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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 6**

Tracker hurried through the busy camp, and he dodged around fellow soldiers. He slowed down once he came upon the tent that regally stood out from the rest of the bunch. He nodded at the two guards by the tent flap then entered with a drop of his head.

Once inside the noisy tent, Tracker studied the soldiers, who encircled the beautiful, dark Conqueror. He approached the group and bowed his head when the Conqueror's gaze met his.

The Conqueror held back a grin then focused on her stratèges, three chiliarchèses, four ilarchèses, and

one hoplomachos. She quickly ceased the officers' discussions by stating, "We'll finish this later. For now, I want the hoplites to pack camp." She then centered her focus onto the hoplomachos. "Vincien, will you have the siege weapons prepared in time?"

Vincien, who had been the hoplomachos since the Conqueror began her campaign in southern Greece, stepped forward and replied, "Of course, my liege. We finished the repairs on the one vincente that was damaged by the lightening storm. My men are prepared to pack it."

"See that they do it promptly."

Vincien bowed his head then reclaimed his original spot.

"Report to me later, Borias." The Conqueror watched her officers start to head for the tent flap.

The stratègos, Borias, faintly nodded to his leader. "I'll see to the hoplites." He waited briefly until all the officers were gone, then he cautiously inquired, "Is it really wise to break away from the northern campaign, Xena?"

The ruler of southern Greece folded her arms over her leather and bronze chest. She carefully studied her long time friend and commander. "This warlord doesn't leave room for choices."

Borias placed his hands on his hips. He glanced once at Tracker then back at the ruler. "I can't imagine what Draco has in mind to stop the army. We are three thousand strong and reinforcements coming from Athens and Corinth."

"Perhaps he has a death wish," the ruler theorized.

Borias grunted and joked, "Be sure to ask when you meet him in battle." He then turned on his boot heels and marched out of the tent.

The Conqueror also wondered what the warlord was thinking in going against her. She didn't have the luxury to consider it deeply right now. She instead turned to Tracker. "What did you find?"

Tracker reached to his left side and carefully untied a rolled up scroll. "I found it, my liege." He finally had it free from his waist, and he held it out to the ruler.

The Conqueror collected the scroll, and she felt her pulse quicken.

Tracker shook his head and quietly mentioned, "We've been trying for countless moons. I'm sorry it's taken this long, my liege."

The Conqueror was slowly unraveling the untied scroll. She softly replied, "No, Tracker. You did well. The slavers have tried every trick possible to stop me from acquiring the list." She hesitated from looking at the list and smirked at the soldier. "Dare I ask what you did to finally get this?"

Tracker's dark eyes glinted, and he slyly replied, "I left no traces, my liege."

"Good," the ruler murmured. The Conqueror had the scroll completely unrolled, and she turned to her right so that the candlelight helped her read the parchment better. Slowly the letters on the parchment shaped and together they formed specific names, places, and lunar dates. The scroll was a lengthy list of the uniquely branded slaves throughout all of Greece that the slavers kept on record. If a branded slave was still knowingly alive, then they would be listed on this scroll along side their original slave trainer, their current master, and the date the master acquired the branded slave.

Xena had wanted this list when she first heard of it. She'd tried numerous tactics to acquire it from the

slavers, but she'd failed more times than she cared to count. It seemed as if the slavers managed to be one step ahead of her, and she would come so close to the list before it would just disappear. Xena had yet to understand how the list constantly escaped her grasp, but it didn't matter because it was now in her hands.

Tracker remained silent, and he watched his leader scan over the list rather quickly. He tilted his head when the ruler noticeably paused and adjusted the long scroll in her hands until a certain area was closest to her. He laced his hands behind his back and waited.

The Conqueror reread the line a fifth time just to make sure, but it was the same information again. Her earlier pulse was even quicker as she discovered the whereabouts of one branded slave, who was still alive according to the list. She had glossy eyes and whispered, "She's in Articia."

Tracker licked his lips then mentioned, "Articia is a three days ride from here, my liege."

