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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.

Feedback: redhope@redhope.net

Homepage: <http://www.redhope.net>

Write a Review: <http://www.redhope.net/xena/review/series9-form.html>

List: <http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/redhope/>

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

To Take What is Mine

by Red Hope

Chapter 20

The Conqueror glanced over the message in the firelight that came from her stratègos, and she grinned. She hastily rolled up the message then handed it to Bastien. "Are the vincentes in place?"

"Yes, my liege." Bastien put his hands behind his back. "They will begin to unpack and assemble as soon as they arrive in the marked location."

"Good." The Conqueror then ordered. "Get Argo ready for me. I'm going to rouse the hippeis for battle."

The chiliarchès was excited, and he didn't hesitate to move through the campfire lit area.

The Conqueror hunted down Officer Nikko, who had recently returned from delivering the horses to the Amazon Nation. She found him already preparing the fifty hoplites that would riding today.

The hipparchis, Nikko, turned at hearing the familiar movements of his leader. "We're tacking the horses now, my liege."

The Conqueror nodded, but she motioned for Officer Nikko to step aside with her. She kept her voice low. "Do you understand the plans?"

"Of course, my liege."

"The unit will be in box formation," Xena explained. "I have a feeling Draco may try from behind or

the sides."

"We will cover any holes," Nikko swore.

"See that you do. We both know how long it takes to adjust formation."

"That valley is a dangerous spot, my liege." Officer Nikko frowned and shook his head. "It gives Draco the advantage if he's mostly on horseback."

"Only if he's on horseback," the ruler argued. "He won't be for long. We have to hold the line until then."

The hipparchis nodded.

"Let's get started then." The Conqueror noted that Bastien was coming with her golden mare.

The hipparchis ordered the hippeis to mount up. He went to his horse and climbed into the saddle.

The Conqueror easily climbed into the saddle, and she checked her weapons one last time. She had her sword at her back, her chakram on her right side, and she'd planted her ivy dagger down in her right boot. Finally her whip was hooked to the side but front part of the saddle. "Let's fall out."

The hippeis were fully prepared with their shields attached to their backs, their double-edge swords called xiphos, and their spears known as a doru.

The Conqueror started in a trot to warm up the horses. She glimpsed to the east and saw a faint glow had begun already. She clenched her teeth and yelled, "Yah!" She spurred Argo into a full gallop up the valley's incline.

The fifty hippeis cheered and followed suit of their leader. They and the Conqueror rode fast through the forest and came onto the gravel road. They galloped harder and in pairs down the road. They kicked up dust and dirt behind them. Their rumble caused the birds and other animals to scatter in fear.

Bastien was left to get the hoplites on march. He already had them in formation by the time the Conqueror left. He then hollered orders for the march to the battlefield, which was located slightly south of the Amazon Nation. Soon enough, he marched the hoplite army down the same road that the Conqueror had ridden down.

The Conqueror and the hippeis rode to the Amazon Nation and made it just as Helios kissed the horizon. She ordered the hippeis to take a momentary break along the border while she galloped in to check on the Amazons. She was pleasantly surprised to only have to go halfway into the forest before she halted Argo.

Argo whined in worry, but she settled down after Xena patted her. She breathed heavily at the countless horses that weaved through the forest towards them.

At the head of the large force of horseback Amazons was the queen and the stratègos. Queen Gabrielle called for the Amazon force to stop, and she and Commander Kaylee quickly approached the Conqueror.

The Conqueror steadied her mare as she noticed the Centaurs who were intermixed with the Amazons. She grinned to herself then focused on the nearby queen and stratègos. "I see the exchange went well."

"It did," Gabrielle replied. "The stratègos will accompany you to Draco's camp. I and my ilarchès will get the Amazons and Centaurs to their appropriate positions."

Xena nodded. She sensed something different about Gabrielle than last night. She wouldn't have time to question it, but she inquired, "What of the automaton?"

"I'll draw her out," Gabrielle replied. "We have everything prepared to deal with her."

"By the ruins, right?" The Conqueror tested.

The bard slotted her eyes because it almost sounded like Xena was up to something. "Yes. Hercules, Iolaus, Yakut, and handful of Amazons are waiting there for the trap." She didn't mention that Faolan was with them too.

The Conqueror nodded. "Be careful, Gabrielle."

The queen gave a sad smile and replied, "As much as I can be." She turned to her stratègos. "You better go. Be safe, Kaylee."

The stratègos touched the queen's knee. "You too, sister." She looked back at the line of Amazon riders and gave a sharp whistle. She waited until the twenty Amazons joined them.

Commander Kaylee ordered the Amazon unit to ride through the woods.

The Conqueror remained with the queen for a moment. "You're sure about this, Gabrielle? You can still-"

"Xena, I won't." Gabrielle searched her friend's concerned features.

The Conqueror sighed, but she nodded. "I know." She didn't want to leave Gabrielle to fight the automaton on her own, but she also had a feeling that Seven would be ordered to take Gabrielle hostage. A dead hostage would be no good so Xena was counting on that to be the case. "I'll see you down there."

"You will," the bard promised.

The Conqueror steered Argo around then tapped the mare's sides. She took off at a fast gallop so she could catch up.

Gabrielle twisted in her saddle and repeated the same whistle that Commander Kaylee had used. She waited for the Amazons to join her.

Back on the lonely road to the Amazon Nation, Bastien hurried the hoplites to march faster. He hated to be late to any date on the battlefield. Nor would it bolster well with his leader either. He caught sight of the sun just over the horizon, but he was in luck. The Amazon forest was just ahead so he steered the army off the road and into the woods.

The Greek Army loudly marched through the woods and chased off the wild life. The army began to glow in the early morning sun thanks to their bright armor. Soon the army came to the edge of a hill, and Bastien halted the unit.

