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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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Started: April 25, 2007

Series 9: **Destiny of Mine** – Story #2

To Take What is Mine

by Red Hope

Chapter 19

Cliona lifted her head from her studies of the herbal list. She gave a low sigh at the queen's entry into the healer's hut at such a later candlemark. "I believe I meant before or shortly after dinner, my queen."

Gabrielle stood in front of the desk and slightly leaned against her staff. "Funny. I didn't know the healers were comedians too."

Cliona quirked a grin and teased, "Free of charge."

"Yea," Gabrielle muttered, "get what you pay for."

Cliona chuckled and leaned back in her chair. "How does it feel tonight?"

The queen sighed and replied, "It's still there."

The apprentice healer let it go. She climbed to her feet and directed the queen into the closest room. She was the only healer on duty tonight. She typically ended up with the last rotational shift that was dubbed the omega shift. Usually the apprentice always lucked out with the omega shift and only had off once to three times a moon depending on the master healer's mood.

Gabrielle set her staff down then took the stool in the room. "Do you always have the omega shift?"

The apprentice readied the special balm. "Typically, yes."

The bard grinned and settled her hands onto her knees. "I could never decide whether I hated the omega

or alpha shift more when I did patrol duty."

Cliona grinned and merely listened to the queen.

"I finally decided the alpha shift was a bit better because I could see the sunrise. By then, I'd be in a better mood."

Cliona shook from a silent laugh, and amusement laced her words. "You must require sleep."

"You have no idea." Gabrielle's moods always coincided with the amount of sleep or quality of sleep she acquired the night before. She sighed now because she knew there wouldn't be any sleep for her tonight. She tilted her head to the left so that Cliona had better access to her wound. She was given the bowl, which she kept cupped in her lap.

Cliona had removed the slightly blood stained wrap. She visually inspected the wound, and she was quite pleased with the hefty, dark scab that'd formed. She then moved behind Gabrielle and checked the back wound. She noted that the wound was almost completely scabbed over. The red, irritated skin around the wound was slightly stretched from the prior poker burning. But once the scab turned into new skin it would greatly improve.

Gabrielle closed her eyes when Cliona's gentle touch came to her back shoulder. The cool balm soothed the ache she felt on her shoulder. The irritated skin around the scabs felt like it'd been burnt by the sun from being outside too long.

"I would tell you to get plenty of rest tonight," the apprentice mentioned, "but I suspect you won't get any."

The bard knew she was see-through at times. "There's too much to be done."

Cliona had finished with the balm. She now wrapped the shoulder again with a clean wrap. "Before the battle, try to stop in so I can check this before you go out there."

Gabrielle nodded but she couldn't promise anything.

Cliona knew it too, but she wouldn't press it. She took the used bowl and set it aside. She picked up the queen's staff and handed it to her once she was on her feet.

"Thanks again, Cliona."

The healer walked the queen to the front door. "You're welcome, Gabrielle. Try to resist from straining your shoulder for as long as you can."

Gabrielle only nodded again then she went to the open door. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Cliona sadly watched the stressed queen leave the hut.

Gabrielle went down the steps and there was Faolan waiting for her. "We need to see the stratègos then find Andra."

Faolan stood up and started the walk through the village.

Gabrielle noticed there was some invisible weight on the wolf. She sympathized too. Eventually she and Faolan tracked down Commander Kaylee. She spoke to Kaylee about who Xena's chiliarchès was and that Xena's hipparchis would be delivering the horses tonight.

Commander Kaylee was pleased. She revealed that Tyldus had sent a message that he would be coming

a candlemark before dawn to join in the battle. She then informed that Hercules and Iolaus had stuck to the plans for the automaton. A deep hole had been dug not too far from the ruins that rested near the Axius River. Kaylee freed a small scroll from her side, opened a map, and showed the queen the location of everything.

Gabrielle then requested to have the map so she could commit it to memory tonight. She gratefully took the map. She was surprised when Kaylee asked about how things went at the Greek Army camp. She told Kaylee the ongoings earlier tonight and about the traditional dance that the army put on prior to battles.

Kaylee was surprised by the tradition, but she'd heard of such a tradition so many countless moons ago when their ancestors walked the earth. She considered whether that was the Conqueror's inspiration.

Finally Gabrielle broke away from the strategos. She headed off and went towards the personal huts. She needed to see her blood sister.

