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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 10

The Conqueror swung her feet out from her stirrups then she brought her leg over the saddle and landed on her boots. She let her cape fall behind her, then she turned her head to the left.

The chiliarchèses, Bastien, marched over to his leader. He already ordered the twenty-five hippeis to dismount from their horses. "Are you sure about this, my liege?"

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow at the chiliarchèses. "I have yet to do anything I'm not sure about, Bastien. See their horses to the corral."

Bastien bowed his head, took Xena's golden mare, and approached the Amazon party that'd followed them to their camp. He told them the Conqueror's orders and only half of the Amazons followed Bastien to the corral.

The other half of the Amazon party approached the Conqueror and her few men.

"Welcome." The Conqueror half turned and held out her hand to the temporary camp that housed her hoplites and hippeis.

The Amazons neared the ruler, but they were captivated by the sheer size of the small army. They couldn't begin to image how large the Conqueror's entire army was if this was a mere fraction.

"Follow me," Xena ordered. She led the way into the camp, but she took one Amazon's side. "You treated my messenger well, Queen Melosa. I appreciate such small gestures."

Melosa remained passive but honestly replied, "We care for any allies... or possible allies."

"So it would seem," the ruler agreed. She placed her hands between her back and cape. "How do things fair with the warlord?"

"Not well," Melosa admitted. "Yesterday he ambushed some Amazons and Centaurs."

The Conqueror's interests were peaked, and she walked slightly closer. "What happened?"

Melosa hated to tell the story. She wanted more than anything to run her sword through Draco. "There were several Amazon children going out of the territory to meet Centaurs." She hesitated as she carefully followed the ruler through the camp they'd just entered. "It seems these Amazons have made playmates with a few Centaur children."

The Conqueror already knew where the story was headed. "How many were killed?"

Melosa shoved her emotions aside then coldly replied, "Two Amazons were killed, three centaurs, and one Amazon escaped." She peered up at the honorable ruler and added, "Draco holds two girls hostage now."

Xena narrowed her eyes at the news. "Ransom?"

"You would think," the Amazon remarked. "He plans to sell them... for what, we're not sure." She moved closer and softly mentioned, "I must warn you. Draco knows you're here."

The Conqueror revealed a dark smile. "Excellent." That was exactly according to her plans because she didn't want the warlord to know of Borias's position. "We can talk in private here." She approached her tent and opened the flap.

Melosa ordered her Amazons to stay on guard by the tent. She then followed the ruler into the tent. She briefly took in the simple aspects of the living space. She'd expected the ruler to live a luxurious lifestyle, but it was not so. She'd heard two opposite views on the Conqueror's life that circulated on many people's lips. The Conqueror was born from the gods or she was peasant stock. Melosa knew the truth though, and Xena's meager lifestyle was a testament to it.

"Would you like wine?" the ruler inquired.

"I'm fine." Melosa did take a seat after Xena offered it.

Xena also sat, and she could tell Melosa had something on her mind.

Melosa debated whether to reveal Draco's real identity, but it would lead to too many questions. Gabrielle had already instructed her to keep it quiet and that Xena would find out for herself.

"What is Draco after?" The Conqueror tilted her head and waited for the information that'd been eluding her during the entire journey north.

"It's a test," Melosa explained. She sat back in the chair before she explained anymore. "Setup by Ares."

The Conqueror was most interested, and her eyes darkened with her emotions. "The God of War?"

"The same. It seems Draco's ambitions and Ares's desires are in line. Ares isn't too happy about your conquest for Greece."

Xena slowly smirked and questioned, "I've heard he prefers a bloodier way."

"Mmmm." Melosa nodded then crossed her legs at the ankles. "It would seem so, and Draco promised to do such if he has the means."

"And Ares plans to provide the means if Draco proves himself."

The Amazon nodded once and mocked, "The Nation happens to be the sitting rabbit. Ares has given Draco an automaton and promised to give Draco an entire legion of them if he destroys the Nation."

"An automaton?" Xena narrowed her eyes and argued, "They're myth."