Bastien turned back to the unit and called out to the subordinate officers in the army. They were known as the hekatontarchès or rather the officer of a hundred.

Each hekatontarchès listened to their orders and called out to their unit to split from the army.

Bastien then faced the valley and commanded for them to march downward. He listened to the beat of the hoplite's sandals against the ground. He adjusted his shield on his back, which proudly displayed

the capital alpha symbol in red and black.

The Greek Army entered the quiet valley that was small and snug. On either side were also hills but straight ahead the land stayed flat and wide open. It would be the direction that Draco would most likely come from if the Conqueror led them here correctly.

The chiliarchès inhaled deeply and yelled, "Hekatontarchès, begin unit formation!"

The fifteen hekatontarchès barked out orders for their unit of a hundred hoplites to make formation.

Bastien stood in the middle of the valley, and he turned in a circle to watch the units assemble into long lines. He wished there were sixteen units instead of fifteen, but this was suffice just fine. Bastien then heard fifteen reports back from the hekatontarchès that their unit was formed.

"Hekatontarchès, tighten formation!" the chiliarchès hollered through the valley.

The unit leaders called their line to walk backwards carefully until they met another line.

Bastien grinned as the back stepping hoplite lines came closer and closer to him from every side. He had to admit that the Conqueror had a brilliant formation idea to do this. He just hoped it would hold until Borias arrived with the other half of the army.

Bastien found himself left with very little space as hoplites' backs were all around him. He called, "Halt!" Now he needed to test and make sure the units understood their position in the overall formation. He called, "East hoplites!"

The hoplites that faced the eastern side of the valley hooted.

"West hoplites!"

The hoplites, who had their backs to the east hoplites all hooted back in response.

"North hoplites!" Bastien hollered. He heard the hoots from behind his back. He then called, "South hoplites." He grinned as the south hoplite lines in front of him hooted. He was about to give more orders, but he stopped upon a hoplite's yell.

"The Amazon Queen, chiliarchès!" a northern hoplite called at the front of the line. He pointed with his spear at the mounted Amazon the crest of the hill.

Bastien quickly turned around and spotted the queen on the top of the hill.

Queen Gabrielle kept Torqueo on the top of the ridge. She studied how the hoplite army had made a square formation in the middle of the valley. She counted fifteen lines, and each line faced a certain direction. But there were only three lines that faced in her northern direction, and she suspected that the army anticipated less of an attack on the north side since the enemy would be coming from the south.

Gabrielle saw that Bastien was aware of her. She raised her staff at him to confirm her Nation and the Centaurs were here.

Bastien unsheathed his xiphos and raised it in acknowledgment.

The Amazon Queen lowered her staff then gazed through the opening of valley to the barren lands beyond. She hoped Xena was making out okay with Draco. She clicked her tongue at Torqueo and entered back into the woods where her Amazons waited for battle.

Gabrielle kept Torqueo at a slow pace back to the Amazon and Centaurs. She was deep in thought and

even memories of her life thus far. She couldn't believe all that she'd survived, and now it may have amounted to this final, great battle. In some way, she felt as if her life had come full circle oddly. The Amazons were her family today, she was protecting them against raiders, the outcome could alter her life greatly, and once more Xena was at her side. This time though it was different because Gabrielle was an Amazon Queen, and she was a trained warrior. This time Xena was the greatest and most respected warrior known throughout Greece, and she was a ruler. This time the results wouldn't just be a shaken village, but it could shape history for many nations. Today, Gabrielle knew she would be apart of that history that would be talked about for generations.

Queen Gabrielle pulled from her thoughts once she heard the commotion of her Amazons and the Centaurs just ahead. She surveyed the forces that lined before her, and she felt the greatest strength behind her. She didn't become arrogant, but she became confident and moved by her Amazons' loyalty and by the Centaurs' dedication. Today, Gabrielle wasn't a little girl from Potidaea; she was the Amazon Queen of a great nation that would never falter and never die.

Officer Rufina trotted her horse out to the queen, who remained several hundred paces away from the line. "The armies are ready, my queen."

Gabrielle shifted in her saddle, but she studied the ilarchès carefully. "It won't be long before the Conqueror and Commander Kaylee show up."

The ilarchès inclined her head slightly.

"I'm going to speak to everybody." The bard tapped her stallion's sides and urged him to go the line.

Officer Rufina followed, and she noted that Tyldus appeared and joined them.

"The Centaurs are ready, Gabrielle."

The queen sadly smiled at the Centaur leader. "I believe we all are."

Tyldus somewhat sighed but encouraged, "The odds are against him."

Gabrielle knew the odds were good for her Nation, but they were not good for her personally. She shifted the reins in her hands but looked at Officer Rufina. "The scouts will send word when the Conqueror arrives?"

"Yes, my queen."

The bard nodded then switched back to Tyldus. "Do you mind if I have a word with the armies?"

Tyldus was surprised by the request, but he nodded. "Of course."

"Thank you." Gabrielle had a faint knot in her stomach start when she tapped Torqueo's sides again. She came closer to the line that made up two armies. She stopped her horse's walk and scanned the countless faces of men and women of Amazonian and Centaur race. She noticed how everybody went silent merely because of her close proximity so she took a deep breath.

"Amazons... Centaurs... look to your right and to your left," Gabrielle called out. "You will find either a Centaur or an Amazon close to if not next to you. This is the first time in unknown generations that the Amazons and Centaurs have stood side by side in arms and not against arms. Today marks a new day when the Nation is no longer comprised of just sisters... today we have brothers. Our two Nations face a tremendous threat, and yet it is this threat that has developed our first bond."

Gabrielle paused and watched everybody's faces and expressions. "By the end of this battle, many of

you will be alive because your former enemy stopped a blade or a spear, for you. Find out his or her name because you will never forget their face."

Tyldus stood behind the Amazon Queen, but he had a view of the Amazons and Centaurs. He slightly bowed his head at Gabrielle's honest and true words.

