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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 11**

"King Cortese?" The Amazon Queen repeated in worry. "No, it can't... be him."

Page felt her shoulders slump, but it was all true. "I'm sorry, my queen." She remained rooted near the queen's pacing form.

Gabrielle stopped behind her chair, which was at the head of the meeting table. She studied her three military officers that'd joined her and Page for the update on the girls.

"Who is King Cortese?" the Commander Kaylee prompted.

Page turned her head to the left and met the stratègos's gaze. "King Cortese rules the Macedon Kingdom."

The stratègos straightened up at the news. "He's the king of the Macedon Kingdom?" She sighed inwardly because that could mean trouble.

The polemarchos then posed a question. "He and Draco must be working together?"

Gabrielle didn't have the answer, but she turned her head to the scout. She first gripped the back of her chair and asked, "You're sure it was his army?"

"Yes, my queen." Page faltered, but she quickly explained, "I didn't realize it until I saw it for myself. The flags being flown over his tent were the sixteen rays... the golden starburst."

The bard licked her lips and whispered, "The Star of Vergina?"

Page nodded her head. "The soldiers' helmets have that symbol stamped on their helmets. It is King Cortese."

"How big is the army?" Commander Kaylee spoke up.

"I would say a thousand strong, stratègos."

Gabrielle straightened up from leaning against the chair some. She turned to Page and ordered, "Go back to the army. I want you and the other scouts to track the army as well as the girls. I want a daily report on their whereabouts and the girls' condition."

"Yes, my queen." Page headed to the door, but the queen's voice stopped her.

"Be safe, Page."

The scout nodded then hurried out of the meeting room into the hall of the administration hut.

"Do you know much about King Cortese?" the polemarchos questioned.

Queen Gabrielle pulled out her chair, but she was careful not to catch Faolan's tail. She took her seat then answered Officer Galatea's question. "I do. He's a favored king throughout Macedon." She folded her arms onto the table and leaned against them. "My villages, Potidaea and Articia, fall under his kingdom."

Commander Kaylee tilted her head and read through the queen. "Yet you don't like him."

Gabrielle licked her lips and met the stratègos's gaze. "King Cortese... he has a history of keeping rare slaves."

Eponin quickly understood what bothered the queen. She was the only Amazon in the room that knew about Gabrielle's history as a slave.

"Rare slaves?" Officer Galatea tried.

"Yes," Gabrielle started, "he likes slaves from exotic lands such as Egypt, Chin, Gaul, and the like." She hesitated and also added, "And he likes Amazons."

"I have never heard of this king," the stratègos remarked.

The queen switched her attention to Kaylee. "You're from another Nation, stratègos. You wouldn't know... nor is the information exactly public." She sighed and further mentioned, "The capitol is Pella, which is a day's ride from Aegae... maybe a bit more."

"I wonder what his intentions are," Eponin murmured.

"It's hard to say," the stratègos replied.

"If he was headed here to help us, he would have contacted us." The polemarchos leaned forward and looked to the queen. "Perhaps we should contact him about the girls."

"No, it's not safe." Commander Kaylee turned her head to the queen. "There's not telling who's side he's on."

"Then how are we going to free the girls?" Officer Galatea was short on patience. She was already frustrated with the fact that the girls had been kidnapped. Now nothing seems to be happening to save them. "We can't just sit around. We need a plan."

"Officer Galatea, at ease before you sprain something," Commander Kaylee tried to warn. Her steel blue eyes flashed at the polemarchos.

"We can't just leave them there," the polemarchos hotly fought.

The stratègos darkened at how Officer Galatea would not calm down. She turned her head to the polemarchos and curtly stated, "There are three things to remember about being an Amazon officer: keep your feathers on, go down with the Nation... and never abandon a member of your Nation." She leaned closer to Galatea. "We will get them back, officer and when it is the right moment."

The polemarchos took a deep breath that calmed her finally. "You're right, stratègos. I apologize."

"At ease," the stratègos softly spoke. She turned back to the queen.

"We do need to develop some plan," the weapons master offered.

