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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 16

Prostig ducked his head and entered the tent. He still had to shake off the grogginess from being awoken, but he would respond to any of Xena's commands. He soon found that there were a few hoplites in the tent and one was Bastien, the chiliarchèses.

The Conqueror slotted her eyes at the newcomer in her tent. "Prostig."

Prostig fisted his right hand and clapped it over his bronze chest. "My liege." He joined the circle of hoplites in the now open spot made for him.

"I'm glad you could join us." The Conqueror placed her hands on her leather hips. "Some changes are about to be made."

"At this time of night?" Prostig prompted.

Xena slyly grinned and replied, "I couldn't think of a better time."

Prostig snorted and folded his muscular arms over his chest. He waited for his orders.

The Conqueror stepped out of the circle and slowly approached Prostig. "Have you met King Cortese's stratègos?"

"Commander Aescalus?" Prostig tilted his head. "I've seen only his face."

"Then you're about to have a closer look," Xena drew out dangerously. "King Cortese is going to be packing camp soon and headed home." She grinned at Prostig's confusion. "He just doesn't know it yet."

Prostig deeply laughed and nodded. "What do you need, my liege?"

The Conqueror clasped the warrior's bronze shoulder and gripped it tightly. She revealed a dark smile and replied, "I need you to capture Commander Aescalus. You're to take twelve hoplites with you."

"It'll be done," Prostig assured.

"Excellent." The Conqueror released her finest warrior. She came into the middle of the circle and began to speak. While she spoke of her late night plans to chase off King Cortese, she turned in a full circle and captivated each loyal soldier's attention.

"King Cortese is Greece's enemy," the ruler informed. "He is treacherous and conniving." She paused and held Bastien's gaze longer than the rest. "Greece does not accept such treason to the state."

Bastien nodded and looked at the group of subordinate officers that circled their leader. "What say you, hoplites?"

In unison, the soldiers clapped their bronze chests and called out, "To honor, to the Conqueror, to a free Greece!"

The chiliarchèses signaled the officers to leave the tent. He bowed his head to the Conqueror and promised, "On your command, my liege." He straightened up, turned on his boots, and marched out.

Prostig only remained with the Conqueror. He tilted his head and inquired, "You will cause a stir, Xena."

"When have I not, Pro?"

Prostig grunted, turned, and started for the tent flap. He hesitated and glanced back at his friend and leader.

Xena raised a questioning eyebrow.

Prostig faintly nodded then left the tent. Just as he made it past a few tents, he was almost runover by Tracker.

"Is Xena still in there?" Tracker demanded.

Prostig narrowed his eyes but not at Tracker. He noted the two villagers that were behind Tracker, and

he spotted their unique hilts. The two men were the Conqueror's soldiers and most likely undercover for something. "Yes," he finally replied to Tracker. "She's about to leave though."

Tracker quickly headed off but called, "Thanks, Pro." Behind him, the village dressed soldiers briskly followed. He barged into the Conqueror's tent without any warning.

The Conqueror initial reaction was to draw her sword. She pointed it at the unannounced newcomers, but she lowered her blade. "Tracker."

"I'm sorry, my liege." Tracker stepped closer to the ruler. "There's more news about King Cortese."

Xena sheathed her sword, and she realized that the two men behind tracker were hoplites she sent to Articia. She neared them and demanded, "What has happened?"

"My liege." The right hoplite stepped forward and bowed. He only spoke after he straightened up. "We have discovered disturbing information about King Cortese."

The Conqueror slotted her eyes and muttered, "I can imagine." She folded her arms. "What are the rumors?"

"They are confirmed facts," the same hoplite insisted. "Many people know of King Cortese's legendary battle against the warlord that sacked his kingdom." He paused and shifted on his feet for a moment. "We found alarming facts, my liege. It seems that King Cortese and this warlord were one in the same."

The Conqueror came closer and hotly demanded, "You are sure of this?"

"Yes, my liege," the hoplite insisted. "He did this to win favor over his people."

"He has no honor," Tracker cut in. "He's nothing but the Romans' dog."

The Conqueror didn't argue Tracker at all. She could tell that the hoplite knew something else. She raised an eyebrow at him, and she had a dark expression. "What is it?"

The hoplite was nervous, and he glanced at his comrade. He silenced his fears then explained, "It seems that King Cortese ordered the kidnapping of Cornelio and his family."

Xena clenched her teeth. She'd feared that such was true. "Have you found them?"

"No, my liege." The hoplite sighed and placed his hand on his sword hilt. "We only recently discovered who'd taken him. The other hoplites are working to find out where they've been taken."

The Conqueror was silent for a moment, and she put together her thoughts. She switched her attention to Tracker.

Tracker saw the look, and he knew what it meant. "I can have my things ready in half a candlemark."

"Good." The Conqueror approached Tracker and softly ordered, "Don't return to me until you've found him."

"Then I'll return soon, my liege."

Xena switched her focus to the two hoplites. "Keep Cornelio's home guarded. See if you can find out anymore on his... true nature."

"Yes, my liege."

"You've pleased me. Now go," the ruler ordered. She waited until they were gone.

Tracker tilted his head. "Will you tell Gabrielle what's happened to her master? She seems rather close to him."

The Conqueror considered the idea, but she finally shook her head. "Gabrielle is the Amazon Queen." She grinned at Tracker's surprised look, but she slowly lost her grin. "She has too much on her plate as it is."

"Then you want this kept quiet?"

"Very quiet," the ruler insisted. "Hopefully we can find him and free him before it is too late."

"Do you think he was taken because of Gabrielle?"

"I suspect so." Xena pressed her lips tightly together at her thoughts.

"It is another way to manipulate you too, Xena." Tracker developed a dim expression. "They know to use her to get to you."

"Yes," the ruler murmured in a distant voice. "And it'll come to a stop... soon." She started past Tracker and left her tent.

Tracker hastily followed and promised, "I will pack and be on my way."

"Good." Xena started to separate but instructed, "Be safe, Tracker."

Tracker only nodded then broke way from his leader.

The Conqueror quickly ran through the camp and looked for Bastien. She was glad to see her men were rising and getting prepared for a possible battle. She finally found the chiliarchèses, who was at the line of the camp that neighbored King Cortese's camp.

"The archers are lining up, my liege," Bastien informed.

The Conqueror watched as a hundred archers filed through the camp and lined down the side of the camp. She focused back on the chiliarchèses. "If I give the signal, be sure their arrows are lit and flying."

"What of you, my liege?"

"That's not your problem," the ruler snapped. "Just be ready for the signal, Bastien."

The chiliarchèses nodded and held his tongue.

Xena gazed over her left should just as Prostig and his twelve hoplites arrived. "Are we ready?"

"Yes, my liege." Prostig came to the ruler's side.

"Let's get started." Xena marched to King Cortese's camp. She lined her sight up with the king's regal tent in the camp. She had felt her anger bubble to the surface as she considered the news that her hoplites brought her. She couldn't wait to get her blade across his neck.

Prostig followed along side the ruler. Then behind him were the twelve hoplites. "You will be fine alone?"

"Until you arrive, yes." The Conqueror widened her stride. "See that you do it quietly."

"Of course." Prostig came to the edge of the king's camp. He waved at the hoplites to break apart and

fan out in the camp. "Be careful, kid." He broke away too.

The Conqueror had a half grin at Prostig's last words. She tried not to increase her speed or else the roaming guards in the camp might become alarmed. She beelined for the king's tent and planned to takeout the two guards quickly.

The tent guards glanced at one another when they saw the Conqueror was coming directly at them. The right guard stepped forward and informed, "King Cortese is resting, Conqueror."

The Conqueror stopped in front of the guard. She eyed him and a chill came over her face and into her tone. "Then he's about to get a rude awakening." Her hands flew up and sharply came at the guard. She jabbed him in the neck.

The guard choked for air and fell to his knees.

The second guard reached for his sword, but he hesitated when the dark Conqueror was suddenly upon him. He filled with dread and almost yelled for help, yet he couldn't because of the strong hand around his throat. He mimicked the gagging pattern of his comrade.

The Conqueror tightened her grip until she crushed the soldier's throat. She opened her hand and watched him fall to his knees then onto his side in a dead heap. She quickly glanced at the earlier guard, who was dead on the ground too with wide eyes and a blood still oozing from his nose.

The Conqueror swiftly but silently went through the tent entrance. She easily maneuvered through the king's tent that held a variety of luxuries from Macedon. She finally came to the king's bed, and she loomed over the resting king. She slotted her eyes at his peaceful features, but she felt nothing for this dishonorable man.

King Cortese was suddenly jarred from his sleep because he realized he was lifted into the air. Next he went sailing and slammed into a few pieces of furniture before he hit the ground completely. He groaned and got up hastily because of the intruder in his tent. He only made it to a sitting position before cold steel was under his chin. He was able to raise his eyes higher until they met acidic blue rage.