Queen Gabrielle waited a beat and let her words soak deeper. She then continued her speech. "Today we do not fight as the Amazons, as the Centaurs, or even as the Greek Army. We fight as the Greater Good to stop a force from destroying our lives, our families, our homes... our beliefs and our Nations." She carefully watched the rise of determination from the warriors. She gripped her staff tighter then hollered, "We are joined by a common belief and a common right. We fight for our honor and our freedom!" She suddenly raised her staff to the bright blue sky that rested beyond the tree tops.

Then the surge of yells and cheers resounded through the woods that was a mix Centaur and Amazon. The warriors raised their blades or spears to the sky too and cried out for freedom and honor. The tidal wave of hollers rippled through the woods and rolled down to the valley where the Greek Army waited.

Bastien, the chiliarchès, turned to the north from where the yells arose. He slightly grinned and hollered, "What say you, hoplite?"

"To Greece!" called back one hoplite.

Then another chimed in, "To freedom!"

Bastien inhaled until his chest was full. "What say you, hoplites!?"

The Greek Army clapped their spears against their shields in unison, raised them up, and cried out, "To Greece! To freedom!" They then all began to cry out in cheers to show how charged they were for battle. Their mighty cries flowed up the valley and spread out into the woods.

Queen Gabrielle still held her staff high up. Now she was fully encircled by the roar from the Amazons, Centaurs, and the Greek Army. She kept her staff high for another few beats, then she lowered it, which seemed to slowly cease the mighty cries of the Nations. She took a deep breath then slowly released it as if she felt everything come into alignment.

"Chiliarchès, to the south!" a hoplite hollered. He was in the front line, and he pointed his doru at the dust cloud that rode closer to them. "They are coming!"

Bastien had turned to the south, and he indeed witnessed a low cloud of dust coming their way. He noticed it was growing larger. He turned back to the north and ordered, "Warn the Amazons and Centaurs!"

A hoplite, who had been selected for the task, he had two doru's. He stepped out of the front line, rammed his left spear down into the ground, and he hefted his right. He took a deep breath then took five running steps and hurled the spear up the valley.

The spear sailed up the slope of the valley and through the trees for several hundred paces. Finally it pierced a tree and made a loud vibration. From up in the tree, an Amazon peered down at it and understood the signal. She turned on the branch and cupped her mouth with her hands.

Queen Gabrielle twisted her head to the right when the bird call came to her.

Tyldus and Officer Rufina hurried to the queen's side.

"They're coming," Tyldus mentioned.

The bard nodded but turned to her ilarchès. "Wait for the next signal."

"Of course." Officer Rufina nodded. "Be careful, my queen."

"You too, Rufina." Gabrielle then tapped Torqueo's sides, and she and Tyldus hurried through the village to the valley's edge. They remained hidden, yet they could easily make out the view of the valley and out of the mouth of the valley.

Bastien gauged that the Conqueror and her party would arrive any moment. The cloud had grown larger and wider, which most likely meant that Draco was chasing after them as planned. He decided it was best to prepare the army. "Hoplites, ready your aspis!"

The fifteen hekatontarchès echoed Bastien's order. Simultaneously the hoplites hooted and moved their shields forward.

"Hoplites, ready your doru!"

Again each hekatontarchès repeated the chiliarchès order. The hoplites lowered their spears, but it was the southern lines that sharpened their sights on the approaching battle.

Bastien called out, "You may break your doru. Your xiphos may go dull from your kills. But you will not drop your aspis." He paused then cried out, "If you shall drop then you will be proudly carried home upon your aspis!"

Queen Gabrielle clearly heard the chiliarchès quick speech come up the valley. She lifted her eyes from the Greek Army and locked on the now apparent chase. "By the gods," she murmured, and she grew tense.

The Conqueror felt them before she saw them so she twisted in her saddle as best as possible. She freed her right hand and caught the whistling arrow near her. She threw it to the ground and gazed over at Commander Kaylee.

"This wasn't what we had in mind," the stratègos hollered. She kept low and against her horse. She couldn't spur her horse to go any faster, but they tried anyway.

"You wanted to burn their camp," the Conqueror yelled back. "I believe that qualifies as reckless."

Commander Kaylee smirked and chided, "I didn't realize you thought of me as reckless."

Xena evilly laughed and called, "Poor choice of words. It was clearly an understatement." She then quickly leaned to her right and caught an arrow that almost struck the stratègos.

"Thanks," Kaylee commented.

The ruler tossed it aside, and she tried to urge Argo faster. "We're almost there!" She indicated the valley's mouth just ahead.

Commander Kaylee looked back over her shoulder and saw the perusing army that was very pissed. She'd come up with the idea, on the ride to Draco's camp, to use the Conqueror's burning technique. Luckily the Amazons she'd selected to ride in the party had arrows and flint stones. So upon arriving at Draco's camp, she promptly ordered her Amazons to set fire to the camp.

Draco's army was mostly mobilized except for the soldiers needing to mount their steeds. They'd done so quickly once the fire began, and Draco hotly yelled for the army to give chase. He'd mounted his warhorse and led the frantic chase after the Conqueror and Amazons. He was furious and further

commanded his horseback archers to fire on the Conqueror and Amazons during the chase.

Now the mixed party of Amazons and hoplites were hightailing it back to the valley in hopes to survive. Behind them were hundreds and hundreds of soldiers that rode on horseback. Draco's soldiers were yelling and cursing the hoplites and Amazons and promised to kill them all once they caught them. The Conqueror also imagined that Draco's foot soldiers would follow behind and later try to penetrate the battlefield. She was at least counting on it.

The warlord rode at the front of the line. Through the chaos, he now spotted the small Greek Army nestled in the valley just past the mouth. He had his sword out and called out to his second in command. "Destroy the Greek Army!" He anticipated that the Amazons wouldn't be far either, but by the time they joined the rest of his army would arrive for reinforcement.

