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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 18

The crowd of hoplites cheered at the start of the three-fourths rhythm, and the flute grew louder as did the drums. The Conqueror walked out into the open circle, and she did a full turn so she could take in each hoplite's excited face. She grinned and came to a stop. She held out her hand to the one hoplite that stood out from the rest of the crowd.

The proud chiliarchès stepped out of the circle, and he approached his leader. He lifted his hand and locked the Conqueror's hand. He and his leader stood side by side, hands strongly locked, and he whispered, "Queen Gabrielle?"

"Yes," the ruler murmured, but her order was clear through the din.

Bastien scanned the crowd and discovered the fair haired queen next to several of her Amazons. He held out his hand to her.

Queen Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows.

Solari nudged the queen. "I think you're suppose to join, my queen."

The bard paled. "This isn't an Amazon dance."

Solari smirked and looked to Ephiny.

Ephiny mirrored the devilish look and thought back on her blood sister's joke. "Time to dance, queen."

She gave Gabrielle the appropriate shove out of the audience circle.

Gabrielle hissed at her Amazons, turned, and tossed her staff to them. She took a deep breath, pulled up her confidence, and came over to the pair. Her steps already matched the drum beat.

The Conqueror had brightly glowing eyes thanks to the firelight. She show a pleased smile that her friend joined them.

The bard took Bastien's offered hand and tightly held.

The chiliarchès leaned closer and murmured, "You must select somebody to join you."

The bard briefly considered getting Solari because of the earlier joke, but she went against it and instead scanned the crowd for a familiar hoplite.

The Conqueror followed the queen's line of sight and grinned. She easily guided their linked line closer and stopped.

Gabrielle held out her hand to the hoplite, and she felt her cheeks heat up.

But Prostig lost some color from his face because never once had he participated in the tsamiko, but he could not refuse. It looked like tonight would be his first time. He slipped through the crowd then took Gabrielle's side. His large hand easily covered over the queen's.

The Amazon Queen chuckled at Prostig's nervous features. "You haven't done this either?"

"Nope," the warrior replied. He said no more and instead looked for his choice in the crowd.

The line continued to grow with hoplites then a hoplite chose an Amazon. Gabrielle wasn't the least surprised when it was Solari. That Amazon had to be in the middle of everything as best as Gabrielle could tell anymore. Solari seemed to decide to have her fun so she selected Ephiny. Ephiny in turn picked Vincien, who had never done the dance either. Eventually the line became a circle and was three people short of reaching the Conqueror again.

The Conqueror halted the last hoplite from selecting anybody else. She always needed the extra space to perform everything correctly unlike other leaders of this dance. She then heard the music quiet to a gentle rhythm, and she officially began the dance.

Gabrielle sharply turned her head to her best friend at the head of the circle. She was stunned to hear the beautiful singing that came from Xena's lips. She never knew Xena could sing until tonight.

The Conqueror stood still, eyes closed, and she sang words that nobody but she understood. They were ancient words that the first Greek warriors spoke before battle. They were melancholy because the warriors were away from home and their families, and they faced a great battle ahead against an invading force. The hoplites believed they would meet Hades on the battlefield.

Suddenly the musical beat grew sharp, and the Conqueror sang louder to match the increase. She sung about one hoplite from the unit, who had stood up and rallied his comrades. He told his comrades that they would defeat the enemy tomorrow and keep Greece safe from such raiders. Xena's song told how the brave hoplite stood before his comrades on the night before battle and asked them if they were behind him. The Conqueror drew her song lower then opened her eyes. She squeezed Bastien's hand in hidden signal.

Bastien inhaled deeply and repeated the exact words that a hoplite said so long ago on that night before battle. "What say you, hoplites!?"

Then every hoplite suddenly hooted twice then rang out, "To freedom! To Greece!"

The flute and drums died out slowly. The Conqueror's song returned low but grew in a gradual crescendo. She continued the hoplites's story. They'd readied by dawn, marched to the battlefield, and stood against a force that was twice their size but only half their spirit. Her pitch grew loud just as the hoplites charged into battle.

