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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 anger leads her into blindness.

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

To Take What is Mine

by Red Hope

Chapter 2

Gabrielle closed her journal after completing her latest entry. She ran her left hand over the soft leather then stared at it. She sighed and lifted her head some. She gazed into the campfire in front of her.

Faolan paused between chewing on his bone. He cocked his head at his friend's forlorn expression.

The Amazon Princess glanced over at the wolf and smiled. "It's nice being on vacation huh?"

Faolan wagged his tail then replied, "Rrrrr." The tip of his tongue poked out.

Gabrielle chuckled and lowered her propped up legs down to the soft, new grass. She'd put in her request for a vacation and to visit her family. Queen Melosa would only approve it if Gabrielle took other Amazons for security purposes. However there was nobody else in the camp, but Faolan.

Gabrielle grinned when she thought back on her small debate with the queen.

Queen Melosa laced her hands and rested them on her desk. "That's fine, princess. Just let me know who will be going with you."

Gabrielle's hands were behind her back, and she knotted her fingers together. "Actually, my queen I'd like to go alone."

Melosa lifted her chin, which was an instant sign of rejection. "You will select at least two other Amazons to accompany you."

The bard mentally prepared for battle; she'd already worked out her plans last night. "I would prefer to go alone, my queen. I need this time to myself."

Melosa sat back in her chair and carefully observed the princess. Over the past seasons she'd come to know Gabrielle better because they were working together now. She had to admit that Gabrielle had grown a lot and rather quickly over these seasons. She was secretly impressed with Gabrielle's advances because Melosa never suspected Gabrielle was capable of them.

"Faolan will be with me," Gabrielle offered. "I just need... a break."

The queen's usually terse attitude cracked under the princess's emotionally laced words. She knew Gabrielle had been under a lot of stress lately. Melosa even heard about the break up between Ephiny and Gabrielle, which had been a shocker to many Amazons. Everybody was fairly convinced that Ephiny and Gabrielle would never separate, and nobody guessed the undercurrent of trouble between the couple. Then again, Melosa doubted Ephiny knew the troubles in the relationship either, and Ephiny probably still didn't understand them.

"You must send word during your visits so that I know you're safe then I will allow this." Queen Melosa knew as soon as she let this happen that Gabrielle would certainly want this same vacation again. She felt comfortable enough though because Gabrielle could protect herself whether by mouth or staff and even sword.

Gabrielle beamed and felt her body relax. The debate hadn't been as bad as she thought it would be. "Thank you, my queen."

The campfire crackled louder than normal and broke Gabrielle from her memories.

The bard leaned to her right some and shoved her journal and quill away in her saddlebags. She figured it was time to get some rest so she stood up and prepared for bed.

Gabrielle didn't wear her usual Amazon attire because she was concerned it'd draw too much attention to her on the road. Instead she'd adapted to a different set of leathers that Andra had actually helped her pick out. So Gabrielle was clad in a deep red leather top that was braided. Then her skirt had the same braided leather belt but the lower half of the skirt was a soft orange cloth then three leather flaps in the front or back. Gabrielle had also picked some new boots that were black. Her old ones were just worn and stretched out. The finishing touch though were her silver cuff bracelets and a single silver arm bracelet on the right arm.

The princess still looked formidable, but she didn't look like an Amazon Princess. The only slight remnants of her Amazon background were the small feathers still tied in the locks of her long hair. Of course nobody, except an Amazon, would most likely understand what the feathers meant.

Gabrielle had already gone to Articia and visited with Cornelio. She also spent a day at her mother's

grave. She was grateful that Cornelio had tended to the maintenance of her mother's grave for all these moons. Although Gabrielle had spoken to Cornelio about having her mother moved to Potidaea so she could be buried beside Gabrielle's father. Cornelio thoroughly agreed that it would be the proper thing to do.