"I want the archers to form!" Draco yelled.

The second in command nodded and gave out the order to the riding archers to form. He listened to the repeated order through the subordinates.

"At the entrance of the valley," Draco called, "we are to stop chase!" He listened to his order echo to the rest of the soldiers that galloped behind him.

"They're falling back," Commander Kaylee hollered over the galloping horses.

The Conqueror glanced back at the enemy cavalry. "Not good," she muttered. She returned her attention and saw they were almost to the mouth of the valley.

"Amazons, remember your duty!" Commander Kaylee yelled. She had already instructed them to stay behind the Greek Army on the south side because that would be the weak point of interest for Draco. She and the Conqueror rode into the valley, around the army, and halted their horses behind the army.

Each Amazon unsheathed their sword and tried to settle their horse. The fifty hippeis readied their spears and kept their shields in front of them.

Draco's army came to the mouth of the valley. He was at the head, and he moved his horse a few paces in front of his army. Then he was flanked by his second in command along with a tall, blond woman that stood out against her black horse.

Draco grinned at the Greek Army trapped in the valley. "Why would you pick here, Xena?" He shook his head but looked at Seven. "When the Amazons show, you are to find Queen Gabrielle. I want her taken hostage."

Seven only nodded and looked back at the Greek Army. She scanned around for any signs of Queen Gabrielle, but she didn't see the petite queen.

"If we have her," Draco informed, "then we control the Amazons and the Conqueror." He looked back at the Greek Army. He raised his sword. "Archers, take aim!"

The archers on horseback raised their arrows to the sky at a certain angle. They pulled back their arrows against the string and became steady. They waited for their next order to fire.

The Conqueror slightly became alarmed. "They're going to fire." She was concerned because the Amazons in her party had no way to protect themselves.

The stratègos also caught on and hollered, "Stay low, sisters!"

Bastien suddenly barked, "To your knees and raise your aspises, hoplites!" He too raised his shield and lowered to his right knee.

"Conqueror, take my aspises!" a hoplite called.

The Conqueror held up her hand at the hoplite that tried to break formation to help her. "Stay in formation, hoplite!" She lifted her eyes and saw the rain of arrows that came for them. She released Argo's reins and prepared to catch any arrows that came near her.

Queen Gabrielle watched in horror as the arrows came down upon the Greek Army and her handful of Amazons. "Artemis, please..."

Tyldus moved on his hooves and shook his head. He was amazed by how many arrows bounced off the bronze shields and no hoplite fell to their death. He then gazed down at the Amazons, who were unprotected.

Gabrielle gripped her staff tightly and resisted the urge to race down the hill. She feared for Xena's life.

The Conqueror bared her teeth and caught the arrows that came close to her body. She listened to Commander Kaylee's blade bounce off arrows in rapid motion. Then she heard the strategos hiss in pain just after the arrows came to a sudden stop.

Commander Kaylee peered at her right shoulder and cursed the arrow that protruded out.

The Conqueror tossed the arrows in her hand then checked on Kaylee. "You're hit."

"Nothing serious." The Amazon reached up to her shoulder, grabbed the shaft, and snapped it off. She groaned but dropped the broken arrow.

The Conqueror knew there was nothing that could be done right now. She looked over at Bastien. "Signal Vincien to fire at Draco!" She hopped out her saddle and started to run around the army.

"He won't be able to load a vincente in time," Bastien hollered back.

"Just do it!" the Conqueror snapped. After her order, she grabbed for her chakram and picked up speed in her run. She raised her chakram and aimed just as the archer cavalry strung their arrows again.

Commander Kaylee was visually checking on her Amazons. Some had been badly wounded while others survived the first onslaught of arrows. She highly doubted they'd make it through the third round.

The Conqueror gave a powerful warcry that resounded off the hills of the valley. She let her chakram fly with the momentum of her strength behind it. She held her breath and watched the weapon spin through the air and target the archers.

The chakram was blur, but it was distinct in its sound. Just from its approach alone, the archers lost focus and peered around their bows. They weren't ever prepared for the chakram when it cut through several of their strings and rendered their bows useless. The chakram then bounced off a soldier's leather helmet and came back to its owner.

Draco hissed and looked back at his archers. He counted that half of them lost their bows. "Restring your bows! The rest of you, take aim at the head of the Greek Army." He had ever intent to see the majority of the arrows go directly to the Conqueror.

The Conqueror caught her chakram, and she rehooked it. "Aspises, hoplites!" She prayed though that

Bastien's signal reached Vincien in time. "Come on," she growled.

The warlord turned back to the Greek Army. He raised his sword and just as he was prepared to tell them to fire, he paused. There was another whistle, but it wasn't like the Conqueror's chakram. It was much louder and moving fast. Then there was a shadow that fell over him.

"Projectile!" a soldier hollered.

The boulder had arched in the sky then came down at Draco's Army. It slammed a handful of soldiers and crushed both man and horse. The boulder rolled several paces then came to a stop with blood streaks across it.

Draco snarled and hotly glared at the Greek Army. He knew if his men didn't move that they were sitting rabbits against the Conqueror's famed weapon. "Attack!" he yelled. "Go for the south side of the army!" After his order, the screams of his soldiers filled his ears. He watched the cavalry launch past him and head for the Greek Army.

Seven remained poised on her horse. She carefully watched every detail.

Draco looked at the automaton. "Remember, if you get the queen then we win." He leaned towards her. "You do whatever it takes to capture her."

Seven turned her cold features to the warlord. "I will comply."

"Good." Draco tapped his horse's sides and raced into the battle ahead. His second in command joined, and Seven took up the rear.

Draco's army surged through the valley. They came closer and closer to the Greek Army.

The Conqueror unsheathed her sword, held it by both hands, and bent her knees slightly. She stared down her blade and bared her teeth at the galloping cavalry.