The Conqueror turned her head to the scout. "Can you be ready to ride in two candlemarks?"

Tracker's eyes slightly widened because he'd just returned from his scroll hunting expedition just a quarter of a candlemark ago. "I... I can be."

The ruler smirked and stated, "Find Prostig. Tell him that he rides with us in two candlemarks too."

Tracker was flabbergasted as he realized he, Prostig, and the Conqueror would be riding together to Articia on a whim. He wiped away his dumbfounded look and hesitantly stated, "Yes... my liege." He quickly went to the tent flap but his leader's words made him stop.

"See that you and Prostig don't speak to anybody about this, Tracker."

The scout nodded. He then hurried out of the tent and broke into a jog.

The Conqueror gazed back at the slavers' list and stared at one particular entry that was most important to her. It simply recorded Gabrielle of Potidaea's original slaver, her master as Cornelio of Articia, and lunar date when Cornelio bought her. The information was a breakthrough for Xena's endless struggle to find Gabrielle's whereabouts. She never felt more close to Gabrielle than she did now.

Xena hastily rolled up the slavers' list, tied it with its thong, and set it on her desk for later. She then hurried out of her tent and sought out Borias so that she could inform him of her brief trip. When she merely mentioned that she'd be gone for six days or so, Borias nearly went red in the face but mostly because Xena wouldn't give any reason to her sudden departure. Xena only promised she'd meet up with the army later once the army was north of the Cambunian Mountains. After the mountains, the army would only be five days from the Macedonia Amazon Nation, and the warlord.

Tracker and Prostig were climbing onto their mounts when the Conqueror trotted up on her mare. The two soldiers became comfortable in the saddles then focused on the ruler.

"We're not stopping until we make it to Articia," the Conqueror instructed.

Prostig adjusted his chest armor until it settled against his large body. "Didn't think we had much of a choice, kid."

The Conqueror smirked at the old joke between her and Prostig. "Do you ever, Pro?"

The warrior glanced at Tracker, who by contrast was physically opposite of Prostig. He saw Tracker's worn features, which made him grin at the ruler. "Not since we met ya."

Tracker grunted, didn't comment, and merely tapped his gelding's sides.

Prostig was highly amused by Tracker's response, and he urged his gelding near the Conqueror's mare. "This is about the girl, isn't it?" He'd learned about Xena's endless hunt for some girl, Gabrielle, since the day he met Xena. He and Tracker felt they owed the ruler the knowledge of the girl's whereabouts after what happened to Xena's young brother, Lyceus.

The Conqueror shifted the reins around in her hand then softly replied, "Tracker found the slavers' list."

The large warrior nodded twice. "He mentioned it." He tilted his head then offered, "We shouldn't waste anymore time."

Xena grinned at Prostig's words, then she suddenly spurred Argo into a powerful gallop. "Yaaa!"

Prostig sighed because he knew he'd be saddle sore. He then laughed at the thought of how sore Tracker must be by now. He kicked his gelding into a gallop and chased after the pair.

The three warriors rode hard and only took breaks to eat or let the horses rest. The Conqueror would not rest until she made it all the way to Articia. She felt so close to Gabrielle now, and she had every hope to find her childhood friend at this man's house. When they came to the outskirts of town, Xena had them slow down and finally dismounted just outside the gates of the town.

Prostig clicked his tongue and drew his horse's attention back. He tugged the horse's reins, then he and the horse started the walk into town. Just beside him was Tracker and to the right was the Conqueror. Prostig glanced at the ruler then turned his head away. He quietly asked, "Who's the king here?"

The Conqueror looked to Prostig and quickly replied, "King Cortese." She glimpsed back at Argo, who was idly following her walking pace. "He's rather popular here. There was a warlord in his kingdom not long ago."

"I heard about that," Tracker spoke up. "The warlord was sacking his villages. For awhile they had a hard time finding the warlord then finally there was a big battle."

"Yes," the ruler agreed. "The battle was bloody, but Cortese's army won."