The bard then spent some time with Maria and her son, Joseph, who was walking and talking now. And boy did that kid ever have a vocabulary, Gabrielle had decided during the visit. Just at the thought of some of the words made Gabrielle laugh. Gabrielle prayed that if she ever had children that they didn't learn such words as Joseph had managed.

Then there was little Mary, who had grown like a weed. Well, Gabrielle decided it was more like a beautiful flower because Mary would become quite the gorgeous beauty in her later teenage years. It wouldn't be long before Mary faced the same challenge as Gabrielle did to break the slavery.

Overall, Gabrielle's visit had been enjoyable. What had sparked some trouble was Cornelio's private talk with Gabrielle about Lila. For a long time, Cornelio had put many of his resources into finding the whereabouts of Gabrielle's sister but to no avail. Lila's trail remained cold, but Cornelio promised he'd listen for any word.

Gabrielle knew she promised her mother that she wouldn't give up on finding her sister. And she wouldn't give up, yet it often gave her a lot of despair. She wanted badly for Lila to be returned to her, and she would have faith that she'd share her future with her sister.

The princess finally settled into her bedroll and rolled onto her right side. She peered over her chest and caught a glance of her furry friend.

Faolan hesitated from his next chomp. He met Gabrielle's stare and licked his chops.

Gabrielle smiled at the white wolf then called, "Goodnight, Faolan." She then closed her eyes and tried to get some rest. Tomorrow she had a long ride to Potidaea.

Faolan grabbed his bone, got up, and quietly went over to Gabrielle. He took the small fur that was beside Gabrielle, which was his that Gabrielle had brought for him. He did a circle over top of the fur then flopped down on top of it. He released a sigh and let his bone roll out of his jaws.

Gabrielle peered through cracked eyelids. She wiggled her hand out of the furs and ruffled Faolan's warm coat.

Faolan moved his head and licked the bard's small hand. He then rested his head down on the front of his paws. He simply studied his human friend in front of him.

Gabrielle faded into her dreamscape rather quickly tonight. She was fairly worn from her ride on Torqueo when she left Articia this morning.

Faolan slept that night too from exhaustion. He had to stay at a certain pace most of the day to keep up with his human friend, who rode that silly, chestnut horse. Faolan actually liked the horse a lot, but he just wouldn't let Torqueo know it.

Apollo mounted his chariot eight or so candlemarks later. He started across the sky, and Helios awoke to bring a new day to the world. The sunlight stirred the small blond, who was nestled deep in the furs and was being safely watched over by a white wolf.

The Amazon Princess urged herself to wake up but slowly. She had a quick breakfast, which she shared with Faolan. She then cleaned up her camp, packed the few things she had out, and then she tacked up

her stallion.

Torqueo stomped his front hoof when his mistress prepared him. He happily started off in a walk when the Amazon took his reins and guided him into the woods.

Faolan sprung along side Gabrielle and carefully inspected the surroundings of the woods.

Gabrielle covered her yawn with the back of her free hand. She glanced back at Torqueo and smiled at him. "We won't ride too hard today, boy. How does a nice stable and apples sound?"

The horse tossed his head and huffed.

The bard shook hers and chuckled. She swore if her animal friends ever learned how to talk that they would have more to say than she did as a bard.

Faolan slightly moved ahead of his human friend. He was first on the road and didn't detect any danger. He turned east onto the road as he already knew the way.

Gabrielle simply followed along and towed her horse too. She planned to make it to Potidaea today, spend the night, and continue tomorrow to Amphipolis. She knew she could only spend a day in Potidaea before the painful memories would surface. At least though she'd see her father.

Gabrielle couldn't wait to see Cyrene or Toris tomorrow evening. Well she was somewhat nervous to see Cyrene. She didn't exactly look forward to the pending conversation that they'd been putting off for moons now. She just tried not to worry too much about it during her trek across Greece.

Around noon, Gabrielle decided to ride her horse. She expertly mounted the stallion and settled into the saddle. Although she did have to strap her staff to the side of her saddlebags, but she still had her sword on her back. And it was about a candlemark later that she noticed Faolan's walk becoming very slow.

