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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 5

The Amazon Princess, Gabrielle, was close to self destruction. She wanted more than anything to shake the queen until all the stubbornness fell out of the queen. Why couldn't Melosa just listen to her for once?

The princess slammed her hut door and ripped her mask from her head.

Faolan had almost caught his tail in the door. He moved away from Gabrielle and took a seat in front of the quiet fireplace. He watched his friend try to get her frustrations out in the open.

"Why is she so pigheaded, Faolan?" Gabrielle tossed her mask on the desk and propped her staff against the wall. "I should have just stayed in Amphipolis if I'd known she was going to do this." She threw up her arms. "What's the point of me doing this if she's just going to reject my ideas?" She shook her head and bowed it.

Faolan released a sigh because he hated to see his friend this way. It was happening far too much lately and thanks to that grouchy Amazon that tried to throw her power around. He often wanted to bite that grouchy Amazon right in her leather butt.

The bard took a deep, calming breath and whispered, "I understand the Centaurs killed Terreis, but that was so long ago." She took another deep breath. "I'd be mad too if my sister was killed by them." She exhaled very slowly. "I'd want to rip them apart too." She looked over at Faolan. "Then I'd remember that my entire Nation depended on my choices, and I'd wise up."

Faolan nodded his head a few times then thumped his tail once.

"If she just set aside her anger then she could see how the Nation could benefit from the Centaurs." Gabrielle walked over to her desk and sat in the chair. "Most of the Amazons realize the fighting has to stop... why won't Melosa figure that out?"

Faolan huffed and walked over to Gabrielle. He sat down and sadly peered up at his distraught friend.

"What am I going to do, Faolan?" Gabrielle slumped in her chair. "I don't want the Amazons to go to war against the Centaurs and now this warlord." She considered that tomorrow she would be meeting this warlord. She had talks setup with Draco, and she doubted she'd convince him not to attack her Nation. She'd also been told that Draco wanted to take on the Conqueror. She knew it would be a slaughter... for Draco unless he had something up his gauntlet.

A knock at the door stole Gabrielle's thoughts away, and she called, "Come in." Gabrielle smiled when the shaman, Yakut, entered her hut.

"Hello, princess." Yakut mirrored the bard's smile. She really hadn't caught up with the princess since the princess left for her vacation, and Yakut had been busy since the princess's return two days ago.

"Yakut, please just call me Gabrielle."

The shaman dipped her head and stood in front of the closed door. "How are you, Gabrielle?" She already read the stress lines in and around the princess.

"I'm okay." Gabrielle petted the wolf while she spoke. "Things don't fair well with the Centaurs."

"So I've heard," Yakut agreed.

The princess held out her hand to the right and pointed at a chair. "Sit down, Yakut." While the shaman collected a chair from the round table, she asked, "How are things for you?"

"Very busy," the shaman admitted. She placed the chair near the bard and wolf then she sat down. "I've learned much, but I have a lot to still learn."

"Well let's hope you'll still have the chance after this war." Gabrielle shook her head and stared down at Faolan. "You may want to think about going back to the Thrace Nation."

Yakut laced her hands in her lap and considered the princess's thoughts. "It's not where I'm needed right now, Gabrielle." She smiled at the bard's concerned features that were on her.

"You don't happen to know any spells that would make the queen agree to an alliance with the Centaurs?"

Yakut knew it was a joke so she softly laughed. "I'm afraid not, Gabrielle." She cocked her head to the side. "Have you met the warlord?"

The princess sighed and tried to get comfortable in her chair. She suspected this would be a long visit with Yakut, which she didn't mind. Gabrielle didn't feel up to thinking out the current problems of the Naiton. "I meet with him tomorrow."

"I hope it goes well." Yakut, like Gabrielle, doubted it would otherwise the warlord wouldn't be here. She then changed topics and asked, "How was your vacation?"

"It was nice to get away," the bard admitted. "I went to see family."

The shaman's curiosity was highly peaked, and her eyes grew bright. "Where's your family live?"

Gabrielle was uneasy, but she trusted Yakut for some reason. She didn't understand why, yet something in Yakut made Gabrielle feel okay. She didn't often feel that way about many people. "My family is kind of spread out. My grandfather lives near Articia, my home is Potidaea, and my other family is in Amphipolis."

The shaman immediately recognized Amphipolis and not simply because it was in the Thrace Providence but because it was Xena's hometown. "What family lives in Amphipolis?"

Gabrielle was curious why the shaman had selected Amphipolis out of the three towns. She went with it though and replied, "My extended family really." She shrugged.

Yakut remained passive and tried not to overly intrude, but it was hard. She didn't know all of Gabrielle's history, but she had pieces thanks to her investigation of Xena's life. She decided to prod Gabrielle and see how comfortable the bard would be with her. "I have a friend from Amphipolis."

Gabrielle perked at the news and became a bit more excited. "Really? What's the name?"

Yakut waited a beat as she struggled whether to say Xena's name, but she had to do this. She had to be honest with Gabrielle, not just because she liked the bard so much, but it was her nature. "Xena." Yakut never thought she'd seen somebody become so pale in her life. She watched the life drain out of Gabrielle.

The bard lowered her head so that her face was hidden. "Xena... you mean the Conqueror?" She lifted her head slowly and challenged, "You're a shaman, Yakut... so you probably know more than you're leading on."

The shaman faintly nodded, and she had a dim expression. "Xena is my friend," she offered, "and I know you two were close when you were younger."

The Amazon Princess swallowed. She was slightly nervous as she played with her hands. "It was a long time ago, Yakut." She tilted her head. "How did you meet Xena?"

The shaman licked her lips then leaned back in her chair. She wanted to be comfortable for this long story. "I met Xena over eight seasons ago. She came to the Thrace Nation looking to take us over."

Gabrielle brushed her hair back. She could tell this would be a dark story about her lost friend, but she prayed it had a better ending. She leaned against the side of her chair and carefully listened to Yakut's details.

Yakut explained everything, and she left no details out. She knew Gabrielle needed to hear the truth even though some parts would be hard. She finally wound it down to how Alti had been killed by the warlord, and that Xena disappeared from the Thrace Providence.

Gabrielle released a deep breath and felt relief come over her. If that evil shaman had manipulated Xena to no end, then the gods would only know where Greece would be today. From what Yakut told her, it sounded as if Gabrielle's memory was the last rope that held Xena back from the darkness. Gabrielle couldn't imagine exactly what had darkened Xena so much over the seasons, but she knew her kidnapping and enslavement were probably a fine start.