The flute sharply returned then the drums boomed loudly and echoed throughout the camp. The ancient battle had begun and every hoplite and Amazon saw it before their eyes. The Conqueror's voice faded out while the music took on the battle's dramatics. Now the dance finally began by the Conqueror's lead.

The Conqueror moved her right boot a step to the right then her left foot moved right too but in front of her right. She repeated the steps three times but the fourth time she brought her front left leg back to her right foot. Next her right foot moved to the left but in front of her left foot. She repeated that again then peered up at Bastien.

Bastien quickly lifted his right hand up as high as he could go.

The Conqueror stretched up her left hand with Bastien's, lifted her right leg, spun in a circle, and quickly knelt as she turned and pulled her leg in. She popped back up once she made full circle. She repeated the same steps as earlier.

Bastien carefully navigated the rest of the line and mimicked Xena's steps, except he and everybody else were not allowed to do the spin. It was the sole move reserved for the leader.

Gabrielle had been watching in awe. She then glanced at the audience that began to clap to the three-fourths rhythm.

Bastien now tapped his right boot to the beat as the Conqueror began her new part of the dance. He heard everybody else in the circle match his boot tapping.

The Conqueror gripped the chiliarchès's hand tighter as she very slowly leaned backwards and sunk down to the ground.

The chiliarchès held strong and proud, and he supported the leader's weight.

The Conqueror used Bastien's support to balance her body as her back hovered a hand's length from the ground. She sunk slightly lower but never fully touched the ground. She remained still, closed her eyes, and waited for the right musical signal.

The drums slowly descended quieter until only the flute was left.

Gabrielle carefully watched how Bastien strained to hold his leader, but he was true. She studied Xena's position and how it showed a defeated stature. Since the start of this dance, she tried to imagine what the song, music, and dance were telling her. She only saw a great battle in her mind.

The Conqueror sharply opened her eyes then rose back up, and her freehand snaked up into the air. She spread out her palm, dropped her head back, and stared up at the night sky. She suddenly gave out a piercing warrior's cry.

The drum echoed backed with a loud rumble. The other drums followed suit and returned the beat again.

The Conqueror restarted the same steps and spins. She moved slightly faster than last time, but on the

fifth spin she did something different. She suddenly did a scissor kick, and the crowd cheered. She started to move the line in a circle much faster.

The dancers in the line mimicked the Conqueror's foot movements, but they would stop when the Conqueror either did a spin or a scissor kick.

Xena kept going faster because of the tempo's increase. As she did the usual steps, she reached to her side and revealed a silk, purple cloth. She briefly broke hands with Bastien, but they now held onto either end of the cloth.

Bastien grinned because this was getting closer to his favorite part.

The audience's clapping intensified and so did the instruments.

Xena came to her spin or kick moment, but she did something new. She tightly gripped the silk cloth then raised her hand up with the chiliarchès's. She hastily began repeated spins on her right foot, and the silk cloth twisted tightly. She then was forced to spin in the opposite direction by the purple cloth. She inhaled deeply and spun faster. Then her powerful battle cry rung out again.

The Conqueror abruptly stopped her spin then repeated the normal steps at a fast pace. She then moved further away from Bastien, slid her hand down to the very end of the cloth, and she raised an eyebrow at her chiliarchès.

Bastien nodded in agreement.

Xena took a back step that was new. She then hopped on her right foot twice then did a small back flip.

The audience cried out loudly.

Gabrielle grinned and watched Xena do a perfect back flip in reverse to return to the starting spot.

The ruler started the repetitive moves once again then did a quick spin. But as she redid the typical moves she yelled, "What say you, hoplites?"

This time the Amazons joined the hoplites and proudly replied in unison, "To freedom! To Greece!"

The Conqueror suddenly released the purple silk stepped to the right three times, breathed until her chest filled, and then her fast feet moved to the beat. She took two big steps then amazingly launched up into the air to reach a height that seemed impossible. At the top of her leap, she suddenly gave the loudest warrior's cry that lasted until she landed on her feet in a proud stature. She extended her arms and called, "To our ancestors, who fought for a free Greece!" She dropped her arms, repeated the two steps on the drum beat, and relaunched even higher than last time.

