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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 17

The Conqueror stood beside Commander Kaylee in the edge of the woods, and they surveyed the local terrain. She pointed off to her left. "My stratègos will come from that direction."

Faolan was seated to the left of the Conqueror. He moved his head in the direction that they were talking. He'd caught up to Xena a candlemark and had stayed at her side since then.

"So you'll set that section on fire?" Kaylee prompted, and she pointed.

Xena nodded and lowered her arm. "Pray to Artemis that the winds will be with us."

The stratègos peered up and mentioned, "If I do then the winds will be against us. She will not like us burning the woods."

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow and reminded, "Better the woods, which can regrow than her Nation being destroyed."

Commander Kaylee sighed because the ruler did have a point. She then tilted her head back to get a better view of Xena's profile. "You'll attract Draco here?"

"Yes," the Conqueror promised, "he won't refuse the chase."

"The queen will be an automatic target for the automaton," Kaylee reminded. She placed her hands on her hips. "I pray this shaman can stop Seven from doing something she may regret."

Xena could tell that the stratègos cared about this automaton. It didn't surprise her either because many Amazons were taught to be concerned about other women regardless if they were in the Nation or not.

"These open lands will make it hard for the Amazons," Kaylee murmured. "We're at a disadvantage here."

The Conqueror scanned the open hills, but she mentioned, "My hoplites are use to these battlefields." She then considered another approach to the problem, and she slyly grinned. "Amazons are quite apt to riding."

"There is no other warrior better on horseback than an Amazon," Kaylee declared. "Our finest archers are also riders and have true aim on the bounciest rides."

The Conqueror was quite content with her idea. "Perhaps that can be taken to our advantage."

The stratègos curiously peered up and waited for an explanation.

The Conqueror folded her arms and inquired, "How do seven hundred more horses on lease sound to you, stratègos?"

Kaylee slotted her eyes, but she slowly grinned at the implications. "Conqueror, I do believe you've captured my heart." She and the Conqueror laughed together.

Faolan twisted his head when the stratègos and ruler briskly shook arms in agreement. He then turned his head to the right when he heard movements coming from the woods. He stood up at seeing his favorite friend.

Queen Gabrielle was joining the pair after she'd finished sending out a quick message to Queen Cyane. She now caught sight of the Conqueror and the stratègos breaking an arm shake. She commented, "I pray that is a good sign then."

Commander Kaylee slightly bowed then replied, "It is, my queen. The Conqueror has decided to loan us her horses for the battle."

The queen came to a stop between the pair. She looked between them and tried to decide what that exactly meant. She centered her attention on the stratègos. "That'll give us fourteen hundred on horseback."

Commander Kaylee rested her hands on her hips. "More importantly one Amazon on horseback is

equivalent to three Amazons on foot."

Gabrielle had a thin smile as she now understood what this meant. Thanks to the Conqueror, her Amazons would have an extra edge. She already knew hoplites were much more formidable on foot than on horseback. The only reason hoplites were ever put on horseback was to protect the flanks, however, more Amazons on horseback would be far better than hoplites on horseback.

"I'm not the most experience with warfare," Gabrielle mentioned, "but inform me of the plans."

"Of course, my queen." The strategos had the queen stand between her and the Conqueror.

Kaylee and the Conqueror then explained the plans on how to draw Draco from his camp. He would suspect such a plot, but he wouldn't expect a majority of the Amazons on horseback. The Conqueror's army would join her waiting army in the valley until Draco attacked. Then the Amazon cavalry would sweep in on Draco's open backside. Meanwhile the vincentes would be unpacked and assembled to be utilized later. The Conqueror suspected that Draco would flee once Borias arrived with the other half of her army.

Gabrielle readily agreed to the idea. She then suggested that she could probably get the Centaurs to join. The Centaurs were known not only for brute strength but also they had unique skills with spears. She suspected that the Centaurs could easily help in rounding up any fleeing opponents. The Conqueror agreed and left it to Gabrielle to speak with the Centaurs. But Gabrielle insisted that Xena join her this afternoon to meet the Centaurs and Tyldus. She was surprised when Xena did agree.

Finally the leaders walked back towards the Nation. Faolan followed along side, and he considered the plans for the battle. He doubted he'd be apart of them since he'd help Gabrielle deal with the automaton. He was quite leery of Ares's automaton.

Once back in the Nation, Commander Kaylee broke away from the group and went to find her second in command. Queen Gabrielle ordered the gate guards to find her half a dozen Amazons to ride. She also wanted her and Xena's horses saddled and brought out. The Conqueror remained busy talking to her hoplites about their plans to ride to the Centaur village. She also ordered two hoplites to return to the camp and talk to Bastien about loaning the horses to the Amazons. The preparations would have to be done just before battle if it was going to work right.

Finally the saddled horses were brought out and the Greek hoplites easily mounted. The Conqueror took Argo and gave her horse a warm greeting before she mounted. Queen Gabrielle was happy to see Torqueo. She easily climbed into his saddle then adjusted her feet in the stirrups right.

Faolan came close to the silly chestnut horse. He sniffed the horse in usual fashion.

Torqueo huffed at the wolf then slammed his front left hoof near the wolf.

Faolan jumped back and growled at the horse, but his fur remained down and his ears forward.

Gabrielle sighed at the pair because they acted like kids. She glanced over at Xena, who showed amusement in her blue eyes.

"We are ready, my queen," an Amazon stated.

Gabrielle smiled at the Amazon, who she knew all too well. "Excellent, Solari." She then spotted Ephiny on Solari's right side. She turned to the ruler. "Are we set?"

The Conqueror had already checked on her hoplites so she nodded. She commanded everybody to

fallout and enter the Amazon woods. She took the lead with Queen Gabrielle at her side.

Gabrielle checked on her Amazons, who silently followed. She glanced down at Faolan and faintly smiled at his presence.

Xena waited a beat then remarked, "You sent Faolan."

The bard shifted in the saddle to get more comfortable. She glanced at Xena briefly. "I did." She wasn't sure how to exactly explain it without agitating Xena. "You two seem to get along."

The Conqueror silently considered it. She idly watched the forest around them as they past everything. They were headed around the Nation so they could make their way to the Centaurs. "I suppose he reminds me of somebody else."

Gabrielle faintly smiled, but she decided the moment required a lighter atmosphere. "Shall I be insulted?" Her voice was light and teasing. "I'm not quite that furry."

Faolan whined from his spot below.

"Hush," the queen ordered the wolf.

Faolan hung out his tongue and shook his head.

Xena had a smile at the joke. She tapped Argo's side so they could pick up the pace. She considered something from her past history with Gabrielle, and she kept her voice down. "Do you recall how many times I tried to get you to ride with me?"

The Amazon Queen had a slow smile. "The last count was sixteen." She tilted her head and chided, "After that horse stomped on your foot, I was not at all enticed."

The Conqueror tried hard not to chuckle, but yet her frame shook from a silent laugh. "You promised you would ride with me."

"I did... I just didn't promise when," the bard shot back.

Xena turned her head to Gabrielle, and the glint showed in her eyes. "Only a bard would be so tricky with words."

"And a bard I am," the queen declared.

The ruler huffed and turned her head away. She watched where she was maneuvering Argo. "A bard schooled at the Athens Academy no less."