"Why haven't you gone to her, Gabrielle?" Yakut's voice was soft, gentle. She didn't want to be pushy because she knew Gabrielle was having a hard time with a lot of it.

The bard shook her head. "I'm afraid of what Xena will think of me. I'm afraid she may reject me. She's changed so much, and I have too." She desperately searched Yakut's face for help. "What can I tell her that'll make her understand why I've been hiding all this time?"

Yakut carefully considered the question and dipped her head some. "Xena dedicated much of her time to finding you, Gabrielle." She met the bard's eyes. "I can't think of many people that would have done what she's done." She leaned forward slightly. "Now that I have met you both, I can see what pulls you two together."

Gabrielle was confused, and she shook her head.

"There's a bond between you both." Yakut tilted her head. "The bond isn't exactly a solid promise that you and Xena will be in each other's lives. But the bond is a representation of how close you two can become... if its nurtured."

"How can you tell this?" Gabrielle urged, "Through your two-spirit?"

"Yes, my two-spirit allows me to see past your skin and even your heart." The shaman relaxed back in her chair. "A person's soul is like a tapestry... they form a picture through the lifetimes." She slightly grinned and informed, "Yours has a very large picture... your soul is older than most. Xena's is much the same way... even mine is the same way."

The bard had dark eyes, which meant her interests were deepened by the conversation. She concentrated carefully on each of Yakut's words.

"When two people meet," Yakut explained, "their souls might mesh together, and they might not. In some cases, the meshing is better than with others. In Xena and your case, your souls fit very well. Have you ever noticed how weaving can be done with different techniques?"

Gabrielle nodded. "There are stitch types and such." She wasn't an expert in the art form, but she'd watched her mother in the past.

"Exactly. Well, if yours are compared to Xena's then you both have matching stitches. Since you have this feature then it is much easier for your souls to combine."

The bard stared in fascination at the shaman. "So, it would be like taking to separate pieces of tapestries then joining them at the ends?"

"Yes." Yakut smiled now that Gabrielle had the idea. "That's exactly how souls can work. However if two tapestries are woven together, and they're not cared for they can unravel."

This made plenty of sense to Gabrielle since people could change so greatly over time. She wondered if a soul's stitching could change too?

The shaman waited a few beats then mentioned, "I wouldn't be so concerned about whether or not you and Xena will connect again." She saw the bard's curiosity so she simply explained, "You will connect, but you should be worried about how you will connect." She slightly grinned, which caused Gabrielle to tense. "When I met Xena she was quite headstrong. It would seem you've aged that way too. I would imagine you both will continue in that direction."

The princess thought back on Xena's mentality during their childhood. She chuckled because it didn't surprise her in the least that Xena had become more stubborn. "I suppose it takes a headstrong person to conquer Greece."

"I suspect so," the shaman agreed, "but it's possible you two will butt heads."

The bard sighed and muttered, "Let's hope not too hard." She brushed her bangs back on her head, and they just fell back. "Xena will be angry with me when she finds out I could have contacted her sooner, and I never did."

"You could send word to her now," Yakut suggested. "She would help the Nation stop Draco."

The princess dipped her head and thought it out carefully. She knew Xena probably would do just that, but Gabrielle didn't like the idea of depending on Xena to fight the Nation's battles. She faintly shook her head and stated, "The Amazons need to stand up to their own problems."

The shaman was a mix of pride and worry. She prayed that Gabrielle would know when to give in and ask for help.

"Besides," Gabrielle continued, "Xena will surely hear word of the warlord. As soon as she does-"

"She'll be here," Yakut softly concluded. "She can't resist a challenge."

"Xena never could," the princess murmured. She then picked up on another angle and mentioned, "Besides that, I don't think it would be wise for me to contact her like this. I prefer to meet her in person... and I can't leave the Nation until this is settled."

Yakut's eyes held the bard's staring gaze. "The Fates will collide soon, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle sighed at the shaman's prediction. "Well Yakut, you're not an oracle... yet." She grinned at the shaman.

Yakut could tell the bard was trying to relax now. She mirrored the grin and offered, "Are you hungry? It is almost sunset."

"Hades," the bard muttered while getting to her feet. "We better go."

Faolan jumped to his feet at hearing the human word for food. It was one of the few words in his vocabulary.

The group exited the hut and hurried across the village to the dining hut. The dinner had been mostly quiet thanks to the ongoing problems. Queen Melosa and Commander Kaylee didn't even join for dinner, which was a bad sign. They were most likely plotting out future plans to handle the Centaurs and the warlord. Gabrielle sent a prayer to Artemis that she could jump in front of the pending war and stop it without getting trampled. She would do anything to stop this war from destroying her Nation.

Yakut and Gabrielle visited with Gabrielle's friends at the usual meeting table in the dining hut. Faolan actually had his dinner early when Gabrielle ate at the head table. He busied with another bone, which had been hollowed out and feta cheese stuffed in it for him. He desperately tried to work his tongue into the bone's hollow center for the feta, but it would take him candlemarks.

The biggest talk at the table was the problems of the Nation and Solari's gossip. Solari kept quizzing the princess to find out what her strategy was for tomorrow. Gabrielle wouldn't reveal what she planned to do or say to the warlord. She simply stated that she planned to make this all work out, and the young Amazons tried to calculate just how true Gabrielle's promise was.

Andra was the only Amazon that understood that her blood sister was truly serious. The blacksmith could only guess what challenges would face the young princess, but she knew Gabrielle had a lot of strength and loyalty behind her. Despite Andra hadn't been an Amazon as long as most, she'd noticed that over the seasons many Amazons, young and old, now highly respected the princess. She suspected that Gabrielle's word weighed more than Melosa's.

Eventually, the friends broke apart and started to head their separate ways. Gabrielle escorted Yakut back to her guest hut then Gabrielle and Faolan went towards their hut for the evening. The bard got to the door, stopped, and looked down at her friend. She quietly asked the wolf if he felt up to a walk.

Faolan dropped his bone by the door then walked several paces away, hesitated, and questioningly peered up at his human friend.

The princess smiled and followed along side the wolf. She led the way out of the village and into the dark woods. She easily knew her way anymore after becoming so familiar with these woods. Her and Faolan's wondering finally took them to the Great Oak. The wolf sat beside the tree and studied the huge tree that he was quite familiar with, and it was the only tree he respected.

Gabrielle stepped up to the old, wise tree. She lifted her hands and placed them both on the tree's thick trunk. She dropped her head back and gazed up at the branches that were budding with leaves. She knew that this tree was the first to bud any leaves in the forest. It was as if all the other trees waited for the Great Oak's signal that spring was official.