The wolf had been walking several paces ahead and slowed down. He finally came to a stop once he sensed the horse beside him.

Gabrielle stopped Torqueo, tilted her head, and carefully listened. She could tell by the way Faolan had his head cocked that he heard something. Then a distant but distinct sound caught the bard's ear so she reached and slipped her staff free. Next, she silently dismounted Torqueo.

Faolan glimpsed at Gabrielle then back at the road when he heard the laughter again. His fur instantly prickled then his teeth flashed.

The Amazon Princess stepped in front of her horse and raised her staff.

The three bandits realized that they had company on the road. They each withdrew their swords and eyed the well armed woman. Then one bandit noticed the snarling wolf and the rather sharp fangs.

Gabrielle decided to start it off the easy way. "I'm not looking for trouble."

Faolan didn't agree because he hunkered some and growled deeper.

The bandits chuckled in unison then two of them nudged each other and pointed at the small woman. They had leering expressions.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes when she noticed the looks.

"Neither are we," the leader spoke, "so just put that stick down and give us your stuff." He considered it then added, "And yourself."

The two bandits behind hooted together in agreement.

The princess sighed and peered down at her friend. "What you think, Faolan?"

The wolf stepped forward, and his lips curled higher.

The leader narrowed his eyes at the wolf. He tightened his grip on the sword hilt when he realized the wolf had his green eyes set on him, personally.

"My friend here doesn't like the idea," Gabrielle translated. "And neither do I." She spun her staff in a circular motion. "You're better off just walking away." She knew half the battle was often intimidation as Eponin taught her.

The leader felt his palms sweat, but he wouldn't back down from a woman and some wolf. He'd be the laughing stock of the bandit business then. "Get her," he hotly ordered his comrades, "And her little wolf too."

Faolan gave a vicious snarl then broke into a run. He targeted the leader.

The leader had wide eyes, and his comrades decided to get away and deal with the girl. He cursed and raised his sword as the bounding wolf closed neared him.

Gabrielle took a few running steps ahead of Torqueo so he'd be protected. She brought her staff up to meet the dual swords. She caught them, then she step back once and slammed one end of the staff into the left bandit's side. She brought her other end back and hit the right bandit in his side. Next she completed her attack by ramming her staff's buttend into the left bandit's stomach.

The bandit howled and was thrown hard onto his back. He hadn't suspected there to be such momentum behind the woman's thrust.

The remaining bandit growled and slashed at the woman.

The princess ducked then cracked her staff over his other side. Gabrielle caught him hunched over so she gave him a resounding kick to his stomach. She stepped back while the bandit hit the ground. She stole a quick glance at Faolan.

Faolan had wrestled the leader onto his back. The wolf was busy holding the bandit's sword hand away. He'd wrapped his teeth around the bandit's right wrist and was digging his teeth deeper every heartbeat.

The leader was screaming and tried to roll the wolf off his body, but the animal was too heavy. Finally, he punched the wolf in the side.

Faolan cried then fell off the bandit. He managed to keep his jaws locked on the bandit's wrist.

The bandit climbed to his feet, but the wolf kept him bent over. He fisted his hand and prepared to punch the wolf in the face.

Faolan saw the punch coming, his bright eyes slotted, and he growled deeper in warning not to punch.

The bandit smirked and brought his fist downward. He could almost taste the satisfaction at getting the wolf. His fist connected but not with the wolf's face. He stared at the small hand that'd caught his fist. His head shot up, and he met a pair of furious green eyes.

"Nobody hurts my friend," Gabrielle snarled then she immediately punched the shocked bandit. She threw a punch with her right hand, and the staff in her hand made her punch harder.

The leader stumbled backwards and quite freely now that the wolf released him. He painfully cried from the ripping and shredding of his wrist thanks to the wolf's fangs. He almost dropped his sword, but he managed it into his other hand.