Gabrielle tilted her head at the sad volume that laced her friend's words. She softly sighed then nudged Torqueo closer to the golden mare. She recalled the childhood talks about Gabrielle going to the academy, and Xena promised she'd be there to help Gabrielle through it. Now that promise was long broken and not by Xena's fault.

"I thought of you often while I was there," Gabrielle confided.

Xena stayed quiet, and she wasn't exactly sure how to reply. She kept her face forward and pretended to concentrate on the ride.

Gabrielle couldn't recall ever having to press Xena hard unless they were fighting. This wasn't a fight though, and she realized Xena had become more closed up over the seasons. Gabrielle understood because she wasn't much the same girl from Potidaea anymore.

"The stars," Xena softly mentioned. Her words were almost missed because she was so quiet. She turned her head to Gabrielle and hesitated but finally explained, "I thought of you the most when I watched them."

Gabrielle knew that was a hard confession from her friend. She wanted to touch the ruler's leg or knee, but she restrained herself. She wouldn't do it here and compromise either of their rulership. Also she didn't need the Gossip Queen spreading rumors about her and Xena that held no merit.

The Amazon Queen instead simply confessed, "I still don't see your silly bear." She then signaled Torqueo to move away from Xena's horse.

The Conqueror bit back her grin, but she chided, "Some bard you are."

"Ha," the bard muttered. "I thought of the warrior in the sky."

Xena slotted her eyes at the queen. "I saw the warrior first."

"You did not," Gabrielle loudly fought back. "I pointed it out first, and you didn't believe me."

Xena freed her right hand from the reins and placed it on her leather hip. "I saw that star picture long before you were ever born."

Gabrielle leaned to her left, closer to Xena. "No you didn't."

"Yes, I did."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes and challenged, "Why you have to be right all the time?"

The Conqueror leaned towards the bard and shot back, "Why you always have to try and beat me?"

"Because you can't admit to being wrong half the time."

"Oooh you were so perfect." Xena freed her hand and pointed it at Gabrielle. "I remember that time you got into a sword fight with me and Lyceus-"

"Oh no wait!" Gabrielle had accidentally pushed Torqueo closer to Argo again. "You started that. You kept calling me a 'sissy girl', and what did you expect?"

"Well if the sandal fits," the ruler stabbed.

Unknowingly the ruler and queen had accidentally halted their horses and caused the entire party of hoplites and Amazons to come to a dead stop. The hoplites didn't mind because they stared dumbfounded at their leader, who kept egging on the Amazon Queen. The Amazons, for their part, were all gossiping and snickering amongst themselves especially because of Solari.

Gabrielle growled and snapped, "I kicked your and Lyceus's butts all the way back to the taverna."

Xena oddly stared at her friend. "No. You kicked Lyceus's butt, and I tackled you to the ground."

"No you didn't, I had you on the ground!"

"No you didn't," the ruler hotly challenged.

Gabrielle leaned closer and growled, "Yes, I did."

"No, you did not," Xena hissed.

Gabrielle bared her teeth, and her eyes danced with anger.

The Conqueror remained tense and locked eyes. She then slowly felt a grin creep along her face once she saw Gabrielle's glow return to her eyes.

Gabrielle wanted to so badly throw a punch at Xena as if they were still kids. But she knew she couldn't plus she didn't want to see Xena's warrior-like reaction to such an attempt. "We'll settle this later."

"Fine," the Conqueror proudly agreed. She straightened up in the saddle.

The Amazon Queen sharply nodded then straightened up. She was quite happy with herself.

"My queen?" Solari called in charmed tone.

The queen twisted around in her saddle. "Yes, Solari?"

"May we proceed to the Centaurs?" Solari innocently inquired.

Gabrielle cleared her throat and turned back in her saddle. She realized what she'd done. She'd forced Torqueo in front of Argo to stop Xena. She caught Xena's smirk.

The Conqueror held out her hand and politely offered, "After you, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard grumbled and tapped Torqueo's sides. She then heard an amused huff come from Faolan. "Don't start with me either, furball."

If Faolan could produce an offended look, he certainly would have done so. He gave a low growl that was far from threatening, but he followed along side. He'd never been bantered before by Gabrielle, but he suppose it was about time anyway.

The Amazons and hoplites proceeded on the route to the Centuars. During the little spat, Ephiny had been the only Amazon that sat aside and curiously watched. She knew much about Xena thanks to what Gabrielle had told her over the seasons. Ephiny never thought she'd see the day when this ghost would suddenly become human form. She also didn't expect Gabrielle and Xena to reconnect to so easily, but she concluded it had to be because of their past that made it easier.

Solari glanced over at Ephiny and detected some distraught emotions. She pushed her horse closer to Ephiny's and quietly asked, "You alright?"

Ephiny sadly smiled at her friend's concern. "Yeah."

Solari glanced once at the queen and ruler riding along side each other. She put herself in Ephiny's feathers, and she understood what most likely bothered Ephiny so deeply. It couldn't be easy for Ephiny to watch her former lover reconnect with her childhood sweetheart. Solari now tried to think of something that'd help settle Ephiny.

"You know, I'm glad the queen finally has her best friend back." Solari tilted her head then questioned, "Did you ever notice how Gabrielle has always kept a certain wall between all of us?"

Ephiny slightly lowered her head and considered the words. She had to agree that Gabrielle had always kept a certain distance from anybody. She, like any Amazon, knew how much Gabrielle loved the Amazons, and Gabrielle acted as a true Amazon. However Gabrielle had developed a certain barrier so her emotions about her past were hardly revealed.

Solari touched her friend's knee. "Everything happens for a reason, Eph."

Ephiny peered up at her friend and sadly smile. "I know... I know."

Solari squeezed Ephiny's knee then softly promised, "I'm here if you need me." She then broke away by urging her horse forward. She wanted to talk to the queen about the trip to the Centaurs.

A candlemark prior to arriving at the Centaurs, Queen Gabrielle sent two Amazons ahead to forewarn the Centaurs. She didn't want to overly surprise Tyldus. She wondered how the Conqueror would interact with Centaurs, but she felt it would go well. Once they'd approached the border, they all dismounted and walked their horses to the distant gates in the barren landscape. Eventually they were met by three Centaurs, who warmly greeted the party and guided them to the slowly parting gates.

The Conqueror carefully watched the interaction between the Centaurs and Amazons. She noticed how one of the Centaurs was quite taken with Gabrielle. He was rather young too or close to Gabrielle's age at least. Xena had faintly raised an eyebrow when he attempted to come closer to the Amazon Queen.

Faolan, however, denied the Centaur from getting closer because he flanked Torqueo's side.

The Conqueror was obviously on the other side of the queen. She glanced down at Faolan after he'd clearly indicated his place by Gabrielle's side.

Faolan waited until the young Centaur wasn't too close again. He had his space again, but he sensed somebody staring down at him. He met cool blue eyes, and he flashed a toothy grin at the Conqueror.

Xena's eyebrow hiked even higher, but she sharply dropped it when Gabrielle turned to her.

"Isn't that right, Conqueror?"

The Conqueror blinked and tried to figure out what Gabrielle and the young Centaur had been saying. She didn't have a clue, but she promptly replied, "Yes, of course."

The bard slightly narrowed her eyes at Xena once she suspected Xena's answer wasn't quite true. She'd seen that act before in the past, but she couldn't question anything as the young Centaur started talking again.