Faolan glanced at his friend then back at the old tree. "Rrrr," he murmured.

The bard didn't respond to the wolf. She instead closed her eyes and mentally spoke to the tree that she'd come to during troubled times. She received no answers to her question or any comments, but she did feel at ease again.

Gabrielle always felt more at peace whenever she visited the Great Oak. She loved this tree just like any other Amazon of the village. Gradually the bard's rampant thoughts and prayers receded like the tide, and she opened her eyes.

Faolan sniffed and peered up at Gabrielle again.

The princess smiled down at the wolf. "Are you ready?"

"Rrrruh."

Gabrielle crinkled up her nose and felt much better. She scraped her hands over the bark of the tree, then she turned away. She and her furry friend made the slow journey back to the village. When they arrived at the gates, Gabrielle made sure to call up a good evening to the Amazon on duty. She received a response back as she walked past.

It wasn't long after that Gabrielle and Faolan entered the hut and ready for bed. Gabrielle slept hard for the first half of the night until she woke up. She then tried to get in a few more candlemarks before dawn came, but she started to worry about her meeting with Draco. She couldn't stop thinking about what she'd say to him and how she'd handle him.

The night didn't last much longer, and Helios awoke the world once again. The Amazon Nation buzzed with busy work to carry out the preparations for war. Gabrielle though busied with trying to bring peace, but she had that sinking feeling anyway. Queen Melosa selected six competent Amazons to escort the bard to the meeting spot with Draco.

When it was Helios high, the princess, her escorts, and Faolan arrived at the meeting spot. The spot had been carefully selected out in the open, away from trees, and out of Amazon territory but not too close to the warlord's camp.

Gabrielle remained on Torqueo, and she didn't order her Amazons off the horses either. She didn't find the warlord in the meeting spot. She worried that it was a trick or he'd changed his mind.

"There," Eponin called. She pointed straight ahead.

The princess squinted and spotted the six horses coming at a gallop. She decided it was time to get ready so she freed her staff from her saddlebags. She fidgeted with her mask on her head but she left it in place. She then touched her sword's pommel behind her back.

The weapons master noted how nervous the princess was about the meeting but that was to be expected.

Andra glanced over at Eponin, yet she held her tongue. She adjusted the reins in her hands and watched the riders near them.

The six riders were upon the Amazons, and they slowed into a trot. They finally stopped when they were a hundred paces in front of the Amazons.

"Dismount," ordered a male voice from the rear.

Princess Gabrielle glanced back at her escort and ordered, "Dismount." She followed her own order and gracefully came out of the saddle. She adjusted her staff in her right hand, which allowed for her Amazons to surround her. Gabrielle then stepped in front of the horses and waited for the warlord to bring himself forward. She also noted how Faolan stood at her right side but slightly in front of her.

The enemy was composed of four male warriors, who were rough looking. Then in the center stood a leather clad woman, who was beautiful but had some odd particulars about her.

Gabrielle couldn't help but stare at the woman. She was baffled by what seemed to be metal or similar that was attached to the woman's skin. And when she gazed into the woman's blue eyes she swore they were ice and lifeless. It made Gabrielle's skin crawl.

The princess's attention was ripped from the woman when a man pushed between the warriors and took the spot before them.

The warlord, Draco, stood in front of the Amazons, and he smiled broadly at the front Amazon's dumbstruck face. He instantly recognized the small, young blond. He laughed deeply, and his voice was dangerous. "It's been a long time, Gabrielle."

Eponin tensed when the warlord immediately knew the princess's name. She caught Gabrielle's stricken

profile.

The princess inhaled sharply, shook her head, and whispered, "Dan?"

Draco chuckled and put his hands on his large belt. "You haven't forgotten. I'm honored, Gabrielle... truly."

The bard felt her heart go frantic when she realized Draco was actually Dan of Amphipolis. She couldn't believe the boy that'd beaten her up was now the warlord attacking her Nation.

"Speechless are we?" Draco taunted. "I never thought you'd run out of words." He chuckled and his dark eyes grew bright with excitement.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth and reined over her childhood fears. "What do you want, Dan?"

"Draco," the warlord corrected. He then smiled and darkly teased, "I thought we could have a reunion." He then lost his smile, tilted his head, and further taunted, "But somebody is missing." He pretended to scan around the open area then he lifted his right index finger. "Wait. I know who it is."

Andra glanced over at the weapons master.

Eponin trade a quick look, but she tried not to takeover the conversation that obviously had thrown Gabrielle off track.

"Xeeena," the warlord drew out darkly. He stepped closer to the princess, but the Amazons reacted by drawing swords. He chuckled and held up his hands. "Touchy, touchy."

Faolan had his ears back, and he bared his teeth.

The princess shook her head and dared to ask the question. "What's Xena have to do with this?"

Draco grinned and stepped back which made Faolan hide his teeth. "Everything, Gabrielle." He folded his muscular arms over his broad chest. "I'm sure you've heard the news that she's moving north now."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes and tried to guess where this conversation was headed.

"Soon she'll be the ruler of Greece," Draco theorized, "and not everybody likes that idea." He glanced back at his comrades. "Right, boys?"

The four warriors chuckled and agreed with their leader. The strange woman, however, remained silent and still like she was a statue.

Draco turned back to the bard. "I kind of like the idea where Xena takes over Greece, then I kill her." He smirked, and his eyes lit up. "I'm the ruler, and we all live happily ever after."

Gabrielle was already disgusted with the warlord. It didn't surprise her in the least that the former bully still wanted to outdo Xena. "Then you obviously didn't come here for talks."

Draco laughed and placed his hand on his hip but rested his other hand on his sword hilt. "Oh no, I came for talks, Gabrielle." He cocked his head. "The terms are very simple."

Gabrielle grounded her teeth when she knew this was sinking faster than quick sand.

"The terms," Draco started, "are that you can hand yourself over to me, Gabrielle, and I'll leave your Nation in peace. Or you don't, and I will wipe your little Nation off this Earth. And I'll have you anyway."

Faolan growled at the warlord and stepped closer to him.

Draco peered down at the white wolf. "You just collect little protectors all over," he jested and added, "You never could protect yourself, Gabrielle." He lifted his dark eyes to the bard.

"Faolan," Gabrielle softly called and was relieved when he stepped back to her side. She felt her anger bubble to the top at Draco's earlier words. Yet she figured out what his purpose was in being here. "You want me for a shield against Xena."