The Conqueror was poised over the fallen Macedon king. She gripped her magnificent sword's hilt with both hands. She kept her legs parted, and her black cape flowed behind her to make her seem ever larger.

King Cortese didn't understand the cause of the ruler's anger, but he did understand he was in a fatal position now. "What is this?" he demanded. He dared fate by trying to shove the blade from his throat, but it was too firmly placed.

"This is King Cortese practicing to kneel before the Conqueror," Xena snidely replied.

King Cortese narrowed his eyes at the words. "If you think-"

"No, I know," the Greek ruler snapped. She revealed an evil smile that flashed in the darkness of the tent. "Pretending to fight a warlord to win over you people's loyalties is a clever idea, Cortese."

The king visibly stiffened, yet he argued, "I don't know-"

"Yes you do." Xena poked her sword's tip against the king's throat. "And do you think the Romans offer you anything?" She gritted her teeth against her rising anger. "You'll be nothing but their slave."

"Better theirs than yours." King Cortese finally had a fire of his own. A fire he'd been hiding since he'd

arrived here. "Bring them the head of Xena then Macedon will always be mine."

Xena laughed and shook her head. "And you believe them?" She smacked the top of her blade against Cortese's chin. "Perhaps you're not as clever as I thought." She withdrew her sword some and ordered, "Get up."

The king, who was merely clothed in his leather pants and a loose white top, got to his feet. Where he'd had passive features, he now had cold and conniving look about him. "And what do you plan now, Xena?"

The Conqueror grinned then lowered her sword. She closed in the distance then ordered, "Get outside." She noticed he wouldn't move so she suddenly pushed him then kicked him for extra effect. She almost had him on his face, but he stumbled and went outside. She followed and carried her sword on her right shoulder.

King Cortese came outside to two dead guards, and he became infuriated. He whirled around and was about to yell until two fast jabs were at his throat. He hit the ground on his knees and grabbed at his locked throat.

The Conqueror took a position in front of the king. "See how so simple it is to kneel before Greece?" She didn't wait for a reply because she heard several soldiers were approaching her. She grinned at the bulky warrior.

"Move," Prostig barked. He shoved the stratègos. Behind him were the dozen of Greek hoplites. He pushed the unarmed and unarmored stratègos to his leader. He then signaled the hoplites to encircle everybody.

Aescalus gazed down at the gagging king then at the Conqueror. "What is the meaning of this?"

The Conqueror merely regarded the dying king. She knelt down in front of him. "Let's make a fair trade, shall we?" She tilted her head and offered, "You tell your stratègos the truth about how you became such the popular Macedon king, and I'll let you live." She raised an eyebrow. "Deal?"

King Cortese frantically nodded.

"Good," the ruler murmured. She stabbed his pressure points then stood up.

The king fell forward and inhaled deeply. He then coughed but slowly recovered. He rocked back onto his knees and coldly gazed up at the ruler.

The stratègos looked between the Greek ruler and the Macedon king. "What does she talk about, my king?"

King Cortese swallowed the blood in his mouth. He turned his head to Commander Aescalus. "The warlord, Stavros, and I are one in the same." He turned his angry gaze onto Xena. "I made up the warlord, hired mercenaries to be the raiders, and had them attack the villages. I then sent my armies to battle the mercenaries, but I made sure that my armies wouldn't defeat the mercenaries until it was the right time."

The stratègos was honestly shocked, and he stared at his king. "You hired mercenaries to attack our own kingdom?"

"Yes," King Cortese coldly replied. He returned his focus to Commander Aescalus. "Do you see it was the only way to win favor over the people?" He grounded his teeth. "The people started to favor the

Conqueror because of her exploits to save the people from their kings and poleis." He then stood up and declared to Xena, "But I will not bow before the Conqueror so as long as I breathe. And if it means killing a few worthless peasants and deceiving their little minds, then it is worth the cost."

The Conqueror lowered her sword to her side and glanced at Prostig. She then pointed to one hoplite off to her right.

The hoplite understood his duty. He efficiently sheathed his sword, pulled off his crossbow from his back, and turned towards the Greek camp. He carefully aimed in the direction of the line of archers that waited, and he fired his loaded arrow.

King Cortese wasn't sure what was going on, but he hotly questioned, "What do you plan now, Xena? We're at a stand still, and our armies are matching."

"Not quite," the Conqueror rebuked. She stepped closer to the king. "You will return to your kingdom. You'll wait... you'll wait for me to conquer you. And you will cower in fear." She finally came toe to toe with the small king. She easily towered over him, and she truly was the power of Greece. "My army will be larger than the lands of your kingdom. You will want to kneel before me. Then finally you will bleed the death of those people you murdered."

For the first time, King Cortese actually felt a sense of dread fill him. He slightly leaned back from the raw power that washed off the Conqueror. He stepped back once then a second time.

The Conqueror signaled for Prostig to leave with the hoplites. She knew it would be any heartbeat now. She let them go first then she focused back on the king and stratègos. She then heard the whistles overhead so she dropped her head back and the sky was lit up by fire. She grinned and locked eyes with King Cortese. She lifted her arms and called out, "And this is my gift to you, King Cortese."

King Cortese raised his eyes, and his heart dropped into his stomach. He helplessly watched in dread as the lit arrows made a descent for his camp. He held his breath and gazed back at the amused Conqueror.

The Conqueror deeply laughed at the king. She lowered her arms as the fire arrows rained down around her and set ablaze the camp. "I look forward to when we meet on the battlefield." She turned then broke into a full run for her camp. She had to dodge around the arrows that randomly landed around her.

King Cortese screamed, "Noooo!" He collapsed to his knees as the arrows landed around him. He fisted his hands and stared at his tent that was suddenly set on fire by a handful of arrows.

The stratègos stood off to the side, but he snapped out of his shock. He thought of the soldiers, who frantically came out of their tents and were panicked. He left the king and hastily tried to organize the men and save what and who they could while the burning arrows continued to strike the camp.

Prostig relaxed once he spotted the lone figure that was coming to them. He recognized that familiar form anywhere. "Here she comes."

The chiliarchèses was clearly relieved, and he looked back at the line of archers. He watched them dip their arrows into the firepits. He lifted his hand and called, "Take aim." He held his arm up. "Steady." He waited a beat then dropped his arm. "Fire!"

The night sky was lit by the soaring arrows that flew for several hundred paces then made the descent for the Macedon camp. There were numerous cries that rung out once the arrows made their marks.

The Conqueror came up to Prostig and Bastien. She faced the burning Macedon camp and grinned.

"Excellent, Bastien."

Bastien bowed his head at the compliment. "As you requested, my liege." He straightened up.

"Give them another around," the Conqueror ordered. "Just to encourage them to pack faster."

"As you wish." The chiliarchèses gave the signal for the archers to ready their bows.

The ruler placed her hands on her hips. "See that the fire doesn't spread to our camp or to the woods. I want a few fire brigades on hand."

"I have already alerted them, my liege." Bastien now raised his hand then signaled the archers. "Fire!"

"Good." The Conqueror listened to the arrows' whistles overhead. Then her vision was filled by the streak of fire on the horizon. "The winds are in our favor. We should not have a problem."

"I concur," the chiliarchèses remarked. "I shall alert you if there are any problems, my liege." He then tilted his head and inquired, "What of the Macedon stratègos?"

The Conqueror folded her arms and slightly smirked. "The seed has been planted."

Prostig silently agreed but commented, "He knew of the king's plans with the Romans. He did not know about the hired mercenaries."

"No," Xena murmured, "He didn't." She had plans for the Commander Aescalus for later down the road. She now looked at Prostig. She had no words for him, but she was thankful for his support. She clapped his bronze shoulder in silent thank you. She then disappeared into the line of archers and went into the camp. She wanted to check on her hoplites to make sure they were prepared for battle in case King Cortese was stupid enough to attack.

Just before dawn, the Macedon Army was trudging out of the scorched camp and headed in a eastern direction back to their kingdom. The army had lost just over two hundred soldiers that'd died in the fire set by the Greek Army. They marched with empty stomachs but yet they were full of hatred for the Conqueror. None was angrier than the king, who planned to extract his revenge quite swiftly. He swore never to fall before the Conqueror.

From the trees, there were three Amazons hidden among the young leaves. For the past few candelmarks, the Amazons watched in wonder as the Conqueror set ablaze the Macedon camp. They couldn't believe it, and they were further stunned when the Macedon Army gathered themselves and merely marched back home. The Amazons expected some half cocked attempt on the king's part to attack the Conqueror, but he most likely lost too much in the fire.

"We need to report this to the queen," Medora suggested.

"She'll be surprised," Teresa commented from a kneeling position on another branch. She dropped her head back and gazed up at her comrades.