"He even saved the nearby village from being burned to the ground," Tracker explained to his old friend. "King Cortese was a hero."

The Conqueror had listened to Tracker's words, and she'd heard the same too. The fact that King Cortese was so popular with his people was going to make her conquest very hard. She could only hope the king would sign over his kingdom to her nation, however, she didn't expect him to do that. She would have to wait and find out what kind of pull she held over the king's people.

The village houses slowly materialized around them, and the people carefully watched the warriors. Several people passed whispers and occasionally pointed directly at the Conqueror.

"Are you sure this was a good idea?" Tracker murmured to his friend.

Prostig chuckled and teased, "I'll protect you, Tracker."

The scout glared up at the bulky warrior, yet he kept silent. He followed the Conqueror to a tavern and stopped short by the steps. Tracker peered up at his leader, who faintly nodded at him. He quickly understood so he handed the reins to Prostig, then he hurried up the steps and disappeared into the tavern.

The Conqueror took a beat to check on Argo and get something to drink. Finally, she came back around after rummaging through the swollen saddlebags. She grinned when Tracker appeared.

"Let's go," Tracker simply offered. He knew where Cornelio's house was located after he'd used some persuasion with the tavern owner. "It's not far... we can walk." He took his gelding's reins back from Prostig and started the march. He led the group through the village and back out of the gates. He then made a right onto a smaller road.

The Conqueror soon took in the iron gates of a house at the end of the road. She felt her stomach knot from anticipation.

Tracker was at the front, and he slightly frowned when he realized the gates were closed. The closed gates were odd to him because it was slightly after Helios high so they should be open at this time. He shook it off and waited until they came closer.

Xena came up between Prostig and Tracker. She had a dark face, and she lifted her left hand up. She soon took the iron lock into her hand and stared at it. She raised her head up and stared through the iron gates at the very quiet grounds and house. There wasn't any sign of life from anywhere beyond the locked gates.

Prostig glanced at the ruler then back at the quiet house.

Tracker shook his head and muttered, "The tavern owner didn't say anything about this."

The ruler made no response. She slightly yanked on the padlock, which made the chain sound out in protest. She held out Argo's reins to Prostig, who took them. Xena then quickly reached behind and unsheathed her new sword. "Step back."

The warriors quickly followed orders and backed up the horses too.

The Conqueror easily slid her blade through the chain links until they were wrapped around each other. She then clutched the hilt with both hands and inhaled sharply. Briefly a warcry broke from her lips, and her arm muscles became exposed as she harshly jerked down on the hilt.

The chain snapped and pinged loudly, and a few pieces flew into the air. The lock's arm became mangled and soon fell to the dirt with the broken chain snaking on top of it.

The Conqueror sheathed her sword behind her back, and she casually pushed the creaky, right gate open. She signaled her men to follow her into the grounds. She first dealt with the horses by getting the bridles off them. Then she and the warriors left the horses to graze by the gates while they headed towards the house.

The Conqueror stopped a few paces when she spotted something off her left shoulder. She noted that Tracker and Prostig were waiting for her at the bottom of the steps to the house. She ordered, "Go ahead and check the house."

Prostig turned and silently went up the steps. He sensed Tracker coming up behind him.

Xena beelined across the grounds, passed the stables, and came to a stop near a lonely tombstone. Her initial fears made her emotions spin, but she forced herself to look down. She came to the front of the headstone, and she took in the Greek words. After several beats, she sadly whispered, "Hecuba."

The mighty Conqueror sunk to her knees beside the grave. She placed her left hand over the grave and reread the headstone. She spent a silent moment speaking to the woman that'd treated her like another

daughter for all the time she'd known Gabrielle.

Back in the house, Prostig and Tracker entered an office, which was bare of any life like the rest of the house. They studied the office carefully and realized it was complete of everything as if somebody would show up in a candlemark.

Tracker shook his head and whispered, "Nothing is gone. They didn't move... just left."