"Raise your dorus!" Bastien hollered. "Brace yourselves, hoplites!"

The Conqueror mentally braced herself for impact between her army and Draco's army. She took a deep breath and cried out, "For Greece!" She then started to run towards the cavalry.

"For freedom!" cheered the hoplites in unison.

The Conqueror took two more steps just before the leading rider was upon her. She launched into the air with her blade coming out horizontally. She released her warcry when her blade sliced through the first throat of her enemy. She easily decapitated him.

The rest of the cavalry slammed into the Greek Army. They hollered and yelled at the top of their lungs and tried to thrust their swords at the hoplites.

The Greek Army used their shields to hold against the horses. But yet they were sliding backwards on their sandals. They hefted their spears and stabbed at the mounted enemy.

Hundreds of Draco's soldiers spread out and rode to the south side of the boxed Greek Army. They were met not just by hoplites but also the Amazons and fifty hippeis, who were skilled fighters on horseback.

Tyldus and Queen Gabrielle carefully watched from their position. They roughly counted the heads of the enemy and came out to twelve hundred. Gabrielle estimated there had to be another five hundred

foot soldiers coming from Draco's camp.

Tyldus shifted on his hoofs but focused on the Amazon Queen. "The time is now."

The bard nodded and twisted in her saddle. She lifted her left hand to her mouth, cupped it, and gave a piercing birdcall. She heard a response back, which meant the Amazons and Centaurs were marching towards her and Tyldus.

"Gabrielle," Tyldus started, "I am honored to fight beside you today."

The queen softened at the kind and true words. "And I with you, Tyldus." She clasped the Centaur's shoulder. "Thank you, my friend."

Tyldus reached up and covered the small hand. "To a stronger Amazon Nation."

Gabrielle swallowed and proudly echoed, "To a stronger Centaur Nation." She slowly freed her hand just as the mounted Amazons and Centaurs marched up behind them.

The Centaurs and mounted Amazons lined the edge of the woods. The Amazon Queen and Tyldus finished the short march to the edge of the hill that wrapped around the valley. The two leaders then paused on the very edge of the hillside, and they gazed down at the battle.

Draco was at the rear of his army. He had been calling out orders to break the Greek Army, but he stopped when he saw the countless Centaurs and Amazons that emerged from the forest at the top of the hill. He shook his head.

"By the gods," the second in command murmured. "We're about to be sandwiched."

Seven ignored the pending threat. She instead was fixated on the Amazon Queen at the front of the line. She tapped her horse's sides and began a gallop around the battlefield. She had her target.

"Amazons, Centaurs," Gabrielle hollered, "attack!" She lifted her staff then kicked Torqueo in the sides.

Tyldus hefted his spear and ran down the side of the hill beside the Amazon Queen.

Gabrielle let go of Torqueo's reins, and she could easily maneuver him just with her legs after seasons of tedious training. She held her staff with both hands and prepared for impact against the enemy. She was only a few more galloping steps so she readied her staff and yelled.

Tyldus pointed his spear's head at an enemy. He then leapt into the air and gave a powerful roar. He pierced a soldier through the top of his helmet and into his skull.

Gabrielle swung her staff around and took a soldier in the back. She stopped Torqueo beside him and finished the soldier off by hitting hard in his side. All around her, the Centaurs and Amazons crashed into the warlord's army like a tsunami.

The battle erupted in the valley at an alarming rate. The sandwiched army desperately tried to fight both the Centaurs and Amazon from one side while attempting to crush the Greek Army. At the south side, the Conqueror hacked through the enemy, and she intended to get to Draco at the rear. She planned to settle this old score, finally.

On the west side of the battlefield, the automaton was slicing her way through Amazons and Centaurs. She was fast and calculated each move, and her ice blue eyes were set on the Amazon Queen. But she was slowed when her horse was struck in the heart by a Centaur's spear. She jumped off her falling horse, landed on her feet, and brandished her sword.

The Centaur had lost his spear to the horse, but he unsheathed his sword too. He came at the automaton and tried for her. He'd heard from the grapevine that this inhuman woman was solely after the Amazon Queen.

Seven met every attempt the Centaur made. She didn't show any weaknesses, and she became agitated by him slowing her down. She suddenly moved fast and sliced her blade up his chest. She landed on her feet after the jump then on her left, the Centaur's guts fell near her.

The automaton lifted her bloody sword and walked past the fallen, gutted Centaur. She saw an Amazon just ahead fighting against one of Draco's men. She came up behind the Amazon and rammed her blade through the Amazon's stomach.

The Amazon lost her sword and fell to her knees. She looked up to the sky and briefly saw Artemis's face before her head was slice off by the automaton.

Seven quickly turned and raised her sword just as another Amazon came at her. She showed no emotion as she stopped the Amazon's blade against hers. Then her left hand shot out and plunged through the Amazon's chest. She wrapped her hand around the Amazon's beating heart and squeezed it. She passively watched the Amazon die then she ripped out her bloody hand. She stepped over the dead Amazon and scanned the battle for the Amazon Queen.

Commander Kaylee cut down another enemy. She then spun her blade around just in time to stop a new attack. She became wide eye at seeing the automaton.

Seven drew her blade back and noted the stratègos injured shoulder. She then locked eyes with the older woman.

The stratègos stepped to the left, but she kept her eye on the automaton. "You don't want to do this, Seven."

The automaton ignored the comment. She lunged at the Amazon, who parred her blow away. She turned after the Amazon dodged her. She slotted her eyes.

"I don't believe you're this cold killer," Kaylee fought. She spun her sword and stepped to the right.

Seven slightly shifted then remarked, "Resistance is futile." She then came at the stratègos again. "You will die."