Xena slightly rolled her eyes once the pair were off on another tangent. She blew up some air, which made her bangs lift. She shook her head and recalled Gabrielle's old habit about gushing over boys in the market. 'Boy Watching' as Gabrielle use to call it, was one of the bard's favorite past times back then. Xena, for her part, would always pick on each guy that Gabrielle cooed over, and that was Xena's favorite part of the game. Ultimately the two would always end up in some fight for half a candlemark then Xena would apologize and Gabrielle would hug her in acceptance.

Finally the party passed the gates to the Centaur village. The Conqueror halted Argo once she presumed it was the leader ahead of her. She dismounted with ease, and she signaled for her hoplites to do the same.

Gabrielle climbed off her stallion, and the friendly Centaur took her horse. She thanked the young Centaur once she had her staff free.

"Queen Gabrielle." Tyldus approached the group of soldiers and Amazons.

The bard switched her staff to her left hand then quickly took Tyldus's extended arm. "How are you, Tyldus?"

"I'm well." Tyldus had a warm smile. He then gazed down at the white wolf. "Hello, Faolan."

"Rrrrr," the wolf greeted back.

The Centaur leader chuckled then gazed over at the tall, dark woman, who was a legend throughout all of Greece. "The Conqueror."

Queen Gabrielle pivoted some on her foot. "Yes, this is Xena of Amphipolis, Tyldus."

The Conqueror stepped forward and politely offered her arm.

The Centaur briefly studied the ruler, but he extended his arm to her. He briskly shook. "Welcome to the Centaur Nation, Conqueror."

"Thank you." The Conqueror released arms. She shifted closer to the bard. "Queen Gabrielle has spoken highly of you."

Tyldus glanced at the queen but remarked, "And she has of you, Conqueror."

Xena kept her surprise fully hidden, but she appreciated Gabrielle's efforts.

Tyldus twisted to his right then waved an older Centaur to his side. "I'd like for you to meet one of my elders, Conqueror." He waited until the older Centaur was next to him. "This is Kaleipus."

Kaleipus had his salt and pepper hair held back by a leather band. He had marvelous amber eyes that stood out in the sunlight. He shook arms with the Conqueror then smiled at the Amazon Queen. "How are you, Queen Gabrielle?"

The bard faintly nodded and leaned against her staff. "I wish I could say better with this pending war."

Kaleipus softly sighed and bowed his head some. "These are trying times." He shifted on his hoofs and offered, "But between all our forces we will succeed."

At that moment, Gabrielle did feel a sense of relief. She already had the Centaurs' promise.

Tyldus called over another Centaur, who was younger. "Phantes, will you give the Amazons and hoplites a tour of the village."

"Of course, father." Phantes switched his attention to the Amazon Queen. "It's good to see you again, Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle chuckled and reminded, "No need to be so formal, Phantes. How are you?"

"I'm well. Yourself?"

The bard nodded. "I'm fine." She then turned some and called, "Solari?"

Solari broke from her sisters and came to the queen's side. "Yes, my queen?"

"I'd like you to meet Phantes." The queen held out her free hand to the Centaur.

"Ah the son of Tyldus," Solari concluded.

Phantes was impressed, and he shook arms with the Amazon. "Solari?"

"Yes." Solari smiled.

"Phantes will be giving everybody a tour of the village while the Conqueror and I speak with Tyldus."

"Of course, my queen." Solari placed her hands behind her back in formal stature. "I know I have not

seen the village."

Phantes slightly smiled once he realized the Amazon was truly interested. "Then we should get started."

Solari chuckled and asked the Centaur to follow her to the group.

Gabrielle briefly watched and felt warmed at the fact that her Amazons were trying hard to get along. She'd brought mostly Amazons from her generation because they were far more open to the relations with the Centaurs. The older generations would just take time, but it would improve.

"Let's go to my hut," Tyldus remarked. "I think we'll be more comfortable there."

Queen Gabrielle nodded then followed the Centaurs through the village. She noted how her friend was scanning the village. She slipped closer to Xena.

The Conqueror peered down at Gabrielle when she unexpectedly came closer.

The bard tilted her head to the side. "You and the Centaurs have one vow in common." She watched the ruler's eyebrow slowly arch. "Honor," she murmured.

Xena nodded because she had heard of the Centaurs' great honor. She and Borias had often talked about it and how they'd handle the Centaurs. Borias had suggested a treaty, and he believed that the Centaurs would make great allies. Xena didn't need much convincing plus she planned to have Borias head the alliance. It looked like she'd start it, then Borias would be able to take it over later.

The three leaders congregated into Tyldus's office and spent a few candlemarks going over the plans. The Centaurs were highly receptive and also supportive. After the long talk, Gabrielle brought up the topic about the arrow fetching that the Conqueror had concluded was Roman. She offered apologies awhile back about the bad politics between her Amazons and the Centaurs for so many long seasons. She felt worse once she discovered it could be the Romans. Tyldus accepted the queen's apology, and he was grateful that the truth had come forth. He promised Gabrielle that he would support the Amazons should they ever go against the Romans' arrow that killed Terreis. Tyldus was not fond of anybody slurring the Centaurs' honor just to bring about needless bloodshed. Queen Gabrielle and Tyldus now had a common bond and enemy beyond just Draco, and it even included the Conqueror.

The bard was seated next to the Greek ruler. She turned her head and murmured, "We should be going, Conqueror."

Xena tilted her head, but she agreed because it was getting late now. She planned to have Gabrielle join her back to her army so that Gabrielle could be familiarized with her army. She currently had her legs crossed, which she undid and gripped the chair's arms. "We have a lot to prepare."

Tyldus nodded and held out his hand to the closed door. "We'll walk you back to the gates then."

The Amazon Queen stood up and went around the chair. She smiled at Kaleipus, who had her staff for her. "Thank you."

Kaleipus returned the warm smile. He then opened the door and let everybody pass before he exited too. He shut the door then joined Tyldus. "The battle should turn out in our favor tomorrow."

"As long as there are no surprises," Gabrielle mentioned.

"Pray there is not," Tyldus agreed.

Kaleipus focused on the tall, dark ruler that stayed near the Amazon Queen. He briefly wondered if that

was intentional on the Conqueror's part or not. "And you will continue your campaign from here, Conqueror?"

"Yes," Xena replied. "I plan to see to the Macedonian and Thrace Providences."

"Ah yes," Kaleipus bobbed his head. "King Cortese will look forward to your arrival."

The Conqueror tasted the wit in the Centaur's words. She grinned and remarked, "Yes, he promises to wait."

"And what of Illyria?" Tyldus inquired.

Gabrielle bit her lower lip slightly. She, like many others, knew that Illyria had battled against the Romans and was subjected to falling to Rome soon. Also many knew of the Conqueror's disdain for the Romans.

"Illyria will be able to hold their borders until I arrive," Xena answered.

Tyldus slightly grinned. "The Romans are like snakes, Conqueror. They slither when nobody looks then suddenly they bite and kill with their venom."

"Yes," the Conqueror softly agreed but argued, "yet severing the head from the body is a quick solution."

"Many fear that Rome will invade Greece soon," Tyldus encouraged. "They are already crossing our borders it would seem... and separating our egos from our intellect." He came to a stop by the gates. He and the other leaders' presence automatically prompted the Centaur guards to get the horses.

The Conqueror remained stoic, and she faced the Centaur leader. "Rome cannot conquer what is already conquered."