Queen Gabrielle bit her lip, and she studied the weapons master. She thought back on the many teachings and lectures she'd received from Eponin over the seasons. She was now a highly trained Amazon like many others in the Nation, however, she had one thing different about herself than any other Amazon. She considered it her greatest weakness, but now it just may be her greatest opportunity.

"I'll rescue the girls," Queen Gabrielle clearly claimed.

Eponin quickly figured out what the bard may have in mind.

The polemarchos dropped her mouth open.

"Excuse me, my queen, " the stratègos interrupted, "but have you lost your feathers?"

"Not at all." Gabrielle could tell that the stratègos and polemarchos were about to fight her left and right. She held up her hand when their mouths opened in unison. She then decided to cut to the chase so she shoved her chair back. Gabrielle climbed to her feet, turned until her right hip faced the officers, and she carefully wiggled her leathers down far enough.

The two officers leaned forward and narrowed their eyes at a symbol that was marked on the queen's hip. Commander Kaylee was the first to realize what it was then the polemarchos dropped her jaw. Gabrielle moved her leathers back up and hid her slavery brand again.

The stratègos spoke first. "How long now?"

The queen kept her self respect, and she remained calm. "I was thirteen when I was taken into slavery." She returned to her seat. "That's not the issue though."

"It's risky, Gabrielle," the weapons master cut in.

Officer Galatea looked between the queen and weapons master then it dawned on her like it did the stratègos. She shook her head and questioned, "You want to rescue the girls? Pose as a slave?"

Gabrielle slowly nodded her head. "It's a safe route of action, and I'm the only person qualified to go undercover as a slave." She swallowed then whispered, "I have the training and understanding."

"And what if King Cortese recognizes you?" Commander Kaylee was fired up at the idea. She didn't like the risks involved. "It's possible he and Draco are working together."

"If that's the case, then I need to go now because time is wasting." Gabrielle looked between her officers. "He won't recognize me, and my brand will win him over."

"How will you escape? And with the girls?" Kaylee demanded. "There are too many variables." She grabbed at the table because she wanted to shake the queen. "If we lose our queen then-"

"Then the Nation will go on," the bard insisted. "You will go on." She locked eyes with the stratègos then glanced at the other two officers. She silenced her own fears about returning to a life she'd forgotten. She honestly whispered, "This isn't about the Nation... or the queen. This is about saving two girls' lives before something happens to them." She swallowed and shook her head despite old emotions surfaced in her. "And gods, I know exactly what can happen to them." She saw she was winning over the officers despite it was hard to accept. "I'm the only chance they've have right now."

Commander Kaylee slowly moved her head in agreement. She just prayed to Artemis that it would be okay and bring back the queen and the girls.

Queen Gabrielle saw she had everybody's agreement. She quickly thought out the new plans, and she softly spoke. "What we discuss in here now is to remain here." She studied her officer's worried features, but she continued anyway. "I'll prepare today and try to enter the army camp tonight. Commander Kaylee, you are in charge until my return." She hesitated and licked her lips. "If I do not return then the Mask of Melosa is to be returned. I will speak to Councilor Masika about the finalization of the alliance with the Centaurs. She and Ambassador Majorie are to handle it."

"What of the Conqueror?"

Gabrielle thought it out then nodded at the stratègos. "I want Melosa to continue to work the relations. Be sure to monitor her so that nothing goes wrong. Ambassador Majorie may support Melosa so that nothing does go wrong. The Conqueror is not to know of my reign."

The stratègos, like many others, did not agree to Gabrielle's choice, but she had to respect it. "As you wish, my queen." She then mentioned, "Officer Galatea and I will continue the preparations for war."

"Good." The queen looked to Eponin. "How is Andra doing with her forging?"

"We are well supplied, my queen." The weapons master held confidence. "We are well prepared for battle."

"Then it sounds like everything is mostly in order." Queen Gabrielle felt satisfied for the most part. Now she just needed to work out her own plans to save the girls. She wrapped up the discussion with

her military officers, then she left the room to find Masika.