Draco's grin widened, and he was quite happy Gabrielle realized his plans. "You have always been Xena's most fatal flaw."

The princess felt her lips curling into a snarl from her rising anger. She tried to cap it off as best as she could. "How did you find me?"

The warlord was excited about the question, and his voice threaded with amusement. "Isn't it ironic that I've found you while your precious Xena could never do it." He laughed at the bard's darkening face. He then simply revealed, "It's amazing how useful that slavers' list is... so easy to get." He arched a dark eyebrow and softly added, "I know how kind Cornelio of Articia has been to you." He licked his lips. "It would be a sad day if he, his wife, and daughter-in-law accidentally died from the house being on fire."

"Don't you dare," Gabrielle snarled. She raised her staff.

Eponin reached over and touched the princess's shoulder to ease her. She hoped it would be enough.

"You bastard," the bard snapped.

"We're under the white flag," the blacksmith simply state aloud to all. She prayed the reminder would bring Gabrielle out of her angry haze. Andra knew they needed the princess to be clearly thinking.

Princess Gabrielle swallowed down her rage at Andra's harsh reminder. She was the princess and diplomat for Artemis's sake. She lowered her staff, but she still tightly gripped it. She lifted her chin and coldly stated, "I've told you once before, and I'm telling you again, Draco. I don't play hostage well in these games."

Draco puckered his lips sum then inhaled deeply. "Well..." He released his breath and patted his belt. "I was hoping you'd say that."

The Amazon Princess knew that there was no backing away from this fight. She hated that her Nation was at stake, but so was the Nation's honor. "The Amazon Nation will not submit to your terms." She knew it was true because the queen and council would refuse. "We will meet you in battle."

Draco was not at all deterred, but he was ecstatic in fact. This actually infuriated the princess, and Draco knew it. "Well I'm sure the Centaurs and my army will have little trouble destroying your weak Nation."

"You can't defeat us," the bard shot back. "Even if you meet us on the field, the Conqueror will be here in time."

The warlord suddenly laughed and shook his head. "Oooh, Gabrielle... you're still dependent on Xena to fight your battles." He had a broad smirk and taunted, "Let's hope your silence after all these seasons won't stab you in the back now."

"She'll stop you for Greece... not for me," the princess hotly reminded. "You can't defeat her. We all

know how large her army is." She shook her head and challenged, "What makes you even think you could stop her?"

"I'm so glad you asked," Draco drew it in a dangerous voice. He took a side step. "I've been given a gift from Ares."

Gabrielle's face dropped. "The God of War?"

Draco showed his teeth in a grin. "It seems Ares has been quite disgusted with Xena's honorable fight to conquer Greece." He then turned his head to the left and held out his hand to the eerie woman. "Amazons, please meet your demise. This is Seven... an automaton."

The bard blinked and stared at the very tall blond, who had her hair back and displayed a healthy amount of muscles.

The eerie woman, Seven, stared at the Amazons and said nothing. The only movement she showed was the steady rise and fall of her chest.

"Seven isn't as talkative as you, Gabrielle. I apologize," Draco joked. He then lowered his hand to his side. "Seven is a prototype automaton... a successful one too." He folded his arms over his chest then continued his rant. "She has been injected with steel by Hephaestus so that her bones are unbreakable. Ares then blessed her with the strength of ten men and the fighting skills of ten warriors. She is the perfect warrior."

The Amazons were horrified by what they'd been told. This automaton seemed so inhuman, yet she was alive and breathing. Was this woman once human before the gods took her?

"And as soon as I defeat you," Draco informed, "Ares has promised me a legion of automatons." He then laughed and filled the silence with his amused voice. "The best part is that the automatons only respond to my orders."

Gabrielle now understood that this transformed woman was basically a zombie to Draco's will. She couldn't believe it. "You're sick, Draco."

"Thank you," the warlord replied. "I try." He then rubbed his hand over his goatee. "But you do see how it's impossible for me to lose." He shook his head and advised, "You mind as well save the heartache, Gabrielle and come with me." He then offered his hand to the princess.

"Never," Andra spoke up hotly. She stepped in front of her blood sister. "You'll have to go through me to take her."

Draco dropped his hand, but he kept his cold eyes on the bard.

Gabrielle clenched her jaw as she debated whether to hand herself over to stop the war before it started.

"We will defeat you," Eponin spoke up next. "Go back to your worthless army."

Draco narrowed his eyes at the older Amazon at Gabrielle's right side. He gazed back down at Gabrielle. "Is that what you wish, Gabrielle? Is your life worth all these Amazons'? Your sisters' lives?"

"Yes," the angry blacksmith remarked.

The warlord ignored it though and held his hand back out to Gabrielle. "You take my hand, Gabrielle and they will live. Its so simple."

Gabrielle swallowed down her mix of emotions. She tried to remain rational and think out the right answer. She then briefly glanced up at the eerie warrior, who seemed like some internally caged woman. She actually felt her heart go out to Seven.

"Come with me, Gabrielle," Draco coaxed one last time.

Princess Gabrielle centered her attention on the dark warlord. She held her head high then defiantly declared, "Never, Draco."

The bemused warlord's hand fell, and he stated, "I will see you on the battlefield soon." He turned and ordered his men to mount the horses. He was on his horse while his warriors moved their horses behind him. Draco turned his horse sideways to the standing Amazons. He focused on the princess. "Good luck, Little Bri." He spurred his horse and took off with his comrades.

Once the enemy was far enough, Gabrielle dropped her head and touched her pounding brow.

Andra quickly turned to her blood sister. "Gabrielle?"

"Please," the princess whispered, "I can't... right now." She lifted her head and ordered everybody to mount. "Let's get back to the village." She went to Torqueo, strapped her staff down, and quickly mounted.

Faolan backed away from the chestnut horse that his friend rode. He sensed that Gabrielle was very upset, and he was too. He didn't like that funny smelling man, who had threatened his friend. He truly wanted to bite that man in the butt more than the Amazon Queen. Faolan took off at a run when the cantering horses headed back for the village. It was easy for him to keep up unlike many wolves could eventually fall behind horses.

During the ride back, Gabrielle's head started to clear out finally. She set her anger aside as she recalled her rant to Faolan last night about the queen's own anger. She needed a clear head so that she could protect her Nation from Draco. As the village grew closer, the princess started to develop a plan to handle Draco and even that strange woman, Seven. She just hoped Artemis would be listening to her hopes and prayers.

The Amazon party raced into the village and went to the stables. They dismounted there and walked their horses inside to untack them. Faolan paused outside of the stables and took healthy laps from the water bucket by the entrance. He then followed in to find Gabrielle.