Andra had been sound asleep until the gentle yet definite knock came at her thatch door. She ran her fingers through her messy hair and came to the door in only her night shift. "Gabrielle?" She was surprised to see her young sister at such a late candlemark.

"Andra, I know it's late, but I need you to train me to wield your hammer."

The blacksmith sighed, but she pulled the door open. "Come in while I get ready." She let the queen and wolf into her hut then shut the door against the late chill.

"I'm sorry I woke you," Gabrielle tried.

"No." Andra shook her head while she gathered her basic leathers. "You're right that you need to learn how to use it." She went into the washroom and got ready. She still talked though. "How were things with Xena?"

"They went really well," Gabrielle happily insisted.

The blacksmith came back out with her night shift in hand and her leathers on now. She tossed her shift onto the bed then collected her boots. She sat on the foot of the bed. "What time did you get back? You weren't here when I went to bed."

"Not too long ago."

Andra had sat on her bed and had dark blue eyes at Gabrielle's words. She smirked and leaned forward to get her boots tied. "How are you and Xena making out?"

Gabrielle tried not to blush at the double meaning words that Andra accidentally used. She just bobbed her head and answered, "I think the relations will work out nicely for the Nation."

"That's not what I asked," the blacksmith warned.

The bard grumbled and leaned against her staff.

"Do I need to ask the furball for the truth?" Andra glanced at the white wolf and mentioned, "He sees everything."

Faolan huffed in annoyance then sat down. He pretended to ignore Andra now.

The blacksmith tied her other boot and tested her blood sister again. "Is she still mad at you?"

Gabrielle put her freehand behind her neck and hooked it for a beat. "I wouldn't say she's over it, Andra. I think she's set it aside somewhat." She dropped her hand from her neck.

Andra finally stood up but she targeted her stare at the small queen. She bluntly asked, "Have you kissed and made out?" She instantly had her answer when Gabrielle turned bright red. "Uhhh huh."

"Looks it's nothing," the bard hotly fought.

Andra slowly approached her friend, sister, and queen. First and foremost, this petite queen was her sister, and she wouldn't treat Gabrielle any different even with the queen's mask in place. "You told me you had a thing for her when you were kids."

"Yes, I did," the bard angrily admitted. "That was then and this is now, Andra."

"Mmmm. I would say your thing for her just got bigger too." Andra folded her arms and grew smug.

Gabrielle became more irate because of her sister's keen insight. "We kissed three times, alright? And the first two times don't count because they were for..." She waved her hand around in the air and declared, "To keep my cover."

"I bet," the blacksmith needled. "And the third one?"

The bard snapped her mouth shut and gave a hundred arrow glare at her sister. "It was in the heat of a fight."

"What was the fight about?"

Gabrielle darkened and challenged, "Do we have to discuss this?"

Andra arched an eyebrow perfectly as if she were Xena. She actually wasn't far from being Xena's twin except she was shorter, muscles stood out, and she didn't have those same bangs. "You know you want to tell me anyway."

"Youuu..." Gabrielle was pointing a finger at her sister. She slightly bared her teeth, but she dropped her hand. "Fine." She lifted her chin. "Her and I got into one of our stupid fights like nothing has ever changed." She slightly grinned.

"Except for the added kissing now," Andra taunted. She chuckled at Gabrielle deep sigh. "Was it good?"

Gabrielle's shoulders dropped in defeat. "Oh my gods, Andra." The blush colored her cheeks again, and she softly confessed, "It was really good." She smirked and joked, "She puts Ephiny to shame."

The blacksmith instantly covered the bard's mouth and warned, "Shame on you." She grinned at her sister's bashful features, yet she withdrew her hand. "You'll hurt Ephiny's ego."

"Just between us," the bard insisted. She then turned to the door and headed out with Faolan and Andra in tow.

"So you think it'll happen again?"

"The fight or the kiss?"

The blacksmith chuckled. "Both."

Gabrielle kept her staff moving to the rhythm of her walk. "Xena and I always fight, Andra. It's just

what we do, but we always know each other's limits too."

"You think the limits are different than what they use to be?"

The queen furrowed her brow because she hadn't considered that aspect. "I'm not sure."

"What about the kissing?"

Gabrielle cleared her throat, and she couldn't control that damn flush. "I... I'm really not sure about that."

Andra lightly touched her sister's nearest arm. "What made you stop kissing in the first place?"

"Oh, well Xena's second in command showed up."

