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Copyright: Many of these characters do not belong to me, and we know which ones do not. I, however, own the plot and other certain characters.

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 14

"How do you feel?" Andra visually inspected her sister's body.

Gabrielle had her back to her sister while she worked her leather halter top. She finally had it hooked into place, and she checked her plain leather skirt. She turned around and finally replied, "I'm fine, sister."

The blacksmith folded her arms then shot a doubtful look. "You know, I did hear about how you escaped the camps."

The queen padded over to where her boots rested by her dresser. She slipped her feet in then knelt. She slowly laced them while she spoke. "Is there a point?" She didn't look at her sister.

Andra narrowed her eyes at the queen. She knew the story about the rescue mission, and she knew Gabrielle's past with the Conqueror. "What happened?"

Gabrielle sighed and switched to her right boot's lace. "I warned her, and she helped me escape."

"Xena you mean?" the blacksmith encouraged.

The bard stood up and faced her sister. "Yes." She tilted her head and asked, "What do you want to hear, Andra? That she's just like the girl I knew when we were kids?"

Andra sighed and neared her young sister. She hadn't seen this much defense from her sister in a long time. "Gabrielle, I'm just concerned."

Gabrielle moved away and went to her desk. "There's nothing to be concerned about." She then heard a snort, but it wasn't from Andra. She turned her head to the right and glared at the white wolf, who'd been silent earlier. "Don't start either, Fao."

Andra saw that her and the wolf, for once, were in agreement about Gabrielle. She eased over to her sister and held her by the shoulders. She studied hardened green eyes. "Tell me what happened."

The bard looked off to her right and stared out the open window over her desk. She finally met Andra's intent gaze. "I tried to sneak into her tent so I could warn her about Draco." She didn't want to divulge anything about King Cortese. She'd hardly had a chance to speak to Commander Kaylee about it. "She actually managed to catch me because she thought I was a spy for King Cortese." She watched Andra's visible cringe. "Anyway, she figured out it was me."

Andra released the bard's shoulders. She turned her head to the right as Gabrielle moved away. "Then what happened?"

The bard shook her head. "I told her what's been happening. She's fairly angry to know it's Dan from Amphipolis." She kept her back to Andra, and she bowed her head. "She's also angry at me for never contacting her."

The blacksmith sadly sighed, yet she neared her friend. "Do you blame her?" She made her way around the bard and stood before her.

Gabrielle lifted her head. "No." She shook her head and sighed. "I'm just as angry." She regarded her sister and questioned, "Why did I do this?"

"You have the answer, Gabrielle." Andra cocked her head and observed the changing emotions in the bard. "We all make mistakes, sister. What's important though is that we learn from them and do our best to correct them." After Gabrielle nodded, she further insisted, "I don't believe Xena is some cold, dead woman. I also don't think she's lost all the qualities about her that you once loved." She waited a beat and posed, "Have you lost the qualities that Xena loved about you?"

The queen licked her lips and whispered, "I think I have." She felt her eyes sting, but she refused to cry anymore. "She and I were loyal and dedicated to each other... the friendship. I failed her where she never failed me."

"How?" the blacksmith fought.

Gabrielle's frustrations were mounting against her sister's stark defense for Gabrielle's silence.

Gabrielle was angry at herself and nothing would change it. "I should have contact her, Andra. I never did it, and she spent so many seasons looking for me."

"You didn't know that."

The bard bitter laughed and walked away from her sister. She went to her desk. "I knew several seasons ago that Xena was seeking me." She jerked open a desk drawer, and she pulled out an old leather journal. She came back to Andra and held it up. "This is Xena's journal from when she was a pirate on the Mediterranean. She was trying to gather money and power to overthrow the slaver that had me. She was also keeping Amphipolis and Potidaea safe from being ransacked again."

Andra sadly smiled at the good and bad of what Gabrielle told her.

Gabrielle didn't feel the same as Andra. She continued to reveal what rested inside the worn pages of the journal. "In the latter part of her journal, she meets a Roman... a Roman nobleman called Julius Caesar."

The blacksmith was instantly struck hard by the famous name. "By the gods," she whispered.

The bard lowered the journal and carefully neared the blacksmith. "Her entries started to change at that point, Andra. She started writing about conquest, power... greatness. She even wrote rough ideas on how to take down Athens, Sparta, and Corinth." She shook her head and sadly whispered, "They were some of the darkest things I've ever read. Things I would have never thought Xena would consider... yet there were the words before my eyes and in her handwriting."

Andra swallowed at the emotions that flowed off her sister. "Gabrielle..."

The queen stood in front of the blacksmith again. She held up the book some and studied the plain cover. "I read these pages, and I realized this wasn't the Xena I grew up with. This isn't the Xena I love." She lowered the journal again. "And I've always feared meeting this dark woman that was once my friend."

Andra completely understood, but she still saw another side to it. "You don't know whether the Xena you knew is truly dead or not." She hesitated then recalled a few facts that she and anybody else knew. "She is conquering, but she does so with honor. Look at how well southern Greece does now."

"I know," Gabrielle whispered. "She's trying hard to destroy slavery too."

Andra nodded and faintly smiled. "She's liable to outlaw it by the time she conquers all of Greece."

The bard silently agreed. She went to her desk and tucked away the journal. "Yes, and I don't understand why." She came back to Andra after she'd closed the desk drawer. "Caesar eventually captured Xena and her crew. The rumor was that she and her crew were nailed to crosses and left to their final candlemarks."

The blacksmith came over to the foot of the bed and sat. She noted Faolan coming over to her so she bent forward and pet him. "How did she survive?"

"I don't know honestly." Gabrielle sighed and dipped her head from her thoughts. "There was nothing about her until she came to the Thrace Nation."

Andra hadn't heard anything about this. She was baffled and stared at the quiet queen.

The bard licked her lips and shook her head. "Melosa said Xena had been banned from the Thrace Nation by Queen Cyane."

"Does Yakut know of Xena then?"