Prostig narrowed his eyes. "Let's find the Conqueror." He double-backed and hurried across the grounds. He easily picked out the ruler in the lonely area.

Tracker took in the grave first then the Conqueror's stone face when she stood up. He looked to Prostig to explain things.

"Everybody is gone," Prostig informed, "All their belongings are still in the house."

"Who leaves without their belongings?" Tracker shook his head and placed his hands on his leather hips.

The Conqueror stared at the house behind the warriors. "Anybody that's been forced from their home."

Prostig sensed the darkness building in the ruler. He then thought of something and mentioned, "There is an office in the house. It may provide some information."

The ruler easily agreed, and she followed the pair to the house. She carefully scanned over the house. She hoped that Prostig was right and that somewhere in the office there was some information to help her track Gabrielle down. Where she'd felt close, she now felt even more distant.

Prostig opened the office door and let the ruler go through first. He and Tracker followed after the ruler, but they waited by the open door.

The Conqueror came behind the desk, and she stared down at the open and half written scroll. She ran her fingertips over the scribed words. She came to the last word, which violently ended with a long tail. She narrowed her eyes when she realized that it was here that Cornelio had mostly likely been seized. She still didn't know who captured Cornelio and his house. She glazed over the scroll, which was a formal letter to King Cortese. The scroll talked about the Romans coming closer to the Greek borders, and that King Cortese should join up with Xena, the Conqueror, to stop them. The scroll came to a sharp stop near the closing of the letter.

The Conqueror found the letter interesting and quite informing. The scroll obviously indicated that Cornelio had some form of power in the village. Also it seemed that the Conqueror may be favored by Cortese's people as the scroll suggested in specific sentences.

Finally, Xena took a seat at the desk and carefully opened the desk drawers. She sifted through them and tried to determine the relevance of various scrolls. Her earlier inclination that Cornelio held some power was true. She continued to find several official scrolls either copies to King Cortese or received ones from the king.

The Conqueror picked out a letter from the king to Cornelio, and she opened it. She scanned over the contents of the letter, which told the Conqueror that King Cortese appraised Cornelio's support of his rein. Xena rolled up the scroll and lowered it back into the drawer. She shut the low drawer, then she jerked open the wide drawer that rested directly in front of her. She found several new quills and inkwells then a single scroll by itself.

Xena almost overlooked the scroll, but a familiar seal struck a cord. She pulled the drawer out further over her lap and plucked the scroll. The scroll fully revealed its significant seal from that of the slave trade.

Tracker had wide eyes when he caught sight of the familiar seal that'd been on the slavers' list. He held his tongue though and watched the ruler.

Xena gingerly unrolled the scroll, and she immediately recognized the slave deed to a particular slave. She kept unrolling it until she came to the slave's bold name near the top. The slave deed was for Gabrielle of Potidaea. Xena held her breath and sunk back into the wood chair; she slowly absorbed the deed's words for the ownership of Gabrielle.

The Conqueror lowered the scroll on top of the unfinished scroll. She stared at the words, and she couldn't believe the reality of the truth. She brushed back her black bangs then peered up at her waiting warriors. "We're closer but still far." She sat up, took the deed, and quickly rolled it up.

"What is the plan?" Tracker inquired.

"We have to find this Cornelio," Prostig pointed out.

"It'll take some doing," Tracker argued.

The Conqueror perfectly arched her eyebrow. "Are you saying you can't do it, Tracker?"

The scout quickly turned to his leader. "No, I'm saying nobody can do it, but me."

Xena softly laughed and set the scroll on the desk. She became solemnly while she stared at it. She lightly touched it with her fingertips and decided whether to return it to the drawer. Xena made her final choice, and she scooped up Gabrielle's deed. She then stood up and quickly came around the desk. "I think the best place to start is in town. We'll go back to that tavern and see if your friend has any information."

Tracker grinned at the thought of toying with the tavern owner some more. He knew the Conqueror could be an even more persuasive interrogator than him.