Gabrielle stepped in front of Faolan and raised her staff in both hands. Off to the right, she caught sight of the other bandits getting up.

The leader held his mangled up arm against his chest. His blood coated his brown leather. He glanced at his buddies, who were backing away from the fight.

"Come on, Goran," a bandit hollered, "Forget her. It's not worth it."

The leader, Goran, glanced at the approaching female then back at his buddies. He pointed his sword at the woman then stated, "You're lucky." He then turned and hightailed it after his comrades.

Gabrielle straightened up and placed her staff's end into the dirt. She observed the bandits running off.

Faolan huffed and shook his head.

The bemused princess glanced down at the wolf. "He's lucky, right?"

Faolan lifted his head and showed his teeth in a seeming smirk.

Gabrielle chuckled and ruffled the wolf's fur. "Thanks, boy." She then gazed down Torqueo and whistled.

The horse snorted then trotted down to his mistress.

The bard rubbed Torqueo's nose and murmured, "Good boy. Ready to go?" She came to the saddlebags and lashed her staff down again. She then mounted the horse with grace. "Let's go." She tugged on the reins and signaled the horse down the road like nothing happened.

Helios made it to the western sky just when the Amazon Princess entered Potidaea. The day had been kind overall, and the weather very pleasant for a spring day. It was always hard to say whether or not the day would be cold or warm, but it'd been warm.

Gabrielle made her way through the town and headed for the other side where her farmhouse was located. She noticed that things were winding down as the market started to shut down. She smiled at how productive the town and villagers were lately. She never suspected her little town would become such an economical force within the providence. Tomorrow she would have to see if the small port had grown anymore.

The bard made it to the worn farmhouse. She came up short by the fence and sadly smiled at her quiet home. She thought back on her meeting with the constable, and how he'd given her the land and deed despite her slavery status. Nobody in Potidaea knew she was a branded slave or the Amazon Princess. They simply thought she'd been freed and now lived someplace else because the memories of Potidaea were too harsh. There was some truth behind those rumors too.

Gabrielle stood anchored by the fence. She felt her memories from the day of the raid wash over her again. She was now thirteen springs old.

Gabrielle ran for her life, but she spotted Xena just ahead who had Lila in her arms. "Xena, hide! A horseman is coming." The small bard heard the booming hoof beats that matched her heartbeat.

Young Xena was stricken by fear just as the raider materialized from the woods. He was on horseback,

sword raised, and determined to kill her girlfriend. "No," she rasped.

Gabrielle kept running towards Xena, who was by the barn. Just then she tripped over the well bucket that her family often used. The tiny bard tumbled to the ground, rolled onto her side, and moaned in pain. She'd badly sprained her ankle.

The raider twirled his sword over his head and cried out, "Got you know, kid!"

Gabrielle lifted her head just as the raider's shadow fell over her. She screamed.

"Stay away from my child!" Herodotus yelled.

The raider was wide eye when the farmer with the pitchfork stepped in the way. He desperately tried to halt his mare but couldn't soon enough. His horse crashed into the points of the sharp pitchfork.

The horse reared up, cried out, and finally fell to her side with the raider underneath.

Xena raced to Gabrielle's side and grabbed the bard. "Gabrielle, get up." She struggled to hold Lila while helping the bard.

Young Gabrielle shook her head and attempted to get up, but she was able to thanks to Xena.

Torqueo huffed and shook his head, which caused his bridle to sound out.

The Amazon Princess's memories fractured. Young Xena, Lila, Gabrielle's father, and the injured bard faded away from in front of the house. The house then aged by many moons; the roof sunk in, the boards bowed out, and the house darkened.

Faolan sneezed quietly then peered up at his friend, who was somewhat distraught. He nudged her thigh with his cold nose.

The princess sadly sighed, but she smiled reassuringly at the wolf. "Come on." She side stepped and opened the gate. She guided Torqueo after Faolan went in first. After she closed the gate, she went directly to the old barn so she could stable the horse. She stole quick glances at the house, which seemed almost ghostly nowadays.