Page softly grinned and argued, "I suspect the queen won't be surprised but quite happy." She tore her eyes away from the smoky camp far below in the valley. She met Teresa's gaze. "I'll report to the queen."

Medora was on an adjacent branch to Page. "And you can't wait to either."

Page smirked over at Medora. "You have no idea." She checked her mask then stood up with her hand sliding up the side of the tree's trunk. "I'll be back in a few candelmarks." She jumped off the branch

backwards and fell like a rock. She neatly landed on her boots and bent her knees so that the impact was softened. She then turned and raced back to their small camp. She needed to get her horse and make the gallop back to the Nation.

Helios began to stir, and he poured out the sun's rays over the Amazon village. Many Amazons began to stir, and they greeted another day that still held peace. The Amazon Queen was among the many that were awoken and so was a white wolf.

Faolan lifted his head and stared at the door. He twisted his head to the right just before a knock.

Gabrielle had gotten out of bed, and she sleepily went to the door. She grasped the handle when the second set of knocks came. She pulled open the door and found a familiar and expressionless face before her.

"Good morning, my queen." Master Eponin stood straight and stoic. In her right hand, was a famous staff that belonged to only one Amazon. She peered up at the staff then back at the queen. She repeated an old act that she thought she'd never have to do again. She tapped the staff's top against the queen's head and commented, "You forgot this, my queen." She tilted her head and reminded, "An Amazon warrior never forgets their weapon."

The queen groused at Eponin's repeated words from seasons ago. She yanked her staff free from Eponin and reminded, "Well this time I was slightly busy getting an arrow rammed through my shoulder."

The weapons master folded her arms and faintly smirked. "Then may I suggest you let the master healer know you're safe and well."

Gabrielle flushed some because she realized her mistake. "I will," she promised.

"Also," Eponin added, "you may want to inform the stratègos that the Conqueror has left the premises."

The bard sighed deeply and annoyance filled her. "Anything else, Master Eponin?"

"Yes, actually." Eponin dropped her arms and actually smiled, which was a rare event. "Glad to see you're awake, my queen."

Gabrielle mirrored back the smile. "Thanks, Ep."

The weapons master nodded, half turned, and mentioned, "Stop by later. I believe Commander Kaylee wants a talk." She then strolled off and went back towards the military sector where her office was located.

Gabrielle stood in the doorway for a moment and watched her friend go. She sighed deeply and sadly wished that somebody would partner with Eponin. Just maybe then Eponin would loosen up on that stoic attitude.

Faolan stood up after his human friend closed the door. He stretched his front and back muscles in usual habit.

The Amazon Queen busied with getting dressed in her informal leathers that were quite plain. She grabbed her mask, positioned it on her head, and picked up the sheathed ivy dagger. She stared at it in her palm, but she knelt and hastily slipped it into her boot on the outside. Next she grabbed her sword and slung it onto her back; the leather strap went across her chest in usual fashion. Finally she collected her staff and left the hut.

Faolan hurried after his friend and stayed at her side. He sniffed the morning air but detected nothing wrong. He bounced along in his walk.

Gabrielle decided it was best to see Etana first and let her know she was fine. She came to the healer's hut and stepped through the open door. She smiled at the greeting healer.

"My queen, we had wondered where you disappeared to."

"I apologize, Cliona." Gabrielle neared the young healer. "I couldn't sleep well on that pallet."

Cliona became amused and nodded. "I understand." She centered her attention on the wrapped wound. "Do you have a beat?" She indicted the slightly red wrap.

The queen glanced at her wound, but it was dried blood. She nodded and followed the apprentice healer into the back. "Is Etana here?"

"She will be shortly." Cliona led the queen into a small room. She went to a nearby shelf and removed several items. "Sit down."

Gabrielle took a seat on a stool, and she set her staff down. She glimpsed at Faolan, who waited in the doorway.

Cliona slowly came back, but she was busy grinding something in the mortar bowl. "How does it feel today?"

"Sore," the bard admitted. "Although the fever is gone."

"That's an excellent sign," Cliona agreed. She turned back to the shelving unit. She dug around for something yet continued to talk. "The infection is gone then." She mixed some salve into her mortar and stirred it all together. "The wound will take some time to heal."

Gabrielle sadly sighed and softly questioned, "Do you think there will be a scar left?"

The apprentice healer came over and held the bowl in her hand. She set it into Gabrielle's hands then worked to remove the wrap. First though, she had to push aside the mask's feathers and colorful straw. "It's possible, but if you continue to stop by then I can apply a special salve. It's known for reducing scarring."

The bard faintly nodded and tilted her head out of the way. She felt the air hit her wound once the wrap was gone. "I will."

Cliona smiled and dipped her hands into the salve. She proceeded to gently rub it into the front wound.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth against the pain but otherwise it was hard to tell it bothered her. After seasons of training to become a warrior, she was use to pain. She recalled Eponin's countless training and lessons that forced her to work through the pain and move beyond it. Had she'd acquired this wound before becoming an Amazon, she would most likely be flinching and hissing.

"Thank you by the way," Cliona mentioned, "for saving Amarice and I."

The queen sighed and argued, "I hardly did much. You should be thanking the Conqueror."

"But if it wasn't for you, she would have not helped," Cliona argued. She moved behind the queen and continued her administrations. "It's not every day the queen, herself, comes to save two kids."

Queen Gabrielle reached behind and grabbed Cliona's wrist. She halted Cliona's work and curtly

informed, "My status as queen doesn't factor into it." She released Cliona then added, "I am an Amazon just as you are. I live by the same beliefs and honor." She'd had her head sidelong, but she turned her head away and murmured, "I won't standby and watch any sister be harmed if I can do something about it."

Cliona softly sighed, but she went back to work. She sadly smiled and sincerely offered, "Thank you... from one Amazon to another."

Gabrielle also smiled, but she remained quiet. She then considered another topic and gently inquired, "You're not a full healer yet?"

Cliona took the mortar from the queen's lap and went to the shelf. "No, but it won't be long before I become one."

"How long have you been an apprentice?"

Cliona came back with a clean wrap. "Since you joined the Nation, my queen." She carefully started the wrap.

"Gabrielle," the queen supplied. "You don't need to be so formal all the time, Cliona."

The young healer chuckled and argued, "It's a bit hard to change that after having Melosa for queen."

"I'm nothing like Melosa," Gabrielle sharply reminded.

"No... no you're not." Cliona brought together the two ends of the wrap at the top. She carefully tied them tightly so they wouldn't loosen. "And I believe that's why the Nation will follow you."

Gabrielle bowed her head, but she felt Cliona put her mask back into proper order. She sighed and whispered, "Melosa never screwed up the way I already have."

Cliona chuckled and knelt in front of the queen. "Neither of us have been in the Nation long enough to know Melosa's entire history as queen." She shrugged and evilly smiled. "I can't imagine Melosa was so perfect. I wouldn't worry, my queen."

The queen held Cliona's gaze, and she saw that the young healer did admire her for some reason. She touched the apprentice's arm. "Thanks, Cliona."

Cliona smiled then stood up. "I will let Etana know you're okay."

"I appreciate it." Gabrielle stood up after she grabbed her staff. "When should I come by?"

"Tonight would be best... before or after dinner." The healer walked the queen and white wolf back to the main entrance of the hut. "I suspect the soreness should fade out in the next day or two."

"I hope so." Gabrielle stood next to the open door. "Thank you again, Cliona." She headed out of the door, and Faolan was on her heels.

"Take care, Gabrielle," Cliona murmured to nobody but herself. She watched the queen through the door until finally she couldn't see the queen anymore. She sighed then went back to work.

Gabrielle made her way to the stratègos's office next. She needed to let her know of the status on the Conqueror. She rapped on the door and waited to be called into the hut. She entered to find the stratègos on her feet instantly.

"How do you feel, my queen?"

Gabrielle closed the door and came up to the desk. She took a seat and sunk into it. "A little weary, but far better." She kept her hand on her staff.

Faolan took a seat off to the right. He watched the small, auburn Amazon sit back behind her desk. He glanced over at Gabrielle.

"The Conqueror left late last night," Gabrielle explained. "I informed her that the Amazon Nation would not ally with King Cortese."

"How did she take to it?"

"Actually far better than I hoped." Gabrielle crossed her legs. "She promised to deal with King Cortese so long as we backed her up."

"I wonder what that'll entail," the stratègos murmured.

"I'm not too concerned." The queen leaned back deeper into the chair. "The Conqueror is honorable."

Commandery Kaylee fully agreed. She came out of her distant thoughts. "We need to finish preparations for war. I've received word that Draco's army is stirring."

Gabrielle considered the news. She was silent and carefully thought over what her and Xena discussed last night. She focused back on Commander Kaylee. "Hercules, Iolaus, Yakut, and I plan to face Seven alone. That'll leave me mostly indisposed to run the army."