The princess promised Torqueo that she'd come back tonight to brush him down and put him back in the corral. Right now she needed to report to the queen. She and Faolan hurried across the village and went into the central hut that had several offices. She went down to the queen's, knocked, and was called to enter. She let Faolan slip past first then she came in next.

"How did it go?" Queen Melosa instantly asked.

Gabrielle didn't bother to sit because she was too stirred up. "Not well, my queen." She folded her arms over her chest. "The warlord, Draco, is somebody I know." She waited a beat and saw how the queen's dark features lifted from the scroll to meet her. "He wants me, personally, so that he can use me against the Conqueror." She tried to prepare herself about what she was going to reveal to the queen. She knew she had to because those other Amazons also knew now. The word would spread like Greek fire throughout the village.

Queen Melosa set her quill into the inkwell then leaned back in her chair; she was fully focused on the bard. "What do you have to do with the Conqueror?"

Gabrielle lowered her head slightly then lifted it again. "The Conqueror and I were... we were best friends as kids. We grew up together."

The queen remained quiet for a few moments then softly asked, "Do you know that the Conqueror was once an Amazon?" She laced her hands in her lap.

"I didn't until just recently," the bard admitted. She wondered how Melosa knew unless the queens were talking, which would make sense.

"I don't know all the details," the queen mentioned, "however Queen Cyane sent out letters to notify all the queens about the Conqueror." She studied the princess and asked, "Why does Draco think you're valuable to the Conqueror?"

The princess was asking herself the same thing, but she tried to answer the question anyway. "The Conqueror was always protective over me when we were kids. He hopes that's still the case and that he can use me for leverage against her."

Queen Melosa figured that was rather rational on his part – stupid but rational. Then something else bothered her so she inquired, "How did he find out you were here?" She leaned forward and softly mentioned, "We've worked hard to keep your name quiet all these seasons."

The bard actually read some concern in Melosa's eyes. Several seasons back, Gabrielle had gone to the queen and finally confessed her past as far as her slavery went. She never felt right in hiding it from the queen, but Gabrielle deeply expressed that she didn't want the information revealed because it could endanger the Nation. "He found out about my grandfather through the slavers' list."

Melosa now understood that the warlord had traced Gabrielle to her master. She suspected that Draco did further homework and waited until Gabrielle showed up in Articia for a visit. He then probably tracked her back to the Nation and learned the rest from there. Well, maybe he wasn't as stupid as she previously thought. "It looks like the Conqueror's destruction of the slave market hasn't done us any favors yet."

Gabrielle lowered her eyes, and she cursed her brand on her hip. She felt so frustrated, and she wanted this all to stop. It did seem easier to just hand herself over to Draco and not care what happened to herself there after. She could still act like a slave again, if she had to do it.

"I'm glad you returned here," the queen spoke when she saw Gabrielle's distant gaze.

The bard focused back on the present. "I told him we'd meet in on the battlefield."

Queen Melosa nodded her agreement, yet she grew dark. "We will have a hard battle ahead of us, princess." She paused as she prepared to reveal another problem to the princess. "Tomorrow the council and I will sign off on a deceleration of war against the Centaurs."

Gabrielle's face dropped, and she stared darkly at the queen. "You can't do this, Melosa. We have to work out relations with them. They can help us-"

"The Centaurs are animals," the queen spat. "They are no better than that warlord."

The princess's temper grew alive again. She suddenly shouted, "They are more human than Draco!"

Faolan had been sitting, but he jumped at Gabrielle's angry voice. He disliked when Gabrielle used that tone, which was rare and too frequent today.

Queen Melosa narrowed her eyes at the princess, who had grown personal relationships with certain

Centaurs thanks to the diplomacy. She quickly stood up so that her presences filled the small hut. "You're not a true Amazon, Gabrielle. You are here because of my sister's death." Her cold stare bore into the princess. "If my sister was here, she would agree to this."

"Terreis would have never agreed to this," the princess snapped. "You're blinded by your hatred for the Centaurs. You're willing to sacrifice the entire Nation for your hatred."

Queen Melosa clenched her hands then hotly demanded, "And you know nothing about standing up for yourself, Gabrielle. I am doing this for my sister, who died because those animals dishonorably attacked her!"

Gabrielle felt slapped across the face when the queen bluntly told her she was weak. She even felt tears stinging behind her eyes, but she hotly fought against them. "At least I know how to honor Terreis's death properly." She then turned and walked out of the office. She only held it open long enough for Faolan to leave with her.

The distraught princess didn't know what to do at first. She debated whether to go back to her hut so she could catch her breath. The hut wasn't where she wanted to go, but she found herself headed in a particular direction. She didn't understand what drove her there, yet she discovered her feet carrying her up the steps of the temple.

Faolan slipped through the open door when Gabrielle held it for him. He then trotted down the aisle beside his friend.

Priestess Maired was knelt before Artemis's statue, and her back to Gabrielle. She slowly opened her eyes and softly greeted, "Hello, Gabrielle."

The princess still couldn't figure out how the priestess or Narkissa ever knew it was her coming into the temple. "Hello, priestess."

The priestess had only taken over six seasons ago, however, she was already popular before the Nation. She wasn't that far different from her mother, who had been the previous priestess.

Maired mentally finished her prayer, stood up, and faced the princess. "You're distressed, princess."

And that was another trick that Gabrielle hadn't pieced together. How in the known-world did Maired or Narkissa know things were troubling her? "I am," she admitted.

The priestess nodded then she smiled down at Faolan. "Hello, Faolan."

The wolf sat down beside the princess, and he wagged his tail. He warmly received a few pets from the priestess. He nudged her receding hand with his cold nose.

Maired chuckled at him, but she focused back on the princess. "The pending war troubles you...?"

Gabrielle felt her shoulders drop because she could never hide anything from Maired. "It does... I'm afraid of what'll happen to the Nation, Maired."

The priestess nodded and gently offered, "Perhaps we should go to my office...?"

The bard understood that Maired often like to take more sensitive topics away from the open temple. She consented and followed the priestess through the side doorway. "How does Yakut fair?"

"She's learning very quickly," Maired replied. "Today she's with mother."

Gabrielle faintly smiled and teased, "I'm sure Narkissa will teach her plenty."

The priestess flashed a grin at the bard beside her. "Mother always has two dinars to throw into the pot."

The bard chuckled and lightly touched the priestess's bare arm. "Your mother is wonderful."