Gabrielle found the mare a nice quiet spot in the barn. She untacked him then rummaged around in the saddlebags for a small bag of feed. Tomorrow she would need to go to the market for more.

The bard hefted her saddlebags and marched over to the open barn doors, which she'd left open earlier. She stood there and stared at the ghostly house, and she debated with herself. She shook her head, turned, and stopped in front of the ladder to the upper loft. She set the saddlebags down by the ladder then brushed her hands off.

Faolan stood in the middle of the barn. He'd been sniffing things down earlier but now waited for Gabrielle.

The Amazon's shoulders slumped, and she turned around. She came over to Faolan and said, "Let's see father then the old house." She patted her muscular thigh in hidden signal for Faolan to follow.

The wolf trotted along to match Gabrielle's fast strides.

Gabrielle went to her father's grave, which had fencing around it. She opened the gate, stepped in, and knelt beside her father's grave. She glanced at Faolan, who sat on her right side. Gabrielle sighed and studied the Greek headstone for her father.

She quietly remained there for some time. She spoke to her father in gentle whispers. She then kissed her right hand and placed it on the grave. Slowly, Gabrielle stood up and silently left the grave site that was maintained by Potidaea.

Gabrielle made it across the yard in no time. She stepped onto the sunk porch and stared at the door handle.

Faolan sat beside his human friend. He twisted his head when Gabrielle hesitated from opening the door. What bothered her so much about the house? Sure it was a little rundown, but he didn't think it was truly that bad.

The princess silenced her fears, grabbed the door handle, and yanked the door open. She was instantly enclosed by dust and old smells when she took her first step through the doorway.

Faolan wiggled his nose, yet he couldn't stop it. He sneezed and shook his head. He blinked then scanned the room, which was rather open and coated in a cobwebs and dust. He counted several pieces of furniture that humans would use to eat at or sit in – things like that.

Gabrielle came to the kitchen table. She grazed her fingertips over top, and she lifted her hand. Her fingertips were gray from the dust. She blew off the dust. She lowered her hand, sighed, and stared at the kitchen, dining, and common room that was combined all into one. She gazed at the opposite side of the room and noticed the fireplace still had old, black embers in it.

Faolan was tempted to investigate the house more, yet he was afraid to leave Gabrielle. So he followed beside her when she moved towards the hallway.

The bard slowly stepped down the dark hallway. There was very little light to speak of since Helios's last rays were in the sky. Gabrielle stared at the closed door to her mother and father's room, however, she didn't dare enter it. She went a few more paces down then turned to her open room. She'd shared the room with Lila.

Faolan poked his head into the room and inhaled the scents. He detected a very faint smell that reminded him of Gabrielle.

The Amazon entered the room and stopped in front of her bed, which was closest to the door. Lila always liked to be by the window. Gabrielle hooked her finger on the low bedpost at the foot of the bed. She bit her lower lip as she absorbed the bedroom.

The beds were still made as if somebody would sleep in them tonight. They hadn't been touched since the day of the raid. The window was matted but the sunset's reds and oranges streamed through the openings. Everything in the room was coated in dust and cobwebs. It was far too eerie.

Gabrielle's eyes wandered over the room then stopped over her bed. She tilted her head at a strange thought and memory. Gabrielle released the bedpost then bent down onto her right knee. She dropped her head and peered under the dark bed.

Faolan moved around and carefully watched what his friend was doing.

Gabrielle stretched out her hands and felt around on the floorboards. She finally felt the familiar board so she wiggled her nails into the right spot. She grunted when the board didn't give way so she tried again and this time the board popped free.

The bard gingerly set the board aside then debated whether to feel into the empty hole. She knew there wasn't anything inside because it'd been a secret hole for Xena more than her. Xena had found the loose

board when they were kids, but they never used it until later. Xena would hide her ivy daggers in the hole whenever she came to visit. Xena and Gabrielle didn't want Gabrielle's parents or even Lila to find out about the weapons in the house.