"By the... gods," Gabrielle murmured.

Bastien chuckled at the queen's words. He, himself, never stopped being dazzled by his leader's abilities.

In midair, Xena unsheathed her sword then landed loudly on the ground, and the drums echoed her landing. She raised her horizontal blade to the sky, turned her head to Bastien, and held out her left hand.

Bastien hastily clasped hands. "What say you, hoplites?"

The Conqueror yelled out, "To freedom! To Greece!" She kept her sword raised, and she stared up the

sky, which sparkled back brightly with stars.

"To freedom! To Greece!" echoed back the crowd.

The Conqueror swiftly spun her sword then brought the blade towards the ground. She called on all her strength and rammed her blade into the ground. She'd pushed so hard that the cross-guard almost touched the ground. She knelt down until her right knee touched the ground.

Then in a wave each dancer knelt one by one until the last dancer was on his knee. The audience in a flowing wind also knelt down. Then gradually the music faded out, and the Conqueror's low song returned. She sang the last of the battle. The ancient hoplites defeated the enemy, but they themselves were all killed but the one brave hoplite that spoke out the prior night. He was badly wounded and slowly bleeding to death. Yet he walked for days until he returned to his home and to his family. There he collapsed into the arms of his wife and only whispered, "Greece is now safe by my brothers' bravery." On the next day, he was buried upon his shield and sword in hand.

The Conqueror extracted her sword from the ground as she rose up to her feet. She still sung the ancient words that nobody could clearly translate, but all understood. She sung her and her hoplites' promise to never forget their ancestors' bravery and to never stop protecting Greece. She let her song fade out and the flute picked up for a moment then slowly faded away.

Now the dancers slowly ascended to their feet then so did the audience.

The Conqueror stepped forward, bowed, and waited for the other dancers to do the same. Once everybody bowed, the audience gave a loudly applause. Xena straightened up and showed her smile at successfully completing the traditional dance again. She had to admit that she too truly believed that performing the dance prior to battle also meant good results. She was becoming just as superstitious as her men.

Gabrielle softly thanked Bastien for choosing her as a dancer. She then drifted over to the Conqueror, who had several hoplites around her. Gabrielle picked out the nonstop congratulations for the backflips.

The bard then sensed a newcomer by her side, and she grinned down at Faolan.

Faolan wagged his tail happily in greeting.

The bard chuckled but lifted her head and studied the Conqueror.

The Conqueror peered past a few of her hoplites and saw the Amazon Queen waiting for her. She focused back on the hoplites and insisted, "Thank you." She offered a last smile. "Enjoy the rest of the night but get some rest." She then slipped past her men.

Gabrielle smiled when her friend came to her.

Xena mirrored back the smile without realizing it. She stopped only a pace from Gabrielle's personal space.

Faolan snuck over to the Conqueror.

The bard shook her head and whispered, "That was amazing. I had no idea that..."

"That I could jump so high?" the ruler joked. She leaned forward some and pet Faolan for a moment.

Gabrielle had a crooked smile and shifted closer. She quietly replied, "That too. But I didn't know you could sing, Xena."

The ruler shrugged then charmingly stated, "I have many skills."

The bard chuckled and smiled at the tall, dark woman. "It was beautiful."

Xena moved slightly closer too and quietly replied, "Thank you."

Gabrielle wanted to say more, but she was cut short by Ephiny's sudden appearance. How in Artemis's name did this keep happening between her and Xena? She turned to her former lover. "Yes, Ephiny?" She prayed that the edge was kept out of her tone, but she doubt it was by Ephiny's slight cringe.

"It's late, my queen. We should prepare to head back to the village."

The queen sadly sighed then nodded. "Can you get everybody together? We need to get the horses tacked and ready."

"Of course." Ephiny wanted to escape, but Gabrielle's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"Thanks, Eph." It was Gabrielle's hidden way to apologize for her earlier harshness.