The blacksmith laughed despite the ruined situation. "I bet that was awkward."

Gabrielle bet it was mostly awkward for Bastien, and she wondered what he thought about walking in on them kissing twice now. She didn't dare ask him though. "It was pretty awkward for Xena and I."

"Mmmm?" Andra prompted.

"Xena had to go perform this traditional dance... that's why Bastien showed up." Gabrielle spotted the blacksmith's hut just ahead. "But Xena apologized for what happened."

"Why?"

Gabrielle slightly lowered her head and frowned. "She thinks it's all too sudden."

"You don't think so?"

"Yes and no." The bard combed her bangs back for a beat. "It's confusing, Andra."

"Then I would say it is too sudden." The blacksmith stopped in front of her closed smithing hut. She turned to her sister. "You remember when I told you not to have sex with Ephiny before you were ready?"

"Andra-

"Come on," the blacksmith urged. "You know what I told you then. This is a similar situation but this time it's somebody you know you really loved at one time, Gabrielle. You know this relationship you value highly and screwing up will be costly."

Gabrielle leaned her head against her staff. "I do know." She raised her left hand and held her palm up. "I just... I don't know how to explain it, Andra. Xena was mostly my world when I was young. Then we were forced apart, and later I thought she was killed by the Romans." She searched Andra's understanding eyes. "Now she's back, and I worry that I may not get a chance to be with her. I don't want to regret not taking a chance before it's too late."

Andra grasped her sister's good shoulder. "I know, Gabrielle. But if it's meant to be, and you move at the wrong time then it could really mess things up."

The bard lifted her hand higher and gripped Andra's arm. "How would I even know?"

"You'll know... and Xena will know too." Andra squeezed the small shoulder in her hand. "Come on." She let go and pushed open the thatch door to her forge.

Gabrielle hoped her sister was right and that she had the strength to be patient. She also prayed that she would even be blessed to have the time to wait after the battle. She didn't dare bring up that aspect with Andra.

A half of a candlemark later, Andra, Gabrielle, and Faolan were making their way to one of the many sparring fields, which were quiet at this time of night. Faolan sat down by the edge of the field and stood guard over his friend's staff. The moon gave enough light for them, and Andra handed over her hammer to the bard. Gabrielle instantly felt the pain erupt in her injured shoulder, but she didn't dare show it. She needed to be strong.

"Now hold it like this." Andra lifted the bard's arms correctly so that the double-faced hammer was diagonal across the bard's body. "The hammer's head is made of pure iron," she explained. "It's heavy and dense so it'll do the most damage when correctly swung with both hands."

Gabrielle hefted the hammer that would be her main weapon tomorrow. She became use to the weight, and she realized that her and Andra were luckily the same height. The hammer's shaft was the right length as a result.

"When you go to do a wide swing," Andra instructed, "you must let your top hand slide down the shaft to your lower hand." She came behind the bard and tapped Gabrielle's right foot. "You probably want your right foot more forward than your left as you go to swing."

"If I'm right handed," Gabrielle countered.

"Exactly." Andra came to the bard's side. "If you do a horizontal swing you can manage it with your hands at either end of the hammer. It's more for closer proximity or a smaller blow."

Gabrielle met her sister's gaze. "A vertical swing is the most powerful."

"Yes, you put all your body weight into it." Andra folded her arms. "You use a vertical swing to smash your opponent's head or crush their shoulder." She hesitated but explained, "You only use a vertical swing if you're more than sure you'll make the blow. If you miss then you'll be spending time relifting the hammer, and your opponent has time to rush you and wound you... or worse."

"Alright." The queen adjusted her grip on the wood shaft.

"First, just walk around with it and try to lift it higher. Get familiar with the weight and balance."

Gabrielle silently agreed by strolling around the field. She quickly became use to the hammer and found a perfect balance with it. She even started to twist the hammer between her hands and watched the double-face spin in midair. She faced Andra, who was a hundred paces away or so.

The blacksmith approached her sister and ordered, "Start with small horizontal swings."

Gabrielle had thought the same already. She focused on her task to learn the hammer. She started slow with a few swings in front of her and without adjusting her hands. She grew faster and managed to swing left then came back with a right swing.

Andra stepped away because she could tell her sister was preparing to do wider swings.

The queen slid her right hand down to her left and gave a powerful swing. She had her legs nicely spread so that she was well planted.