Gabrielle amused herself and felt around in the hole. She came up short when her fingers hit something smooth. "What in..." She shook her head and grabbed up the item.

Faolan stepped closer and inspected the object his friend had in her hand. He sniffed the leather sheath once it was close enough to him. He didn't sneeze though.

Gabrielle stared at the sheathed dagger. She was dumbfounded and almost frightened. She dared herself to unsheath the dagger and prove whether or not it was one of Xena's.

Gabrielle bit her lower lip. She clenched her teeth and lifted her freehand. She knew as soon as she took the hilt, withdrew the dagger, and saw the blade then she would know if this was real. The ivy design on Xena's matching daggers were one of a kind.

The dagger's hilt was taken into a sweaty palm. Then slowly the blade was scraped out of the sheath and the shiny metal proudly flashed what little light was in the room. Once the blade was freed from the sheath, a beautiful and detailed ivy design was displayed.

Gabrielle gasped and almost dropped the dagger. She shook her head and muttered, "How did this get here?"

Faolan stretched out his neck, sniffed the dagger, and detected a very different scent around the dagger. He knew it was not Gabrielle's smell, but it was a human's.

The princess raised the dagger up and held it more in the sunset light. She stared at the ivy design that she'd always loved about the pair of daggers. She carefully sheathed the treasured dagger from her childhood. She then ran her hand over the leather sheath that was not at all familiar to her.

It occurred to the bard that the sheath was indeed new. The original sheath had been brown, but this one was black leather. She furrowed her eyebrows when she realized that the dagger and sheath were not dusty or cobwebbed. In fact, the dagger's blade had been well kept and maintained.

Gabrielle had a knotted stomach, and her anxiety grew. She hastily replaced the board but kept the dagger. She climbed to her feet, scanned the untouched room, and hastily left her dark room. "Come on, boy."

Faolan broke into a trot and chased after his friend, who hurried through the dark house.

Gabrielle came out of the house, out of the porch, and stopped a few paces away from the house. She gasped for air and tried to gain control over her frantic heart. The accelerated heartbeat wasn't from the running by any means, but from the fright. There was no doubt in Gabrielle's mind that Xena had returned to her house at some point and placed the dagger in the secret spot.

The bard shoved away her racing thoughts and tried to calm down. She shook her head of the disappearing thoughts then continued back to the barn. She decided she'd stay the night in the barn. She entered the barn and found that Torqueo had finished his meal.

Gabrielle had considered going to the local tavern to get her dinner, but she wasn't up to it and especially now. Instead she bent over her saddlebags and shoved the dagger away for later. She then lifted the saddlebags and balanced them on her shoulder. Very carefully, Gabrielle ascended the worn ladder and came to the loft.

Faolan sat at the base of the ladder. His head was far back, and he watched his human friend go up. He sneezed though when tiny pieces of wood dust caught in his nose thanks to Gabrielle's boots.

The Amazon searched the loft and discovered the old, beat up lantern still hanging from the hook. She couldn't believe her luck. Now she just hoped there was some oil left in it or else she'd be having a hard time moving about soon. The sunlight was almost completely gone.

Gabrielle shook the lantern and heard a faint sloshing. She was amazed, but she hastened to her saddlebags and removed her flint stones. She opened the lantern's small door, clapped the stones, and sparked the soaked wick.

The loft started to glow thanks to the lantern.

"Rrrrruh!" Faolan called from below.

Gabrielle stepped to the ledge, peered over, and grinned at the white wolf. In her right hand, she held up the lit lantern. "Come on, boy... jump."

Faolan's ears fell back, and he hung out his tongue. There was no way he could make it that high. "Rrrrr," he grumbled.

The princess giggled then knelt down beside the ledge. She spotted the iron hook that stuck out from the board near her. She hung her lantern on it so that the light would spread throughout most of the barn. She then went to the ladder and while she climbed down it, she debated what to do about Faolan.