"Yes." Gabrielle saw how Andra found all the information so intriguing. "Yakut befriended Xena eight seasons ago. They grew fairly close, but Xena had plans to take over the Thrace Nation. Her plans went a little shaky when she met up with the Nation's shaman."

"Yakut wasn't the shaman?"

"No, actually it was an older Amazon named Alti." Gabrielle came over to the bed and sat beside her sister. She studied Faolan while she spoke. "Alti convinced Xena that together they could paint Greece in blood and rule everything."

"Gods," Andra murmured. "Then what changed?"

Gabrielle bit her lower lip. "Xena made a mistake and Queen Cyane caught her. Yakut then freed Xena before she could be punished."

Andra was shocked and suddenly stopped petting Faolan.

The wolf whined and nudged the blacksmith's hand with his cold nose. Once she started to pet him again, he sighed happily.

"After that, Xena killed Alti and marched her army to Sparta." Gabrielle peered up at Andra. "We all know the rest of the story."

"So..." Andra stared up at the thatch ceiling and tried to gather her thoughts. "There's so many seasons that there's no word on her?"

"Yes, nobody seems to know what happened to her." Gabrielle shrugged. "I can't imagine how she got off a cross and returned seasons later with more skills than an Amazon Nation."

The Amazon considered it then finally stated, "She has many skills." She tilted her head and reminded, "But she's changed, Gabrielle. I don't think it's been for the worst either." She looked deep into the bard's eyes and stated, "She fights for a stronger, equal Greece. It's obvious how proud she is of the Greek Nation."

"I know." Gabrielle bitterly smiled and nodded once. "I could see how hurt she was, Andra."

"Because you never contacted her?"

"Yes," the bard whispered. "If I truly thought it wouldn't have bothered her, then I wouldn't have been so scared to tell her. I suppose some part of me always hoped the same Xena was inside of her." She closed her eyes and lowered her head. "I failed her, Andra." She opened her eyes and revealed the glistening. "I failed myself."

The blacksmith sat up from her bent position. She collected Gabrielle's hands into hers. "Sister," she softly called the bard back to the present. She sadly smiled and reminded, "There isn't a person in this known-world who is perfect. If you never failed then you'd never know where you needed to improve. I think this Xena still holds her same feelings for you as she did seasons back."

"Andra..."

The blacksmith squeezed the younger Amazon's hands. "You must give her a chance."

Gabrielle opened her mouth, but she lost her words. Andra was right that she wasn't giving this older

Xena a chance to show herself. She sighed and shook her head. "Damn."

Andra could see she was breaking through perfectly. "And I think if Xena isn't as different as you may fear. If she isn't, then forgiveness isn't hard for her."

"I don't know," Gabrielle murmured. "She hates the Romans... Caesar."

"Oh I'm sure Caesar has sought Xena's forgiveness," Andra mocked. "I'd have a hard time forgiving somebody nailing me to a cross too."

"Especially if the person doesn't find it a mistake," Gabrielle muttered.

The blacksmith squeezed her sister's hands one last time. She pulled back and stated, "Go to her, Gabrielle. You can set things right... you have to try."

"I know," Gabrielle whispered. "I will." She lowered her eyes to Faolan and studied how white his coat remained.

Andra was about to speak again, but she was cut off by the knock on the door.

The bard slid off the bed and ordered, "Enter."

The head councilor rushed into the hut. "My queen."

"Masika, what's wrong?" Gabrielle grew worried at Masika's distress.

Masika glanced at Andra and decided it didn't matter if the blacksmith heard or not. "A messenger arrived... from the Conqueror."

Andra exchanged a look with the bard.

"She wishes to setup a meeting with the queen." Masika closed the hut door and stepped up to the queen. "You must hurry." She had a grim expression. "Melosa intercepted the message and told the messenger that she agreed to the meeting. The Conqueror will be here shortly."

"By the gods," the queen whispered in fear.

Andra hopped off the bed and joined the pair. She turned to Gabrielle. "The Conqueror thinks Melosa is the queen, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle gritted her teeth and seethed, "Yes, but I didn't make Melosa queen again."

The head councilor was actually relieved to see Gabrielle's temper. "Melosa was speaking with Commander Kaylee to prepare for the Conqueror's arrival."

"Hades," Gabrielle growled. She sidestepped the head councilor, grabbed her staff and hanging mask, and she opened the door. "Come with me, Masika."

Faolan hurried out of the hut and waited.

Andra came up to Gabrielle. "Good luck, sister. I am behind you." She then marched off and returned to her smithing hut.

Queen Gabrielle waited until Masika and Faolan were at her sides. She hurried through the village and sought out Melosa and Commander Kaylee, who were in the military office. Gabrielle stormed into the hut and broke up the conversation between the pair.

Masika took up position beside the queen. She folded her arms and darkened her features at the former queen.

Melosa was at the side of stratègos's desk. She straightened up at seeing the newcomers.

The stratègos was seated, and she became stiff at seeing the queen's furious expression. "My queen."

Gabrielle's dark eyes flashed between the stratègos and Melosa. She targeted Melosa and hotly demanded, "What do you think you're doing, Melosa?"

Melosa placed her hands behind her back and merely replied, "I'm following your commands, my queen."

The bard slotted her eyes at the smart remark. "What commands are those?"

Melosa glanced at the head councilor, who greatly favored Gabrielle, and she knew who the stool pigeon was now. She focused back on the new queen. "You assigned me to deal with the Conqueror. I am doing as you command."

"Yes, but it is to be done under my administration." Gabrielle stepped up to the former queen. "Or did you happen to have selective hearing at that particular order?"

Melosa fisted her hands and clipped, "I prefer to face the problems promptly... instead of cowering in my hut."

"Why you-"

"My queen," Commander Kaylee cut in. She was suddenly on her feet and informed, "I was directing Melosa with handling the Conqueror." She knew she'd receive the heat too, but she preferred to take it than Melosa. She knew how Melosa would react to Gabrielle because the pair were like olive oil and water.