Tyldus grinned and folded his arms. "I shall hope so, Conqueror." He glanced off his right and saw that the hoplite and Amazon party was coming back. He softly smiled at seeing Phantes in the lead.

The Conqueror took the moment to get Gabrielle's attention. She touched the bard's arm lightly and murmured, "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Queen Gabrielle nodded then glanced at the older Centaurs. "Excuse us for a beat." After Tyldus's nod, she and the Conqueror strolled away to a lonely spot. "What's wrong?"

Xena folded her arms and lowered her voice. "I want you and your Amazon party to return with me to my camp."

The bard furrowed her eyebrows, and she quickly glanced at the low western sun.

The ruler already realized it was roughly three candlemarks before sundown. She touched the bard's shoulder. "You need to see the army and meet a few of my officers. Otherwise your stratègos might be lost on who to talk to."

Gabrielle leaned against her staff. "Alright." She propped her head against the staff then added, "I shouldn't stay too long."

"I know." The Conqueror had removed her hand. "I'll make sure several of my soldiers escort you and your Amazons back to the village." She noted the instant disappointment in those green eyes. She easily figured out what brought it. "I would escort you myself, but I have to prepare the army for

tomorrow."

The bard sighed and lifted her head. "I know you do." She shook her head and started to move away. "We better get moving then." She headed back to Tyldus and Kaleipus. She brushed back her bangs and realized how worn she felt already. She glanced at her wounded shoulder, which ached in reminder. She and the Conqueror began the process of saying goodbye and thanking the Centaurs for their support.

The Conqueror mounted Argo first then she waited until Gabrielle was on her horse. She then steered her mare around her mounting hoplites and the Amazons.

Queen Gabrielle bid goodbye one last time then followed the Conqueror. She ordered her Amazons to follow them, but she didn't explain that they were headed to the Conqueror's camp until they far away from the Centaurs. She was surprised that her Amazons seemed rather thrilled to go to the Greek Army camp.

The Conqueror took the lead once they were beyond the borders of the Centaurs. She picked up the pace because she wanted to make it there before nightfall. She suspected her army was getting prepared for the battle tomorrow. Also she prayed that Bastien had received word to get the horses ready for the Amazons, and he had better done it.

Gabrielle remained fairly quiet during the ride. She listened to the idle chitchat amongst her Amazons. She occasionally glanced back at them to check on things. She then picked up on the faint din of noise on the horizon, and she imagined they were near the camp.

The Conqueror stopped on the crest of a hill and waited until Gabrielle came to her side.

The bard gently tugged on Torqueo's reins. She gazed down into the valley and held her breath at the number of tiny figures moving through the camp. She then noticed the charred earth where she suspected King Cortese had camped his army prior. She could even still detect the smoky scent on the breeze.

"For such a minor army, they're still impressive," the ruler gently commented.

Gabrielle broke from her thoughts and turned her attention to her friend. "How many are coming from southern Greece?"

"Fifty thousand hoplites," Xena murmured, "and five thousand hippeis."

Gabrielle stiffened and whispered, "Fifty thousand hoplites?" She found sharp blue eyes on her now.

"Yes, and I levied twenty thousand more in Sparta before I left to come here."

The bard shook her head and questioned, "How many soldiers are there in a Roman legion?"

"A legion can be comprised of four thousand to five thousand five hundred legionaries."

Gabrielle hastily did the math. "That's basically ten legions marching this way."

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow and replied, "They're far better than legionaries. Forty thousand are Spartan hoplites, and I've remodeled the Athenian hoplites to match the Spartan system."

The Amazon Queen gripped the saddle horn and stared down the valley at the hoplites in the camp. "I just realized how safe Greece is."

"Not quite yet," the Conqueror argued. She then clicked her tongue at Argo and started down the valley.

Queen Gabrielle tapped Torqueo's sides. She caught up to Xena easily and inquired, "Will you stop at Greece?"

The Conqueror remained silent for awhile, but she finally replied, "I can't be sure yet."

Gabrielle slightly narrowed her eyes then argued, "Rome will not stop until they have Greece. They're like a plague... they've taken Sicily, and they've turned their sights on us, Hispania, and Gaul."

Xena held tightly to Argo's reins and mostly to clamp down on her anger. She always felt her blood boil at these types of talks, and she reminded herself to stay somewhat calm.

"What can Greece do against such a force?" the bard quietly questioned.

The Conqueror turned her head to Gabrielle. "We have to stop them before they can spread any further."

Gabrielle nudged Torqueo closer to the golden mare. "Do you really think you're capable of stopping such a powerful nation?"

Xena eyed the bard and questioned back, "Do you think you're really capable of reigning over the Macedon Amazon Nation?"

The bard slightly grinned at the question being turned on her. "Yes."

"How can you be so sure?"

Gabrielle shrugged and simply replied, "I just know I am. And I can feel I'm destined to do it."

The Conqueror slightly softened at the vow from her friend. "It is the same for me." She now watched where Argo was going, and she directed the mare around the charred remains of a camp. She brought the group to the Greek Army camp, and she climbed out of the saddle once she was by the camp.

Several hoplites wound through the camp and approached the party. They helped with getting the horses from the hoplites as well as the Amazon visitors.

The Conqueror ordered her hoplites that'd been with her today to take a break. She then offered to Gabrielle and her Amazons a tour of the camp. She faintly smiled when the queen promptly replied with a yes. She started the tour through the camp, and she was satisfied to see that her hoplites were preparing for battle tomorrow. Their armor was well shined, their boots repaired, and sword being sharpened.

The Conqueror came to a stop when a particular, regal hoplite marched up to them. She greeted, "Bastien."

The chiliarchès bowed to his leader then focused on the Amazon Queen. He was relatively surprised by her small stature, but he waged it had nothing to do with how she ruled.

"This is my chiliarchès," Xena explained, "Bastien."

Queen Gabrielle stepped closer to the hoplite and held out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, commander."

"You as well, Queen Gabrielle." The chiliarchèse shook arms and had a bright smile.

Gabrielle decided Bastien was rather handsome, and he was most likely Xena's age or slightly older. "How long have you been in the army now?"

The chiliarchès placed his hands between his back and red cape. "For over twenty seasons." He peered up at his leader then back at Gabrielle. "I was conscripted from Corinth just after the city fell." He slightly grinned and added, "I have not regretted in joining the Conqueror since then."

The Conqueror had a small grin, and she clasped the hoplite's shoulder. "See that you don't ever, Bastien." She gave him a strong pat on his bronze shoulder. "Would you care to join us on the tour?"

"Of course, my liege I can spare a moment."

"Excellent." The Conqueror placed her hand between her cape and back. She continued the walk through the busy camp. At her left was Gabrielle and Bastien took her right side. She continued to explain her army's makeup and structure system.

Gabrielle carefully listened, and she finally questioned, "What is the specific rank of chiliarchès?"

The Conqueror glanced at her officer to answer the question himself.

Bastien smiled at the Amazon Queen. "The Conqueror is obviously the highest rank in the army. Just below her is the stratègos then next is a chiliarchès."

"A third in command," the bard concluded. "Is there more than one chiliarchès?"

"There is typically a chiliarchès for every thousand to five thousand hoplites," Bastien explained. "It depends on how large the unit is and how knowledgeable the chiliarchès may be."