Kaylee raised her sword and stopped the blade. She now put her best effort into the fight. She parred away the attacks, which were strong and rattled Kaylee. She couldn't believe the strength that Seven possessed. She realized how much of a threat the automaton truly posed.

Seven slashed away at the stratègos. She moved faster as she bored of the fight. She had her mission to fulfill. She gave a calculated kick at the stratègos's chest.

Commander Kaylee couldn't duck away from the kick because she was too close. She was hit hard, and she came off her feet. She crashed hard onto the ground and lost her sword. She groaned, but her fuzzy vision only shaped a tall glob that loomed over her.

"Stratègos!" Officer Galatea yelled. She'd seen the stratègos go down, and she pushed through the battlefield. She covered the paces quickly.

Seven stepped over the fallen stratègos. She turned her blade downwards and aimed for small woman's chest.

"No!"

Seven sharply turned her head to the left. She saw Galatea's sword coming at her. She moved fast, freed her left hand, and caught the blade in her palm. She wrapped her hand around the sword and squeezed tightly.

Officer Galatea was stunned when her blade was shattered purely by the automaton's hand. She looked from broken sword to the automaton's cold face.

Seven quickly turned her sword and ran her blade through the Amazon's stomach. She jerked it hard then ripped it back out.

Galatea stumbled backwards, covered her bleeding stomach, and fell to her knees. She looked over at Kaylee. "Get up," she rasped then fell.

The stratègos was in shock at losing her second in command. She got her hands under her, and she was about to go for her boot dagger.

Seven hastily turned her sword back to the stratègos. She placed the tip under Kaylee's throat and shifted more over top of the Amazon. She stood tall and dark, she was every bit soulless when she stared deep into Kaylee's eyes.

The stratègos kept her hand near her boot. Even if she had her throat slit, she planned to still retrieve her dagger and give this a last attempt. She held the automaton's lifeless eyes, and she didn't show any fear.

Seven stayed motionless for several beats. Then she pulled her sword away suddenly and walked off. She disappeared into the swarm of soldiers, Amazons, and Centaurs.

"By Artemis," Kaylee gasped. She jumped to her feet, grabbed her bloody sword, and went to Galatea. She was far too late though. She cursed and gazed off in the direction that the automaton went, but there was no way for her to warn Gabrielle.

Torqueo whined, reared up, and smashed his hoofs at an enemy.

Gabrielle had a brief glimpse of the automaton in the battlefield. She caught sight of Commander Kaylee trying to stop Seven, but Seven was now after her again. She moved her staff around and rammed the head of it into a nearing soldier's face. She knocked him back, but he recovered and slashed at her. She parried his blow away.

The soldier crashed to the ground after another but hard strike to his face. He didn't get back up.

Gabrielle lifted her head and scanned the crowd. She didn't see the automaton this time. "Hades," she cursed and looked for Seven.

"My queen, behind you!"

Torqueo sensed it in time. He kicked at the automaton, who had snuck up behind him.

Seven took the blow and landed on her back. She flipped onto her feet without any injury that was apparent.

Gabrielle signaled her horse to turn some. She eyed the automaton, but she kept her staff horizontal to her side.

"If you surrender, Queen Gabrielle then this battle ends now," Seven informed.

The bard felt the panic because she was this automaton's ultimate target. She gritted her teeth then coldly remarked, "I am nobody's hostage!"

"Soon you will comply!" Seven took two steps then jumped with her sword being sheathed.

Gabrielle screamed when the large and heavy automaton crashed into her and took her off the saddle. She slammed into the ground but luckily her feet weren't tangled in the stirrups somehow.

Torqueo whined in fear. He moved out of the way.

Gabrielle focused on the heavy weight on top of her. She reached down for her ivy dagger that was Xena's childhood weapon. She couldn't grab it though, and her fingertips scraped over the handle.

Seven grabbed the queen's wrists and lifted them over her head. "Resistance is futile."

"Resist this!" Melosa slammed the butt end of her sword into the automaton's head.

Seven was knocked off the queen but there was no damage to her head. She climbed to her feet quickly.

Melosa clenched her teeth at the intense pain in her hands from hitting the automaton. It was like hitting a stone wall.

Gabrielle got to her feet with her staff in hand. She took Melosa's side.

"Get on your horse and go," Melosa ordered.

"You can't stop her," Gabrielle reminded.

"I know," Melosa barked. She then came at Seven. "Just go!"

The queen raced over to her horse and remounted him in a heartbeat.

Melosa desperately fought the automaton but only enough to slow her down for Gabrielle. She planned to make a hasty retreat once Gabrielle was off and galloping.

The bard spurred Torqueo to pushed through the battlefield and go back up the valley. She glanced back at Melosa, who was falling to her knees before the automaton. "Gods, no." She pressured Torqueo to go, yet she hollered, "Seven, you can't resist your destiny!"

The automaton grew curious at the remark. She focused back on Melosa and struck the Amazon across the face with a hard smack of her hand. She tossed Melosa aside then turned in the direction Gabrielle rode towards. She gave chase.

Gabrielle finally was free from the battlefield once she was over the hilltop. She spurred Torqueo into a full gallop. "Yaaa, boy!"

The Conqueror had heard the queen's cry to the horse. She sharply looked over her right shoulder and saw Gabrielle take off. She then spotted the automaton, who broke through the battle and ran after Gabrielle. She cursed, but she refocused on her two attackers that came at her.

The Amazon Queen stayed low as the wind passed her. She could only allow Torqueo to go so fast because of the heavy forest, but she knew the paths well. She looked back over her shoulder and saw Seven not far behind. She was amazed by how fast the automaton could run. Gabrielle realized the fear she felt because Seven was so dangerous.

Gabrielle kept pushing her stallion. Just ahead she saw the bright light from the opening of the temple and its surrounding grounds. She prayed that her Amazons, Hercules, and Ioalus were prepared. She inhaled deeply and gave the warning of her arrival. She freed her left hand from the reins, slipped her index and middle finger between her clenched teeth, and she sharply whistled.