Andra was quite impressed with Gabrielle's ability to adopt the tool to a weapon. She decided not to bother instructions on a vertical swing and just let Gabrielle figure it out. "Do a few vertical swings."

Gabrielle was efficient in making the adjustment to do small, quick vertical swings that she could easily recover from. She repeated them then intermixed them with several small horizontal swings.

The blacksmith grinned and felt much better about the battle than she did earlier.

The bard felt that incredible burn in her arms and injured shoulder. But it only encouraged her to try harder because that was how Eponin taught her. She was fully focused on her footing, body's balance, and her swings' angles.

Andra now stepped up to her sister and held up her hands. "Here's your target."

Gabrielle abruptly stopped and held the hammer up in the air to the right of her head. The sweat coated her skin and made her shine in the moonlight. Her green eyes were stormy, and her bangs were damp against her brow.

Andra gave a smirk and teased, "Come on, little sister."

Gabrielle moved quickly and did several vertical swings.

Andra was fast and agile despite most would think otherwise. She easily dodged the swings, but kept her sister plenty busy. She ducked a few times or jumped aside from a small vertical swing. She then realized Gabrielle was gearing up for a full vertical swing. She had wide eyes and managed to jump out of the way just in time.

The blacksmith's hammer loudly slammed into the ground. For a moment it remained there then it was lifted to reveal blades of glass stuck to the face. The earth was left with an obvious crater.

Andra stared down at the dent and peered up at Gabrielle. "Nice."

Gabrielle let the hammer's head sit on the ground, and she balanced the handle.

Andra came over to her sister. "There's just one thing you need to keep in mind."

The bard tilted her head, which meant she was listening.

"If that automaton gets a hold of my hammer then it'll be a serious problem." Andra pointed at the tool. "It's a great weapon for you, but for her it's a lethal weapon. If she has the strength that they claim then wielding that will be like you wielding your staff. It'll be light, and she'll adopt to it in a beat."

Gabrielle hadn't considered that aspect, but she appreciated Andra's point. "I think I'm going to practice some more."

Andra imagined that Gabrielle not only wanted to practice but work off some nervous energy.

"You should get some more rest," the queen insisted.

The blacksmith nodded yet asked, "Will you?" After her sister shook her head, she sighed and offered, "Try to at least sit and relax before everything happens... you know breathe and eat."

Gabrielle half grinned and promised, "I will."

Andra stepped closer and leaned over to place a quick kiss to her sister's cheek. "I'll see you later." She then strolled off and headed back to her hut for some more sleep. She calculated it'd be four to three candlemarks before dawn.

The queen watched her sister go then switched her attention to the wolf. "So, do I look good with a

blacksmith's hammer, Fao?"

The wolf whined then peered down at the staff beside him.

Gabrielle glimpsed at the hammer then at her staff. "I think I prefer my staff too." She picked up the smithing tool and continued to practice some more until she felt it'd be too much on her shoulder. She only practiced for another half of candlemark then decided it was best to get ready for later.

Gabrielle first scooped up her staff, then she and Faolan hurried back into the village. She went to the stables and found Torqueo, who had been peacefully sleeping. He whined at Gabrielle for waking him up.

"Sorry, boy. We need to make a quick ride to the old ruins." Gabrielle propped her staff and the hammer against the stall wall. She then hastened to tack up her horse. She then managed to lash down the hammer to Torqueo's side. She then had to tie her staff down too.

Faolan moved out of the way when his friend and that silly horse came out of the stable. He backed away when Gabrielle mounted the chestnut stallion.

Torqueo shook his head, which caused his mane to tussle. He followed the signals to head to the gates, and he went at a fast walk. He wasn't signaled to stop until just near the gates.

"My queen, where to?" a guard inquired.

"I'm headed to the ruins. I won't be long," she assured.

"Estimated time?" the guard queried.

Gabrielle considered it then replied, "Give me two candlemarks at the max."

The guard nodded and went to the door. She hauled the huge door open and waited for the queen and wolf to pass. She then shut the door.

"How long?" another guard hollered.

"Two candlemarks," the ground guard called back up.

The guard on the wall cupped her hands over her mouth. She gave a special, coded bird call towards the woods. She heard the distant hoof beats through the woods that she knew were the queen's. After a beat, she received a confirming bird call back.

Faolan ran swiftly along side the horse. He easily kept stride, but briefly peered up at the trees when a bird call passed over his head. With his excellent night vision, he made out the patrol Amazon neatly tucked in the trees.