The bard spoke to the councilor for awhile then afterwards, she and Faolan headed back to the hut. Gabrielle had explained to the head councilor the plans to get the girls. Masika wanted to argue them, but she knew the queen would do it despite her warnings. It was sun high when Gabrielle went into her hut, and she paced to think of her plans to enter King Cortese's camp.

Faolan sat in front of the fireplace. He tilted his head and called, "Rrrr."

The bard stopped and faced her loyal friend. "You're going to have to stay here, Faolan. You know that, right?"

The wolf hung out his tongue.

Gabrielle frowned because she worried the wolf would follow her. She and Faolan hardly ever separated, and she was quite use to Faolan being at her side. She tried not to think about that aspect right now. Her major concern was getting into King Cortese's camp.

The Amazon Queen stopped pacing, and she whispered, "I need to be a slave again." She inhaled deeply then pulled out her darker memories from her childhood. She slowly turned her head to the right and stared at Lammy on the desk. She then lowered her eyes to the sheathed ivy dagger.

Gabrielle suddenly filled with ideas for her plans. She needed to be a slave again, yes. She darted over to her desk and scooped up the sheathed dagger. She unsheathed the shiny blade then gripped it tightly in her right hand. She held the sheath with her left hand.

"This is going to hurt," the bard whispered. She brought the blade's tip up to her left arm near her bicep. She clenched the sheath more, then she pressed the tip harder against her skin.

The dagger cut through the soft skin, and it traveled across the Amazon's bicep until it was on the inside of her arm. Left behind was a trail of dark blood.

Gabrielle bared her teeth, but she didn't scream. She then moved the dagger to her lower arm, and she cut down her arm until she met the top of her wrist. She watched her blood oozy down her arm, but she ignored it and knelt down. She quickly slashed her right leg with the dagger and made one more wound.

Faolan had watched in worry. He softly called, "Rrruh."

The Amazon sadly smiled at the wolf. "It has to be believable." She then hurried into the washroom where she had some medical supplies. She hastily wrapped her wounds so that the bleeding would stop soon. She then washed the blade clean of her blood.

Gabrielle placed the sheathed dagger back on the desk. She then raised her hand up to her hair, and she touched her Amazon feathers. "These will have to go." She was prepared to pull them out, but another idea came to mind. She turned her head to the white wolf. "What's your opinion about short hair, Faolan?"

Faolan twisted his head the other way. He then wagged his tail across the floorboards.

"My thoughts exactly," the queen murmured. She then quickly untied the leather thong from her right arm. She went to her dresser and dug around for her old clothes she'd wear in Articia or at the Academy. She hoped her muscular body would still fit in them.

Gabrielle quickly unhooked her sheathed sword from her back. She removed her mask and set it with

her sword on the desk. Next she stripped of her Amazon leathers and put on her peasant clothes. Amazingly the clothes still fit her fine. Now all she needed was to catch her sister. First, she took off the peasant clothes and put her leathers back on so nobody would be overly suspicious.

"Come on, boy." The queen opened the door, and she left the hut with Faolan. She hurried across the village and made it to the blacksmith's hut. She knocked on the open door as she entered.

Andra was bent over, and she poured liquid iron into a mold for arrowheads. She'd spotted Gabrielle, but she finished her work first. She then set the hot bowl aside and removed her work gloves. "Hello, Gabrielle."

The bard smiled at her blood sister as she came over. "I need a favor, Andra."

The blacksmith set her gloves down then approached her sister. "Does it have anything to do with this?" She pointed at the wrapped wounds on the bard's arm.

"In a way, yes." Gabrielle mentally cursed herself for not thinking about that part. Oh well it was done now. She then quickly explained what was going on and that she needed Andra need to keep her silence.

Andra had a hard time agreeing, yet she knew that Gabrielle was telling her a lot since she was the queen. Then Andra discovered what it was that Gabrielle needed her to do, and she was stupefied. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," the bard insisted. "Can you do it now?"