"Not anymore." Melosa shifted in her chair to get more comfortable. "Her name is Seven, and her bones have been filled with steel. Ares blessed her with the strength of ten men and fighting skills of ten warriors. And the kicker is that only Draco can control her."

"Formidable," the ruler muttered.

Melosa silently agreed and merely revealed, "We're working on a plan to stop her."

The Conqueror knew not to pry so she held her tongue. She did though inform, "I am here because Draco threatens the Greek Nation. Also Aegae has requested I use any means to stop him."

The Amazon was clearly interested in the information. She didn't know that Aegae and the Conqueror had any relations unless they were new. She continued to speak with Xena for some time, and they worked out relative plans to handle the situation.

When it was Helios high, the Conqueror escorted the Amazons out of the camp. She'd had strong talks with Melosa and expected their relations to turn out well. The Conqueror stood at the edge of the camp and watched the Amazons ride off, yet she noted that Melosa wasn't in the lead. She felt that was strange then a random thought came to mind. She never once heard any Amazon refer to Melosa as queen.

"My liege," the voice came.

Xena tore from her thoughts and turned around. She discovered Bastien was before her and next to him was a messenger. She stepped closer to the pair and waited for the messenger to speak.

The messenger bowed then straightened up after a beat. "Conqueror, I am Myron. I'm from King Cortese's army, but I did not travel from the kingdom." He reached to his side and extracted a rolled up message. "King Cortese is headed this way to assist you with the current troubles with the warlord

Draco."

The Conqueror was inwardly surprised, but she remained passive. She stepped closer to him and accepted the tied scroll from the messenger.

The messenger briefly allowed the ruler to read it, then he spoke again. "King Cortese would be honored to fight in battle with you against Draco. He hopes this will lead to future relations... and plans to stop the Romans."

The Conqueror hesitated from reading the rest of the scroll at the mention of Romans.

The chiliarchèses tensed at his leader's look. He knew, like any hoplite, that the Conqueror despised the Romans and worked hard to keep them out of Greece.

"How far is the king?" Xena had read that King Cortese was on his way to meet her. He was bringing a thousand soldiers too.

"If his journey is on schedule, he should be here in two days." The messenger put his hands behind his back and waited.

Xena was skeptic about the king's sudden appearance in the game now. She rolled up the formal scroll and clutched it tightly. "Bastien, see that Myron has a tent for tonight." She returned her attention to the messenger. "You're welcomed to stay until your king arrives unless you prefer to return to him sooner."

Myron bowed his head then met the ruler's gaze again. "I can only stay the night, Conqueror. King Cortese expects me back with word from you."

"Very well." The Conqueror nodded at the chiliarchèses to find him a tent. She watched them go, then she raised the scroll up. She needed to reread it again then make her decision about his support. She was quite tense and mostly because something just didn't feel quite right. Never in history could Xena recalled so many forces colliding in one spot. She realized she would find out soon what would happen, and that made her smirk.

The Amazon party that'd left the Conqueror's camp were headed back to the Nation. They would take a couple of candlemarks to make it back into Amazon territory. The village was rather busy and especially the queen, who was in her hut with Commander Kaylee and one of the scouts.

"You're sure about this?" Gabrielle hotly urged.

"Yes, my queen." The scout had dim features and held regret in her eyes. "They're moving them southeast. The party that's guarding them is fifty strong and the automaton is with them."

The bard nodded and softly ordered, "Keep tailing them. I want a constant report of their whereabouts."

"Yes, my queen." The scout bowed and left the hut to carry out the orders with her comrades.

"Damn it," Gabrielle growled. She walked away from the stratègos and tried to think. "There's no way we can attack them."

"There's too many," Kaylee conceded. "We'll endanger the girls."

"What in Hades is he up to?" Gabrielle started to pace.

Faolan sat in front of the fireplace. He turned his head right and left as his human friend past him.

"We need to make a move," the queen stated.

The stratègos stepped into the queen's path. "We need to do something, I agree. We just can't endanger these girls lives."

Gabrielle couldn't fight the stratègos's point. She hated how helpless she felt, and she was scared about what would happen to the girls. She pushed her bangs back then stared at her furry friend. "I want to keep a party on alert. If there's any opening we can get, we need to take it."