Gabrielle set her fiery green eyes on the stratègos. "And when did you plan to inform me?"

"I-"

"Before or after the Conqueror's arrival in the Nation?" the queen demanded.

"My queen..."

"Enough," the bard snapped. She slammed her fisted hand onto the desk. She looked between Melosa and Kaylee. "I may be half your ages, but I'm no fool." She studied the stratègos then coldly chewed out, "I didn't expect this from you, stratègos."

Commander Kaylee dropped her eye contact. She knew she'd made a mistake when she allowed Melosa to corner her in the office without the queen. She sighed and stated, "I apologize, my queen."

Gabrielle was reminded of Andra's speech earlier about mistakes and improvements. She nodded at the apology and turned to Melosa. "Melosa, need I remind you why I am queen now and you are not?"

Melosa prickled at the cutting, challenging words from the young woman. She was amazed by the bard's unknown temper. She lifted her chin and curtly replied, "No."

Gabrielle remained cold despite she'd expected Melosa to fight her more. She was glad though it didn't happen.

Masika approached the group as did Faolan. The councilor broke into the conversation. "We have to prepare for the Conqueror's arrival."

"The stratègos and I have already forewarned patrol," Melosa explained.

The queen set aside her anger and focused on the main problem. "Good." She removed her fisted hand from the desk. "Make sure the gate guards are put onto alert, stratègos."

"It'll be done, my queen."

"There is one problem, my queen." Melosa held back her grin but a glint appeared in her eyes. "The Conqueror believes I am the queen."

Gabrielle was silent and thought out the problem.

"Also," Melosa added, "King Cortese is not aware of you being an Amazon... let alone the queen. If word spreads about such then it could threaten everything."

Commander Kaylee broke into the conversation. "By now King Cortese knows his Amazons are gone, but he doesn't know how. He'll most likely think they escaped on their own."

"He'll assume they've returned back to the Nation," Melosa explained.

The stratègos sighed and looked between Melosa and the queen. "It could prove to be a problem. He'll also assume that we're now aware of his possible betrayal to the Conqueror."

"He may fear the Conqueror's meeting with us," Gabrielle decided aloud.

"Most likely." Commander Kaylee noted how Masika was carefully listening. "It's a real danger, my queen."

Gabrielle's thoughts were ramped, and she tried to think of the best way to handle the situation.

"My queen, I believe it's best that I continue to pose as queen," Melosa suggested. "The Conqueror will most likely show with guards. The Conqueror may stay silent about your rulership, but I suspect her guards won't once they return to the camps."

The stratègos had a tight jaw. She didn't like Melosa's underlying plans that were coming to the surface now. She couldn't speak though because it wasn't her place.

"Besides that," Melosa went on, "you don't want to endanger the relations I've been making with the Conqueror."

Masika darkened at the former queen's possible plans. She turned her head to Gabrielle. "What Melosa is suggesting-"

"Is necessary," Gabrielle cut off.

Melosa shot a smirk at the head councilor, but she rid of it quickly.

Masika touched the queen's arm. "Gabrielle, you can't keep playing this charade with the Conqueror. It is incredibly dangerous."

"It's even more dangerous if King Cortese finds out Gabrielle was the same slave in his camp," Melosa hotly fought. "There's no doubt that if Gabrielle's presence is revealed that the Nation and the Conqueror will be further threatened by King Cortese. He's already sided with us."

"For now," Masika hotly reminded. She, like other officials, were updated on King Cortese's real plans that Gabrielle had overheard. "He's a threat either way."

"Only to the Conqueror," Melosa snapped. "He will be to the Nation if he finds out we know his secret." She turned back to the queen. "We must keep you in silence, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle stared at Melosa and repeated her words.

"The entire Nation is at stake," Melosa softly spoke.

Masika looked to the stratègos, and Masika could tell the stratègos also didn't agree to Melosa's idea. She studied Gabrielle's face, and she knew it was a losing battle.

Gabrielle sighed then finally nodded. "You'll meet with the Conqueror, Melosa. See that you keep the relations strong."

"Of course, my queen." Melosa bowed her head then lifted it. "I should prepare the welcoming." She headed to the door but called, "Stratègos, see that you assist me later."

Commander Kaylee darkly glared at Melosa's back, but she replied, "Of course." Once the former queen left, she looked back to Masika and Gabrielle. She could tell the councilor was angry about Gabrielle's choice.

Masika had no words. She shook her head and walked out of the hut. She couldn't believe she'd gone through the trouble to find Gabrielle and only have the new queen submit to Melosa's conniving ideas. If Gabrielle couldn't amount to the real queen that the Nation required then Melosa was all they did have left.

Faolan peered up at the saddened queen. He dropped his ears.

Commander Kaylee came around the desk and stood beside the queen. She stared at the hut door, but she turned her head to the queen. "Why would we want to ally ourselves with a man who took our children?" She turned her head away then left her office hut too.

Gabrielle dropped her head back and stared at the thatch ceiling. She closed her eyes just as her emotions surged to the top. She had to protect the Nation, right? Her identity would bring about King Cortese and Draco onto her Nation otherwise.

Melosa and Commander Kaylee had efficiently organized the greeting party that awaited at the Amazon borders. Melosa then prepared her best leathers she wore as queen. She then rounded up the officials that were required to accompany her on the dais. She'd received word that the Conqueror had rode through the border.

The officials were standing around at the bottom of the dais. Gabrielle explained to everybody that they were to remain silent about her rulership and that it was imperative. The officials didn't fully understand, but they did the queen's bidding. Melosa then ordered everybody to prepare on the dais because the Conqueror would be here shortly. So all of the councilors, military officers, agricultural director, ambassador, and priestess climbed up the dais. They lined the dais in their designated spots and the priestess and stratègos stood to either side of the throne chair. Second to last was Gabrielle, who reserved a spot to the right of the throne in the line of officials. She pulled her mask down and the other officials followed suit.