Ephiny nodded and offered a faint smile. She then hurried off to get her sisters ready.

Xena scanned for Bastien and spotted him. "Bastien?"

Faolan now sat down once he realized it be a few more beats. He turned his head every time somebody different spoke.

The chiliarchès broke away from his conversation and came over to his leader. "Yes, my liege?"

"I need you to gather twenty men to escort the Amazons back to their village."

"Of course." Bastien was about to carry out his orders, but he stopped at the ruler's voice.

"And are the horses prepared to be exchanged?"

The chiliarchès positioned his hands behind his back in formal fashion. "Yes, my liege. They will be ready to be taken to the Amazons late tonight."

"Excellent. I would like for the hipparchis to go."

"I will inform Officer Nikko to be in charge then." Bastien tilted his head. "Anything else, my liege?"

"That is it, Bastien."

Bastien took a faint step but paused. "Wonderful performance, my liege." He grinned then walked away without a glance back.

The Conqueror huffed then focused back down on the petite blond. "I'll walk you to the horses."

Gabrielle nodded then began the journey through the crowd and camp to where she presumed the horses waited. She went rather slowly because she hoped it would make the wonderful night last longer. She noticed how Faolan had a hard time walking so slow when they normally went faster. "Thank you for having us here tonight," she politely began.

Xena showed a smile. "It was our pleasure. We rarely invite allies to our celebration, and we've never invited them to join in the dance."

"I'm honored," Gabrielle insisted.

Xena could tell Gabrielle was honest. She was pleased too. She slipped her hands behind her back and locked her cape against her back. "Be careful going back."

"We will be," the bard promised.

"Make sure to get your wound redressed."

The queen glanced at the wound and chuckled. "I would have forgotten if you didn't say anything." She spotted Xena's raised eyebrow, and she mock glared. "Don't say anything."

Faolan snorted loudly.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes at the wolf's smart attitude. "I get it from both sides."

The Conqueror smirked and decided not to comment for once. She continued the slow walk to the horses, and she realized she never walked this slow. She normally hated to, but she felt the need to so that her time with Gabrielle would be stretched longer.

Gabrielle spotted the horses not too far away. She mentally sighed and carefully grasped Xena's upper arm. "Xena?"

The ruler actually stopped because she was concerned by Gabrielle's tone. She faced the Amazon Queen and freed her hands from her back.

Faolan had gone a few more paces but halted once he realized the humans weren't with him. He faced them and noticed how closely Gabrielle moved to Xena.

Gabrielle had removed her light touch. "I need you to ask you a favor." She hadn't planned to ask this, but she'd given it serious thought today during her few moments of silence on the rides between villages. Now the reminder about her wound made her think twice.

The Conqueror slightly narrowed her eyes then her brow crinkled. "What is it?"

The bard swallowed and her stomach knotted together. "I..." She dropped her head for a moment then peered back up with a darkened face.

Xena became far more worried and stepped closer until she was almost touching the bard. "What's wrong?"

Gabrielle breathed deeply then explained, "For awhile I've been meaning to unearth my mother and transport her to Potidaea so that she could be buried beside Dad."

Xena didn't like where this conversation may be going, but she waited.

"I've been too busy with the Amazons to get it done." The bard frowned in disgust, but kept focused on Xena. "Tomorrow if... if something happens... something happens to me, I need you to move my mother."

"Gabrielle-,"

"No," the bard insisted. She could tell Xena wanted to deny the reality of tomorrow. "I won't be at peace in the afterlife if mother hasn't been moved."

"Don't do this, Gabrielle." Xena clenched her hands at her side.

"Xena, we both know the risks tomorrow." Gabrielle lifted her hand and covered her heavily beating

chest. "I'm already injured, and I'll be facing an automaton. We both know there's a good chance that I may get killed."

"Then don't go to battle," the ruler hotly urged.

"Xena, that automaton is on a mission to hunt me down," Gabrielle hotly whispered. She dropped her hand. "She will do anything to get me and hiding or running from her won't work." She then swallowed the developed lump in her throat. "And don't ask me to hide after everything... I'm tired of it. I have to face her, Xena."