"What is a unit of a thousand called?"

Bastien smiled at the queen's curiosity to understand the military system. "A unit of a thousand is called a chiliarchia."

Queen Gabrielle nodded a few times. "How long as Borias been stratègos?"

Bastien held his silence this time.

The Conqueror peered down at her friend and replied, "Since I began my campaign for Greece."

Gabrielle wasn't sure if she hit a spot or not with the ruler, but she felt like she'd done so. She gazed ahead and noticed they were coming out of the camp somewhat. She stopped walking when the Conqueror had done the same.

Faolan kept going, and he approached the wagons that had a few hoplites moving around it quickly. He carefully investigated it.

Behind the Conqueror and Gabrielle, the Amazons were chatting away and talking about the Greek Army. They were all quite fascinated by what they were learning, and many were taking mental notes to take back to the Nation.

"These three wagons contain one vincente."

Gabrielle absorbed the ruler's words. She shook her head some and peered up. "The siege weapon you invented?"

The Conqueror softly laughed and replied, "I did not invent it. I just learned how to use it." She gazed back at the hoplites that rushed around to finish packing the weapon. "Vincien?"

A hoplite broke away from the group after he gave a few more orders. He came over and bowed.

"Evening, my liege."

Xena held out her hand to the Amazon Queen. "This is Queen Gabrielle, Vincien."

The hoplite smiled at the newcomer and held out his arm for a shake. He warmly greeted, "Welcome to the Greek Army, Queen Gabrielle." He placed his hands behind his back and informed, "I am a hoplomachos in the Greek Army."

"Officer Vincien invented the siege weapon," the Conqueror explained. "It is why the weapon is named after him."

Queen Gabrielle leaned against her staff and studied the weapon. "I've heard it is quite impressive once it's assembled."

"Did it really bring down the Walls of Sparta?" Solari argued. She'd drifted closer.

Gabrielle chuckled at her nosy Amazon's question.

"It was the main reason why it was designed, " the hoplomachos replied to the Amazon.

Solari rested her hands on her hips, and she stared at the disassembled and packed siege weapon. "How long does it take to unpack it and assemble it?"

Vincien briefly glanced at the Conqueror for authorization to divulge such censored information.

The Conqueror faintly nodded at the hoplomachos.

"It takes three quarters of a candlemark to unpack, assemble, and prepare the weapon to fire a projectile," Vincien answered.

"Can bad weather slow you?" Queen Gabrielle tried.

The hoplomachos chuckled and nodded his head. "In that case, it can take at least a candlemark. I'm in the process of devising a way to speed it up though."

The bard smiled and argued, "I'm sure you will if you managed to develop such a weapon."

Vincien grinned a little. "Thank you." He then went more stoic. "I must return to work. Perhaps I will see you on the battlefield, Queen Gabrielle."

"Perhaps," the queen relented. She watched him go, but she gently called, "Fao."

The white wolf popped around the corner of a wagon then came over to his human friend.

"This way," Xena commanded.

The tour continued through the camp until it was too dark to do anymore. The Conqueror brought the group back to the center of the camp where all her hoplites were organized in a party like fashion. She told the Amazons they were welcomed to dine and drink with her men. Every Amazon warmly took the offer with the exception of Ephiny and Solari. They hesitated from leaving their queen.

"Go ahead," Gabrielle insisted to her friends.

Solari fiddled then argued, "My queen, we do have a duty to perform."

"And I also give the orders around here," the queen reminded.

Ephiny touched Solari's shoulder. "I'm sure the queen will get us if she needs something."

Gabrielle nodded at Ephiny's agreement, but she suggested, "We'll leave in a few candlemarks after everybody has eaten and rested. The ride back to the Nation will be at least two candlemarks."

Solari sighed and gave into the idea. "Yes, my queen." She then headed off with Ephiny.

The bard shook her head once her last two Amazons finally decided to relax. She peered up at her tall, dark friend. "They take things more seriously than others." She shrugged and further explained, "They've been my friends since I first came to the Nation." She didn't go into detail about Ephiny.

Xena folded her arms over her chest and remarked, "To have dedicated friends are important." She then decided to change the topic. "Are you hungry?"

"I think so," the bard agreed. She didn't dare admit she was just starving because she hadn't eaten since breakfast.

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at the petite blond. She lowered her voice and teased, "I know that monster in your stomach has not disappeared."

Gabrielle subconsciously put her freehand over her bare stomach. "Well..." She slightly blushed but finished, "I suppose some things never change."

Xena chuckled, touched the bard's shoulder, and guided her to where dinner was being served. "I suppose not." She glanced across the bard and spotted Faolan still with them. She planned to get him the right scraps that he'd love.

The ruler and queen each collected plates of food then found open stools along the circle of entertainment. Gabrielle was surprised that the army would celebrate prior to a battle and not afterwards. She considered what the purpose of it was, but she started to realize how the celebration seemed to lift her spirits. She decided it had something to do with that, and it was merely another form of ceremony.

After everybody mostly ate, the hoplites that were least armored began to dance together or sing. The atmosphere was lively and almost colorful from all the campfires. Many other hoplites cheered on or clapped too. Soon enough a particular Amazon joined into the festivities, and Gabrielle wasn't surprised it was Solari.

Gabrielle leaned forward and set her plate of scraps down in front of Faolan. She briefly pet him then straightened up. She leaned closer to Xena and inquired, "Do you always do this before battles?"

"Just about," the ruler replied. "Its become tradition that I started some time ago."

"Aren't you concerned about them drinking too much?" Gabrielle received a soft laugh from her friend first.

"Not at all." Xena glanced over at the container of wine that'd been recently brought out. "The wine has been heavily deluded with water." She then signaled the dancing and cheering hoplites. "By the time they're finished being so active, they've actually burned off the little bit of wine. But it does put them into good spirits before the battle."

Gabrielle had a smile that curled at her lips. She liked the idea that Xena had put together so long ago. She then lost her view when a large, burly man stepped in the way.

The Conqueror reclined her head some and grinned. "Prostig."

"Hey, kid," Prostig taunted. He then focused down on the small Amazon Queen. He folded his arms. "Were you planning to introduce me after all these seasons of hunting for a ghost, Xena?"

The Conqueror sighed, but she stretched out her legs. "I suppose so."

Gabrielle blinked and tried to figure out how this large, hulking man was allowed to call her friend by her first name. Everybody else in the army was quite formal. Plus she noted how he was dressed differently than hoplites, but still somewhat similar with bronze armor.

"Prostig, this is Gabrielle."

Prostig eyed the petite blond, and she looked far different than he ever expected. "It's good to meet you finally, Gabrielle."

The queen cleared her throat some then carefully remarked, "You sound as if you've known of me for some time."

Prostig folded his muscular arms over his chest. He chuckled and revealed a bright grin. "Xena hasn't been the only one looking under every stone to find you." He then focused back on the ruler. "I take it you didn't tell her about Tracker and I?"

"I hadn't gotten that far," Xena admitted.

Prostig grunted and dropped his arms. "Well, I'll leave you two to catch up." He moved away but remarked to Gabrielle, "I hope to see you again, Gabrielle."

The stunned bard could only nod and watched him go. She then turned to her friend. "Who was he? And who's Tracker?" She slotted her eyes at her friend.

The Conqueror wasn't bothered by the look. She did softly clear her throat then offered, "How about a walk?"