Queen Melosa grinned when the Amazon warriors marched through the village and lined the dais so that it formed a corridor. She noted that the grounds were filling with an audience of Amazons as word

had spread of the Greek ruler's arrival.

The gates opened and in filed a handful of Amazons, who were the greeting party. One Amazon acquired the ruler's mare and took the golden horse to the stables.

Queen Melosa turned and climbed the dais step by step. She pulled her mask down, turned in front of the throne, and slowly sat down. Her mask's long feathers poured down over her throne and behind her legs to the floor of the dais. She kept a ridged back, but she carefully watched the greeting party escort the Conqueror.

The Conqueror shined in the sun's golden rays. She was proud and represented the strength of Greece. She had her sword at her left side, chakram at her right, and her cape rode the breeze behind her. Out of instinct, she rested her hand on her sword's hilt as she approached the lined Amazons before the throne.

Xena paused at the head of the lined Amazons, and she stared at the wood throne at the top of the dais. She was suddenly struck by a dejavu, and she held her breath. She focused on the ruler in the throne, but she couldn't see any face because of the wood mask. She felt a faint weakness in her knees because she now recalled her aged dream about entering thatched village ruled by Gabrielle.

Suddenly the Amazon in the throne rose up to her feet. She stood proud before the Conqueror. "Xena of Amphipolis... Conqueror, welcome to the Macedonian Amazon Nation."

The Conqueror breathed deeply once the voice did not match Gabrielle's. She cursed her old dream and rid of it from her thoughts. She proudly marched down the line of Amazons and stopped at the foot of the dais. "Queen Melosa, I appreciate your welcome to your Nation." She bowed down and held it for a moment. She straightened up again and met the queen's masked features at the top of the dais. "I am here to speak of relations."

Melosa smiled behind her mask. "The Nation welcomes such relations, Conqueror."

Xena figured as much, but she switched to a topic she wanted more than anything. "I am also here for another reason."

Melosa slotted her eyes, but she had to be careful.

Gabrielle was tense at the words from her old friend. She worried this could go poorly. She started to breathe hard behind her mask, and she even feared Xena would recognize her from here. She reminded herself that the mask hid her well.

Eponin stood beside the real queen. She carefully leaned closer to Gabrielle and whispered, "I've taught you better than this, Gabrielle." She straightened up and hoped the words would hit the bard hard.

The bard shut her eyes against the rising sting in her.

"I'm here to find a particular Amazon from this village," the Conqueror spoke out. "She goes by the name of Gabrielle." She instantly noticed a small clamor filter through the onlookers, but she couldn't make out anything. She narrowed her eyes but refocused on Melosa.

Melosa placed her hands on her hips. She debated how to respond.

Gabrielle had quickly opened her eyes at hearing Xena's request. She fisted her hands at her side, and she repeated the fight back in Commander Kaylee's hut only half a candlemark ago. She then thought of Melosa's words that Gabrielle should remain in the silence, again. She shook her head and muttered, "No."

"Conqueror, I am afraid there is no Amazon here that goes by that name," Melosa called out.

The Conqueror stepped closer to the dais and coldly stared at the Amazon. "She told me she's a Macedonian Amazon."

Queen Gabrielle had a wild heartbeat at her thoughts. She sharply came back to the present just as Melosa spoke again.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, Conqueror." Melosa tilted her head and repeated, "There is no Amazon by that name."

"No," Gabrielle repeated louder than last time once everything struck her hard. She broke away from the line of officials and called out, "No, Melosa!"

Melosa was stunned and turned to Gabrielle. "Don't do this to the Nation," she warned. She ripped her mask back and glared at the queen's covered face. "You'll forfeit the Nation if you do this."

"No I am not," Gabrielle hotly spoke. "My Nation will not side with the enemy, who stole our children from us."

"Gabrielle," Melosa lowly spoke.

"Step back, Melosa," Gabrielle coldly ordered. "I am queen."

Melosa wasn't moving aside. "Gabrielle-"

The Conqueror could barely make out the voices, and she started to tense up. She felt an urge to bound up the dais and discover who hid behind the other mask, but she restrained herself.

The queen yanked her mask back finally and revealed her fury filled eyes. "Stand back, Melosa or I'll put you under arrest."

Commander Kaylee stepped forward at those words, but she wouldn't go any further without proper orders.

Melosa was still then nodded. She stepped away from the throne and took Gabrielle's vacant spot.

The Conqueror was ridged and wide eye. She stared at the profile of the woman she'd caught in her camp the other night. She quickly understood that Gabrielle wasn't only an Amazon, but she was the queen.

Queen Gabrielle turned until she had her back to the throne. She stared down at the Conqueror. "I am here, Conqueror." She wasn't sure how to pose her next words, but she decided to do it bluntly. "I'm the real queen, and I have misled you into believing Melosa still retained the queen's mask." She nervously clenched her hands, but she made herself do this. She would not hide, be silent, or lie about who she was to Xena, herself, or anybody else. She would speak the truth before her entire Nation.

"I feared that the Amazon Nation could be harmed because I am a branded slave." The queen hesitated when the audience began to talk, but she stopped them with her continued speech. "However I've come to realize that if I cower because of my brand that I make my Nation a slave too. The Amazons are a symbol of strength and so the queen must be too." She swallowed and prayed that her words somewhat helped the situation. "I apologize, Conqueror for my personal deception. I pray it does not deter you from the relations because my Nation is far more honorable than I."

The Conqueror felt her anger return about what'd happened. She had a violent taste on her tongue, but

she desperately tried to regain some control. Then her attention was captured by the beautiful white wold that stood to the right of the dais. She hadn't noticed him until now, and she started to piece the last bit of the puzzle together. Something settled most of her anger after she spotted the wolf.

Gabrielle nervously waited for any response from the ruler. She desperately prayed to Artemis that this would work out okay for the Nation more than for her. She mentally begged for Xena to speak again before she collapsed to her knees.

"The deception remains personally between us, Queen Gabrielle. I will not hold the Nation responsible for it, but a repeat will be far more dangerous." The Conqueror bore her anger at the bard. "See that a repeat does not occur less you prefer to make an enemy of Greece."