The blacksmith glanced at her cooling arrowheads in the mold. "Let me just pour water on these, then we'll get started." She grabbed a wood bucket and poured the water over the orange arrowheads. She moved her head out of the way when the steam rose up.

"Alright." Andra came over and pointed at a chair. "Sit down." She then hunted around for a sharp dagger and a pair of scissors that she'd made herself seasons ago. She set her tools down on the nearby table next to Gabrielle. She first removed the three feathers in the queen's hair then set them on the table. She grabbed the scissors.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and tried not to think about what her sister was going to do.

Andra collected a lock of hair, but she hesitated. "You're sure about this?"

"Just... do it," the queen urged, "before I do change my mind."

The blacksmith softly laughed, but she went to work at her task. She spent a half a candlemark or so. She'd first cut away much of Gabrielle's longer hair, and she'd toss the pieces to the floor. A few times she managed to throw a few locks onto Faolan, who wasn't too appreciative.

Gabrielle was nervous, but she just kept her eyes closed and thought about her plans to get into King Cortese's camp. She had some ideas already, but the hard part would be getting the girls out safely. She finally opened her eyes when Andra said she was finished.

The blacksmith rooted around her forge for a small mirror that she knew she had someplace. She finally dug it up and came to her sister's side.

The bard took the mirror and prepared for what she didn't expect. She sucked in her breath and stared at what seemed to be an older version of herself.

Andra smirked and stated, "I think that put five Helical Rising on you." She smirked at Gabrielle's awestruck features. "I cut well, don't I?"

Gabrielle played with her short, shabby hairstyle with her freehand. She was amazed, and she actually started to like it. She brushed her bangs off to the side then grinned. "Not bad, Andra. I may tip you."

The blacksmith laughed and took the mirror back. "I only accept dinars, my queen." She took her tools too and put everything back in its home. "Don't forget your feathers."

The queen collected the three prized feathers. "I don't know how I'll wear these again."

Andra came back over and frowned at the bard's words. "We'll figure out something later."

Gabrielle nodded then peered down at Faolan with a smirk. "What you think, boy?" She smiled at the wolf.

Faolan hung out his tongue then stood up onto all four. He unexpectedly shook his body, which caused the hair from Gabrielle's haircut to fly all over.

"Faolan!" Andra hollered. She pointed a finger at the wolf. "I'll make wolf meat out of you!"

Faolan showed his teeth, but he didn't growl at all. He was use to the blacksmith's idle threats, and he loved to receive them too.

Gabrielle stood off to the side and chuckled at the pair. "Come on, Fao." She smiled at her sister. "Thank you, Andra." She and Faolan quickly left before the blacksmith became anymore annoyed. The bard made her hike back to her hut so she finished getting prepared. After a beat, she realized many passing Amazons kept staring at her like she was from another tribe. She just smiled at them and received very nice smiles back.

Gabrielle entered her hut and closed the door after Faolan made it. She set her Amazon feathers down on her desk beside Lammy and the ivy dagger. She then hastened to change herself into Gabrielle, the slave, before she became an Amazon. She prayed though that nobody would think too much about her muscular built, however, she suspect that King Cortese wouldn't mind it at all. After Gabrielle changed into her old peasant clothes, she prepared a few items she'd need on her ride to King Cortese's camp. She set her Amazon sword, staff, and an empty satchel for food along with a waterskin. She figured a small Amazon party would join her and go to the scouts, who were tracking King Cortese's army.

Gabrielle switched from her low cut boots and dug out a pair of worn sandals she use to wear at Cornelio's house. When she bent forward to unlace her boots, her quill necklace fell out of her top and dangled in midair. The bard hesitated and straightened up then grabbed her beloved necklace.

Gabrielle internally fought with herself. She heavily sighed, which caused Faolan to lift his head off the floor. She reached behind and grasped the small clasp at the back of her neck, yet she faltered from actually unhooking it.

Faolan turned his head and locked eyes with Gabrielle.

The queen held still and fought again with herself. She stared at Faolan and wished he could voice his opinion about whether to removed the necklace or not.

Faolan hung his mouth open then gave a low whine before he softly barked.