The Conqueror paused when she was at the side of the desk. She heard a low crunch under her right boot so she stopped and moved her foot aside. She stared down at what she'd walked on a beat ago.

Prostig studied the smashed quill beside his leader's boot.

Xena stared at the broken quill. She summarized that Cornelio must have been dragged around this side of the desk, dropped his quill, and was taken from his office. She didn't know what kind of man he was, but she had every intent to find out. She was prepared to repay him with any punishment or reward according to how he'd treated Gabrielle all these seasons.

The Conqueror held tightly to Gabrielle's deed, and she hurried out of the open door. "Let's get back to town, stable the horses, and eat."

Tracker followed second and muttered, "And talk to the owner."

Prostig chuckled as he followed but closed the door behind him with a resounding boom. He turned on his heels and marched down the hallway behind the ruler and scout. He, Tracker, and the Conqueror soon made it out of the gates, which they closed behind, and they went back to town at a slow ride.

The Conqueror was silent during the ride. Earlier she'd carefully stowed away Gabrielle's deed in her

saddlebags for later consideration. She directed her warriors back to the same tavern as earlier and stabled their horses nearby. First they went to the inn that was next door to the tavern, and they obtained rooms and left their belongings behind. Finally they marched up the steps of the tavern and entered through the open doorway.

The tavern was bustling and loud, yet one patron spotted the three heavily armed warriors. He nudged his friend beside him, who turned his head to the warriors. Then a third patron noticed the warriors, and he focused solely on the tall, dark woman in the front. The din in the tavern started to recede like a tide.

The Conqueror scanned the people's faces and took in the mixture of emotions directed at her. She bit back a snide grin and merely soaked in the fact she could capture people's attention. She'd stopped in the middle of the tavern, but now she picked up her right boot and moved to the right. She gracefully glided towards the tables and slipped past the narrow spaces between the chairs.

Prostig and Tracker carefully followed behind, however, Prostig was slower because of his enormous size. He finally took his seat after Tracker and his leader sat. He was the only warrior who had a smirk on his face.

Eventually a nervous barmaid showed up at the table. She fidgeted a little with her skirt, but she kindly inquired what they wanted to drink.

"Port for all of us," the Conqueror replied.

The barmaid nod then quickly disappeared.

Prostig grunted and leaned back in his chair. "Like a bunch of mice."

"It always starts that way," the ruler softly conceded.

"Mice have teeth and claws too," Tracker reminded. "I won't forget Corinth... ever."

The Conqueror made no response, but she silently agreed. She scanned the tavern again from her observing position in the corner. She slightly leaned her chair back until it was on its rear legs only. She folded her arms over her chest and tilted her head. Now the low whispers from the villagers filtered to her clearly, and she heard everybody debating about whether she was the Conqueror or not. Everybody mostly agreed that the female warrior was the Conqueror and that she could be nobody else.

The barmaid soon returned, hastily dropped off the drinks, and promised to bring meals by in half of a candlemark. She rushed off again and immediately went to the tavern owner, who was behind the small bar.

The Conqueror slightly tilted her head back when she heard a man scrape his chair across the floor. He had made an agreement with his buddy at the table, and now he had to fulfill it. He carefully approached the table where the three warriors sat, and he carefully studied them.

Tracker peered up at the man after he drank some of his port.

Prostig was the first to greet him. "Hello."

The man nervously fiddled for a beat then daringly asked, "Are you the Conqueror?" He directed his gaze at the female warrior.

Xena leaned forward until her chair's front legs slammed onto the floor. "Who wants to know?"

"Well... uh... I'm Hector. My friends and I were debating whether or not you were." The villager sighed

because he'd lost the earlier contest to his friends and now had to ask this warrior.

The Conqueror straightened up in her chair. "It's nice to meet you, Hector." She paused then formally stated, "I'm Xena of Amphipolis."

Hector quickly realized that the Conqueror and Xena of Amphipolis were the one in the same.

"Take a seat," Prostig offered and pushed the seat out.