Gabrielle bowed her head momentarily then honestly stated, "The Nation does not wish it, nor do I." She lifted her head.

"Very well." The Conqueror put her hands behind her cape and waited.

The bard felt weak in her knees indeed, but she descended the dais step by step. She stopped on the last step and stood before the ruler. "Thank you," she sincerely whispered.

The Conqueror didn't respond. She stared coldly at her former friend.

Gabrielle signaled her Amazons to descend the dais too. She held her gaze with the Conqueror while the officials floated past her. Once she was the only Amazon remaining, she offered, "We'll start with a tour around the village."

Xena stepped aside and waited for the queen.

Gabrielle stepped off the dais finally, but she wouldn't go until Faolan was at her side.

Faolan hurried over and took residence by the bard's right side.

"This way," the bard informed. She started the walked down the line of Amazons then she decided to go to the agricultural area of the Nation.

Xena sensed Gabrielle's fears and nervousness. She glimpsed at the wolf on the other side of Gabrielle. "So he's your friend?"

The queen peered up at the ruler briefly. She sadly smiled because Xena was the first person ever to label Faolan as her friend instead of her pet. She nodded. "He is. His name is Faolan."

The Conqueror found it a fitting name, and she was curious how the two befriended each other. She would find out later perhaps. She cordially mentioned, "We've already been acquainted."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows, but she didn't question it right now. She instead started the tour and hoped the motions of it would help her and Xena settle into some rhythm.

The Conqueror merely listened, but she took mental notes the entire time. She read the tension that was built in Gabrielle, and she suspected not much of it left by the end of the tour. Xena did feel some calmness from the simplicity of the tour and spending time at Gabrielle's side. It wasn't under ideal circumstance by far, but she decided it was a start.

"And this is our temple," the bard came to the end of the tour. She noted how Xena stared at it quite hard.

The Conqueror decided that the temple mimicked the temple in the Thrace Nation. There were some differences, but it was mostly the same design. She concluded there was some rule about this throughout the Nations because they all had the same design. The religion had to be consistent and so do their buildings.

Gabrielle had tried to think of what to do next after the tour. She couldn't tell if it was safe to discuss relations or not. It was possible there were just too many personal problems between them that needed to be discussed before the relations could go onward. She mentally sighed.

"When did you become queen?" The Conqueror turned to the bard and waited.

Gabrielle faced the ruler and honestly replied, "It hasn't even been a fortnight."

Xena understood it was quite recent. She kept cool despite she snidely inquired, "Are there any other secrets I should be made aware of?"

The bard dipped her head then sighed. She peered up into icy blue eyes that loomed over her. "Let's go for a walk." She knew that the ears of the village would pick up on their pending fight. She tapped her staff once against the ground then started in the direction of the gates.

Faolan stood up and glanced between Xena and his friend. He followed after Gabrielle once Xena's boots scraped over the dirt ground.

Gabrielle felt relieved that the ruler followed her out of the village. She brought them to the lake that her and Ephiny often romped in when they were younger. She stared at the peaceful lake and dropped her head against the staff.

Faolan sat down between the rulers, and he too watched the lake.

The Conqueror folded her arms over her chest. She put together her thoughts and feelings about the recent developments.

"No," Gabrielle finally whispered. "I have no other secrets." She raised her head up and truthfully confessed, "I'm a branded slave that was schooled as an Athens Academy bard, accidentally became an Amazon Princess, and fought for the caste as Amazon Queen."

Xena processed the information, and she recalled an aged conversation between her and Gabrielle as kids. She felt a deep ache and whispered, "You went to the Athens Academy?"

"Yes, my master sent me there." The bard went back to the serene lake and regarded it. "I graduated several seasons ago."

The ruler's ache was from the fact she'd missed out on Gabrielle's accomplishment as a bard. She knew how much Gabrielle dreamed of that time, and she wanted to be there when Gabrielle did it. Now her own dream was shattered, but yet she was happy the bard made it.

"We're different people now," Gabrielle softly mentioned. "We've lived separated lives."

Xena huffed and remarked, "Far different. I never expected you to lie to me, Gabrielle."

The bard sighed and argued, "I didn't lie to you."

"You deceived me, I'd say that's fairly close to it." Xena felt her anger bubble back up.

"And I made a mistake, Xena." Gabrielle felt her emotions rise in response. She straightened up and

turned to the ruler. "Don't tell me you've never made any."

Xena hated that Gabrielle was right, but she refused to face it now. "You were so much apart of who I was, Gabrielle."

"And so were you, Xena." The bard felt desperate because the conversation could go ugly. "I thought for moons and moons that you were dead. Everybody thought you were, and we lost hope."

"We?" the ruler questioned.

"Cyrene, Toris, and I," the bard revealed. "Cyrene misses you, Xena. You don't know how hard it has been for her."

"And I don't care," the ruler snapped.

"She's your mother," Gabrielle hotly argued. "They're your family."

Xena slotted her eyes and cold memories about how her mother rejected her after Lyceus's death stung her all over again. "The only family I have left... is dead." She found the conversation pointless so she walked around Gabrielle and kept going.

The bard quickly turned around, and she took on a mix of anger and pain from Xena's cold words. She quickly shot back, "How long will you damn me for this, Xena?" She watched Xena stop, and she stared at the ruler's tense back. "Or are you really going to prove my fears right? That you are some cold, dark woman that's lost her heart."

Xena turned her head sidelong. "Maybe you are right." She turned her head away and started her walk again.

"You know, you're not so innocent, Xena," the bard hotly fought. She tensed when the now furious ruler turned back to her. She wouldn't back down. She merely stated, "Lila."

The Conqueror fisted her hands at her side.

"I know you found her." Gabrielle slowly approached the ruler, and Faolan was at her side. "When were you going to tell me that?"

The Conqueror remained passive, but she knew her mistake too.