Kaylee understood the implications. "Officer Galatea and I can handle it."

"Are you prepared to work along side the Conqueror?" Gabrielle tried.

The stratègos laced her hands in her lap. She tilted her head while she thought out the proper response. "On the battlefield, yes."

Gabrielle bit the inside of her mouth.

"I leave the politics to you, Gabrielle."

The bard slowly nodded. She uncrossed her legs and now leaned forward. She set her staff down on the floor then straightened back up. "There are somethings you should be aware of." She paused and tried to compose her words properly. "The Conqueror and I go far back. We have our differences to work out, but she and I have the same goal here. We have to stop Draco and not just for the Nation but also for Greece."

"That is a higher responsibility, Gabrielle."

"It is, but even I realize what this could mean for the Nation of Draco reaches his ultimate goal." Gabrielle licked her lips. "He will wipe out every Nation. He will take Greece. And there will be no freedom for anybody let alone the Amazons."

"And what of King Cortese?"

"He's an enemy of the Nation," Gabrielle declared. "We will need to inform Queen Cyane."

"She undoubtedly has ties with the Macedon Kingdom," the stratègos agreed. She nodded once but at her thoughts. "I will need to speak to the Conqueror about the plans then if we're to work along side."

"I'll arrange it," Gabrielle promised. She picked up her staff but didn't stand quite yet. "It's important

that..." She lost her words because of the knock at the door. She turned her head that way.

"Enter," Commander Kaylee ordered. She straightened in her chair when the scout, Page, entered her office hut.

Page showed relief at finding not only the stratègos but also the queen. "I have news about King Cortese." She approached the queen and stratègos.

Commander Kaylee nodded and ordered, "Report."

Page stopped next to the white wolf. She placed her hands behind her back in formal routine. "The Conqueror infiltrated the Macedon camp. We are not sure what words were passed, but the Conqueror ordered her archers to set the Macedon camp ablaze."

"By the gods," Kaylee murmured. "What else?" She could tell there was more. She briefly glanced at the queen, who was not at all surprised by the change of events.

"The Macedon Army salvaged what supplies they could and left the camp. They march to the east."

"Back to Macedon," the stratègos muttered. She focused on the queen.

Gabrielle had her head slightly bowed. She peered up at Page and inquired, "What of the Conqueror?"

"She remains in the camp, and her army has been roused."

The bard nibbled on her lips, and she thought out the next steps carefully. "Page, I'll need you to deliver a message to the Conqueror." She inclined her head more for a better view of Page. "Please tell her that the Amazon Nation is pleased and grateful for her support. Then invite her to come to the Nation as Commander Kaylee and I would like to speak with her."

Page nodded. "It'll be done, my queen." She quickly bent forward then rushed out of the hut.

Gabrielle slowly rotated her head back to the stratègos. "I would say our plans just got switched."

Commander Kaylee chuckled at the queen's smirk. She then nodded her head a few times.

The Amazon, Page, hurried through the village and went back to her waiting horse. She gently patted the mare, but first she untied the reins from the wood post. She then hopped back into the saddle and became comfortable. She set the reins right in her hands then galloped through the village and out the gates.

Page arrived back at the small camp and found that Medora was on break. She didn't bother to dismount and guided her mare through the dense woods to the edge of the forest. She stopped on the edge and gazed up at Teresa.

"They've been training since this morning," Teresa simply commented. She kept staring down at the Greek Army camp.

Page shifted in the saddle from being a little sore. "The Conqueror is preparing."

"She is." Teresa freed her hand from the trunk and pointed to the southern part of the camp. "She's been preparing that massive siege weapon."

Page leaned to the side of her saddle, which creaked in response. She slotted her eyes at the huge weapon. "The vincente." She shook her head and explained, "They say that weapon brought down the walls of Sparta."

"I believe it." Teresa gripped a branch. "You should have seen it when it was unpacked, Page. It made the Amazon Solstice Tree seem like a twig."

Page noted that several specialized soldiers were disassembling the massive contraption, and they were going as fast as they could go. She suspected they often practiced unpacking, assembling, disassembling, and repacking the siege weapon. That certainly sounded like the Conqueror's efficient style.

Page shoved her thoughts aside and mentioned, "I have to go down."

Teresa slightly grinned and inquired, "The queen?"

"Mmmm."

Teresa shifted on the branch, which swayed up and down slightly. "They say the queen and the Conqueror go way back." She peered down at her comrade. "You think it's true?"

"I hope it is." Page tilted her head back. "I rather have the Conqueror on the Nation's side."

Teresa quietly considered this then commented, "That is if the queen doesn't infuriate the Conqueror anymore."

Page softly laughed and chided, "The queen infuriates everybody but that's why she's well loved."

Teresa smirked and nodded her head several times. "Good luck."

Page rolled her eyes then tapped her horse's side. She continued through the remaining woods then came out into the open. She pushed her horse into a full canter and headed for the Greek Army camp.

The Conqueror gave a sharp battle cry then raised her hands. All her opponents came at her, but she dodged their sword attacks. She had yet to unsheathe her sword, and she proceeded to disarm the hoplites one by one with great ease.

The twenty hoplites eventually were either weaponless or flat out on their backs. The Conqueror remained in the circle and walked around her fallen or disarmed men. She shook her head several times. She came to a stop though and grinned at the warrior that stepped up to her.

Prostig had his sword's blade resting against his shoulder. "My turn, kid."

Xena chuckled and stepped back once. She lifted her hands and egged, "Come on, Pro." She'd beat him several times in the past ever since the first time when she was a teenager. That didn't matter to her though, but she valued the fact that Prostig continued to try and never backed away.

Prostig lifted his sword off his shoulder. He glanced at his shiny blade then unexpectedly rammed into the ground. He devilishly grinned and lifted his hands.

The Conqueror slowly arched an eyebrow when she realized they would be wrestling more than anything else. She was fast and agile, and her opponent was slow and strong.

Prostig stepped closer to his prey.

The Conqueror wasn't deterred, and she briefly debated to cheat with her pressure points. She usually kept that as her all else fails technique.

"Conqueror!" a soldier hollered.

Prostig cursed and straightened up. He gazed in the same direction as Xena.

The ruler sighed that her fun had been spoiled. She met the jogging hoplite halfway and inquired, "What is it?"

"An Amazon has arrived and wishes to speak with you."

The Conqueror couldn't completely resist her grin. She figured word would travel fast about her refusal of King Cortese. "I'll be there in a beat."

The soldier clapped his bronze chest then hurried off.

The Conqueror turned back to her men that'd practiced with her earlier. She then set her sights on Prostig. "Give them another candlemark of training, Pro."

Prostig bowed his head and replied, "As you wish." He then lifted his head and slyly grin. "Next time, kid."

The Conqueror turned some, but she promised, "That will be soon, Prostig." She briskly walked away and found her way to the Amazon. She arrived just after the Amazon had dismounted. "Welcome, Amazon."

The Amazon respectfully bowed her head at the ruler then supplied, "Page."

The Conqueror instantly took to the Amazon's attitude and manners. She stepped closer and held out her arm in offer.

Page was remotely surprised, yet she didn't deny the shake. She then explained why she'd arrived. "Queen Gabrielle wishes that you come to the Nation. She and Commander Kaylee would like to speak to you about the approaching battle against Draco."

"Take a moment to rest, Page. I'll give a few men and follow you back to the Nation."

Page faintly smiled and nodded. "No rush, Conqueror."

The Conqueror stepped away, but she softly ordered the hoplite, "See that she and her horse are cared for while she waits."

"Of course, my liege," the soldier murmured.

The Conqueror then hastily left and went about preparing some men to come with her to the Nation. She soon was on Argo's back, and she had twenty hoplites on horseback too. She led them to the waiting Amazon, who mounted quickly. The Conqueror let the Amazon lead the way, and the Conqueror stayed at Page's side. The ride went quickly because Page had them gallop the whole way once they made it to the road.

Forewarning about the Conqueror's arrival made it to the queen's ear. The Amazon Queen invited the strategos to join her in greeting the Greek ruler. Commander Kaylee did join on the trip to the gates. On the walk to the gates, Gabrielle realized just how nervous she felt at seeing her old friend. She reminded herself that she was an Amazon Queen, and that her and Xena were friends as kids. Yet Gabrielle felt the sweat that coated her palms.

Faolan took a seat next to his friend. He dropped his tongue out just when the walking horses entered through the cracked gates.

The Conqueror seemed even larger as she remained astride her golden mare. She gently tugged on Argo's reins then she slipped her feet out of the stirrups, swung her leg over, and hopped off. She sensed her cape cascading behind her and lightly flutter in the low breeze.

Queen Gabrielle signaled the guards to take the Conqueror's horse.