Gabrielle closed her eyes tightly, and then slowly her hands fell from her neck. "I can't," she murmured and opened her eyes. She knelt down and continued to unlace her boots. "Fao, you're going to have to

stay here in the village."

Faolan yawned in response.

The bard grumbled and finished putting on her sandals. She straightened up and curtly demanded, "You have to stay."

Faolan twisted his head to the right and stuck out his tongue.

Gabrielle glared at the wolf, who seemed to have selective hearing at times. She shook her head then scooped up her belongings. She needed to hurry so that she could find King Cortese's camp.

Within half of a candlemark, Queen Gabrielle was astride her stallion, and she had an escort that rode out of the gates with her. Of course Faolan would not leave his friend's side so he ran hard along side Torqueo, that silly horse. Gabrielle had hoped that the nonstop gallop to King Cortese's army would wear out Faolan, but he never once broke away. Gabrielle couldn't imagine how Faolan managed to run so fast for such a long stretch of time, and she wasn't sure if it was good or bad.

At sunset, the Amazon party met up with the scouts that'd tracked King Cortese's army. The army had marched west all day and most likely tomorrow they would be close to the Aegae, the Centaurs, the Conqueror, and the Amazon Nation. After dusk, Gabrielle joined Medora and Page near the parameter of the camp. Medora had been in charge of watching the girls as best as she could from her far away position. The girls mostly remained in the jail wagon, but they were released a few times for various reasons. Medora had a feeling that King Cortese would try to have them trained soon.

Page was on the queen's right side, or as close as she could be since Faolan was between them. She touched the queen's shoulder and asked, "Are you sure about this, my queen?"

Gabrielle brushed back her blond hair and whispered, "For the third time in my life, I am sure of something and saving these girls is one of them."

Medora guessed that one of the times was when Gabrielle challenged Melosa. She couldn't decide what the other thing could be.

"I should go," the bard whispered. She then lowered her gaze to Faolan and narrowed her eyes at him. "You need to stay, boy."

Faolan dropped his ears back then his eyes saddened.

"I'm serious," Gabrielle hotly whispered. She leaned down to him, kissed him on the head, and whispered, "I love you, Fao." She straightened up and looked between her Amazons. "If anything is to happen, I want one of you to hurry back to Commander Kaylee." She then hesitated and further added, "The main priority is to save the girls." She paused, and her voice lowered. "My safety is at the bottom of the list. Is that clear?"

"My queen-

"Is that clear?" the queen cut off.

Medora glanced at Page, but she slowly nodded despite she wouldn't fully follow the orders, ever.

"Yes, my queen," Page curtly replied.

"Good." Gabrielle took a deep breath and picked out where she would enter the camp. "Be safe, Amazons." With no other words, she quickly darted through the woods and went around the army's

camp.

Faolan stood on all fours and took a step towards Gabrielle. He could watch her for much longer than the Amazons because of his excellent eyesight. Yet once she was gone from his view, he unexpectedly howled with his muzzle pointed towards the dark sky.

Gabrielle felt the sweat rolled down her neck, and she breathed heavily. She moved silently through the woods as her mentor taught her seasons ago. She was finally on the opposite side of the camp from where her Amazons were located. She knelt down beside a tree and studied the busy camp.

The queen made her final choices. First she ripped some grass free and tossed it aside. Next she rubbed her hands in the soft soil until her hands were fairly dark. She quickly rubbed the dirt onto her cheek, forehead, and over her feet. Then she tousled her short hair so that she looked like a wreck. The last touch was she ripped her right sleeve some as well as her brown skirt. Now it was time to put her bardic skills to full use so she stood up and inhaled sharply.

"Here goes," she whispered. She broke into a full run and aimed for the army that was unsuspecting. She went several hundred paces, and she knew she'd passed the parameter. Any heartbeat could mean a patrol guard could spot her and attack. She now started to look back over her shoulder.

Gabrielle didn't watch her footing and made her run more frantic. She heard low footsteps coming for her, but she gave a low cry.