The Conqueror grabbed the bard's shoulder. Her voice came out low yet urgent. "I didn't find you now just to see you get killed shortly after." She had racing thoughts then insisted, "I'll help you stop her."

"No," Gabrielle fought, "you need to be at the battlefield to command your army. You have to face Draco head on."

"And he's worth spit to me compared to your life," Xena reminded.

Gabrielle reached up, grabbed Xena's hand from her shoulder, and took the larger hand into hers. "I know, but I'm asking you not to do this. You have to stop Draco, and I have to stop Seven. It's the only way, Xena."

The Conqueror was breathing heavily, and she turned her head away. She tried to cap off her mix of emotions.

"Xena," Gabrielle gently whispered, "I have to do this. You know that. Since we were kids you've told me to face my fears and my problems." She shook her head and insisted, "This isn't any different."

Xena clenched jaw and still wouldn't look at her friend. She felt the heat of Gabrielle's hand in hers.

"You remember when we were kids," Gabrielle started in a wistful tone, "and you and Ly would climb up into that tree behind your mother's taverna? I chased after you two and tried to get up into the tree."

Xena slowly turned her head back and studied her friend's emotional features. The old memory clearly came back to her.

"You'd put her hand down to me and say 'You've gotta have faith, you got to.' Then just before we locked hands you would pull yours away." Gabrielle shook her head and confessed, "I was angry at you... and hurt. You'd always protected me then there were times like those that I couldn't understand how you could treat me like that."

Xena was still breathing deeply but no longer from anger. The childhood memories made her ache because she hated some of the lessons she'd taught Gabrielle, but they'd always paid off too.

"We both knew I hated heights." Gabrielle paused and licked her dry lips. "Then finally one day I was so angry that it made me determined to get up there. And I did it."

Xena sadly smiled at how Gabrielle triumphantly made it into the tree. Gabrielle had been proud that day, but Xena was far more proud than Gabrielle ever realized.

The bard showed a sad grin. "I still remember that. But I never understood why you'd never helped me up into the tree. I didn't understand until several seasons ago." She subconsciously shifted her hand so that her fingers laced through Xena's longer ones. "When I had my Amazon Judgment, apart of my trial was that I had to fight in the trees against a masked sister. If I fell then I couldn't receive my mask. I still had some of the height fears and that's how they chose my judgment. At first I didn't think I could

do it, then I thought back to you and the tree."

Xena slightly bowed her head, but she kept listening.

"You never gave me your hand because you wanted me to have faith." Gabrielle started to smile but more proudly. "To have faith in myself."

Xena finally smiled now that she knew Gabrielle understood her hard lesson.

"I passed my Amazon Judgment the first time," the bard informed. She shook her head and stated, "I had faith in myself then, Xena. And now I must have it so I can defeat this automaton no matter the costs. I have to do this." She squeezed Xena's hand. "But tell me for once that you have faith that I can do this too."

Xena mustered her strength as a warrior. She raised her free hand and tenderly rested her callused palm against the bard's cheek. She lowered her head closer and softly affirmed, "I do have faith in you, Bri." She studied the deep green eyes that she'd missed for so long. "Just know if something happens to you then everything I worked for will be meaningless."

"No," the bard emotionally insisted, "don't make that about me. You've accomplished too much to lose it now. You have to keep going because this is about the Greater Good." She squeezed Xena's hand harder. "We always talked about that as kids and how the Warrior Princess would never stop to fight for the Greater Good. Don't let that just be a story, Xena."

The Conqueror slowly nodded her silent promise. She fisted her freehand at her side.

Gabrielle noticed it, and she took the white knuckled hand into hers. She felt how Xena struggled, but she saw Xena's hand loosen then opened until their palms touched. She gradually laced their other two hands together while she spoke. "If I don't make it tomorrow, I want to be committed to an Amazon pyre."

The Conqueror closed her eyes against the words she didn't want to hear. She knew she had to listen though and fulfill Gabrielle's requests.

