword to her side because Gabrielle didn't need the extra weight. "It sounds like I have a lot to hear."

The bard slid off the pallet and replied, "You could say that." She went to the window and gazed outside around the quiet village. She concluded it was quiet enough for her to sneak back without getting caught. She then smirked that she was about to do this, but she didn't care. She was the queen afterall.

The Conqueror came up behind her childhood friend, who she almost lost. She peered out the window and asked, "Where's your hut?"

Gabrielle leaned closer to Xena then pointed. "Over that way."

"There's patrol, right?"

"Sure, but Xena I don't think they'll say anything."

The ruler shrugged and reminded, "Better to be safe than get put back on the pallet."

The bard softly laughed and smiled at the ruler's words. "Alright. So, what's the first step?"

The Conqueror turned and eyed the wolf. "The furball first." She went over to him.

"Andra was definitely here," the bard murmured. She knew Andra called Faolan that nickname all the time.

Xena bent over Faolan and carefully lifted him up. "Don't you dare dig those claws into me, Faolan."

The wolf did his best not to while he was carried to the window.

Xena managed to sit on the sill with her legs hung outside. She slide off and landed on her feet with ease. She set the wolf down then turned back to Gabrielle. "Alright, your turn. Watch your shoulder."

Gabrielle was about to climb out, but she stopped and spotted Faolan's favorite fur. "One beat." She rushed over and collected his blanket, rolled it, and handed it to Xena. "He'll be mad if I leave it."

The Conqueror sighed and set the blanket down by Faolan. She then focused back on getting Gabrielle out safely. "Come on."

The Amazon sat on the sill and mimicked Xena's earlier actions. She slid off and safely landed on her feet. She was lucky Xena steadied her for a moment until she found her balance again.

"Let's move before we're spotted." The Conqueror brought Gabrielle to her side and hurried them through the quiet village. She also carried Faolan's blanket in her right hand.

Faolan was at fast gate so he could keep up. He kept his eye on Gabrielle.

The bard was happy to find that the jog wasn't too hard. She suspect she had enough energy to make it to the hut.

"Wait," Xena whispered. She stopped the bard and tugged her back behind a hut.

"What?" Gabrielle poked her head around the corner of the hut like Xena. "Oh." She chuckled as three Amazons marched past and were headed to the gates. "Nice call," she whispered after the Amazons were gone.

The Conqueror tilted her head and carefully listened for anymore distinct noises. "Alright, let's go." She went around the hut and brought the bard with her.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," the queen murmured.

Xena slyly grinned and huskily remarked, "It's fun, isn't it?"

Gabrielle did note how much her friend seemed to enjoy this kind of thing. Xena always had since they use to sneak out of Gabrielle's home when they were kids. That was how they always ended up in the barn at night.

Gabrielle focused back on the task at hand. She noticed they were coming into the residential huts where everybody lived. She smiled because she was almost home. She wasn't paying attention to much but suddenly Xena grabbed her and yanked her back behind another hut. Xena's hand over her mouth muffled her small yelp.

"Faolan," the ruler hissed.

Faolana skittered behind the hut's side just before the door opened up.

The Conqueror removed her hand from Gabrielle's mouth. She still kept her arm around the bard's waist, and Gabrielle's back was pressed against her body. She carefully listened to the Amazon's boot steps, the thatch door closing, and the continued boot steps that grew distant.

Gabrielle released her breath and dropped her shoulders. "That was close." She knelt and picked up Faolan's blanket that'd been dropped. She poked her head around the hut's side and saw it was clear. "My hut is just a few more over."

Xena nodded and came around the hut. She quickly brought Gabrielle to the front door of the queen's hut. She pulled the door open and let Gabrielle and Faolan in first. She then stepped in and closed the door, but it was fairly dark inside except for some light from the open window.

"It's a bit chilly in here," the bard admitted. She carefully moved about her hut and sought her candles and flint stone that sat by it. She found them on her desk and quickly lit them. She ignited a few other candles until she had a decent glow in her hut.

"Do you want the fireplace started?" the ruler inquired.

"No, I'll be warm once I get in bed."

The Conqueror nodded, and she worked the Amazon sword free from her side.

"What will you do?" Gabrielle neared her friend.

"I need to return to the army." Xena hung Gabrielle's sword on the pegboard next to the door. "My commanding officer will get too many worry lines otherwise."

Gabrielle softly laughed to herself, but she came over to the ruler. "What's the next step now?"

"I'm going to deal with King Cortese," the ruler promised. "Prepare your Amazons for war."

Gabrielle stepped around the Conqueror and set the blanket down by the fireplace for Faolan. "I'll inform the Centaurs too."

"Tyldus is their leader?"

"Yes." The queen stood back in front of her friend. "He and I are close, luckily."

Xena had a random thought come to mind and commented, "You don't have any feathers?" She saw the bard's confusion so she merely pointed the bard's hair.

"Oh." Gabrielle sighed and swept her short hair back. "I cut my hair before I entered Cortese's camp. I had to remove my feathers."

The Conqueror gradually arched an eyebrow and questioned, "Do you have two blue feathers?"

"Yes, actually. I earned one for the trade pact with Potidaea and the other for saving the relations with the Centaurs." Gabrielle was dumbfounded that Xena had known anything. "How did you..."

"Dardanus," the ruler simply replied. "I should go."

"Your horse is in the second stable," Gabrielle informed.

Xena nodded and stepped back to the door. She hesitated when the bard came closer. She turned her head to the bard.

"Listen," Gabrielle started, "the gate guards may give you a hard time. If they do, simply tell them 'gunē'. They won't question you then."

The Conqueror nodded. "Thank you." She grabbed the door's handle, but she faltered from going just yet. Why did she feel the need to keep talking? "Be safe, Gabrielle and stay away from the arrows."

The bard chuckled and promised, "I don't plan a repeat." She stepped back. "You better go."

Xena nodded, opened the door, and whispered, "I'll see you soon." She slipped out.

Gabrielle held the door cracked and watched the Conqueror zip through the darkness of the village. "Damn." She then widened her eyes when three patrol Amazons were about to happen upon Xena. She held her breath but gasped when Xena suddenly jumped and neatly landed on a hut's roof. "Wow." She heard Faolan's agreeing whine. "I have to get her to teach me that." She then chuckled at the unaware, passing patrol.

Gabrielle decided she better close the door before she was spotted. She smirked at that thought of a healer checking her room and finding it empty. She sighed and decided she better get up early and let everybody know she was fine. Right now, she wanted some rest so she quickly readied for bed.

Faolan returned to his fur and did a circle over top of it. He flopped down and sighed contently to be back in the hut. He watched Gabrielle until the candlelights were extinguished. He then listened to his

human friend crawl into bed. He then closed his eyes and dozed off just like Gabrielle.

To be continued.