"Who goes there?" a soldier hollered. "Stop there!"

The bard switched her direction some and tried to get away from the soldier.

"Stop!" the soldier hotly ordered. "Intruder!" He chased after the young woman, who suddenly tried to run another direction to get away from him.

"Leave me alone!" Gabrielle begged. "Please!" She slowed her run down so that the guard would advance on her.

"Stop!" The soldier noted the woman was unarmed so he didn't bother to unsheathe his sword. He moved faster and came up on the woman's heels. "I gotcha now." He suddenly jumped for her.

Gabrielle screamed when she hit the ground with the man on top. She kicked and screamed more. She now heard a few other voices, and it was fellow soldiers coming to help.

"I got her," the soldier said from his spot on top of Gabrielle. He grabbed Gabrielle by the wrists and hauled her up. "Come on, girl. Get up. There's no use running now."

"Please, no," the bard urged. "Gods please." She kept struggling against him, then she urged tears to show. "No, no, no... I won't go back."

"What's all your babbling?" the soldier demanded. He jerked her closer, and his comrades got a hold of her too.

"I won't go back to him," Gabrielle hotly yelled.

"Hades she's pretty beat up," another soldier comment from his position a few steps away.

"You a slave, girl?"

The bard froze then frantically shook her head. "No, no. I'm-"

"She's a slave, I bet," the first soldier decided. "Kiril, check her hip."

Kiril was struggling to control Gabrielle from the right side. He snarled, "Hold still, girl." He actually managed to push her skirt's belt down away. He clicked his tongue and declared, "A branded slave."

"No," Gabrielle shoved Kiril off more than she planned.

Kiril growled and jumped back at the Amazon. He grabbed her again and held her tighter. "King Cortese likes his slaves wild too."

"It sure is his luck lately," the third soldier mentioned.

"Let's take her back." Kiril and the first soldier drug Gabrielle through the rest of the woods and towards the camp.

"We should put her in with those Amazons girls. She'll fit right in."

"Amazons?" Gabrielle was panicked and shook her head. "Gods, no." She struggled again but Kiril had enough of her. Suddenly Gabrielle's temple was hit hard, and she became an unconscious heap.

The soldiers worked together and carried the branded slave into the camp, which caught many other soldiers' attention. They took her through the camp and finally came up to the wagon. One of the wagon guards was surprised, yet he grinned and unlocked the wagon's door. He made sure that the two Amazons didn't try to get out. The two soldiers tossed the unconscious slave into the wagon then hastily locked up the wagon again.

Amarice grabbed the bars and yelled, "Let us out of here, you bastards."

"Shut up," the wagon guard ordered.

The patrol soldiers laughed together and walked off.

Cliona knelt beside the unconscious woman and carefully turned her over. Over the seasons, she'd become a fairly qualified healer, and she planned to check on this woman. She rested the woman on her back and started at the top of her body, yet Cliona faltered.

Amarice stilled gripped the bars and glared at the soldiers. She sighed, turned, and gazed down at her friend and the unconscious woman. It took a few beats, but the familiar face registered in her memory. She sucked in her breath then whispered, "By Artemis, it's the-"

Cliona was extremely fast. She'd sprung to her feet and covered the other Amazon's mouth. She leaned in until her lips almost brushed Amarice's ear. "Don't say it. If they find out it's her..." She couldn't finish her thought and only added, "She's here to save us." She withdrew and watched Amarice nod her head. "Help me with her."

Amarice knelt down on one side of the queen while Cliona took the other side. She and Cliona silently worked together to stop the fresh bleeding on the queen's head.

The young healer had ripped off a long band of cloth from the queen's brown skirt. She tied it around the queen's head and hoped it would help stop the bleeding. She then checked on the rest of the queen's body, and she noted the recent slash marks. She couldn't imagine what'd happened, but the queen seemed fairly beat up. If this was a rescue mission, it seemed the queen needed more rescuing than them.