Torqueo whined at the excitement and fear that coursed through him. He jumped over a log then landed into the clearing in front of the temple. He hurried to the wide open space that was before the ruins, and he turned around from Gabrielle's signal.

Gabrielle clumped the reins into her left hand, but she raised her staff horizontal to her body. She eyed the dark woods and waited for the automaton. She also scanned the trees, but she couldn't make out her Amazons that were hidden away in them.

Seven jumped onto the same log that the horse had left over. She stood on the log and stared coldly at the Amazon in the clearing. She stepped off the log then strolled into the opening to where the sun shined down on her. She suddenly seemed golden because of her soft hair color.

Queen Gabrielle swallowed, but she called upon her Amazon courage that Eponin had nurtured in her for seasons. She would face this threat and stop it. She freed her boots from the saddle and felt her feet on the ground. She patted Torqueo on the rump and softly ordered, "Go on."

Once Torqueo trotted off, the bard raised her staff with both her hands. "Nobody believes you're meant to be this way, Seven."

The automaton listened but made no response. She reached for her bloody sword and unsheathed it with a low scrape. She carefully approached her prey.

"But if you can't stop yourself," Gabrielle declared, "then I will stop you."

Seven slotted her eyes and coldly replied, "You do not have the skill or the strength to defeat me."

"Perhaps not," Gabrielle debated, "but I have the heart." She approached her opponent. "And I have the right kind of strength." She bent her knees as the automaton finally stepped into close fighting proximity.

"Your attempt will prove worthless." Seven suddenly went on attack.

Gabrielle parried the sword swipe away. She wasn't shy and went on offense too. She was amazed by Seven's quickly ability to adapt and change tactics. Gabrielle was lucky in the fact that she could read Seven's body motions for precursors to how Seven would attack.

Seven brought out her left hand and caught the middle of Gabrielle's staff. She lifted it up, which in turn lifted Gabrielle off the ground. She raised her sword. "I was ordered to take you hostage. If that requires disassembling certain body parts, then I shall do it." She prepared to cut Gabrielle at the wrists.

The Amazon Queen gave a battle cry, lifted her legs, and slammed her boots into Seven's chest. She pushed off and flew into the air. She managed to flip and land on her feet.

The automaton stood rooted and remotely surprised by her opponent's skill. "Perhaps I misjudged you, Queen Gabrielle."

"I get that a lot," the bard remarked. She then grinned confidently.

"No matter." Seven spun her sword and marched up towards her enemy.

Gabrielle needed to weaken Seven so that it'd make it easier for Hercules to handle her. She just hoped that Andra's hammer would do the job. She suddenly turned and made a dash for the ruins.

Seven didn't bother to run, but she briskly walked in that same direction. She stopped though once she entered the ruins, and she surveyed them. She hadn't expected them, but she looked around for the Amazon Queen.

Gabrielle seemed to appear from nowhere. She stood on the top of the foundation and in her hands was a blacksmith's hammer. "This is a temple to Gaia, Seven. Do you know who she is?"

Seven slotted her eyes at her target, and she proceeded towards the foundation. "A former Titan that is locked away in the underworld." She hurried up the cracked and darkened steps. She slipped past broken remains from columns. "Her name means Earth. She was brought forth after Chaos, and she bore Uranus... god of the sky."

Gabrielle grinned at the automaton's speech. She stepped back once but to her left. "She also didn't trust Chaos," she mentioned. "She feared he would destroy all that she'd shaped with Uranus's help." She stepped to her left again and raised the hammer some. "So she bore a daughter. Do you know who that daughter was?"

Seven stepped to her right and followed the circle that Gabrielle was making in the middle of the temple. "She had many children."

"Yes but one of those is special among the rest." Gabrielle shifted to the left again. "Her name is Artemis."

The automaton slotted her eyes because she'd never heard of such tales. "You are incorrect... she is the daughter of Zeus and Leto."

"No," Gabrielle debated, "She's the adopted daughter." She and Seven started to circle each other more. "Gaia and Artemis are sworn to protect earth together. And Artemis designed the Amazons to help her in her mission."

Seven glared darker at the Amazon Queen. "This is irrelevant." Yet she continued to listen anyway because she was captivated by the information.

"Actually it is," Gabrielle softly spoke, "especially to you." She paused then declared, "You're an Amazon... you just don't know it yet." She surprisingly attacked the larger woman.

Seven was caught off guard for once, and she was slammed hard by the hammer on her side. She hit the worn marble floor, but she still retained her sword. She lifted her eyes and coldly stared up at the queen.

Queen Gabrielle brought the hammer around and prepared to bring it down vertically at Seven. "Time for your destiny, Seven!"

The automaton hastily rolled out of the way, jumped to her feet, and she stared at the major impact the hammer made on the foundation. She lifted her eyes and felt her anger rise up at the challenge.

The queen brought the hammer around just as Seven came at her. She used the handle like it was her staff, and she blocked the attacks. She finally had an opening and swung the hammer repeatedly at her opponent.

Seven jumped out of the way and ducked, but it was hard because she was tall and large. She took a

solid hit to her right shoulder, which made her drop her sword. Her entire body frame vibrated when the hammer met her steel reinforced bones.

Gabrielle stepped back two paces and heavily breathed. She stared coldly back at the lifeless eyes that were locked on her.

Seven reminder herself that the drop of fear in the pit of her stomach was irrelevant. She came at her enemy with her bare hands.

The queen swung the hammer, which came to a fast stop.

Seven held the handle tightly between Gabrielle's own hands. She bared her teeth then pulled back her freehand into a fist.

Gabrielle knew her choice so she released the hammer and ducked from the powerful punch. She backed away and cursed now that Seven had the hammer. She hated that her blood sister may be right about this one.