Gabrielle kept Torqueo at a full trot through the dense woodland. The cool air helped calm her warmed body from the earlier practice. And as she rode through the woods, she listened to the distinct bird calls that floated above her. They seemed to follow her all the way through the woods. She could easily translate them after spending so many seasons learning them. All the patrol Amazons were being instructed to keep an eye on her so no mishaps would happen tonight.

The Amazon Queen halted Torqueo just on the outskirts of the forest. In the background there was a continued echo of bird calls so she patiently waited. Not far ahead were the ruins and beyond that was the gorge to the Axis River. It would be in this open land that they would fight the automaton tomorrow.

Just behind Gabrielle the trees rustled then three Amazons appeared on foot from the darkness of the woods. One Amazon peered up and nodded at the queen.

The bard tapped Torqueo's side then continued her journey to the ruins.

Faolan went ahead of Gabrielle and kept check on any signs of danger.

The three Amazons flanked the queen's horse and kept guard too.

Gabrielle slowed her stallion even more once they entered the ruins. She stopped Torqueo then dismounted with ease. She quickly unlashed the heavy hammer.

Torqueo let out an huge sigh of relief now that the extra weight was off him.

Gabrielle grinned and patted her horse's side. She now surveyed the ruins for the right spot to hide her weapon. She then found the spot. It was two fallen pillars that were close together and made a tiny alcove. She squatted down and tucked the smithing tool down into the dark hole for the battle tomorrow.

Torqueo tossed his head when Gabrielle came back to him. His reins were taken, and he was guided through the ruins carefully.

The bard decided to walk back to the woods so that she could refresh her memory about this location. She didn't often come here.

The three Amazons kept to Gabrielle's side and visually scanned for any danger.

Faolan had his head low, and he sniffed the ground.

"These ruins are haunted," an Amazon dared.

Gabrielle wrapped her left hand in Torqueo's reins. "They say this use to be a temple here many, many generations ago."

"A temple to a Titan," a different Amazon suggested. "Those were the only temples then."

"But how did it fall?" the first Amazon argued.

"It fell when the Titan fell."

The queen shook her head and asked, "What makes it haunted?"

"You have not heard, my queen?"

The queen gave a doubtful look to the Amazon. "Would I ask otherwise?"

The Amazon flushed but hastily decided to answer the earlier question. "Well, some kids have snuck here late at night. They come racing back to the village though in no time flat."

"Why?"

"They claim they hear voices." The Amazon walked closer to the queen. "Oddly, they keep insisting it's only women's voices they hear."

"It's probably the wind," an Amazon argued.

"It's actually a bit of a game," the third Amazon finally spoke. "You get a handful of Amazon kids, and

they start teasing each other about coming out here. Some will claim they've spent a night out here, but they never really have done so. But the two or four Amazons that have never been out here are told to spend the night."

"Oh sweet Artemis," Gabrielle muttered. She glad she was never young enough for that unofficial right of caste.

"So the kids will all come out here and leave the few that claim they can spend the night." The Amazon now chuckled and showed a bright grin in the darkness. "They never make it that long. They'll run back into the forest screaming their feathers off, and the other kids will be waiting to get a laugh."

"Patrol always ends up taking them back to the village to their mothers."

Gabrielle shook her head and chuckled. "That sounds about normal for these kids." She then came to a stop on the edge of the ruins and turned back to them. She studied the fallen pillars and partial walls that were left. The only true remains that showed some previous life was the foundation.

"I wonder if it was really a Titan?" an Amazon murmured.

"Perhaps if you stay tonight, Thira then you'll find out."

The Amazon, Thira, shot a scowl at her Amazon sister. "Only if you join me, Helle."

Helle gave a deep laugh. "I have patrol duty myself."

"Sissy feathers," Thira shot back.

The queen hastily held up her hand. "Alright, Amazon kids."

Thira chuckled and nodded. "Sorry, my queen."

Helle cleared her throat and went more formal into her role.

The third Amazon, Leda, moved away from the group and seemed to be focused on something.

Faolan sharply lifted his head at the sound.

"Do you hear that?" Leda whispered.

"Come on, Leda," Helle insisted. "The breeze just picked up."

"No, I hear it too." Gabrielle moved over to Leda and brought Torqueo with her.

Torqueo whined in protest and became skittish.

"It's okay, boy." Gabrielle reached for her stallion and tried to sooth him.