"She is," Priestess Maired softly agreed. She stopped at her office door, opened it, and guided the bard and wolf into it. She held out a hand to the chairs in front of her desk. "Sit down, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle took a seat, and she was happy when Maired sat beside her instead of behind the desk.

The priestess became comfortable and started the conversation. "Your talks with the warlord did not go well?"

Faolan released a low rumble then he flopped on the floor. He rested his chin on Gabrielle's boot.

The bard glimpsed at the wolf then replied, "It didn't turned out the way I expected it to... by far." She slumped back in the chair. "Draco is actually somebody I know... he's from Amphipolis."

The priestess stiffened at the news slightly, yet she inquired, "What is he after?"

"Me," the princess simply answered. She then unfolded all the details to the priestess. Gabrielle never had trouble disclosing any details to the priestess. It was a known fact throughout the Nation that any Amazon was allowed to speak to the priestess about any trouble. The priestess often gave advice and counsel to any Amazon that required it, and the priestess never disclosed their knowledge to anybody else. The priestess didn't even answer to the queen or council.

Gabrielle had come to rely on Narkissa's support back when Narkissa was the priestess. Narkissa had spent many candlemarks helping the princess work through her fears as a former slave. The bard often credited former Priestess Narkissa with all her success, but Narkissa argued it and reminded that Gabrielle made the conscious choices in her life. Now that Maired had taken over the temple, Gabrielle often sought her out for support. Gabrielle knew, since she was the princess, that she could reveal the Nation's ongoings to only the priestess and not fellow Amazons. She often wanted to go to Andra, but it was too risky.

Priestess Maired carefully listened to everything the bard had to say. She hardly interrupted the princess unless she required finer details to understand something. Once Gabrielle finished, Maired exhaled and prepared her words carefully. "I understand why you're so concerned, Gabrielle. You have a lot of threats to deal with here."

Gabrielle shook her head and argued, "I'm scared for the Nation." She clutched the chair's arm. "I'm not worried about what'll happen to me if Draco has me."

The priestess shook her head and her tone subconsciously picked up a harshness. "Yet you should be concerned, Gabrielle. You are the princess... the next in line to rule the Nation. You are the Nation's future, and the Nation cannot afford to lose that future."

The princess dipped her head and softly commented, "A princess is easy to find and train."

"Is that how you see it?" The priestess eyed the young Amazon. She understood the princess had already suffered enough today, but she had to make her point clear. "I will tell you a secret, Gabrielle." She leaned forward and stated, "No princess or queen is randomly selected. Each princess and queen is carefully selected for specific reasons."

Gabrielle had furrowed eyebrows when she lifted her head. "How was I selected? I'm only here because Terreis gave me her caste when she was dying."

"And do you believe that Terreis's death happened for a reason? Or was it just a random fluke?" Maireid cocked her head and waited for the bard. "Think carefully before you answer, Gabrielle."

The bard did think carefully about it. She even thought as far back as when her town was raided and her family mostly destroyed. Yet she would have never met Cornelio then gone to the Academy and met Ephiny. She'd never become a princess otherwise. Gabrielle felt as if each turning point in her life was a carefully calculated step made just for her. She licked her lips then finally broke the long silence. "It was fate," Gabrielle concluded.

"It was just not fate," Maireid clarified, "but it was destiny, Gabrielle. It was apart of your destiny." She then leaned forward and gathered the bard's small hands into hers. "You still have yet to fulfill all of your destiny."

Gabrielle bit her lower lip and asked, "What is my destiny?"

The priestess squeezed the bard's hands then released them. "It is what you believe in, Gabrielle. I cannot tell you... Artemis cannot tell you." She tilted her head. "The Fates do not even control your destiny."

"How can they not?" Gabrielle shook her head because she'd been always taught that the Fates controlled her life.

"They are simply what they are," Maireid explained, "The Fates. Many believe that there is no difference between fate and destiny, but there is a small, tiny difference between the two." She dipped her head some and asked, "Do you know the difference, Gabrielle?"

The princess compared the two and tried to theorize what Maireid might be asking. "If the Fates decide... fate then that means they must guide my life." She tapped the chair then tried, "But destiny they don't control... that's controlled by something else?"

Maireid smiled when the bard started to piece the puzzle together. "Yes. Who controls your destiny, Gabrielle?"

Princess Gabrielle had bright eyes when the answer came to her. "I do." She finally smiled. "I control my destiny."

The priestess nodded her head, and she mimicked the bard's smile. "The Fates may weave your tapestry, however, you control what color the string is. So when the Fates do weave the tapestry to produce the picture, you've actually decided what the picture will ultimately be."

Gabrielle leaned back in the chair once everything made sense to her. She whispered, "There's no destiny but what I create."

"Exactly."

The princess had a content smile, and she studied the now calm priestess. Then her mind skipped to another topic. "What should I do?" She knew her question was quite ambiguous so she cleared it up. "If we fight both the warlord and the Centaurs then we won't win. But if the Amazons and Centaurs join then we stand a chance against Draco."

"You still have a problem with this... strange woman... Seven."

The bard nibbled on her lower lip as she'd been deeply considering that aspect. "I may have a friend that can help the Nation." She then focused back on the priestess. "Something bothers me about this woman Seven. When I look at her... I feel deeply for her."

"Why?"

"I guess because I know she has no control over her actions." Gabrielle's frown showed. "She's under Draco's control because the gods made her that way. But I don't think she use to be that way." She sighed and murmured, "She had to be... human before this happened to her."

The priestess couldn't be sure without actually meeting the woman. She didn't like the fact that Ares was involved with this, but she had faith in Artemis to protect them from him and his games.

"What about Yakut?" Gabrielle suddenly brightened at a possible plan. "Would it be possible for Yakut to use her two-spirit to find out more about her?"

Maired wasn't positive because she didn't know too much about Yakut's two-spirit. "You should speak to her about it, Gabrielle. I believe Yakut could help though." She tilted her head then offered, "If anything of this woman is left within the shell then Yakut will be the only one that can figure it out."

"I pray she can reach her too," the bard murmured.

Maired faintly nodded her head.

"I just don't know what to do to help the Nation," Gabrielle muttered. She rubbed her brow and hung her head slightly. "I've tried so hard to reach the queen, but she refuses to see what this'll do to the Nation. All she sees is her sister's death and vengeance."

"And rightly so," the priestess surprisingly stated. "Many Amazons would feel the same way if they lost their sister that way."

"I would too," Gabrielle agreed, "but I would realize too that my anger could cost hundreds of lives. My sisters' lives. Then when will the cycle stop if not with the queen? How can a queen lead by that type of example?"