Xena handed Argo's reins to the Amazon, then she noted that other Amazons assisted her men. She briefly glanced at Gabrielle, but she said nothing and went to her hoplites. She ordered them to remain on guard here by the gates and that she would try not to be long.

Queen Gabrielle lifted her chin slightly as the Conqueror approached her. She swallowed nervously yet greeted, "Welcome back, Conqueror."

The Conqueror easily detected Gabrielle's apprehension, and she wasn't exactly sure what caused it. She thought they'd settled some of their issues last night.

Gabrielle couldn't stop the twist in her stomach. She suddenly felt a lack of power as the Conqueror loomed over her. She hadn't realized until now just how powerful the Conqueror could be. This certainly was not her best friend from her childhood. This was a warrior that was fighting for a honorable cause and for her country's freedom.

"You wanted to talk," Xena prompted.

Gabrielle blinked out of her reverie. "Yes." She held out her hand to the stratègos, who most likely didn't quite follow what'd happened. "This is the stratègos of the army, Commander Kaylee."

Commander Kaylee was never intimidated by anybody or anything. She took a half step and offered an armshake.

The Conqueror had a thin smile, and she shook arms with the muscular stratègos. She released arms then focused back on Gabrielle. "How is your shoulder?" She noted the clean wrap on it.

The queen glanced at it then back at her friend. "It's improving."

Xena faintly nodded in acceptance.

"Perhaps we should take this to my office," Kaylee offered.

"Yes, you're right." The bard put her staff into her other hand in a nervous motion. She then moved, which caused Faolan to get up.

The Conqueror glanced down at the white wolf, and she flashed a smile at him. For a brief second, she'd pulled her ruler mask away then returned it.

Faolan huffed, brushed his fur against the ruler's legs, and he quickly caught up to Gabrielle.

The Conqueror watched him go, and she admired the wolf's constant dedication to Gabrielle. She wondered why a wolf would become so attached to a human.

Queen Gabrielle stopped by the office door because Kaylee opened it for them. She entered and set her staff against the wall this time. She took a seat in front of the desk, and she noted the ruler sat beside her.

The stratègos took her usual spot behind the desk. She crossed her ankles and studied the pair in a new light. She did sense some charge between them that she hadn't noticed earlier.

Gabrielle twisted her head towards the Conqueror and softly mentioned, "King Cortese is headed back to the Macedon Kingdom."

"It would seem so," Xena granted. Her tone held slyness to it.

The bard slightly narrowed her eyes and tested, "What did you promise him?" She knew her friend too well.

Commander Kaylee leaned forward and listened to the two. She couldn't quite pin the alchemy between them.

"A defeat," the ruler casually remarked.

Gabrielle nodded and questioned, "A trial before the people?"

Xena grunted at the ludicrous idea. She'd put many prior kings on trial, but she had a feeling King Cortese would not be one of them. "He'd rather die."

The queen now completely turned her head to the ruler. She then questioned, "If you declare war on the Macedon Kingdom, you may lose favor in your country."

The Conqueror revealed a smug look then argued Gabrielle's point. "I won't have any trouble keeping my country's favor." She bit her lower lip then showed a wide grin. "King Cortese is not as honorable as many think."

"Any harsh slave owner can't be," Gabrielle snapped. She'd heard much about the king during her season with Cornelio. She'd heard countless horror stories that was passed around by slaves about things King Cortese did to his slaves.

"How can you be sure?" Kaylee broke in finally.

The Conqueror sharply turned her focus to the stratègos. "I uncovered information that King Cortese and the warlord Stavros were one in the same."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows at the implications. She shook her head and asked, "He purposely had his villages attacked?"

"Yes," Xena merely replied.

Commander Kaylee mirrored the same disgusted look that her queen showed. She shook her head then whispered, "That sick bastard." She shook her head and urged, "We need to tell Queen Cyane, my queen."

The bard was edgy about what she'd learned of King Cortese. She climbed up from her chair, which made Faolan lift his head from the floor. She walked away but promised, "We'll send word promptly." She touched her forehead and tried not to think about her grandfather. She knew Cornelio had dealings with King Cortese, but they'd only been political in nature. She also firmly knew that Cornelio would never agree to such deceit.

"My queen?" The stratègos tried.

Gabrielle had done some pacing, but she stopped. She met Kaylee's gaze. "How many Amazons can we have for the battle?"

The Conqueror tightly clenched the chair's arms. She sensed Gabrielle's distraught, and she suspected it

had something to do with Gabrielle's master. She didn't want to say anything with the stratègos here. She didn't know what the relationship was like between Gabrielle and Kaylee.

"The army is two thousand strong, my queen."

"On foot?" Gabrielle sharply inquired.

"A thousand."

"On horseback?"

"Seven hundred."

"Archers are three hundred," the queen concluded. She wanted Xena to hear the numbers. She focused on the ruler's tense back. "Your army, Conqueror?"

"A thousand hoplites and five hundred hippeis." The Conqueror tilted her head then added, "Two vincentes." She licked her lips as she considered whether to reveal Borias or not to the Amazons. She silently cursed because she knew if she didn't reveal the secret that Gabrielle would most likely be furious at her. She was already hiding information about Cornelio, which could get her burnt later too.

Gabrielle ticked a back molar off after Xena spoke the numbers "What's Draco army?" She asked Commander Kaylee.

Commander Kaylee opened her mouth to reply.

"Two thousand five hundred strong," the Conqueror informed.

Gabrielle came over and stood off to the side. She stared at the ruler's stoic profile, but she glanced at Kaylee again. "This'll be a close battle." She hoped her stratègos would play along with her.

Xena licked her lips, and she watched the Amazonian stratègos nod. She slightly bowed her head then sighed. "It will be an easy defeat... for Draco."

Commander Kaylee slotted her eyes at the Conqueror. She inwardly chuckled because the queen had been right after all. "You have something up your gauntlet." She already knew the Conqueror's famous sneak tactics from the past. She flashed a grin over at the Amazon Queen and nodded.

Gabrielle chuckled at her stratègos's look. She strolled behind the chairs and came to the Conqueror's side. "You have two thousand foot soldiers and a thousand hippeis." She then tilted her head, folded her arms, and grew smug. "And four vincentes."

The Conqueror tilted her head back and slotted her eyes at the smug queen. She gradually arched an eyebrow.

Queen Gabrielle chuckled and softly reminded, "We grew up together, Conqueror." She decided that was explanation enough for the ruler. When she'd first heard word that the Conqueror arrived with just over a thousand soldiers she didn't quite believe it. She'd sent out a secret party to do some scouting, who quickly discovered the other half of Xena's army. They were strategically placed northwest of Draco.

"Point taken," the Conqueror murmured. She hadn't expected that from her friend. She shouldn't have put it past Gabrielle though.

Commander Kaylee softly chuckled, but she became more serious once the queen sat down. "What are

our plans?"

Queen Gabrielle turned her head to the Conqueror and waited.

Xena met her friend's curious gaze, and she grinned.

Gabrielle returned the grin and teasingly reminded, "Draco does have a weak spot for you, Conqueror."

The ruler thought the same thing too. She chuckled and nodded. She then dove into a tactical, sound plan with the queen and stratègos. She guessed they'd spoke for a solid two candelmarks. She thought of her men, but she wasn't too worried about them. She figured they could wait longer because she still wanted to speak to Gabrielle alone. After the meeting, the Amazon Queen, Faolan, and the Conqueror left the office and the stratègos to prepare.

"Is there somewhere we can talk alone?" Xena softly inquired.

Gabrielle hadn't expected the request, and it took her a beat to reply. "Yes... we'll go to my hut." She checked on Faolan, who followed her. She headed for her hut with her staff in hand and her friend at her side.

The ruler was silent during the walk, but she discreetly assessed Gabrielle's shoulder wound. She could tell Gabrielle was in pain and didn't care to admit it. Once she was inside the hut, she casually inquired, "So tell me how the shoulder really feels?"

Gabrielle had finished propping her staff against the hut wall. She sighed and replied, "It'll be fine."

"I know that," the Conqueror refuted. "And that doesn't tell me how it feels."

The bard didn't want to admit her pain. She'd spent too many seasons training how to ignore it and not give into it. "It's fine."

Xena arched an eyebrow but held her comment. She waited for Gabrielle to put her back to her, then she quickly moved. She grabbed Gabrielle by her good shoulder and pulled her to a stop.

The queen clenched her teeth and naturally hissed at the sharp pain. "Xena-"

"It's pretty bad huh?" The Conqueror shoved the mask's long straw aside. She visually inspected the wrapped wound, which had slightly reddened. "You'll need this wrap changed."

Gabrielle softly sighed and held her tongue.

Xena reached up with her left hand, removed the mask that was in her way, and she gingerly tossed it onto the bed. "Lean your head forward."

"Xena-"

"Lean your head forward," the ruler sharply instructed. She wasn't use to being refuted.