Helle and Thira had moved closer to Leda. They grew tense and nervous as some distant sound gradually grew louder.

Gabrielle stopped petting Torqueo's nose and now scanned the temple ruins before her. She thought she should be scared like her sisters, yet she was quite opposite about it. She felt more at ease than anything.

"I hear it now too," Helle murmured. "It is a woman's voice."

"Women's," Leda corrected.

Thira reached back for her sword hilt. "It could also be a trick."

Gabrielle glanced at the tense Amazons and gently ordered, "Steady." She shifted closer to Faolan, who was watching the ruins for something. "Do you know what it is, Faolan?" She really wished the wolf could talk at this point.

The wolf had his fur up, but he wasn't snarling. He then stiffened once a particular voice grew louder than the rest.

"Γαῖα... Γαῖα... Γαῖα," the voice spoke louder.

"What in Artemis's name does that mean?" Helle nervously demanded.

The Amazon Queen slotted her eyes and concentrated on the voice better.

"Γαῖα... Αμαζόνες... Ἄρτεμις..."

Gabrielle realized she'd heard similar tones sometime just recently. Then it struck her that the tones of the words were very similar to the song that Xena sung tonight. "It's some ancient language," she explained.

"My queen, I don't think we should wait around to see who owns that voice," Thira suggested.

"Γαβριήλα... Γαβριήλα... Γαβριήλα."

The queen dropped Torqueo's reins and whispered, "That's my name in ancient Greek." She recalled when Xena use to call her that as kids. Xena had a fascination with ancient Greek words and writing for some reason and had committed many candlemarks to learning it, and as a result Gabrielle had picked up a few things too.

"My queen," Thira urged, "ruins that are calling your ancient Greek name aren't exactly the safest spot."

"No wait." Gabrielle held up her hand at them. "Just stay here."

"My queen," Helle fought, but she felt like her feet were too heavy to move.

"Γαβριήλα," the woman called through the ruins.

"Gavrila," the bard translated. That was her name in true Greek form as Xena taught her. She stepped up onto the sound foundation of the ruins, and she turned in a full circle.

"Γαβριήλα," the feminine voice rode the breeze all around the ruins.

"Has she lost her feathers?" Helle questioned. "And why can't I move my feet?"

"I don't know," Thira was trying to lift her right leg but it seemed impossible and like some invisible counter weight held her still.

"Look." Leda directed at the queen. "By Artemis..."

Tree roots had sprouted from the ground and were rapidly snaking towards the temple's remaining foundation.

"My queen, watch out!" Helle hollered.

Gabrielle tensed at seeing the countless tree roots that came towards her in unison. She then glanced

over at her Amazons but lowered her gaze to Faolan.

Faolan could move, but he would not interfere here. He gave a low howl to his friend.

"Γαβριήλα." The voice had grown quite distinct and was directly behind the bard.

The bard spun around and lifted her hands in normal defense manner. She saw nobody but then realized the tree roots were piling up a few paces from her feet. She stepped back once and wondered if this was a mistake.

The roots were rapidly bonding and twining upwards into a shape. They grew higher and distinctly started to shape into human form.

"By the gods," the bard murmured. She lowered her hands when the roots shaped a woman's face. She drew in her eyebrows when the leaves grew in the eye sockets to represent green eyes. Then lips were formed by the blooming of petite red flowers.

"What is that?" Helle demanded. "My queen, get away!"

"It's a woman," Leda murmured in awe.

The woman constructed from roots glided across the foundation and approached the weary Amazon Queen. The roots shifted one by one to help the figure walk on the foundation.

"Who are you?" Gabrielle asked.

"Είμαι Γαία."

The bard shook her head then fought, "I can't understand ancient Greek."

"Get away from there!" Thira's voice echoed through the ruins.

Gabrielle glanced in worry at her Amazons. She didn't sense any threat from this mysterious creature or woman. She just wasn't exactly sure.

The feminine creature held up her hands in spread open her vine fingers. She patiently waited.

The Amazon Queen hesitated, but she slowly lifted her hands.

"She has lost her feathers," Helle claimed when the queen's hands clasped the creature's.

Gabrielle suddenly was jolted by something, and she shut her eyes. She opened them but had to blink a few times because it felt like she'd just directly looked into the sun. Slowly her focus came back and there before her stood a very tall woman that had be taller than Xena.