"You're trying to get out of my question," Gabrielle argued.

Xena gradually arched an eyebrow then scanned their surroundings, which was mostly hoplites. She then centered back on Gabrielle. "I'm not. I'm just inclined to have more privacy."

The queen became bashful once she realized the problem. She checked on Faolan, who was just finished with his meal. "Fao?"

The white wolf licked the plate one last time and peered up.

"Stay here and watch the Amazons for me."

Faolan poked out his tongue in absolute disgust. Was he some Amazon babysitter now?

"Please, Faolan," Gabrielle insisted.

The wolf inhaled deeply then released it dramatically. He turned his head away in defeat.

Gabrielle bent forward and kissed him on the head. "Thanks, boy." She climbed to her feet and collected her staff.

The Conqueror set the plate on her stool because she figured somebody would come around to clean up. She then directed the way out of the camp.

Queen Gabrielle strolled along side and took in the chilled night of the spring time. She truly felt it now

that they just came out of the camp and into the open.

Xena paused and surveyed the local terrain. She spotted the perfect area to go to so she started in that direction under the moon's guiding light. "Prostig and Tracker are old friends of mine. They use to be apart of Bracis's raiding party."

Gabrielle came to an abrupt stop and grabbed the ruler's arm. "The same warlord that attacked Potidaea?"

The Conqueror turned back to the bard, and she read the rising defenses in her friend. "Yes." She hesitated but explained, "One of the raiders in Bracis's army figured out Lyceus and I joined so we could find you and Lila. The raider killed Lyceus and almost had me, but Prostig and Tracker stopped him. They set me free and told me to take Lyceus home."

Gabrielle shook her head and tried to process what she'd learned. "What happened to the raider who killed Lyceus?"

The Conqueror flexed her jaw a few times then hoarsely replied, "I don't know." She turned back to her destination and continued up the valley's incline. "Tracker and Prostig have been at my side for many seasons. They've helped me search for you."

Gabrielle had dampened emotions because of Xena's nonstop efforts to find her. She couldn't believe she'd been this blind and willing to hide. She owed so much back to Xena after her mistaken decision.

Xena had hiked up the side of the valley and slowed down near the crest. She turned, and the camp lit up to her.

The bard also faced back at the camp, and she was surprised by the number of campfires. It was indeed an army that resided down in the valley.

The Conqueror said nothing and merely sat down.

Gabrielle followed suit, and she set her staff aside. She pulled her legs up and crossed them.

Xena mimicked the same position and fisted her hands in her lap.

"You know," the bard softly started, "when I stop and think about where we both are today compared to where we thought we would be... it just startles me." She shook her head and peered up at her friend. "We never saw any of this."

"No," Xena murmured.

Gabrielle leaned forward and grabbed at the grass in front of her. She pulled one blade at a time and tossed it while she spoke. "What I did was really stupid." She felt curious blue eyes on her, but she didn't meet them. "I shouldn't have hid from you for so long." She sighed and yanked a few blades harder than last time. "I just thought we've changed so much that we'd never be able to be friends again." She tossed another few blades. "I thought wrong."

The Conqueror had carefully listened, and she understood what Gabrielle was trying to say. For much of her life, Xena had envisioned finding a whipped and beaten slave girl, and a cruel master, who Xena would kill on the spot. Instead she'd discovered quite the opposite of the situation, and Xena was not at all prepared for it. She was still grasping the fact that Gabrielle was indeed a powerful Amazon Queen and an achieved bard.

"You're somewhat right," Xena finally said. She waited until curious green eyes were locked on her.

"We've both changed... a lot."

The Amazon Queen sighed and straightened up. She leaned back until her hands were behind her could hold her up. "I'm an Amazon Queen, and soon you'll be the ruler of Greece." She shook her head and grinned at her friend. "Not quite the Warrior Princess stories I had written in my scrolls as a kid."

Xena recalled those scrolls, and the nickname that Gabrielle had given her as a kid. She'd always debated how Lao Ma had picked that same exact name.

"And that's what's odd," Gabrielle brought up. "How did you manage to get that nickname anyway?" She shook her head. "Did you use it?"

The ruler slightly bowed her head then lifted it again. She gazed up at the stars. "No... I earned the name while I was in Chin."

"Chin?" Gabrielle grew wide eye. "The lands to the rising sun? You've been there?" At Xena's nod, she inhaled sharply. "By the gods." She pushed back her short hair and dropped her hand back to the ground. "Why were you there? How long?"

Xena sighed because she didn't want to face her past in front of her childhood friend. She didn't look at Gabrielle but kept studying the vivid stars. "I was there for eight seasons." She paused but softly added, "I went there to plunder Chin... to get lost in my anger."

Gabrielle could tell it was hard for Xena to bring it up. She sat up from her comfortable position and touched her friend's knee. "You don't have to tell me everything."

Xena lowered her head and stared at the small hand that rested on the top of her exposed knee. She turned to Gabrielle and whispered, "I will tell you everything... just not tonight." There was a gentle squeeze to her knee then Gabrielle's touch was gone.

Gabrielle wouldn't press the topic. She instead carefully asked about something else that'd been nagging in her mind for a long time. "What happened after the Romans captured your ship?" She shook her head. "There were rumors that you and your crew were crucified, but... you couldn't be alive now if it was true."

Xena pulled up old and angry memories and tried her best to explain what'd happened so long ago. "I was crucified." She saw the fear and upset that swelled over Gabrielle's face, but she continued to tell her aged story. "Before it happened, my men and I had captured a Roman nobleman."

"Julius Caesar," the bard murmured. "You ransomed him back to Rome."

"Yes." The Conqueror recalled that Gabrielle had read her journal and was fairly knowledgeable about her past as a pirate. "Caesar promised he'd return, and he did one day. He surprised both me and my men by capturing my ship. We were towed to the nearest shores where crosses were built."

Gabrielle felt her heart drop, and her imagination heard the banging of hammers against wood.

"I and my men were lashed to crosses along the shore. I was the last to be raised."

Gabrielle clenched her teeth, and she felt her anger return. She rarely became angry because she was mostly a tender soul. Yet it were moments like these that brought her anger up quite easily. She'd come to understand how she protective she could be over family, and she still saw Xena as family.

"Caesar then ordered for my legs to be broken." Xena held her silence for a beat. "But by nightfall, M'Lila showed up and freed me from the cross. She'd acquired a horse somehow and put me on it."

The bard remembered the slave from Gaul that'd been a runaway on Xena's ship. She waited for her friend to finish the dark story.

"I rode to a healer's home that wasn't too far. The healer, Niklio, took me in and reset my legs." Xena didn't want to explain just yet how her legs were fully healed by Lao Ma. She instead jumped to the last bit. "Several of Caesar's men tracked me down to Niklio's home. I killed all of them, and I swore to Hades I'd send many more."

Gabrielle slightly lowered her head and closed her eyes. She now understood what drove her friend to the hatred and darkness. She could see why everyday it was a struggle for Xena to walk the fine line between doing the right thing and the wrong thing. She imagined she too would fill with rage if a former lover captured her, crucified her, and finally broke her legs.

The bard peered up again. "I'm so sorry, Xena."

The Conqueror breathed deeply and slowly released it. "What happened between Caesar and I only made me strong." She swallowed down her anger and whispered, "That's all I'll ever thank him for."