The stratègos fully agreed. She touched the bard's shoulder. "We'll get them back, Gabrielle." She was more than confident that they would because she didn't like the idea of those girls getting hurt.

The queen nodded and appreciated Kaylee's support. She and the stratègos talked for awhile longer then the stratègos headed off to put together a team. Gabrielle figured that Melosa would be returning soon so she grabbed her staff. She and Faolan left in pursuit of the party. She hoped things went well between Melosa and the Conqueror.

Gabrielle didn't find Melosa or the party had returned just yet. She suspected it wouldn't be long, but she did see her blood sister, Andra, was making a beeline for her. She also recognized Hercules and Iolaus on either side of her. She became curious and met them halfway.

"Hello, sister," the blacksmith greeted. "We were just coming to get you."

The queen slightly grinned and peered up at Hercules. "I see you've found my blacksmith."

Faolan took a seat beside the bard, and he idly listened.

The demi-god chuckled and placed his hands on his hips. He glanced at Andra then back at the small queen. "We think we came up with something to help us fight the automaton."

Gabrielle was interested and insisted on what was the new idea.

"You need to... try it," Andra offered. She led them back to her smithing hut, and she went to her forge. She picked up her blacksmith hammer, and she turned to the queen, Iolaus, and demi-god. She clearly displayed her full muscles that'd developed over the seasons from her work. "The automaton is made of metal and most weapons will break against her."

The queen quickly realized what Andra may have in mind. "Then you can use this?" She peered up at Hercules.

Faolan tilted his head back and studied Hercules. He waited for a response too.

The demi-god hesitated from answering, but the blacksmith took the opening.

Andra stepped up to Gabrielle and replied, "No, you must use it." She held the hammer by the end and top of the shaft. She studied Gabrielle's pensive expression.

"I can protect myself," Hercules reminded. "She won't target Iolaus."

"So that leaves you unprotected," Iolaus summarized. "You'll need something to protect yourself."

The bard wasn't sure despite it made sense. She focused back on her blood sister's stern features. She gave in and stepped forward. She gripped the weapon along the shaft next to Andra's hands. The hammer didn't become heavy until Andra released it.

"By the gods." Gabrielle hefted the hammer, and she wondered how Andra ever managed with it.

"It's my strongest hammer," Andra explained. "It'll be impossible for her to break it." She saw

Gabrielle's concerned features, but she insisted, "It's the only thing, Gabrielle. You need something other than your staff or sword." She waited for some response.

The queen stared at the heavy hammer that could be made a weapon. She couldn't argue that her staff may break or not even harm the automaton. She didn't like the idea of fighting Seven, but it may become her only choice.

"I also may be able to use it to strike her over the river," Hercules voiced.

Faolan gave his low agreement about the hammer.

Gabrielle grumbled at the wolf, but she couldn't argue the points anymore. She sighed and nodded. "Alright." She then focused on her blood sister. "You'll need to teach me how to wield it."

Andra folded her arms over her chest and smirked. "I know how to wield it as a hammer, not a weapon. Maybe between Eponin and I we can teach you a few things."

"That'll do," the bard relented. She handed the hammer back to her sister. "I'll talk to Eponin. Maybe we can begin today." She then glanced about the blacksmith hut. "If you're not too backed up."

"I'm not," the blacksmith promised.

Gabrielle nodded, but she turned to Hercules and Iolaus. "Have you talked to Yakut at all?"

"We were just talking to her this morning," Iolaus mentioned. "She wanted to see you."

The bard couldn't agree more. She peered down at Faolan and thought of her plans for today. She figured she needed to talk to Yakut more than anything. "I'll go see her now."

"Herc and I were going to take our horses... go see the gorge Melosa was talking about."

"Good idea." Gabrielle pulled up her mental map and replied, "You have to ride north... northeast of here."

"About a candlemark?" Hercules inquired.

"Or less," the bard answered. "Be careful out there. Draco seems to be watching our every move."

"We'll be fine," the demi-god promised.