"Xena, we can spend the rest of our lives being angry at ourselves and each other. Or we can work through this and try again." Gabrielle gripped her staff tighter and reached up to her quill necklace. She clutched it tightly and whispered, "I haven't hung onto this necklace for so long without good reason. Show me I'm right for hanging onto it."

Xena struggled between her deep hurt and what she'd always felt for the bard. Then an old memory floated back to her about a time when she promised Gabrielle they would always be friends no matter what happened. Xena had meant it, and Gabrielle promised it too. She was a woman of her word, and she knew Gabrielle was too.

"Alright," Xena whispered, "but don't think this is over by a long shot."

The queen released her quill necklace, and she nodded. "I hope it's not." She quirked a small grin at her joke, but she knew it wouldn't work on Xena.

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow, but she turned around.

Gabrielle called Faolan to her side. She waited for him then she turned her head back to Xena.

The Conqueror had only gone a few paces and stopped. She tilted her head and slotted her eyes. She suddenly became wide eye at a familiar but threatening sound. "Gabrielle, watch out!" She was in a blur and headed for Gabrielle.

The bard held her breath at the sound of an arrow whizzing through the air. She saw it was coming right for her. She was amazed when the arrow was plucked from the air, and Xena before her with the arrow in hand. "By the gods, how..." She stared up at the ruler.

Xena threw the arrow to the ground, and then she hastily spun around. She raised her hands up and caught two more arrows coming at them. She tossed them to the ground, plucked her chakram free, and threw it towards the line of trees.

Gabrielle broke from her daze and stepped to Xena's side. She raised her staff and her view of the tree line came into focus. She watched the chakram cut through the branches and revealed the three archers in the trees. She glimpsed at the ground and noticed the fetching was the same color as the ones that'd killed the young Amazons.

The Conqueror stepped forward and grabbed the chakram. She realigned it and aimed it at the three archers. "My next throw will cut your throats. Get out of the trees!"

"No," ordered an emotionless voice, "lower your weapon. Or Queen Gabrielle will be terminated."

The Conqueror turned her head to the left and stared at the female warrior, who was only a few paces from Gabrielle. She'd hadn't seen the woman at all, but she did threaten Gabrielle from her position.

Seven kept her arrow tightly strung and aimed at Gabrielle's head. She would easily kill the queen if the Greek ruler did not heed her warning. She'd been informed that the queen was the Conqueror's greatest weakness.

The Conqueror saw no other options. She lowered her chakram.

"Now, Conqueror disarm yourself." Seven kept her eye focused on the tense Amazon Queen.

Gabrielle didn't move for she feared she'd set off Seven. From the corner of her eye, she watched the ruler remove her weapons slowly. She knew she needed to start talking and hopefully it'd bring a distraction. "Seven, you don't want to do this."

"I do not comply to your orders, Queen Gabrielle."

Faolan carefully walked towards the automaton. He dropped his head and ears then bared his fangs. His low growl started to pick up strength.

Seven briefly regarded the white wolf then factually informed, "The guardian of Artemis." She focused back on the Amazon Queen. "It would seem you're highly regarded by Artemis, but it will no longer matter." She shifted her focus to the Conqueror.

Xena tossed her sword on top of her chakram. "Alright, Seven. I'm free of my weapons."

"Queen Gabrielle, disarm yourself too."

Gabrielle gripped her staff tighter, and she debated what to do. "Seven, I know you weren't born this way. Haven't you ever stopped to think about who you really are?"

Seven ignored the remarks and stated, "Resistance is futile, Queen Gabrielle. Disarm yourself."

The bard freed her left hand from the staff, but she tightened her right hand. She couldn't take the chance of her or Xena being captured because there was too much at stake. She prayed Xena would at least make it out of this ambush. She suddenly cried and threw her staff directly at the automaton.

Seven expected as much so she released the arrow, dropped the bow, and neatly caught the staff. She spun it just as Gabrielle's scream echoed.

The bard fell to her knees when the arrowhead dug into her right shoulder.

Xena scooped up her sword, but she had to deal with three arrows coming at her next.

Faolan bounded at Seven and jumped for her.

Seven expected the move from the wolf. She spun the staff around quickly and slammed it into the leaping wolf. She cracked it hard across Faolan's ribs and sent him flying towards the woods. She brought the staff back around and coldly stared at the kneeling queen. "You will be terminated."

The Conqueror grabbed her chakram, and she threw it at the archers, who were string another round of arrows. She then raced for the nearing automaton.

Seven quickly marched up to the Amazon Queen. She raised the staff and prepared to strike it at Gabrielle's head. She planned for the hard sweep to severe the bard's head from her shoulders.

Xena gave a fierce battle cry, and she jumped in front of Gabrielle. She lifted her sword with both hands and held tight as the fast moving staff came at her blade. The steel sword rang out when it halted the thick staff. She then sent a sharp kick to the automaton's chest.

Seven took the blow and stumbled back a few steps.

The Conqueror faced Seven with a dark expression. She freed her right hand and snatched her returning chakram out of the air. She held it up between them and dared, "You're fast, but you're not as fast as my chakram. Try me."

Gabrielle gritted her teeth and clutched the arrow's shaft. She bit back her cry when she snapped off the shaft. She slowly stood up and reached to her back. She grabbed her sword's hilt and unsheathed it, but she had to switch the blade to her left hand.

Seven raised the staff and eyed the two opponents.

"Stay behind me," the ruler ordered the Amazon Queen.

The bard gave her sword a spin, but she wouldn't listen to the ruler. She glanced at the injured wolf and her temper rose. She stepped up to Xena's left side.

Seven regarded the pair then made a choice. She lowered the staff and signaled the archers to retreat. She slotted her icy blue eyes at the pair. She hefted the staff and prepared to throw it at them.

Xena feared it would strike them. She instantly hooked her chakram and intercepted the now flying staff. She caught it by the shaft, but she realized her mistake when Seven dashed for her.

The automaton kicked the staff from the ruler's hand then the sword to follow. She quickly caught Xena by the neck and wrapped her fingers tightly over the ruler's throat. She easily lifted Xena up from the ground and proceeded to squeeze.