Afterwards, Cliona and Amarice could only sit down in the straw and wait to see if the queen would

awaken. Through the night, the Amazon Queen remained motionless and silent. Cliona constantly checked on the queen's pulse and was happy to find that the bleeding at stopped. She hoped by dawn that Gabrielle would be up.

Cliona's estimation had be fairly exact. The bard's movements started small with her hands then her breathing deepened. Finally, Gabrielle slowly opened eyes, and she took in the wood bars over her head. Her memory hastily kicked into gear.

Cliona knelt beside Gabrielle and touched her shoulder. "My..." She faltered and corrected herself. "How do you feel?"

The bard appreciated that Cliona stopped herself in time. "I've had better, and I've had worse." She went to touch her pounding forehead, yet the healer halted her attempt.

"It's best to leave it alone for now."

Amarice knelt beside Cliona. She brushed back her fire red hair and glanced at Cliona.

The young healer spotted a guard watching them. She quickly focused back on Gabrielle. "I'm Cliona." She signaled the other Amazon. "This is Amarice."

The bard only needed a beat to catch on, and she offered a sad smile. "The name's Cassandra."

Cliona tilted her head and read deeper into the queen's expression, but it was true.

Amarice swallowed and saw the queen focus on her. She saw the questioning in the queen's eyes so very slowly, Amarice nodded her agreement.

Gabrielle had Amarice's agreement. She now returned her attention to Cliona and waited.

The young healer bowed her head some. She knew that the name, Cassandra, was a code for an undercover rescue. She feared that the queen's attempt at a rescue was misplaced because she saw how banged up the queen looked. She lifted her head and saw that the queen expected her to acknowledge the rescue mission.

Gabrielle tilted her head at the concerned healer. She ebbd Cliona's fears by adding, "I'm from Aegae."

Cliona ran through her memory bank and recalled that Aegae was another code word for backup. She somewhat felt better because that most likely meant that an Amazon party was watching them. She then sensed the sheer determination from the queen, and she finally agreed. Cliona bowed her head.

Gabrielle felt relief pass through her that Cliona agreed. She now started to get up to her feet.

"Let us help you," Cliona insisted. She and Amarice helped the queen up to her feet.

"Yes, I feel somewhat weak," Gabrielle lied. She faked a stumble, but Amarice helped her. "Thank you."

The guard had watched, and he chuckled then turned around. He idly listened to the boring chitchat between the women.

"You two look like Amazons," Gabrielle mentioned. She leaned against the bars and scanned over the young women's muscular bodies.

"We are," Amarice confirmed. "We're from the Macedonian Nation."

"That's not far, is it?" Gabrielle touched her forehead but dropped her hand. "I'm not really from Aegae... my master is though."

Cliona brushed her brown hair back. She encouraged the conversation. "You're a runaway slave?"

The bard bowed her head and toyed with her dirty, blue top. "Yes." She licked her lips and closed her eyes. "I was born in Germania." She told her made up story, but she saw her real childhood flashed in front of her. "My home was attacked when I was just a child. I was taken into slavery." She opened her eyes and gradually lifted her head.

Cliona was silent, and she felt as if the story was more real than fake. She glanced at Amarice.

Amarice frowned at Gabrielle's story. She had to admit that the queen was certainly an excellent bard. "We're sorry, Kassandra."

Gabrielle shook her head then insisted, "I am what I am." She pushed off the wagon's bars. "I cannot escape my slavery." She went to the wagon's locked door. She poked her face through the bars. "It's all I'll ever know."

The guard softly laughed and muttered, "The woes of a slave."

The Amazon Queen glanced over at his back. She didn't exactly smirk, but a bright glint showed in her eyes. She couldn't wait to make that guard eat his words.

Amarice folded her arms over her chest. She didn't resist her smug look.

Cliona, however, was concerned because she couldn't imagine how the queen would keep up the slave charade and get them out safely. She truly hoped that Queen Gabrielle had an excellent plan up her sleeves. One thing was obvious to Cliona, and it was the simple fact that Queen Gabrielle had a slave's profile down perfectly. Cliona planned to cross her fingers and pray to Artemis for this to work out okay.

**To be continued.**