The woman wore forest green leathers and her top mimicked leaves. Her hair was midnight black but it seemed to flash green in the sunlight around them. Then her eyes were such a beautiful shade of green that Gabrielle saw the most radiant forest captured within them.

Suddenly Gabrielle realized she was no longer in the ruins but in some temple. It wasn't night but day, and a stream of sunlight poured through the opening in the ceiling above them. She focused back on the woman, who she held hands with still. She almost let go but she was denied.

"Don't let go or else this'll be lost." The woman had a deep and magical tone.

The bard found her voice finally and nervously asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Gaia, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard hastily put the pieces together and stated, "This was your temple."

"It is still my temple," the Titan argued. "But you must listen now because I do not have much time here."

Thira shook her head again after the queen spoke in that ancient Greek tongue.

"She's in some trance," Leda hypothesized.

"They're both talking to each other too," Helle concluded.

"I wish I knew what they were saying," Leda murmured.

Gaia glanced off to her right and stared at the wall or at least it seemed like a wall. She could see past the illusion she'd created for Gabrielle, and she saw the worried Amazons. "Your Amazons do not understand what is happening." She turned back to the small queen.

"I'm not exactly sure I do," Gabrielle argued.

Gaia revealed a grin but became more serious. "Tomorrow you face a great threat against something the gods have created."

"The automaton," the queen argued.

"Yes." Gaia waited a beat then honestly stated, "You are right to be concerned about your death." She squeezed the bard's hands tighter. "Tomorrow may be your last day to reign, but it will be your finest."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and whispered, "I can accept that." She opened her eyes again and hoarsely asked, "But why are you here? Not to tell me just about my fate."

"No, there are things you must understand before the battle." Gaia lowered her head closer. "The automaton has a far better destiny than what the gods have designed for her."

"How do you know?"

The Titan chuckled and explained, "She has the soul of an original Amazon, and it is her soul that has allowed her to survive this far." She caught Gabrielle's confusion so she quickly explained. "She was seven of nine test subjects. All eight could not handle Hephaestus and Ares's testing, but she survived it because of her Amazon spirit. Ares and Hephaestus believe they succeeded with her because they'd correctly fine tuned the metals. However they're discovering that their experiment had numerous flaws, and they cannot balance the metals to work properly."

"Then the automatons that Ares promised Draco don't even exist?"

"Exactly." Gaia smiled at the queen's quick perception. "But it still leaves my Amazon in the middle of this mess that these gods have created."

"How can we free her?"

"Bring her here." Gaia studied the bard's rich green eyes that matched her own. "Here at my temple the spirits of the original Amazons still live. She will be reunited with her soul that the gods took from her."

Gabrielle nodded her agreement and promised, "We'll free her."

"I know you will." Gaia sadly smiled. "I must go before I am found."

"How are you here if you're trapped in the underworld?"

The Titan softly laughed and reminded, "The Titans were here first, and we will be here long after the gods have died off. It is the Titans that the humans need and once that it realized then we'll ascend the underworld. Until then, we have our ways to still momentarily ascend the underworld."

The bard had a faint grin at this foretelling, but she still had a question. She quickly asked, "Is it true about Xena, Yakut, and me? That we have souls from the first Amazons?"

"Yes," the Titan softly answered, "and you must heed your priestess's wise words." She then suddenly straightened up as if sensing some threat. She focused back on the bard. "I must return to the underworld."

Gabrielle noticed how it was growing dark inside of the temple and the walls were beginning to melt. She felt like ducking, but it had to be an illusion because there were no sounds.

"Live your destiny and fight tomorrow with your soul, Gavril." Gaia now released hands. She morphed back into the root and vine creature that she'd been earlier. Suddenly the roots died and the breeze intensified then she burst into millions of brown pieces.

Gabrielle's senses had been overridden, and she collapsed to the foundation in an unconscious heap.

"Queen Gabrielle!" Helle screamed. She suddenly felt the weight gone, and she sprinted for the queen.

Leda and Thira raced behind and jumped up onto the foundation behind Helle.

Helle fell to her knees beside the unmoving queen. "My queen?" She touched queen's warm cheeks, and she was relieved to see her breathing still.

Faolan had appeared from no where. He hastily licked Gabrielle's exposed cheek and whined.

"Fao," the queen grumbled.

Faolan wagged his tail and proceeded to lick his friend more on the cheek.

"Oh come on."

Helle sighed in relief then helped the queen sit up finally. "Are you okay?"

Thira squatted down next to the queen. "You really scared us there."