Maired smiled at the bard's words and not because they were positive words. What made her smile was that the young princess was so insightful compared to so many other Amazons. "Your words are true, Gabrielle." She became sober again. "As your priestess I cannot tell you what must be done, but I can guide you in the right direction." She waited a beat then merely supplied, "The known-world has many cycles within it... some smaller than others and some larger than others. These cycles though are constant, and they will always continue whether we notice them or not."

Gabrielle absolutely use to hate riddles like this, but she'd grown to enjoy them when the priestess gave them to her. She just wished she could have this one more straight forward since one of the largest battles faced the Nation right now.

Priestess Maired stood up, which caused Faolan to lift his head. "The answer isn't that far behind you, Gabrielle."

The princess lifted from her seat and felt Maired's hand on her shoulder.

"You must believe in your destiny, Gabrielle," the priestess whispered, "and you will see it clearly."

Gabrielle nodded then signaled Faolan to go ahead of her. She followed the wolf to the door, opened it, and glanced back at the standing priestess. "Thank you, Maired."

The priestess felt confident in the young princess. "I will be here, Gabrielle." She then watched the princess silently leave her office.

Gabrielle hastened out of the temple and decided to begin her first step to her plans. She didn't care what this could cost her with the queen, but the Nation was too important to her. At first it took some doing, but Gabrielle managed to track down Gryta, who was on patrol duty.

Gryta broke away from patrol duty when the princess called on her. She was surprised by it as it never happened before, but she followed Gabrielle back to the village. She occasionally glanced at the white wolf, who was always steadfast to Gabrielle.

The princess guided the Amazon into her hut then closed it up tight. She then took a seat at her desk and offered one to the historian.

Gryta sat, but she was openly concerned.

"Gryta, I need you to do me a favor... a very risky favor." The princess leaned forward in her chair, and she ran her fingers through Faolan's coat.

The historian tilted her head and leaned forward too. She felt like she was about to hear a plot for conspiracy, and she grew excited. "What's happening?"

"Well, I want you to hear everything first before you agree. You can say no and walk out of this hut like nothing happened." Gabrielle studied the Amazon carefully. "Okay?"

Gryta nodded her head. "I understand."

"I'm not sure if you heard or not, but the warlord has a gift from Ares."

Gryta grunted and questioned, "Some woman named Seven, right?"

"Then you heard?" After the historian nodded, Gabrielle continued to speak. "There's two friends I know who might be able to help us defeat this woman." She noticed how Gryta leaned forward more as if she caught the secret in her hands. "Their names are Hercules and Iolaus."

"Sweet Artemis," the historian murmured in surprise. "You know Hercules?"

The princess chuckled despite the situation. "Yes, and I'm pretty sure he can help us fight Seven."

"I am sure too," Gryta agreed. "Does the queen know of your idea?"

"Not by a long shot," the princess honestly answered. "I'm concerned the queen is too focused on the Centaurs."

The historian grunted, folded her arms, and leaned back in her chair. "You mean getting revenge for Terreis's death?" She shook her head. "I knew Terreis... she's probably furious at Melosa right now for this. Terreis never believed in war or violence to resolve problems."

Gabrielle silently agreed with her friend. She stopped petting Faolan and straightened up. "I need somebody to take a message to Hercules and Iolaus. To bring them back here."

Gryta now understood what the princess was planning and why she was asked here. "Does Commander Kaylee know about this either?"

"No," the bard replied. "It's between you and me."

The historian touched her forehead and thought out the implications if she went on this secret mission for the princess. She lowered her hand to her lap, and summarized, "So, I'm breaking Amazon law, and I potentially face punishment before the stratègos if not the queen and council." She inhaled deeply when she absorbed what this could mean. She then tilted her head and exhaled, "And so would you."

The princess slowly nodded her head. She held her breath and waited for Gryta's decision.

The Amazon was silent for awhile and weighed her choices carefully. She then recalled all of Gabrielle's past history since she'd joined the Nation. Gabrielle never did anything in self interest but only things to help the Nation. She then smiled and stated, "I can't wait to see the look on the queen's face when she realizes what's happened."

Gabrielle chuckled when Gryta's joke made her relax. She couldn't believe that the historian would follow her into this crazy scheme of hers.

"When should I leave?" the now serious Amazon asked.

"Tonight while everybody is at dinner. I don't think you'll be noticed leaving. I'll quickly write up a letter and drop it by your hut this evening before dinner."

Gryta nodded. "Do you know where I should begin to find them?"

The bard dipped her head and traced her memory of when she last heard of Hercules's travels. She'd heard something while she was in Amphipolis. "Go south to Beroea."

The Amazon consented then promised she would carry out the mission without telling anybody else. She then started out of Gabrielle's hut and decided it was best to return to patrol duty so nobody would wonder. Her shift would end in a candlemark, which would give her enough time to head back into the village, pack, and ride off at sunset.

The princess quickly wrote out a careful message for Hercules and Iolaus. She hoped they would quickly return with Gryta and help the Nation. Otherwise they would have a hard time stopping Seven without somebody to match her strength.

Gabrielle and Faolan then hurried to Gryta's hut and found her there. The bard dropped off the message but quickly left after thanking the historian. Gryta promised she would not return unless it was with Hercules. The bard was grateful she could rely on her friend to do this despite the risks.

The princess then trekked over to the sparring fields where she hoped to catch the weapons master. There was something nagging in the back of Gabrielle's mind between what Priestess Maired said to her and what Queen Melosa planned to do. Gabrielle spotted the weapons master busy in the field with several Amazons. She waited patiently until Eponin spotted her.

The weapons master told her class to continue practicing. She then joined the princess.

"How is class?" the princess started.

Eponin folded her arms. "You must recall what it use to be like." She signaled with her chin all the young Amazons. "It wasn't long ago you were at that stage."

The bard sadly smiled at the young Amazons that were training with staffs. "I'm still there, Eponin." She chuckled when Eponin rolled her eyes.

"You've mastered your staff, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle was amazed at the compliment from Eponin because they were few and far. She dipped her head and quietly asked, "I would like a moment with you in private... if you can spare it."

The weapons master guessed it had to be serious and related to the pending war. "Hold on." She strolled away and ordered the young Amazons to perform a few drills then they could be finished for the evening. She then came back and led the princess to her hut. When she entered, she wasn't surprised to find Hali there. "Will you excuse us, Hali?"

The senior grade glanced between the princess and weapons master. "Of course." She bowed out of the hut and decided to finish up the young Amazons that Eponin had left.