Hector debated it, then he gave into the invite. What could happen anyway? Besides that he'd have plenty to brag about later to his friends and family that he'd been invited to the Conqueror's table. He took the seat and studied the warriors' faces.

"What you drinking?" Xena inquired.

Hector hesitated because he hadn't expected the question. He slightly flushed then replied, "Ale."

The ruler nodded and looked to Tracker.

The scout popped out of his chair and weaved through the tables towards the packed bar.

Hector was dazzled that he wasn't only invited to sit with the ruler but to also be given a drink. His luck was very high today.

"How do things fair here in Articia?" the Conqueror carefully tried.

"We prosper pretty well under our king," Hector answered.

"King Cortese?" Prostig pressed.

Hector nodded then looked to his left at the ruler. "Nobody in the village would expect to see you here." He paused then softly added, "Until later."

"I'm here for personal reasons," Xena simply clarified. She then peered up when Tracker returned.

The scout placed the mug in front of the man then reclaimed his chair beside the Conqueror. He picked up his own mug but didn't drink from it.

Xena gazed back at Hector, who glimpsed at his buddies back at the table. She bit back a grin and slyly asked, "Maybe your friends want to join us?" She held out her hand to the large, open table. "There's plenty of room."

Hector beamed at the offer. "Are you sure?"

"Mmmm." The Conqueror nodded. "We have plenty of room."

The villager was ecstatic. He hopped out of his chair then raced to his former table. He ordered his friends to get up and join him at the Conqueror's table.

Xena glanced at Prostig and Tracker and silently traded understanding expressions. She planned to pump these villagers for information about Cornelio and the whereabouts of his slaves. She also figured she could learn a little about Articia for later conquest. It was risky business because undoubtedly word would spread of her visit in Articia to the king, but it wouldn't matter in the end.

Quickly enough the Conqueror's table was full between her men and the three villagers. She and Prostig started up the light conversation and Tracker piped up now and again. They mostly discussed the villager's lives and what they did day in and day out. Eventually the Conqueror directed the

conversation more towards the village itself, and the people.

"Everybody lives in town?" Tracker question.

"Mostly," a villager agreed, "but there are a few wealthy men outside of town. They have larger farms and many of us tend to their farms."

"You give a certain portion of your profits to the landowner?"

"Yes, exactly," Hector agreed with the ruler.

"Who are the landowners?" Prostig tried.

"Well the biggest landowner is Cornelio," Hector hastily answered.

Another villager snorted and argued, "But not right now."

Tracker set his mug down after a drink then asked, "Somebody bought more land?"

The right villager, Argus, huffed and clanked his mug's side against the table's side. "Hardly. Cornelio just left."

"Just left?" Hector chided. "We all know he was taken."

Argus rolled his eyes, but he too agreed with Hector.

Nestor was the third villager, and he really liked the Conqueror and her warriors. He finally piped up and explained, "Nobody knows who took him, but we all think it has something to do with the Romans."

The Conqueror's eyes slightly widened in disbelief. Her skin automatically crawled at mention of her long-time enemies ever since Julius Caesar.

Hector clanked his mug down and looked to Nestor. "It's just a rumor... besides how could the Romans get here into the kingdom?"

"King Cortese wouldn't let them anywhere near the borders," Argus remarked.

"It doesn't mean they couldn't have hired somebody," Nestor argued. He turned back to the ruler of southern Greece. "Cornelio was petitioning King Cortese to ally with you so that you two could beat the Romans."

The Conqueror digested the news that she already had a clue thanks to Cornelio's scroll. "How does the king feel about it?"

"The king is iffy... he's afraid you'll take his throne," Argus replied.

"You would, wouldn't you?" Nestor leaned against the table and waited.

Xena's eyes glinted, but she honestly answered, "Only if the people wished it."

The villagers exchanged looks, but they made no response.

Tracker spoke up in the silence. "What became of Cornelio's house?"