Gabrielle believed it too. She headed out the door with Faolan on her heels. She glanced back at Andra and called, "Thank you, sister."

The blacksmith smiled and watched the group leave her forge. She then went back to work so that she could prepare the Nation with enough weapons and armor for the pending battle. There was already a large stockpile, but they could never have enough arrowheads.

Gabrielle broke away from Hercules and Iolaus. She and Faolan hurried to the temple and hoped to find Yakut there. She was in luck and both Yakut and Priestess Maired greeted her in the temple. Priestess Maired could tell that Gabrielle wanted to speak with Yakut so she excused herself and went to her office.

Yakut started the conversation first. "I just spoke to Hercules and Iolaus. They're fairly confident they can slow Seven down." She faltered some but mentioned, "They said you're the bait."

The queen nodded. She briefly felt Faolan's fur brush her leg, then he sat down. Gabrielle focused back

on the topic. "It's the only way, Yakut."

The shaman could tell there was no way to talk Gabrielle down. She slowly nodded and gave into Gabrielle's sacrifice. She knew she had to do everything she could to release Seven from her invisible bonds to Draco and the gods. She just prayed that Seven, the real Seven, was a woman with a heart.

Yakut finally spoke again and mentioned, "Hercules, Iolaus, and I think it would be best to trap Seven to a certain degree."

"Any ideas?"

"Yes, we think if we can get her into a deep enough hole then Hercules can hold her." Yakut adjusted her headdress then continued with the idea. "It won't stop her, but it should slow her down enough that I can touch her."

"Your two-spirit works through contact?"

"For the most part, yes," the shaman replied. "It's really the only way for me to quickly trace her soul and find out what's happened to it. If I can find it, then I'll attempt to sever it from the gods."

Gabrielle nodded then verbalized the rest of the plans. "If it doesn't work then we need to get her to the river's gorge."

"Yes, exactly." Yakut tilted her head to the right. "Iolaus will try to protect your back with arrows."

"Who knows how well those will work," the bard muttered. "Hercules will be in the hole?"

Yakut nodded. "We think that would be best." She then lowered her voice. "You may want to bring a contingency of Amazons."

The queen considered it then finally shook her head. "I don't want to endanger anymore lives than I have to. Besides that, I need everybody in the battle."

The shaman figured her idea wouldn't work, but Gabrielle smiled at her.

"Thanks for the concern, Yakut." Gabrielle dropped her smile at a more serious note. "Do you think you can help Seven?"

Yakut clenched and unclenched her hands at her sides. "I think so, but there is no guarantee."

The bard nodded but offered, "You don't have to do this, Yakut."

"No," the shaman instantly replied, "I want to try to help her. No god has the right to control anybody."

Gabrielle showed a bitter smile, and she pray to Artemis that it would work. She peered down at the faithful wolf at her side, and she lifted her head. "I pray that Artemis will be with us."

The shaman slowly smiled and promised, "She will be." She grasped the queen's shoulder and squeezed. She removed her hand and carefully asked, "Any word on the girls?"

"I'm afraid so," the bard murmured. "Draco is moving them. A large party of his warriors are taking them southeast of here."

"That's quite close to the Conqueror."

"It is, but nobody will touch them." Gabrielle shook her head. "As long as they have those girls."

"Let me know if I can help," Yakut insisted.

"You already have," Gabrielle promised. She then bid goodbye to her new friend, and she left with Faolan. Gabrielle returned to her hut so she could go over some scrollwork that needed to be approved. It was the prealliance with the Centaurs. Yet when Gabrielle made it to her hut, she became distracted by the sheathed dagger she'd left on her desk.

The queen picked up the dagger from her childhood. She carefully unsheathed it and stared at the ivy design that hadn't faded over time.

Faolan watched his friend observe the dagger. He could still detect that human odor from the knife that wasn't his friend's. He wondered if he'd find out who it belonged to or not.

Gabrielle sheathed the dagger, then she glanced at her quill necklace that dangled on her chest. She'd worn since her mother returned it. She was never questioned about it in the Nation because many assumed it was an Amazonian jewelery. The bard released the charm, and she set the dagger down on the desk again, next to Lammy.