Gabrielle gave in and dropped her head forward. She felt strong hands at her injured shoulder.

"This'll hurt for a moment, but it'll relieve the pain."

The queen tightly squeezed her eyes at the sudden, intense pain that flared through her shoulder. She clenched her hands but remained silent. Then suddenly the pain was gone.

The Conqueror had used her pressure points to lessen the pain for Gabrielle. She worried if the pain

wasn't relieved for some time then her friend would develop a headache. She also wanted to check something else so she reached for Gabrielle's uninjured shoulder. She gradually arched an eyebrow at Gabrielle's hidden tension.

The bard lifted her head and sighed at the lack of pain from her right shoulder. She then noticed that Xena was massaging her left shoulder.

The Conqueror slightly shook her head because she could feel an awful knot that'd developed in Gabrielle's left shoulder. She suspected it been cultivating there for many moons. "How often does it hurt?"

The bard bit her lower lip, but she couldn't nor would she lie to Xena anymore. She'd developed the shoulder pain so long ago that she couldn't quite recall. "It depends. Some days it's fine, and other days it hurts."

Xena kept kneading the shoulder and hoped to work away the hardened knot. "It feels like needles being shoved into your shoulder."

Gabrielle lowered her head and tilted her head out of the way. She didn't argue Xena's description about her left shoulder pain. She typically had those very painful days when she was under a lot of pressure and stress.

"Why don't you sit down. That'll make this easier."

The bard still stayed silent, but she did sit down at her desk. The strong hands returned to her left shoulder and continued the massage. She was amazed at how well Xena seemed to work the stress out of her shoulder. She closed her eyes and relaxed for the first time in many moons.

The Conqueror kept her focus on her friend's shoulder. Yet she peered up and scanned the contents on the bard's desk. She felt her heart sink at seeing Lila's Lammy. It'd been some time since she'd seen it, but she still recognized it to this day. She could recall when she'd come into Gabrielle's and Lila's shared room, glance at Lila's made bed, and there would be Lammy on top of the pillow.

Gabrielle decided to break the silence finally. "Thank you for taking care of King Cortese."

Xena slightly grinned and huskily replied, "My pleasure."

The bard grinned at the tone and teased, "Page told me. It sounds like you enjoyed yourself."

The ruler chuckled and mentioned, "You know me, Gabrielle."

The queen slowly opened her eyes at the unbelievable statement from her childhood friend. She hadn't expect those words, and she sadly smiled. "Yeah... I do." She felt an extra squeeze on her shoulder.

Xena glanced back at the desk then something caught her eye. She narrowed her eyes at the item then asked, "What is that?"

The bard wasn't sure what her friend meant so she questioned, "What?"

"The arrow fetching," the ruler insisted.

Gabrielle broke from Xena's contact for a beat. She leaned forward and collected the broken arrow that only had the fetching and a hand's length of the shaft left. She sat back in the chair and felt large hands back on her shoulder again.

The bard held the arrow shaft up so the golden fetching stood upwards. She stared at it and explained, "I broke it off an arrow that'd been shot at the Amazon and Centaur children." She shook her head and continued to talk. "The arrows had the same style fetching as the arrow that killed Terreis seasons back." She turned the shaft in her hand so that the fetching rotated too. "It doesn't make sense how Draco could be involved with killing Terreis, but it wasn't the Centaurs that killed her." She lowered the fetching to her lap and sadly mentioned, "Melosa still doesn't completely believe it."

The Conqueror had been silently staring at the fetching. She had a ghostly look on her face and stopped massaging Gabrielle's shoulder. She'd heard Gabrielle's voice in the background of her thoughts, and she lowered her vision to the fetching in Gabrielle's lap. She snapped out of old memories and asked, "Can I see that?"

Gabrielle handed it up to her friend.

The ruler lifted it close to her face and carefully inspected the detail of the fetching. She instantly felt her chest tighten with anger. "Those bastards."

The queen hadn't expected such a coldness. She twisted around in the chair and peered up at her darkened friend. "What is it?" She felt alarms go off in her.

Xena tightened her hold on the arrow and hotly whispered, "This is Roman... I recognize the style."

Gabrielle stared at Xena in disbelief. She shook her head and spoke her fast moving thoughts. "If that's Roman and Draco is using them then..." She became horrified about what this could mean. "The Romans are funding him." She shook her head frantically and stood up from her desk. "That means the Romans may have killed Terreis." She felt her anger boil like Xena.

The Conqueror tried to cap her anger that instantly flared at the thought of Romans. "They wanted the Amazon and Centaurs to stay at odds."

"But why?" Gabrielle demanded.

"Divide and conqueror," Xena murmured, "you divide a woman's emotions from her sensibilities, and you have her."

The Amazon Queen furrowed her eyebrows. "What?"

The Conqueror pulled away from dark, angry memories and explained, "An... old friend of mine said that once."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes because she didn't believe Xena thought this person was friend. She knew Xena's darker sarcasm. "This friend of yours wouldn't happen to factor into this?"

Xena twisted the shaft in her hand and stared at the rotating fetching. "It's his style." She put herself into his place and whispered his exact tactic. "Separate Queen Melosa from her sensibilities by killing her sister. She'll be focused on revenge against the Centaurs. And the Centaurs will defeat the Amazons in battle."

"Why would he want the war? What's it worth to him?"

The Conqueror lowered her hand that held the fetching. She focused back on Gabrielle. "It's a common Roman tactic that I've discovered. When I conquered Athens, I found that Rome was supplying the Athenians with arms."

Gabrielle tried to think like the Romans. "So that Athens would defeat you?"

"That's what I thought at first too." The Conqueror shook her head and explained it more. "I found evidence that Athens was receiving arms long before I ever took Sparta."

"Then...?"

"Sparta was also receiving arms from Rome," Xena revealed.

Gabrielle started to piece it together. "Rome wants all the Greek city-states to keep fighting amongst themselves. If they're all so focused on each other then they wouldn't notice the Romans coming in to take over."

"Exactly," the ruler agreed. "Rome knows how egotistical Greeks can be and have been feeding it for some time. That was another reason I found it important to conquer the city-states and kingdoms. They're all so focused on revenge that they don't see the real threat."

"Sweet Artemis," the queen murmured in surprise. She brushed back her bangs and stared down at the broken Roman arrow in Xena's hand. "But why would they want a war between the Amazons and Centaurs? We're just small Nations with little land."

Xena tried to figure out the answer, but she didn't quite have it yet. She did realize that whatever the reasoning, the Romans had sent Draco to finish what the Centaurs were accidentally suppose to do. She was going to say something but the knock at the door distracted her.

Gabrielle touched Xena's arm in apology for the interruption. She brushed past and went to the door. She cracked it open and was surprised to find Yakut there.

"Can I come in for a moment?" the shaman insisted.

The bard would have refused if it was anybody else, but she recalled that Yakut and Xena were already friends. She just hoped there was nothing unsettling between them. She let Yakut inside then closed the door.

The Conqueror faced the newcomer and softened out of her stoic attitude. "Yakut."

The shaman sadly smiled at the ruler. "Hello, Xena." She glanced at Gabrielle. "I'm glad you're both here."

"What is it?" Gabrielle became worried.

Yakut saw the tension pass between the queen and ruler. She sighed and explained, "Maired wants to speak to us." She then glanced down at Faolan. "That includes you, Faolan."

The wolf whined and dropped his ears back in apprehension.

Gabrielle had a confused look at how Faolan seemed to perfectly understand Yakut. She shook it off and focused back on Yakut. "What's it about?"

"I'm not exactly sure," the shaman replied, "but she said it's important. We should go to the temple."

The Amazon Queen wouldn't argue, but she wasn't sure about Xena. She gazed over at her friend. "Maired is our priestess."

The Conqueror had picked up on that fact. She turned and set the broken arrow on the desk. She joined the pair and declared, "We better not keep her waiting. Priestesses tend to dislike that type of thing."

Yakut chuckled and pushed back her headdress. "I see somethings haven't changed about you, Xena."

The ruler barely kept from rolling her eyes. "Or with you, Yakut."

The shaman grew smug.

Gabrielle watched the two, and she briefly considered whether something else had been between them. She picked up her staff and decided to leave her mask. "Let's go." She opened the door and waited for everybody to file outside. She then stared over at Faolan, who wouldn't budge.

Faolan was standing, but he lowered his head in a sad manner.

"Come on, Fao," the queen ordered.

The white wolf slinked along as if he was about to be in trouble shortly.

Gabrielle shook her head and closed the hut door. She followed the pair, but she was in her distant thoughts. She wondered what Maired needed, and she wanted answers as to why the Romans plotted for her Nation to battle the Centaurs. She felt her anger return towards the Romans. She couldn't believe that because of the Romans her Nation almost went to war and could have been destroyed.