The Conqueror grasped the automaton muscular arm and desperately fought her, but it was useless. She felt her consciousness starting to slip and her air shut off.

"No!" Gabrielle slashed at Seven.

The automaton caught the blade with her freehand, and she narrowed her eyes up at the dying Conqueror. "You have ten heartbeats remaining."

The Amazon Queen released her hilt and suddenly lunged for the automaton. She managed to ram Seven hard, but Gabrielle felt like she hit a stone wall. She put all her strength into it and shoved the automaton down to the ground.

Xena fell to her feet and gasped for air.

Seven released the sword and now focused on Gabrielle. She rolled the bard under her and grabbed for the bard's throat with both hands.

Gabrielle tried to shove the automaton off, but she was far heavier and stronger. She then heard a furious snarl and suddenly Faolan attacked the automaton.

Seven didn't scream or flinch when sharp teeth sunk into her arms. She continued to squeeze the life out of Gabrielle and wouldn't relinquish her hold. She didn't lose her grip until there was a cold and sharp edge at her neck.

The Conqueror kept her arm stretched out and the chakram pressed into the automaton's throat. "Release her."

Seven loosened her grip.

Faolan stepped back and bared his bloody teeth at the automaton. He wanted to attack her again, but he trusted the Conqueror's help.

Seven removed her hands and placed them flat on the ground.

Gabrielle hastily wiggled out from under Seven and climbed to her feet. She collected her sword and staff then sheathed her sword. She next picked up Xena's sword and waited for the ruler.

Xena resisted the cough that almost came to her. She didn't dare touch Seven because of what could possibly happen. She decided the automaton was far too smart and strong. She instead stood up and backed up to Gabrielle's side. "Don't move, Seven." She retrieved her sword from Gabrielle. She then signaled the bard to head back to the woods where they'd come from and opposite of the archers.

Seven lifted her head and watched the backwards, retreating rulers. She coldly eyed the Amazon Queen more than anything.

Gabrielle shivered at the primal look from the automaton. She realized that Seven would carry out her orders no matter what it meant. She truly hoped there was something left of Seven's humanity in her.

Xena kept her chakram at the ready. She whispered, "When we get into the woods, we need to make a run back to the village. She won't follow."

The bard nodded and glanced back at the tree line that was a few steps away. "How sure can you be about that?"

"Fairly sure," the ruler murmured.

Gabrielle was in the woods, so she hefted her staff then made a break for it. She whistled for Faolan, who'd remained near the automaton.

Faolan suddenly broke into a run, zipped past Xena, and chased after his friend.

The Conqueror remained at the edge of the forest. She hollered, "Tell Draco that I won't just bloody his nose this time, I'll kill him." She turned and disappeared into the woods.

Seven climbed to her feet and glared at the spot where the rulers had gone. She fisted her hands and marched off to where the archers would be waiting for her.

Xena easily caught up to the bard. She noted the arrowhead tip protruded from the back of Gabrielle's shoulder. She inwardly sighed at Gabrielle's earlier attempt to save them. "You could have been killed."

The queen slowed her pace some because of the weakness that was coming over her. She resisted it though and still used the remainder of her adrenaline. "As if it would concern you."

The Conqueror was stung by the comment. She understood it, but she quickly corrected it by stopping Gabrielle's run. She faced the queen and reminded, "I didn't get you freed from King Cortese just to see you get killed today."

The bard sighed and nodded. She reminded herself not to be smart anymore unless she wanted to worsen things between her and Xena.

The Conqueror could tell her words meant something. She then stated, "Let's get the arrow out before it get's any worse."

"It can wait."

Xena ignored the bard's comment. She stepped closer, sheathed her sword, and hooked her chakram. She raised her left hand and ordered, "It has to be pushed out. You'll need to push against my hand."

Gabrielle gave in, and she decided she'd need some support. She dropped her staff, lifted her left hand and clutched Xena's padded shoulder. She closed her eyes when Xena's lower palm lightly pressed into the broken shaft. "Alright."

The Conqueror moved forward, and Gabrielle moved towards her. She pressed her palm hard against the shaft, and Gabrielle's low cry rung out. Then her palm met the bard's wet, hot shoulder.

The Amazon Queen felt the arrow sticking out of the back of her shoulder. She slumped against Xena from the weakness. "Gods."

Xena wrapped her left arm around the bard's waist and stepped closer. "I gotcha." She reached behind the bard and clutched the arrow. "It's almost out." She gripped the bloody shaft and proceeded to extract it the rest of the way.

Gabrielle shut her eyes tightly and clung to the ruler. She muffled her low cry, but she felt relieved when the arrow was freed from her shoulder. Then her world started to spin and her strength was disappearing rapidly. "Xena," she rasped.

The Conqueror glared at the bloody, broken arrow in her hand. She tossed it and suddenly realized the bard was about to fall down. She hastily scooped up the tumbling queen into her arms.

Faolan had been watching, and he whined in fear.

"Gabrielle?" The Conqueror received no response. She adjusted Gabrielle in her arms and found the bard was fading out from the pain and blood loss. She also felt the blood now oozing onto her arm thanks to the completely open wound. "Hades."

Faolan walked towards the village then turned his had back and whined. He wanted to go back quickly and find a healer.

"Right beside you," the ruler agreed. She started into a slow run, but she couldn't go too fast. She peered down at the paling queen, but she knew she'd make it back in time. "Hold on, Gabrielle." She was silently thankful for the earlier tour because she knew exactly where the healer's hut was located.

"Xena, my staff," the Amazon murmured.

"Forget it. Patrol will pick it up." The Conqueror noted the gates just ahead, and she was grateful to see the door open. She aimed for it, ducked under a few low branches, and jumped through the door with perfect accuracy. She surprised several gate guards, who shouted but she had no time.

The guards were stunned to see the queen injured, and they hastily sent out a warning to all.

Faolan followed along side. He'd occasionally peer up at the queen, but he sensed she was still awake.