"I know there's much more," Gabrielle murmured.

"There is," Xena agreed. She sadly smiled at her friend. "Later though."

The bard faintly nodded and tried to relax despite the new anger she felt. She wanted to meet this man that'd forever altered Xena. She could almost feel the desire to want him dead for it too, but she wouldn't give into it.

Gabrielle decided the best solution to changing the mood was to sit back. She rested in the grass, stretched out her legs, and tucked her hands under her head. She studied the beautiful stars.

Xena tilted her head back and studied them too.

The Amazon Queen chuckled and teased, "I only see the dipper."

The Conqueror rolled her eyes and stretched out her right hand. "The bear is right there." She traced the stars into an odd bear shape.

"What kind of bears have you seen?" the bard tormented. "That's more like a... rock."

Xena chuckled and peered down at her friend. "A rock?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "Well it has no real shape... like a rock."

"It's a bear," the ruler argued.

The bard revealed a smirk and teased, "I think you need to refresh your memory on what a bear looks like."

"Gods," Xena muttered in an irritated tone. She turned away from her friend and stared at the crescent moon above the horizon.

Gabrielle crossed her ankles and carefully asked, "Will you go to Amphipolis?"

Xena understood how the bard's implications. "Only to acquire it," she simply stated.

"The Delian League is there now," Gabrielle reminded. "What happens if the league refuses to let Amphipolis annex to Greece?"

"Then I will find some other means."

The bard decided not to push it any further. She instead went another route. "You should visit your mother, Xena."

The Conqueror didn't reply and pretended not to hear her friend.

"You two have to face each at some point."

"No we don't," the ruler snapped suddenly.

Gabrielle tried to remain cool headed. She then came up with another angle that would surely jar the ruler. "So you're going to pull my move huh? Just hide from your mother."

Xena clenched her hands and loosened them. "This is different."

"Not entirely," Gabrielle gently argued. She shifted on the ground some so she'd be more comfortable. "Xena, you haven't even met your nephew and niece." She quickly sat up. "Your nephew, Lyceus, he always asks about you. I'm constantly telling him stories about you and me... and Ly."

The ruler lowered her head some and fought not to reply.

"Now you have a three month old niece. She's as cute as a whip from what Cyrene has told me," the bard mentioned. "I heard she has your blue eyes."

Xena sighed deeply and gazed at her friend with hooded eyes.

Gabrielle felt like she may be winning Xena over now. "You can't deprive those kids because of what happened so long ago."

"Maybe after I'm done my campaign I will go," the ruler slightly relented.

The bard smiled because it was a start.

Xena glared at her friend because it always drove her wild how Gabrielle could easily win her. She tried very hard to resist Gabrielle's demands, but she seemed to end up agreeing anyway. "I hate how you do that."

"Sorta like how I do the Blame Game," the bard teased.

"Gods I really hate that one too." Xena huffed and shook her head. "Why did I befriend a bard?"

"You just couldn't resist me... how innocent and cute I am."

The Conqueror chuckled and taunted, "Not anymore so it must be something else."

Gabrielle covered her chest with her right hand. "I'm not cute?"

"Well you're certainly not innocent," Xena shot back.

"That didn't answer the question." Gabrielle evilly grinned.

"I'm still deciding." Xena chuckled at the bard's annoyed look. She always pulled out those words whenever she wanted to delay the truth from Gabrielle. "So, I noticed something interesting today." She stretched out her long legs then placed her hands behind her to prop her body up.

"What was that?"

The Conqueror crossed her legs at her ankles. "Looks like you still play the Boy Watching game."

The bard furrowed her eyebrows some. She tried to think about what her friend meant. She recalled the silly game that she'd do for candlemarks on end in the market with Xena. She then lit up like a candle once she figured out what Xena's reference meant. "Oooh you mean Tassos this afternoon." She laughed after reflecting back on the young Centaur that was so fascinated with her. "Yes, Tassos has his dreams."

Xena arched an eyebrow, but she waited to see if anymore secrets would be divulged. She was somewhat bemused.

"Actually," Gabrielle revealed faster than she was thinking, "I prefer to do Girl Watching." She slightly paled and peered up at Xena. She hastily tried to correct her miscalculation. "I mean... I..." She groaned and lifted a hand to the back of her neck. "That just didn't come out quite right," she muttered.

"Well," Xena thoroughly teased, "you wouldn't be a true Amazon otherwise."

The Amazon Queen slightly relaxed after the joke. But she seriously offered, "I'm sorry."

"You're fine." Xena shrugged and replied, "I suspected as much anyway."

Gabrielle curiously studied her friend.

Xena turned her head to the petite blond. "Gabrielle, don't tell me you forgot our teen crushes on each other?" She enjoyed the rising color on the bard's face.

"No, I didn't," the bard hastily argued, "but it... it was just a long time ago."

The Conqueror turned her stare back up to the stars. "Yes... yes, it was," she sadly murmured. She sensed that Gabrielle had relaxed since the earlier confession. "So, are you with any of your Amazons?"

"Oh you know me... I sleep with one Amazon a night." Gabrielle received a doubtful look, and she jokingly questioned, "Am I that obvious?"

"Only slightly."

Gabrielle had a silly smile, and she shrugged. "I was seeing an Amazon. We were together for a long time, but it just... it wasn't healthy for either of us." She now propped up her legs and rested her arms on top of her knees. "Especially for her. I haven't been with anybody since."

Xena remained silent for a moment. She realized this was the first time since her teens that she was sitting down and having a 'girl talk' as Gabrielle always called it. Unexpectedly a crooked smile shaped her full lips.

The bard peered up and caught the look. "What?" Xena's smile was contagious to Gabrielle.

"I haven't done this since..." Xena shook her head. "Since we were last together."

"The girl talk thing, you mean." Gabrielle chuckled and rested her chin on her arms. "I've hardly had a chance to do it myself." She then decided to keep going with the conversation but turned it back on Xena. "So when was your last time?"

The Conqueror blinked at the sudden question that would never be asked of her by anybody. Obviously she forgot that Gabrielle was the exception to the rule. "None of your damn business," she growled.

Gabrielle smirked, and a glow filled her eyes. She was not at all scared off by the minor threat. "It must

have been awhile with that kind of response."

Xena darkly glared at her friend. "It was a moon ago, thank you."

"I wasn't talking about your last cycle, Xena."

Xena suddenly became offended. "Neither was I," she snapped.

Gabrielle devilishly laughed and teased, "A whole moon? I don't believe it a bit."

"Whaaaat?" the ruler drew out in annoyance. "I wasn't the local wench around Amphipolis."

The bard laughed and reminded, "No that was Sybil if I recall right."

Xena groaned at the reminder of the girl, who was known for sleeping with any guy in Amphipolis.

"Are you serious?" Gabrielle tried again. "Come on, I've even heard of the sexual exploits of the Warrior Princess."

The Conqueror slotted her eyes then sharply stated, "They're slightly blown out of proportion."

"Slightly?" The bard tilted her head and smirked. "So which parts are true? If it's not the part about how often then maybe it's the part about how it's done."

"Gabrielle," the ruler hissed.

Gabrielle laughed now that she'd hit the Roman nail on the head. She shook her head and buried her face into her arms. "Oh gods, Xena." She lifted her head and revealed her reddened face from the laughing. "If it's any consolation, I haven't had sex for almost four seasons now." She enjoyed the raised eyebrow, but she now flopped back into the grass with a huge smile.