Hector took the question quite quickly. "The constable of Articia is holding it. The land will be auctioned after twenty seasons if Cornelio doesn't return home."

"What of his slaves and horses?" Prostig prompted.

Hector shrugged and shook his head after a beat. "Nobody knows what's happened to his slaves... or horses. They were taken too." He glanced at Argus then back at the warriors. "He had a wife, daughter-in-law, and grandson... they're all gone too."

The Conqueror narrowed her eyes at the further disturbing news. "Is the constable doing anything to find out what happened?"

"Constable Jacinto has been working on it, but he doesn't seem to know." Nestor sighed and dipped his head. He stared into his almost empty mug. "It's a damn shame too. Cornelio was a kind man." He gradually lifted his head. "There were rumors that he was trying to help slaves." Nestor knew this would interest the Conqueror because of the Conqueror's well-known dislike for slavery. "Supposedly he would only purchase branded slaves so that he could help them be free."

"That's impossible," Tracker debated, "they're branded."

"It doesn't mean a branded slave can't keep their head down and keep their freedom." Prostig waited to see if Tracker would argue with him.

"They'll still live their life in fear... that's not true freedom," the scout reminded.

Prostig grunted in defeat, and he drank some port.

"Do you know who the slaves were?" Xena arched an eyebrow and inwardly tensed.

"He didn't have too many," Nestor replied. He drummed his freehand on the table. "A little girl, a young boy... he did have an older woman, but I think she died awhile ago back when that disease broke out."

"He did have another young girl there," Argus reminded.

"I haven't seen her in a long time." Hector had twisted features, and he tried to recall when he last saw the sunny blond slave in the market. "She was a chatty one too. She'd come to the market often to buy the regulars." He chuckled and added, "She could talk any merchant down to his lowest price."

The description of her old friend instantly charged Xena. She easily recalled those trips to the market with Gabrielle, and she'd listen to Gabrielle practically barter a merchant out of his stall. Gabrielle was a master at her craft – talking.

"I'm not sure what happened to her," filtered back Hector's voice. "She just disappeared."

Prostig could tell his leader was none too happy to reach another dead-end. Why couldn't Xena just have some luck for once? The Fates loved their game with Xena. Prostig rerouted the conversation so that the ruler wouldn't think too hard about the new predicament.

The plates of food soon arrived, and the warriors slowly ate while they spoke to the villagers. After the hefty meal, the Conqueror and her men bid goodnight to the villagers then paid for all the food and drinks. The Conqueror led the way back to the inn next door, and she remained silent. Just before she entered her room, she told Prostig and Tracker to be ready to travel at first light.

When Helios was high enough over the horizon, his rays traced into the opening of the horse stables in the small town of Articia. A large, burly warrior walked into the entranceway of the stables, and his bronze armor reflected the morning sunlight. Prostig grunted at seeing the Conqueror in Argo's stall and almost done with tacking the horse.

Xena raised an eyebrow at the warrior as he went past her stall.

"Good morning," Prostig politely stated. He swung open the stall door and went to his horse.

"Is Tracker up?"

Prostig had a saddle in his arm, yet he answered, "He's moving slowly today."

Xena was bemused slightly, however, she knew she'd been working Tracker quite hard lately. She decided she'd give him a few days break once they rejoined the army. "I want to catch the army just after they get through the mountain pass."

Prostig listened while he prepared his gelding. He debated whether to voice his question or not, but he made his choice. "What of Gabrielle?"

The Conqueror finished the last buckle. She remained facing the horse and replied, "The Fates don't wish for me to find her." She turned her head to her warrior. "I have a nation to conquer and rule."

Prostig released the saddle that balanced on the horse's back. He came to the stall wall and clenched the top with his large hands. "You've been trying for too long, Xena to give up now."

"I'm not giving up," the ruler remarked. She moved in front of Argo and took the reins. She opened the door and guided her mare out of the stall. "Have you ever noticed water takes longer to boil when you watch it?"

Prostig dropped his shoulders.

"I cannot bring her back, Prostig... but I can make sure nobody else repeats her fate."