Eponin sat behind her desk once Hali left. She waited until Gabrielle sat down too. "You're concerned about what happened today?"

"That among other things," Gabrielle admitted. She carefully decided how to handle this conversation with Eponin because she wasn't a hundred percent sure how Eponin felt about her. She felt that Eponin and her had grown a tight relationship after so many seasons of training, but that still didn't put the trust between them. "I need your opinion on something, Eponin."

The weapons master tilted her head and mentioned, "I'm listening."

"Do you think its possible for me to defeat the queen in combat?"

Eponin became sword straight in her chair when it struck her what Gabrielle meant by the question. "You're thinking of challenging the queen."

The princess bowed her head for a beat, but locked eyes with Eponin again. "Yes." She waited until the weapons master relaxed some then she explained, "We can't go to war against the Centaurs and Draco. There's no way we can defeat them both."

Eponin lifted her arms and placed her elbows on the chair arms. She laced her hands together and cushioned her chin on her linked fingers. "I agreed that we cannot defeat them beyond a miracle." She had unfocused eyes while she thought this out. "If you defeat the queen and take the mask, it is possible that the Centaurs will join us."

"I can pretty much guarantee it," Gabrielle spoke up. She noticed Eponin's perplexed face. "The Centaurs have repeatedly told me that they would ally with the Amazons if it wasn't for Melosa. The only reasons they've agreed to any relations with us is because I'm the princess."

The weapons master sighed and murmured, "I thought as much." She lowered her hands to her lap.

"Can I defeat her, Eponin? You know my fighting technique and level better than anybody."

The weapons master couldn't argue that because she'd trained the bard herself. She planned to be honest with Gabrielle. "Melosa is a great warrior, Gabrielle."

The princess brushed her bangs back and muttered, "That means no." She studied Faolan, who looked back at her.

"It doesn't mean no, and it doesn't mean yes." Eponin leaned back into her chair. "Melosa is much more experience than you are, Gabrielle. She certainly has that ahead of you." She paused and considered other factors. "However Melosa is not a god... she has her weaknesses."

The bard tore her attention away from Faolan and studied the weapons master.

"For many seasons, Gabrielle I have been training you to interpret your opponent's attacks and even defense." Eponin stopped and noticed how Gabrielle intently listened. "You have the gift to understand people very well, Gabrielle. It has always been my hope that you could translate that gift into your fighting so that you could calculate your opponent's moves. If you can be a step ahead of your opponent then that is your best defense."

The princess hung her head briefly while she mulled over Eponin's confession. She hadn't heard that many words from Eponin in some time. She understood what the weapons master was telling her and always had been. She just never saw it until now for some reason. She lifted her head. "If I can find Melosa's weakness then I can defeat her."

"Just like any other opponent," the weapons master agreed. "You have the skills and techniques to defend yourself and attack, Gabrielle. You just need to be quick enough to detect your opponent's weaknesses so you can exploit them."

"That makes sense." Gabrielle's head bobbed. "Do you know what weapon the queen would most likely choose?"

"I would suspect the chobbos."

The princess slightly grinned because she was fairly confident with the weapon. She lost her smile though. "Eponin, if I defeated Melosa in the challenge... I'd have to kill her..." She shook her head. "I don't know if I could do that."

The weapons master admired how the princess was concerned about that aspect. "It isn't a requirement, Gabrielle but it is common tradition."

Gabrielle let out a breath when she heard this news. "Then why do they kill the other?"

Eponin shifted in her chair then explained the history behind the kills. "Whoever is the winner typically fears that their opponent may challenge them again" She knew Gabrielle understood by the bard's look.

"Are there reasons why the winner wouldn't kill their opponent?"

"There are a few rare occasions, yes. If the winner does not fear their opponent will rechallenge them then it is safe. Or if the winner feels the Nation is mostly loyal to them. Often the loser loses enough face where even if they won the next challenge that the Nation would not follow them." Eponin paused and let Gabrielle absorb the facts. "This is only if the loser agrees to yield to the winner. If they refuse to yield then the winner will ultimately have to kill their opponent."

Gabrielle shook her head and muttered, "There's just no real easy way out of it. Is there?"

"Not particularly," the older Amazon muttered. She noticed the worry and concern that filled the bard. "Death is not to be taken lightly."

The bard lifted her head and stated, "It's not defeat and dying that I fear. It's defeat and the Nation being slaughtered."

The weapons master sadly smiled out how the princess was indeed considering this challenge for the sole purpose to save the Nation. Gabrielle wasn't doing this for power like some Amazons had done in the past. "Gabrielle, every queen has their reign and eventually their reign comes to an end whether or not they're ready. It is a fundamental cycle.... and one day Melosa's reign will come to an end then the next reign will begin."

The weapons master's words echoed bells in Gabrielle's memory. Gabrielle felt her confidence boost when the priestess's riddle started to make sense to her. "I think maybe Melosa's has come to that end," she whispered.

Eponin held back her smile. "If you believe you can defeat Melosa in combat, Gabrielle then you will do it." She then leaned forward some. "But if you falter in your belief for even a heartbeat then Melosa will win."

Gabrielle was silent for a bit then she nodded her head. "I understand, Eponin." She raised her head and sincerely said, "Thank you for your help."

"Gabrielle, you're my proudest student," the weapons master offered. "I do not fear the day when I become your student." She rested back in her chair again. "Perhaps that day will be soon."

The princess chuckled and teased, "Let's hope not, but you're getting good at this talking thing."

The weapons master grunted, but she grinned some. "Indeed." She then had a wider grin. "If you succeed, Gabrielle then you will be the youngest queen in Amazonian history."

Gabrielle slowly stood up. "That would be something for Gryta's history scrolls."

Eponin tilted her head back some at the standing princess. "Well," she sincerely voiced, "I pray Gryta has a chance to write that in the history scrolls."

Gabrielle hesitated, but she knew Eponin was being true. She didn't understand the loyalty, yet she wouldn't refuse it. "Me too, Eponin."

The weapons master dipped her head then said, "I'll see you at the dining hut shortly."

The princess patted her leg for Faolan to follow her. "Thank you again, Eponin. I'll see you soon." She slipped out of the office hut.

Eponin remained quiet and thought out her conversation with Gabrielle. She'd trained Gabrielle hard over the seasons, and Gabrielle was skilled with several weapons. The only exception was a bow and arrow, but there was no way Melosa would select that. If there was any luck to be had then Melosa would challenge Gabrielle with staffs. She grinned at the thought of her student beating the queen in a staff challenge. The idea almost made Eponin giggle.

To be continued.