The wolf was standing up, and he made a circle as his friend came back down.

The bard hopped off the second to last step and landed beside the wolf. "You're going to have to stay down here, boy."

Faolan sat down and stared up at the bard.

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips. "I can't carry you up there."

Faolan wagged his tail across the floorboards.

"No," Gabrielle sternly stated.

Faolan then thumped his tail on the boards. Next he hung out his tongue in extra effort to win Gabrielle.

The princess shook her head. "Somebody has to watch after Torqueo anyway."

The horse snorted and flayed his mane all over.

Faolan glanced at the huge horse then back at his small companion that he loved. He wiggled forward then lifted his head and rested his chin on Gabrielle's knee.

Gabrielle lost her stern face. "Fao," she complained.

Faolan poked his tongue out slightly.

"Fine!" Gabrielle threw up her hands. "If we fall off the ladder, you're hitting the ground first." She reached down, picked up the heavy wolf, and hoisted him up.

Faolan did everything he could to keep his claws from retracting. He knew the pain they could cause a human. He then felt safely held by the woman's strong arms; he sensed his furry stomach pressed

against the woman's chest.

Gabrielle turned to the ladder. She used one arm to hold the wolf, and she grabbed the ladder with her left hand. She carefully ascended each step and wondered what in the world she was thinking in agreeing to this. The climb to the top never felt longer, and she started to sweat from the heat of the wolf's body.

Faolan then yelped when he was tossed the rest of the way and landed neatly on the loft boards.

Gabrielle finished the climb and fell on the loft's floor. She gasped for air and fanned her burning chest.

The white wolf came closer, lowered his head, and licked Gabrielle's moist face.

"Aaah, Faolan!" the bard complained. "Stop that."

Faolan brought his tongue down lower and licked the bard's ear. He knew he'd get the greatest reaction whenever he licked there.

"Faolan!" Gabrielle squealed and rolled away. She had a small fit of giggles from the tickling. She covered her now moist ear and growled, "Stop it."

The wolf snorted, but he waved his fluffy tail. He was happy he'd be spending the night up here with Gabrielle.

The bard rolled onto her back and stayed like that for awhile. She felt her body much cooler, yet she was happy that Faolan would be up here with her for the night. She focused on the wolf and asked, "You hungry?"

The wolf lifted his paws one by one and clicked some of his nails on the floorboards.

"You feel like jerky?" the bard inquired. She decided that was about all she was going to have and maybe some cheese too. "At least tomorrow night we'll have a good meal." Gabrielle knew the ride to Amphipolis wouldn't take long so she planned to leave late morning or so. She needed to send out a message to Queen Melosa to let her know her whereabouts. Then she wanted to stop in and visit Constable Rasmus plus pick up feed for Torqueo.

Gabrielle finally got to her feet and prepared her bedroll and Faolan's too. She then sat on her bedroll and fanned out the food near her bedroll. She quietly ate and shared it with the wolf.

While she quietly ate, she considered the dagger that was Xena's. She couldn't imagine why in the world Xena had returned to Potidaea and placed the dagger there. Gabrielle also couldn't guess when Xena had shown up to do it. She wondered if it'd been recent or not, but she doubted it was recent.

Gabrielle finished off her meal. She put away her bags and brushed off the crumbs so they wouldn't get in her bedroll. Next she brought her saddlebags closer and pulled out her journal plus two blank scrolls.

Gabrielle diligently wrote in her journal and recorded today's events. She ended the entry with several puzzling questions about Xena and the dagger.

Faolan remained nestled in his fur and just quietly listened to the scratching sound beside him. Occasionally he detected the horse's whines from below.

Gabrielle closed up her journal, tucked it away, and grabbed a scroll. She quickly wrote out a short letter to Queen Melosa and told her how things were going so far. She then signed it and rolled it up. Then she took the second scroll and started a longer letter to Andra. Her blood sister had asked her to

write her at least once and let her know how she was doing.