"But I want my ashes to be taken to Amphipolis," Gabrielle surprisingly whispered. "I want to be placed by your brother."

"Oh gods, Gabrielle," Xena achingly murmured, "I can't..." She didn't want to bury another loved one in Amphipolis. She wasn't sure she had the strength to relive a similar horror.

"I was closer to your family than mine," the bard insisted. "Please, Xena?"

Xena flexed her jaw a few times, but she nodded. She couldn't verbally say it but she did manage, "I'll... take care of... everything."

Gabrielle swallowed then the sting increased behind her eyes. She rasped, "Thank you." She then stepped forward and lowered her head until her forehead touched Xena's chest. She closed her eyes and squeezed Xena's hands tighter, which were between the small space of their bodies.

Xena returned the force of the hand holding. She shut her eyes and lowered her head until she had her face hidden in the bard's soft hair. She could smell the distant leather and the strong sandalwood. She squeezed her eyes tightly and willed her emotions to settle down.

Gabrielle refused to cry here. She was close to it, yet she held it in check. There was a small part of her that truly wanted to give in and hide behind Xena. She knew Xena would do everything and anything

to protect her, and Gabrielle always adored that fact because it told her how special she was to Xena. She also liked the feeling of being that safe. But it was the Amazon inside her and the piece of her that Xena had raised in her that wouldn't allow her to give into it. She would face her challenge tomorrow and win even if it meant her life to accomplish it. After tonight's celebration, she was starkly reminded of the code as an Amazon she would always honor.

Faolan sadly observed the pair that were so close together yet seemed far too. He had his ears back and an awful feeling was in the pit of his stomach. He almost felt nauseous, yet he knew this would come some day. He never knew how or when, but Artemis decided it would be tomorrow.

Xena placed a light kiss to her friend's head then straightened up some. "You should be going... the Amazons are probably waiting for you."

Gabrielle straightened up from the position she didn't want to lose. She didn't want tonight to end, yet it was fate that the sun would always rise and fall. She slowly backed out of her close spot to Xena and broke hands.

"Come on," the ruler murmured. She glanced at Faolan, who joined them on the walk to the horses.

The queen squared her shoulders as they approached the group of Amazons. She put on her mental queen mask and fell into role. "Are we ready?"

"Yes, my queen." Solari had Torqueo's reins, and she guided the horse over to Gabrielle. "I tied your staff to the bags already."

"Thank you." Gabrielle accepted the reins. "Mount up, Amazons." She heard the rustle of feathers getting up into the saddles.

The Conqueror saw to the officer that was in command of the small party that would escort the Amazons. She instructed him to follow the Amazon Queen's orders and that they better return the Amazons safely to the village. She came back to Gabrielle, who was on her horse.

"I'll see you on the battlefield when it starts," the bard promised.

The Conqueror touched the bard's knee. "I had better." She squeezed then dropped her hand. "Be safe on the trip back."

"Thank you again for tonight." Gabrielle gave a last smile.

Xena nodded then stepped back. She glimpsed at Faolan, who wagged his tail at her. She shook his head at him, but she hoped the wolf would protect Gabrielle tomorrow.

"Let's go," the queen commanded. She glanced back at Xena as her Amazons started to move out of the camp on horseback. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Xena nodded once. "See you then." She now turned and walked away because otherwise she would be tempted to haul Gabrielle off the horse and keep her safe. She listened to the horses riding away at a fast walk.

Gabrielle urged Torqueo to go ahead, and she fell into line.

The Conqueror only made it a handful of paces before she turned and watched them leave. She had her head turned sidelong.

Gabrielle couldn't resist the desire, and she twisted around as much as she could in her saddle. She was

surprised to see Xena watching her go. She told herself not to do it, but she couldn't stop herself. She freed her hand and held it up up in Xena's direction.

Xena couldn't deny Gabrielle so she raised her hand up in return. She waited until Gabrielle turned back in the saddle, then she went deeper into the camp. She had a lot to do to prepare for the battle.

To be continued.