"Xena, thank you."

The Conqueror was confused and peered down at the bard. She could see how dazed Gabrielle was, but she questioned, "For what?"

Gabrielle shut her eyes and whispered, "For protecting me still... after everything."

Xena wasn't sure how to respond, but she swallowed and quietly stated, "I don't think I could ever stop." She spotted the healer's hut, and she tried to speed up.

Faolan slowed slightly and let the Conqueror ahead of him.

The ruler bounded up the steps, stopped at the top, and didn't have a single care. She kicked the door open and stepped sideways into the hut. "I need a damn healer! The queen has been injured."

Cliona was the first into the foray, and she was shocked at the scene. She stared at the injured queen in the Conqueror's arms.

The Conqueror snapped the young healer out of her revere. "Her wounds need to be closed."

"Etana!" Cliona hollered. "I need help! It's the queen."

The master healer was already rushing down the hall. "This way, hurry." She waved the ruler down the hallway and into the end room. "Cliona, get the poker in the fireplace."

Another healer, Melpomene, rushed into the room next and closed the door. "What's happened?"

"She's been struck by an arrow in the right shoulder," the Conqueror explained. "I've already removed the arrow." She gently lowered the bard onto the wood pallet. "Gabrielle?" She checked the bard's face and saw she was still conscious. "Come on, stay with me."

"Get her on her side," Etana urged. She and Melpomene hastened to gather cleaning supplies and wraps. "Cliona, the poker?"

"It's almost ready." Cliona was bent in front of the fireplace. She wiped the sweat off her forehead but

kept twisting the orange poker in the fire.

The Conqueror turned Gabrielle onto her left side. "Gabrielle?"

The bard forced her eyes open. The sweat was beading on her forehead, and she felt it hard to breathe. She peered up at Xena and for the first time since they were kids, she saw the obvious concern.

"Is that poker ready?" the Conqueror barked. She turned her head to the young healer.

"I need another few beats." Cliona buried the poker deeper in the hot ambers.

Xena turned back to the bard, and she slightly knelt down. "Stay awake, Gabrielle."

"I am," the queen softly promised. She heard the other two healers come to the bedside behind her. She closed her eyes though.

"Open your eyes for me," the ruler ordered. She kept her hand on the bard's side to balance her better. She soon found hazy green eyes on her. "Talk to me."

The bard slightly smirked and teased, "I never thought I'd hear you ask me that."

The Conqueror faintly smiled at the old joke from when they were kids. She'd always tormented Gabrielle by doing silent games because the bard spoke too much in her opinion.

Gabrielle's smirk softened into a smile, and she whispered, "You're starting to smile." She coughed and argued, "An arrow in the shoulder is worth it then."

Xena rolled her bright blue eyes and sighed. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard from you, Gabrielle."

The bard chuckled, but she stopped from the pain. She shut her eyes again and muttered, "I seem to have an idiot track record lately. I hate to disappoint."

The ruler sighed and ordered, "Open your eyes." She could see they'd have a lot of work to do if they planned to rebuild their friendship again. There was a lot of guilt, anger, and pain to heal and calm.

"It's ready," the young healer announced. She dashed over to the queen and Conqueror.

"Do it, Cliona," the master healer snapped.

Gabrielle gripped the edge of the pallet and shut her eyes tightly. She held her breath when the heat appeared by her shoulder.

Cliona hesitated because she'd never done this before now. She feared she'd screw up, and it could mean the queen's life.

"Cliona." The queen's voice held urgency.

The young healer no longer faltered, and she drove the bright orange poker into the front of the queen's shoulder.

Gabrielle screamed loudly and dug her nails into the pallet.

Xena briefly shut her eyes. She opened them once the scream stopped. She stood up completely, but she grasped the bard's torso with her left hand. She tilted Gabrielle closer to the edge so that her rear shoulder was better exposed to Cliona.

Cliona brought the poker around and aimed the tip at the open and bleeding wound.

The bard screamed again when the poker pressed into her shoulder blade. Her right hand shot out and grabbed Xena's freehand. She gripped it so tightly, and she felt Xena hold on too. The tears welted in her eyes and the smell of burning flesh surrounded her.

Cliona hastily removed the poker once the wound was sealed. She moved away and let Etana and Melpomene sooth and clean the wound.

Xena removed her hand from the bard's torso and carefully pushed Gabrielle's wet bangs from her forehead. "It's over."

The queen felt she was about to pass out any beat. She still held onto Xena's hand, and she whimpered, "Not completely yet." She felt hands all over her shoulder and the burning heat was soothed away. She lost her grip on Xena's hand, and she was about to roll off the pallet when the pain caught up to her completely.

Xena was fast, and she halted the bard's fall. She adjusted the unconscious queen on the pallet then peered over at the healers. "I got her." She briefly watched the healers finish their work. She only lowered Gabrielle onto her back once they completed their work.

Gabrielle softly moaned once she was on her back, but she didn't wake up. She now had a bandaged shoulder that developed a red circle in the center.

The Conqueror stared at the young woman that'd meant the most during her in teenage. She heard a low whine off to her right, and she noted Faolan for the first time. She could tell he was worried too. She leaned down to him and pet him gently. "She'll be fine, boy."

Faolan licked the ruler's hand, but he winced from the pain at his side.

Xena recalled the wolf had been badly hurt during the fight. She needed to attend to him too and if she didn't do it then she'd probably catch Hades with Gabrielle. She glanced back at the Amazon Queen and silently asked Artemis to care for the queen. She focused back on the wolf. "Let's get you checked out, Faolan." She straightened up and stole one last glance at Gabrielle. She promised she'd return later to check on the bard.

The ruler stepped out of the way and let the healers continue their administrations. She instead disappeared into an empty room that had plenty of medical supplies. She carefully picked up Faolan and set him on a pallet. She focused her next half of a candlemark in tending to Gabrielle's friend and guardian. But all her thoughts were for Gabrielle and her recovery.

To be continued.