The group entered the silent and empty temple. Yakut led the way to the altar, and she was going to suggest going to the back office. She came up short though because Maired appeared from that direction.

The priestess approached the group and smiled at them. "I'm glad your four could come so quickly." She ascended the few steps to the altar and walked down to them.

Gabrielle recalled her place as queen and proceeded to introduce Maired to the Conqueror. "Maired, this is Xena of Amphipolis."

The priestess smiled at the ruler and placed her hands behind her back. "The famous Conqueror." She studied the entire length of the legendary ruler. "And the infamous Amazon that killed the Shaman Altı."

"Maired-" Yakut tried.

"It's okay," Maired cut off. She held up her hand at the shaman then put it behind her back. She focused back on the Conqueror. "I am one of many that is grateful for the Conqueror's actions."

Gabrielle didn't like the tension in Xena. She quickly broke into the conversation. "Why did you ask us here, Maired?"

The priestess recognized that Gabrielle was being curt with her, which never happened. She suspected it was because Gabrielle was feeling defensive over Xena. "It's time you three understand your place in Amazonia." She then tilted her head and locked eyes with Faolan. "All four," she corrected.

Faolan sighed deeply and lowered his head. He remained seated at Gabrielle's side.

The bard glanced down at the wolf then slotted her eyes at the priestess. "Does Faolan understand everything we say?"

Maired grinned at the question. "Yes, he understands Greek very well. I believe he's quite apt with Latin too." She shifted her attention to the wolf again. "Are you, Faolan?"

Faolan felt curious green eyes down on him, and he turned his head away in a guilty manner.

Gabrielle lifted her head and shook it.

"I'm sure too if he was human, he'd have plenty to say." Maired then chuckled and added, "Lucky for us he can't."

Faolan hotly huffed at the priestess's joke. What he wouldn't do to give Priestess Maired a bite on her silk covered butt just for the smart remark, but he knew Artemis would probably have his fur for it too.

"Seven said that Faolan is Artemis's guardian."

"He's a guardian from Artemis," Maired explained to Gabrielle.

"What is he guarding for Artemis?" The Conqueror inquired.

Priestess Maired smiled at the ruler's very precise question. "Faolan was sent by Artemis to guard her Hippothoes." She then devilishly grinned down at the wolf. "However he's fallen slightly short of his duties. Have you not, Faolan?"

"Rrrrr," the wolf sadly replied, and he huffed.

Maired lifted her gaze. "Like humans, I suppose Faolan has flaws too." She became more serious. "Faolan has accidentally favored you, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle was trying to wrap her thoughts around Faolan's existence.

"Hippothoes," Xena translated, "Amazons."

"Not just Amazons." The priestess tilted her head. "A hippothoe is an elite Amazon... a rare Amazon, who is only born for a sole purpose in the eyes of Artemis."

"You're talking about the legend," the shaman concluded. After Maired's faint nod, she noticed that Xena and Gabrielle didn't understand the ancient legend in Amazonia. She turned to them and started to explain it. "You know the story about how the Amazons came to be?"

Gabrielle, the bard, instantly rolled into the story. "They say that it was a pact between Gaia and Artemis." She sensed everybody's eyes on her so she continued the story. "Gaia, like the other Titans, was to be casted into the underworld, but Artemis came to Gaia. Artemis felt deeply for Gaia being casted away, and Artemis offered some salvation to Gaia. Together they made a secret pact. Artemis promised Gaia a way to funnel her powers to earth so that she could continue being the Goddess of Earth. In return Gaia promised to always produce forests for the Amazons to live in and be protected."

Maired softly smiled and replied, "That's the version we tell around the campfires." She glanced over at Yakut and nodded.

The shaman lifted her hands and very much mimicked how Gabrielle spoke. "The real story isn't just in the pact. It's in why Gaia ever birthed Earth because she originally doubted doing such. She believed that Chaos would return and kill Earth." Yakut paused and searched the curious faces of Xena and Gabrielle. "Everybody believes that Artemis is the daughter of Zeus but in fact she is the daughter of Gaia. She's not only the daughter of Gaia, but Gaia entrusted her to guard Earth from Chaos. Gaia felt that Artemis could keep him at bay by protecting her waters, sky, and forests."

Yakut pushed her shifting headdress back then continued the story. "Once Gaia birthed Earth, she also birthed Artemis, and she instilled Artemis with all the values of goodness and gave her animals to help her in her mission. But then Zeus was born, and he casted the Titans away." She paused, but she locked eyes with Gabrielle. "The pact is true, Gabrielle. But what Amazons don't know is that Artemis feared she could not handle watching over Gaia's Earth all on her own. Zeus had birthed humans, and they

were plentiful. They also pillage the Earth. She was only a goddess, and she couldn't be in two places at once. So she secretly went to her mother in the underworld and explained she needed more than one set of eyes. Gaia and Artemis came up with a plan that involved a single oak tree."

Gabrielle held her breath at the picture being painted before her. It wasn't just an imaginary picture but it was a real picture of the painting located in the room that her and Andra stayed in the day they became blood sisters.

"Artemis returned to Earth. She helped her mother find a way to emit some of her powers to Earth again. As a result, the first oak tree sprout from the ground, but it was no regular oak tree. It's roots reached far below Earth, down to the underworld, and to Gaia. It was Gaia's only attachment to Earth again. From this tree, the first acorn grew and fell to the Earth."

"The Tree of Life," the Conqueror whispered.

"Yes," Yakut murmured, "it was the Tree of Life for the Amazons." She softly smiled. "From that first acorn came the first Amazon. Artemis and Gaia would birth hundreds of Amazons to help Artemis protect Earth. They'd decided it was best every Amazon look human then Zeus would never suspect that they were really from Gaia." She started to move her hands to the story. "Later, Artemis noticed that Zeus's female humans were curious about her Amazons, and her Amazons were just as curious. They befriended each other. Artemis saw an opportunity to spread her mission so she had her Amazons welcome the women into their arms. Soon enough the women took on the Amazons' dress, beliefs, values, lifestyle... they became the Amazons."

"Then what happened to the original Amazons?" Gabrielle insisted.

"Well," Yakut continued, "Hades had discovered the Tree of Life because of the roots. He told his brother Zeus. Zeus was furious, and he destroyed the Tree of Life but he didn't realize what the Tree of Life had been doing." She paused and licked her dry lips. "The Tree of Life was gone and so Artemis could no longer have new Amazons. But what she did have was a new kind of Amazon... female, human Amazons. She had the real Amazons teach the human Amazons how to fight and protect Earth. The human Amazons learned everything they could, and they started to realize that the real Amazons were aging and soon would die. The human Amazons became a mix of anger and upset because they realized how much they loved the real Amazons. They were all family."

Gabrielle felt her eyes sting. She story touched her so deeply, and she didn't understand why so. She just knew it reached so far into her that it made her tremble.

"The human Amazons begged for Artemis to do something before the real Amazon race died. Artemis explained there was nothing she could do, and she felt all the painful heartache from every last Amazon. But she came up with an idea that wouldn't save the real Amazons but would make them everlasting." Yakut paused and glanced up at Maired. "She selected one human Amazon and one real Amazon then she explained to them her idea. She asked them if they agreed to her idea, and they said yes."

Maired wistfully smiled at Yakut's story. She faintly nodded for her to keep going.

"Artemis merged the real Amazon and the human Amazon together," Yakut murmured. "Artemis made the first priestess." She turned back to the queen and the Conqueror. "The priestess was a bridge between the real Amazons and the humans Amazons. She became the pillar in the first human Nation that evolved after the real Amazons died. The real Amazons were dead, but the priestess can speak not only to Artemis but to the dead, real Amazons. She looks to them for guidance for when the human

Amazons lose their way or there are hard times. And the real Amazons are still with us in spirit, they are our strength, and they protect us on our eternal mission to protect Earth."

Gabrielle had a heavy lump in her throat, and her eyes stung. She tried to swallow the lump down and when she spoke her voice shook. "Then what is a Hippothoe?"

Yakut gazed up at the priestess to explain it.

The Conqueror glanced at Gabrielle, and she felt her emotions shaken too. Yakut's story drove deep into her too despite she didn't show it on the outside. She now listened to Maired speak.

"A Hippothoe as I said is a rare Amazon." Maired returned her hands behind her back. "What makes them rare is that they're a human Amazon, who has a real Amazon's soul." She paused and let it sink in for a beat. "Gabrielle and Xena, you have both heard the story of the first shaman brought to the Thrace Nation. Do you believe that was by accident?"

Gabrielle quickly answered, "No. There was a reason."

"And there was," Maired agreed. "The first shaman... the lost shaman was Crescentia."

"Crescent," Gabrielle murmured, "Crescent moon."