The Conqueror shook her head a few times. "Enjoyed yourself, didn't you?"

"Hmmm." The bard tucked her hands under her head again. "I'm sure it's not everyday the Conqueror is thrown for a loop."

Xena softly grumbled and decided to hold her peace. She didn't mind though that Gabrielle had talked about it. She realized just how different her relationship with Gabrielle would be compared to anybody else in her life. Gabrielle was the only person that had insight to her true nature because they grew up together. That gave Gabrielle instant leverage that nobody else could gain.

"So dare I ask who was your last bedmate?" the bard taunted.

"You're pushing your luck, Gabrielle," Xena fairly warned.

Gabrielle chuckled and kept her smile in place. Gods she was amazed by how great she felt just from talking to Xena again.

The ruler glanced over her shoulder and studied Gabrielle's wound. "How does it feel?"

The bard looked at her shoulder too and shrugged. "It needs to be redressed soon." She moved her shoulder some, but the pain sharply spoke to her. "Still sore though."

Xena was worried about that especially since Gabrielle would be going into the battle already injured. She didn't much like it. "You'll need to be careful tomorrow."

"I will be," the Amazon Queen promised.

"You're going to be at an extra disadvantage."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes some then argued, "Xena, we're not kids anymore. I know where my weaknesses lie."

Xena couldn't resist her protective streak that she'd had ever since she befriended Gabrielle. She sighed and reminded, "And you know I won't stop protecting you."

The bard flexed her jaw a few times then honestly stated, "I don't need somebody to protect me anymore."

The Conqueror tilted her head and mocked, "Obviously." She indicated the wounded shoulder.

"Oh, I'm sure you've never been injured during a fight," Gabrielle debated. Her anger was sparked and not directly at Xena but the protective speech reminded her too much of past conversations such as with Melosa and Draco.

"That's different," the ruler fought back.

The queen swiftly sat up and slightly turned her body to the ruler. "Listen, I've been doing just fine taking care of myself all this time without you. I have been trained to be an Amazon warrior so I do know what I'm doing."

Xena now sat up too, and she easily matched Gabrielle's temper. "And you never listen to me when you should do it."

"That's because you're not always right," the bard leaned in closer. "You do happen to be wrong once and awhile."

"Hardly," Xena hissed, "I'm always right about you."

Gabrielle darkened and mocked, "I'm sure you just had me pegged this time. You probably thought I was some cowering slave, who was waiting for her hero to show up."

Xena refused to be baited. "Just listen to me this time, Gabrielle."

The bard fumed because there was no way she would stand behind her Amazons instead of beside them during the battle. "Why can't you listen to me for once?"

"Why you have to be so stubborn?" the Conqueror loudly questioned.

"Why you have to be so pigheaded?" Gabrielle hotly fought back.

Xena grounded her teeth, leaned in, and growled, "You never listen."

"You," the bard angrily drew out, "never... listen." She then prepared her next fighting words.

The Conqueror saw it coming, and she suddenly closed in the small gap. She covered Gabrielle's parting lips with hers, and Gabrielle briefly fought against her.

Gabrielle gave into the furious kiss, and she raised her hand. She soon had her fingers tangled in long, black locks. She moaned from the inflamed passion.

Xena kept up in the domination match. She pushed her body forward against Gabrielle's.

The bard finally gave into a demand, and she laid back on the ground. She didn't break the hungry kiss, and she groaned when Xena was over top of her. Then there was a warm hand against her right side.

Xena briefly pulled away from the kiss because she needed a breath. She then was forced into a second kiss by Gabrielle's pull. She eagerly met it.

Gabrielle moaned louder than last time, and she was starting to lose her better senses. She wanted badly not to care about her responsibilities as an Amazon Queen. Just before she decided she was going to ignore them, she felt Xena stiffened and abruptly end the kiss. Gabrielle now realized how frantic her heart pounded against her chest.

The Conqueror turned her head to the left and from the corner of her eye she saw the outline of another person. She instantly recognized the silhouette, and she hotly demanded, "What is it, Bastien?"

The chiliarchès thought about escaping quietly after he figured out what scene he'd walked into, again. He knew it was useless now that the Conqueror spotted him. "We're about to begin the tsamiko, my liege."

The Conqueror cursed herself because she knew the traditional dance could not be performed without her. She chided herself for being the one to start this tradition in her army. She shut her eyes deeply and carefully replied, "I'll be there in a few beats, Bastien." She now felt a small hand against her cheek that gently ebbed her annoyance.

"Thank you, my liege." The chiliarchès decided it was best to leave now. He hastily marched back to camp and sighed in relief that he wasn't beheaded or worse.

Xena turned back to her current situation, and she felt awkward suddenly. In the heat of the fight, she'd taken control of the situation the way her body wanted to do it. She began to feel aggravated at herself for giving into her darker desires.

"Gabrielle, I..."

Gabrielle had set aside her passions once she realized the dilemma at hand. She traced her fingertips across Xena's cheek and covered Xena's lips with her fingertips. "Don't apologize for something we both wanted."

Xena realized that her friend did indeed speak the truth. She wanted Gabrielle just as Gabrielle wanted her in return. She wasn't sure though if she wanted to accept that facet so soon. "I think we're getting ahead of ourselves."

"Maybe... maybe not," Gabrielle murmured. She pulled her hand away and offered, "We'll talk about it later."

The Conqueror consented by only nodding.

"Come on." Gabrielle started to get up and so did Xena. She let Xena get to her feet first, then she got up too but grabbed her staff. She neatened up her hair some and hoped there was no grass caught in it. "So what is the tsamiko?" She hoped the change of topic would help.

The ruler had gain some control back. She started the walk down the hill. "It's a warrior's dance that I've instated for every unit to impose before battle. It's sort of a good luck dance, and the hoplites are very superstitious about it."

Gabrielle could appreciate that idea. She was starting to realize the type of culture that Xena had harvested in her army over the seasons. The army seemed to be bonded closer than any normal army, and she decided that was what gave Xena's army an edge over many.

"Why do they need you there?"

The Conqueror slightly grinned. "There is one part of the dance that only I perform if I'm present. It includes several back flips."

Gabrielle lit up at the information. "I have got to see this." Suddenly her pace picked up.

Xena chuckled and smiled at her friend's newly inspired reason to hurry. She widened her gate and easily stayed at the excited bard's side.

"There's so much you have to teach me so I can fight better," Gabrielle insisted.

The Conqueror smirked and chided, "I thought you said you were well trained, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle quickly figured out the joke. She growled and brought her freehand at her friend's leather stomach to smack her hard. She was surprised when Xena caught her by the wrist, and she glared up at her cocky friend. "The was pure luck."

Xena released Gabrielle's wrist and remained smug. "No, that's the difference between Amazon training and real training."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes at Xena's arrogant words and tone. "Just you wait."

The Conqueror chuckled and held her tongue this time. She knew her smug attitude was plenty enough to annoy Gabrielle to no end. Gods she almost forgot how much she loved to egg on Gabrielle until they were almost into heated fights. Now she just didn't expect this sudden lust or passion that coated the fights between them. Xena had no idea where it could lead them, but it left a worry sensation in the bottom of her stomach. She hoped for once that Gabrielle was right about her being wrong.

To be continued.