"Yea, you were talking weird," Helle informed.

Gabrielle touched her pounding forehead. "Talking weird?"

"You spoke in that ancient tongue," Leda explained from her hovering spot behind the group. "What was that?"

The queen massaged her head and hoped it would rid of the headache, but she doubted it. "You didn't see her?"

"Oh we saw her... or it... whatever it was." Helle now helped the queen get to her feet.

"You didn't see the temple?" The bard watched her Amazons exchange looks. "Oh great." She pushed her bangs back. "It all must have been an illusion."

"Or you're delusional," Helle quipped. She suddenly hissed when Thira elbowed her.

"It's okay," Gabrielle insisted. She glanced past her Amazons and noted Torqueo waiting for her. "Let's get back to the village."

Leda helped the queen get off the foundation and started back to the horse. "What was that?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," the bard swore.

Leda shrugged and adjusted the queen's arm across her shoulders. She tilted her head to the side to get a good look at the queen's profile. "Try me."

Gabrielle felt her strength returning as she made each step. "It was Gaia." She grumbled and stated, "I know I probably lost my feathers."

"I think you lost them some time ago," Helle teased.

"Do you want patrol duty on the omega shift for a moon, Helle?"

Helle nervously smiled at the queen. "Uh no, not really."

"I believe you, my queen," Leda softly spoke up.

"Suck up," Helle needled.

Thira again elbowed Helle to get her to quit.

"Are you related to Solari?" Gabrielle directed her question to Helle.

Helle chuckled and replied, "You would think so."

The bard now separated from Leda. "I'm okay now. Thank you."

Torqueo flicked his tail when Gabrielle came to him.

"You stayed," the bard murmured to the horse, "thank you." She took the reins and set them over his head. She then proceeded to get into the saddle. "Fao?"

The white wolf appeared out of the darkness and showed he was ready to go too.

Gabrielle stole one last glance at the ruins of the ancient temple. She clicked her tongue once at Torqueo then headed back to the woods.

None of the Amazons spoke anymore, and they each thought about what they'd seen and heard. Gabrielle especially considered whether her meeting with the mother of Earth was real or not. She couldn't write it off though because her Amazons did see Gaia in the form of roots and vines. She also debated what the likely hood was of the Amazon Nation being built relatively close to these ancient ruins. It could not have been by happenstance in her opinion.

The three patrol Amazons eventually broke away from their queen once they were deep enough in the forest. Gabrielle made sure to thank them, then she tapped Torqueo into a gallop for the Nation. Faolan also picked up his pace and hurried after the horse and rider. Once she made it through the gate's door, she was greeted by Commander Kaylee and Officer Galatea.

Gabrielle swung her feet out of the stirrups and landed down on the ground.

"My queen, Officer Rufina is going to meet the Conqueror's hipparchis to make the exchange."

The queen considered the news then stated, "I will go with her. Where is Rufina?"

The stratègos almost replied, but she heard the movements behind her. She had her answer coming towards them.

Gabrielle pulled Torqueo's reins from over his head. She came closer to the stratègos and polemarchos. She spotted Officer Rufina in the lead of fifty Amazon warriors. "Is this everybody, ilarchès?"

The ilarchès, Rufina, bowed to the queen then straightened up. "Yes, we're prepared to retrieve the horses from the Conqueror."

"Excellent. I'll be joining you." Gabrielle saw the ilarchès well contained surprise. "We best not be late." She handed her reins to Officer Galatea. "Can you take care of Torqueo?" She made sure to get her staff too.

"Of course." The polemarchos took the horse's reins.

The ilarchès accompanied the queen's free side that wasn't taken by the wolf. "Let's move, Amazons." She started for the open door and filed out of it.

Once the party was gone, the polemarchos looked to Commander Kaylee. "Is it me or did the queen seem a little weird?"

"We're Amazon officers. 'Weird' is apart of the job," the stratègos remarked.

Galatea grunted because she agreed. She then gently tugged on Torqueo's reins. "Come on, boy." She led him away to the stables.

The stratègos peered up at the guards on the wall. "How are things?"

"Quiet, stratègos," a guard reported. "The calm before the storm."

"I suspect so," Kaylee murmured. She walked away and muttered, "Time for some of my special wine." And she really did need a kick to be ready in a few candlemarks to battle beside the Conqueror. There was not telling what Helios's morning would bring to the Amazon Nation.

To be continued.