The dagger's hilt protruded out of the sheath. It remained bright in the sunlight for many candlemarks, but by night it took on a golden hue. In the late night the golden glow wore away and changed into a white coating over the silver handle. It wasn't until Helios arose that the handle was easily visible again. The dagger sparkled at its owner when she awoke to the new day.

Queen Gabrielle worked to prepare for the day. She'd hooked her sword across her back, put on her mask, and she almost had her staff when there was a pound on her thatch door. "Come in," she called.

Commander Kaylee entered and closed the door quickly. "My queen, a scout returned this morning."

"What is the news?"

The stratègos darkened and replied, "It's not good. Draco's party met with another party late last night... in some remote woodland."

"By Artemis," the bard murmured.

"It was a trade," Kaylee went on. "The second party took the girls and Draco's group were headed back this way."

Gabrielle touched her forehead and tried to think.

Faolan was resting on the foot of the made bed. He watched the two Amazons with his bright green eyes.

"The scouts are still following the girls?"

"Yes, but the second party is too large to attack."

The bard was afraid of that news. "Who are they?"

"We don't know," Kaylee replied. "They're soldiers though. They're dressed in consistent uniform and carry a crest on their helmets."

Gabrielle shook her head then tried to think of the next step.

"We'll keep following the girls."

The queen nodded then focused on the strategos. "Nobody is to attack Draco's party or warn the Conqueror. If Seven is with them then it's too dangerous."

Commander Kaylee thought the same. She just wasn't sure what the next step would be to save the girls without them being harmed. "Perhaps once we discover who's taking them then we can act."

"I hope so," the bard whispered.

The scouts were a solid day's ride from the Nation. They carefully followed and tracked the movements of the soldiers that'd taken the girls. The wagon that the children had been locked into was now hitched to a horse while the fifty soldiers were on horseback. They marched out of the woods and came onto a road. The road would lead them east mostly.

The soldiers talked amongst themselves, but by nightfall the Amazons expected them to stop. The soldiers didn't, and they marched for another candlemark. Finally the soldiers slowed down when somebody was running down the road towards them.

The runner stopped in front of the party. The moon reflected the same crest on his helmet. "There were no problems?"

"No," the front soldier replied. "Is the king expecting us?"

"He is." The runner turned and ordered, "This way." He guided the large party off the road and into the woods.

The Amazon scouts carefully maneuvered through the woods and tried to tag behind the party. The four Amazons stopped after awhile, and three Amazons dismounted. The three on foot continued to track the soldiers, and they came out of the woods into a large open field. They were shocked by what they discovered.

Medora, one of the scouts, remained in the tree. She was dumbstruck. "It's another army."

"Who's though?" Teresa asked. She was down on the ground and observed the countless campfires.

Page was on the other side of the tree, opposite of Teresa. "I've seen that flag." She narrowed her eyes at the flying flag over the regal tent of the leader. "I use to live in that kingdom before I joined the Nation."

Medora gazed over the tree's branch and questioningly studied Page.

Page shook her head then finally stated, "It's King Cortese." She looked between her fellow Amazons. "He has an obsession with slaves... he wants the most rare ones."

"Rare?" Teresa shook her head, and her brow furrowed.

"Yes," Page whispered, "ones from Chin or to the Land of the Rising Sun." She pressed her palm against the tree's trunk. "The most beautiful ones. Or slaves from Egypt." She hesitated then angrily whispered, "And especially Amazons."

Medora shook her head. "But why is he out here? Where's he headed?"

"I don't know," Page murmured. "He must have a thousand men with him."

"We better get word back to the queen," Teresa reminded. "She'll need to know."

The scouts backed away from their location and before they were spotted. They made it back to the

scout that waited for them with the horses. Page volunteered to make the run back to the Nation and report their findings. She'd climbed onto her horse and went back to the road. It would take her all night to make it back to the Nation. Page, like all Amazons, feared what would happen to the girls soon if something wasn't done to save them. Page knew that King Cortese's reputation as a slave owner, which many people overlooked because he was praised as a just and kind ruler otherwise.

To be continued.