Andra was the only Amazon that knew the most intimate details of Gabrielle's past from start to current. Gabrielle and the blacksmith had become close over the seasons, and they truly were sisters now. Gabrielle undoubtedly missed her real sister, but Andra helped that ache stay at a constant dull instead of sharp pain.

The blacksmith had tried to come along with Gabrielle. At first, Gabrielle had just politely declined Andra's insisting, but it became sour. Andra was concerned about her sister going alone, but not because of the danger, instead Andra knew how emotional the trip may turn out to be. The blacksmith wanted to be there for her young sister, yet Gabrielle refused her offers each time. Finally, the sisters sat down, and Gabrielle explained she needed to go alone but appreciated the concern and offers. Andra only relented once Gabrielle promised to write her at least once to say how she was feeling.

The bard finished her letter, rolled up the parchment, and set the scroll beside the more formal one to the queen. Gabrielle then gazed across the barn and studied the open doors. She debated whether to close them, but she decided against it because the moonlight helped chase off the darkness in the barn. She only planned to turn the lantern down and not off.

Gabrielle pushed her furs aside and prepared to deal with the lantern. She got up and paused. She turned her head to the right and studied the straw off to her right. Why hadn't she noticed the straw earlier?

The bard padded over to the loose straw on the floor. She knelt beside it and picked up a few pieces. She play with the pieces and carefully studied them in the lantern's dull light.

Faolan had his head up, and he intently watched his friend.

Gabrielle shook her head and lifted the straw higher. It was impossible for this straw to be here after so many seasons away from the barn. What made sense to her though was that somebody brought it up here. The princess glanced over her left shoulder and studied the wood track and spotted the wood block that would run on the track. Then attached to the wood block was pulley system to lift the bails of straw or hay into the loft.

Gabrielle realized that the block and pulley system should be aged and dulled, but they were in good condition. She'd seen them in better condition, but she knew they were still in fair condition for not being in use for so many moons. The bard turned her head back to the mess of straw and gauged that it'd been up here for some time.

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes when one conclusion came to mind. "Xena," she murmured and dropped the piece of straw. "You stayed up here, didn't you?" She recalled an old conversation with Xena when they were kids.

Xena had fussed one evening when they arrived up in the loft for the night. The loft's floor was bare of any hay thanks to Gabrielle's father clearing it up. Gabrielle listened to her friend's brief rant about how Xena couldn't sleep up in the loft when there was no straw or hay to sleep on top. Xena had a thing against hard sleeping surfaces.

Gabrielle recalled she'd tried to seriously listen without breaking into a fit of giggles. Finally, she and Xena went back down the ladder, and together they hauled a bail of hay to the loft using the block and rope. Once they were back up in the loft, Xena freed the hay from the bail and spread the fresh hay around on the loft's floor.

The princess pulled away from her memory. She bit her lower lip and felt her eyes sting. She ignored her bubbling emotions and climbed to her feet. She walked back to her bedrolls but knelt beside the concerned wolf.

Faolan received a kiss, but he observed Gabrielle crawling into the furs. He sighed and lowered his chin onto his paws.

Gabrielle snuggled deep into the furs. She was on her left side so that she faced Faolan and the mess of straw. She almost envisioned young Xena in the straw, and she wished it was true. She just couldn't imagine what Xena, older Xena, would look like in the straw.

The princess rolled onto her back and stared at the roof above her head. Her imagination toyed with Xena's young image and tried to age Xena to what she'd look like today. Gabrielle shook her head when she figured she was probably way off base. Besides that, it didn't really matter what Xena looked like. Gabrielle berated herself for letting her imagination play with her again. She needed to stick with reality, which was much colder than she wished it to be.

It took awhile for Gabrielle to get some sleep, but she eventually found it. The dreamscape kept her restless most of the night as she dreamed of her lost friend.

To be continued.