Prostig leaned heavily against the stall. "By conquering Greece? By destroying the slave market?" He shook his head. "What of the slave markets in Rome... Egypt? Shall you conquer those too?"

Xena briefly considered it then softly answered, "Perhaps." She then turned and led Argo out of the stable.

Prostig grunted and turned his head to the left. He watched Xena and Argo's shadows until they were gone. He puckered his lips slightly and muttered, "There's no destiny but what we make, kid." He straightened up and went back to preparing his horse. He soon heard Tracker entering the stables, and Prostig greeted the grumpy scout.

The small, warrior band rode hard back to the army. The Conqueror did make the trek easier on the way back because she broke for camp each night instead of going nonstop. She could tell Tracker was very grateful for the nights' rests.

On the third day, the Conqueror rode Argo to the top of a ledge that looked down into a valley. She steered her galloping horse close to the ledge, and she gazed down at her army. She wickedly smiled when she heard her soldiers' marching boots, the cavalry horses' breathing, and the wagon wheels going over stones at the rear. She spurred Argo to go faster, and Argo's hoof beats made her feel alive. She planned to meet her army at the end of the valley then take her formal position at the head of the army.

Prostig and Tracker were far behind the ruler. They didn't plan to rush after her either because they would meet the army in plenty of time too. Neither warrior had the same energy like the Conqueror after all the traveling.

Xena soon reclaimed her leading position before her army. She rode beside Borias and several of her

other officers. She received a brief report about the army's travel through the mountain pass and that they'd only had a few troubles with the wagons for the supplies and siege weapons. Overall the trip had gone smoothly, and Borias expected the army would reach Aegae, a small town, within four to five days. The Conqueror was excited at this news because Aegae was merely half a day from the Macedonia Amazon Nation and the warlord, Draco.

The hoplite army came to a stop in a large valley a few leagues north from the mountains. The Conqueror ordered for a temporary camp to be built for the night, and they would break camp midmorning tomorrow. Her tent was the first to go up followed by her officers' then the shared tents between the hoplites.

The Conqueror had stolen away in her tent for a couple of candlemarks. She needed some moments of silence, and she cleaned her leathers while she thought out her plans for Draco. She finished off her polishing by wiping down her recently sharpened steel sword. She studied the shiny blade that reflected her striking and defined features and blue eyes.

Xena's attention was torn away from her new sword, and she lifted an eyebrow when one of her tent guards entered.

"The six soldiers are here as you requested, my liege." The guard bowed his head.

"Send them in," the ruler ordered.

The guard clapped his fist over his chest then marched out.

The Conqueror swiftly sheathed her sword behind her back then turned slightly. She tossed her used rag onto the chair behind her. She straightened up when six hoplites filed in and completely filled her tent.

"My liege," one hoplite spoke, and he bowed. He noted his comrades followed suite.

Xena studied her carefully selected hoplites, then she finally explained, "I've chosen you six to fulfill a very specific mission."

"We will not fail you, my liege," a hoplite proclaimed.

"That's why I chose you," the ruler coaxed. "You six are to ride to a small town that's east of here. It's called Articia." She moved away and went to the small table in the corner. She picked up her chakram. "There's an empty house just outside of Articia that you are to guard until I advise otherwise."

"Articia does not fall under our polis," the first hoplite spoke again.

"No it doesn't," the ruler agreed. "It is apart of a kingdom... the ruler is King Cortese. You're not to make your presence known." Xena turned around and held the chakram in her hand. "See that you find suitable wear to fit in." She lifted the chakram and briefly stared at its sharp edge.

The hoplites curiously stared at the peculiar weapon that their leader was famous for using during battle. There was nobody else that'd mastered such a weapon.

Xena lowered her chakram to her side. "Your second mission is to find out what happened to the landowner."

A hoplite stepped forward some and questioned, "What is his name, my liege?"

The Conqueror hooked the chakram then simply replied, "Cornelio."

**To be continued.**