The priestess smiled at Gabrielle's quick intelligence. "Yes. She was fated by Artemis. After she lost her tribe, she traveled and what guided her to the Amazons was the moon that shined not only at night but during the day. The moon brought her to the Thrace Nation where she was taken in by the priestess there."

"What exactly saved Crescentia?" Yakut prompted. "Nobody seems to know."

"Oh Amazons do know, Yakut." Maired tilted her head. "Just only certain Amazons know the whole story. The Thrace priestess at the time was Artemus, and she spoke to Crescentia. She told the shaman about the Amazons... the real Amazons and the human Amazons. Crescentia was so moved by what happened to the real Amazons. Artemus and Crescentia continued to talk, and soon Crescentia realized what her shamanism could do to help."

Yakut suddenly had wide eyes once she figured out what may have happened. "By Artemis," she whispered.

The Conqueror narrowed her eyes because she had her wages too. "Crescentia was a shaman so she found a way to have the real Amazons reborn but in human form."

Priestess Maired very slowly nodded then smiled. "Exactly." She brought her hands forward and held them out before the three Amazons. "You three are Hippothoes. You are human, yet you have the soul of an original Amazon." She lowered her hands.

"Something tells me that's about half of it," Xena insisted. "What's the rest of it?"

Maired chuckled at Xena's perceptive attitude. She linked her hands in front of her. "The original Amazons may have looked human when they were living, but they were unique because they each had a special skill or quality to them. All skills were Earth related in some way. One Amazon may be able to walk on water while another could breathe under water. A third Amazon could make trees grow at an incredible rate. It was their skill given by Gaia."

The priestess paused and scanned the serious faces of the Hippothoes. "There were three original Amazons that were the most powerful. They were the first three Amazons born so they were the eldest

and the most wise. They controlled the sky, the forest, and the earth."

"Not the waters?" Gabrielle challenged.

"The earth includes the waters, my queen," the priestess explained. "The earth is dead without its waters and the waters are meaningless without the earth." Maired sighed. "These three Amazons were Artemis's chosen. She entrusted them to help her guide the original Amazons. Those three Amazons did guide the other Amazons, and they were the last to die just as they were the first born. Without them, the original Amazons could have lost their way."

"So then we're those three Amazons?" Gabrielle concluded.

"Yes," Maired agreed. "You three are the chosen." She held out her hand to Gabrielle. "You are the forest. Your eyes mimic that of what you are, and your hair is as golden as the sun from which the trees need to live from." She then lowered her hand and held up her right at Xena. "The sky. You have eyes as rich as sky, but yet by night you are black." Finally she directed her last words to Yakut. "And Yakut, your brown eyes are that of the earth. You have a two-spirit because you are a Hippothoes and being a shaman you can transcend to the underworld. Just as they say if you swim to the bottom of a lake you'll make it to the underworld."

The Amazon Priestess laced her hands back in front of her. "You three cannot survive without the other. It is why you all are close in age. When one dies, the others will surely follow soon. None of you have any powers or gifts without the other. And when you're in close proximity of each other you are at your strongest." She then lowered her gaze to Gabrielle. "My queen, you are the focal point. You connect the sky and the earth together. You also keep the sky calm at night, and you help the earth reach full strength by letting roots grow strong and holding things together."

Gabrielle felt some kind of completeness fill her. She didn't completely understand why, but she accepted it.

"Xena," Maired softly spoke, "You tread a fine line everyday. You have a constant balance of dark and light in you. You must learn to work through the long nights and wait for the mornings. But take the nights to your advantage because that's where your strength lies if you know how to control it." She glimpsed at Gabrielle then back at Xena. "Trust Gabrielle to guide you through those dark moments. And don't mistake the fact that the sky needs to stay vast and open so that a forest can grow high up and stretch their branches."

The priestess then turned to the young shaman. "Your two-spirit is a direct connection to the original Amazons, Yakut. They will empower you if you let them. And you must continue to help the forest grow and reach higher to the sky. It's an endless mission but a true one because to do otherwise would lead you astray."

Yakut inclined her head. She didn't fully understand, but she knew she would in time.

Maired inhaled deeply and slowly let it go. She looked between the chosen and merely said, "You now have the knowledge. I will be here to guide you three as you find your way." She went silent and started to walk away.

Gabrielle turned her head and stared at the priestess's back. "Maired?" She came after the priestess.

Maired stopped and turned to the bard. "Yes, my queen?"

The queen was close to touching the priestess's arm, but she came up short. "What are we suppose to do now?"

The priestess gave a half smile and simply repeated, "Knowledge is power, Gabrielle. Now you must learn to use that power." She bowed her head. "I'm always here for counsel, my queen." She then straightened up and glided away back to the hallway that went to her office.

The Conqueror breathed deeply then muttered, "Riddle me this, riddle me that."

"What Maired tells us is true," Yakut stated. "I've seen it."

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow then argued, "I believe her, but I don't have time to worry about stories and riddles."

The Amazon Queen came back to the pair. She listened to what they said, but she locked eye contact with Xena. "It's not stories... it's who we are." She searched Xena's eyes and saw something that wasn't doubt but closer to denial. She needed something slightly more impacting. She then had an idea. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

The Conqueror couldn't believe she was agreeing when she needed to deal with her army right now. But this was Gabrielle, and she couldn't refuse the woman that was closest to her. She followed along side Gabrielle.

Faolan whined from his seated spot.

The bard glanced back at him. "Come on, boy." She waited until he was at her other side and Yakut was tailing them. "You little sneak," she chided the wolf.

The white wolf whined sadly.

"That's okay." Gabrielle slightly bent and ran her fingers through his coat. "I don't mind being your favorite but not that I blame you." She just caught the last motions of Xena's eye rolling. She softly laughed and guided everybody down to the room that her and Andra stayed in one night.

The three women entered, and Gabrielle centered everybody underneath the ceiling painting. She pointed up at it and merely waited.

Xena slotted her eyes at the story the painting depicted. She found her attention attracted by the three Amazons in the woods. She focused on the Amazon on the right, who was the tallest and had hair as dark as the night sky. Then the Amazon's eyes actually had tiny sapphire chips placed in them.

The queen had her head way back. She softly spoke now. "I saw this painting many moons ago. I didn't think much about it until your story, Yakut." She felt her features pull inward from her deep thoughts. "But this painting... it doesn't feel so new to me."

"I do feel de-ja-vu," Yakut agreed.

Xena lifted her head after she'd kept it reclined so much. She started to walk away, back to the door, and she had tense shoulders.

Gabrielle was surprised by the sudden exit. She hurried and caught Xena by her gauntlet covered wrist. "Xena?"

The Conqueror stood next to the open doorway. She looked between the shaman and the Amazon Queen. She then coldly informed, "I don't have time to theorize whether these stories are true. Right now, we have a real problem that could kill hundreds of people."

"Xena," Gabrielle carefully tried, "I don't think Maired told us this just to ignore it."

Yakut turned her head away from staring at the pair. She swallowed and bit her lower lip tightly.

"Well then perhaps you and Yakut can figure it out while I stop Draco." Xena tried to jerk her arm free, but she couldn't from the persist bard.

Gabrielle felt that it was something else going on. "Xena, what is it?" She kept her voice low, but she worried that Yakut's presence would hinder Xena from being more open.

The Conqueror glimpsed at Yakut, who tried to act like she wasn't in the room. She lowered her gaze to Gabrielle and clipped, "I don't have time for stories." She saw Gabrielle's hand fall from her gauntlet finally. She then added, "Nor do I like being told my fate is controlled by the gods." She made her escape and headed through the hallway.

Gabrielle silently cursed and glanced over at Yakut. It was the first time she realized how Yakut had some saddened expression and seemed to want to be any place but here. She slowly lifted her eyes to the painting and studied the three Amazons. She furrowed her eyebrows and noticed how the green and blue eyed Amazons were closer physically but the brown eyed one was slightly more distant. Then upon closer inspection it indeed was true that the brown eyed Amazon had a forlorn look on her face as she stared at the other two Amazons.

The queen set it aside for now. She glanced once at the faint outline of a white wolf in the painting, which gave her a perfect idea. She knelt down and called, "Fao?"

The white wolf trotted over and sat in front of his friend.

The shaman turned her head to the queen and wolf. She quietly listened.

"I need you to do something for me, please." Gabrielle could tell from Faolan's eyes that he would agree. "Go find Xena and stay with her for awhile." She now petted the wolf. "I think you have a calming effect on her. She'll probably be annoyed at you for a few beats, but just do your sweet, innocent trick."

Faolan huffed and wagged his tail across the floor.

Gabrielle leaned in and kissed him on the nose. "Thanks, boy." She let her hands glide through his fur as he hurried out of the door. She was now left with Yakut, who needed some support Gabrielle decided. She just hoped she could help Yakut somehow. But there was something about the painting of the brown eyed Amazon that told her that it may be very hard. Gabrielle would still try anyway.

To be continued.