Seven adjusted the hammer between her hands. She found the weight quite comfortable, and she knew she could truly damage the Amazon Queen with this weapon. She made fast steps towards Queen Gabrielle.

Gabrielle clenched her hands and held her position. She needed to wait another beat until it was the right moment. She then heard the bird whistle so she ducked, spun around, and picked up a wood shield that had been blending in with the dark foundation.

Seven stopped when she heard the whistle, which was followed by several other whistles. She glanced down at the Amazon Queen, who was protected under the shield. She raised the hammer, but then arrows suddenly plunged into her body from all sides.

Gabrielle clutched the shield's handle tightly. She heard a few arrows hit her shield, but she jumped from her skin when the hammer's head slammed down next to her. The arrows had stopped so she stood up and lowered the shield to her right. Beside her left boot was Andra's hammer.

Seven had moved away, and she had almost twenty arrows that stuck out of her. She looked at them protruding from her body then she looked over at the Amazon Queen. She was shocked yet growing angry by the trickery.

Gabrielle knelt and picked up the hammer again. She still held the shield at her side, but she carefully watched the automaton.

Seven clenched her teeth, however, she proceeded to snap off the arrow shafts one by one at a fast rate.

The queen was dazzled by the fact it didn't seem to slow down the automaton. She clearly saw the blood that oozed out around the wounds but it didn't bother the automaton.

Seven came to the arrow that was stuck in her stomach. She yanked it out then tossed it aside. She walked over to her sword, picked it up, and faced the queen. "I don't feel pain. And I heal quickly."

Gabrielle did notice that the stomach wound was indeed bloody, but it was actually gradually closing up. "Just my luck." She saw Seven coming for her so she threw the shield at her.

Seven punched through it with her left hand then ran after the queen.

Gabrielle made a run for it too. She took a few steps, jumped off the foundation, and landed neatly on

the ground. She faced the automaton that rushed down the steps. She walked backwards and drew Seven away from the foundation.

Seven followed the back stepping queen. With her left hand, she started yanking out the broken shafts from her body. "Your attempt to stop me is admirable at best, but you sentencing hundreds of people to their death." She jerked out an arrowhead from her upper leg. "If you comply now then you'll save what's left."

"You don't know Amazons very well, do you?" Queen Gabrielle drew the automaton further from the foundation. "We don't surrender. We don't stop. And we never abandon our faith."

"Your faith is weak in the face of power," Seven snapped. She came at Gabrielle again.

The bard blocked the sword attacks. She knew she was close, and she just had to execute things perfectly now. She pushed all her strength into the fight and tried to force Seven to move backwards.

The automaton was hard pressed and took a few steps back. She teetered on another step, but Gabrielle's wide swing forced her back again.

Gabrielle watched Seven's boot move back onto the leaves then she heard the snap of branches begin.

Seven was clearly shocked, and she fell down into the hidden hole. She dropped her sword and tumbled into the deep hole. She hit the cold, dark ground yet before she could get up, a set of strong hands were on her from behind.

Gabrielle could just make out the struggle as Hercules worked to get a grip on the automaton. "Yakut!" she hollered.

The shaman raced out from the woods that surrounded the temple. She came over to the queen and peered into the hole. "Hercules, do you have her?"

"Almost!" Hercules locked Seven's arms behind her back. "You're not going anywhere." He grounded his teeth and held her still. "Alright, Yakut!"

Seven tried to jerk free, but it was useless. How could it be possible somebody was as strong as her? "Who are you?" she snarled. "This is impossible."

Hercules smirked then looked up to see Yakut on her stomach.

Gabrielle knelt beside the shaman. She kept near in case something went wrong.

"Bring her closer," Yakut urged. She stretched down her hand, which wasn't far from touching Seven's head. "Closer."

Hercules forced Seven forward to the edge of the pit. He held her close to his body and controlled her.

Yakut felt her hand pressed against the automaton's forehead. She closed her eyes and proceeded to bring her two-spirit to life. She hastily traced Seven's life force and tried to find the exact point when Seven lost her soul.

Seven actually felt a sharp pain in her head for the first time. She hissed in pain and fought harder against her captor.

The shaman located the moment when Seven lost her soul. She now rushed to figure out where it was taken so she could return it.

"Come on," Gabrielle whispered.

Yakut suddenly screamed from unexpected pain. "I can't get to.. it!" She opened her eyes, which were filled with tremendous pain. "I'm not strong enough."

The queen touched the shaman's outstretched arm. "You can do it, Yakut. Come on!"

At that moment, Yakut gained a surge of strength but it wasn't enough. She started to scream again, and she was so close to freeing Seven's soul.

Seven screamed for the first time, and she fought her hardest now because of the immense pain in her head. She lifted her legs, slammed her boots against the pit's wall, and pushed with all her strength. The contact to her head was gone and ultimately the pain. She flipped over Hercules's head, and she attacked him.

Hercules wasn't fast enough, and he took several blows to the back of his head. He collapsed to the pit's floor in a useless heap.

Seven lifted her angry eyes up at the shaman and queen.

"Get up, Yakut." Gabrielle knew the shaman was weak so she helped lift her to her feet.

Seven growled, took two running steps, jumped over Hercule's body, and slammed her hands into the soft dirt. She climbed up the side.

Gabrielle was on her feet and had Yakut up too. She pushed Yakut out of the way just as Seven jumped for them. She was hit by what felt like a stone wall. She came to the ground roughly, and the automaton was on top of her.

Seven was furious, and she grabbed for the queen's left arm. "I'm going to immobilize your arms and legs so you cannot resist." She decided this would be the simplest way to control the queen.

"Get off my sister!" Andra had run from the woods and dropped her hidden position. She scooped up her hammer with ease then brought it around to hit Seven on the side.

The automaton again was thrown off the Amazon Queen. She rolled onto her back and showed a faint bit of pain over her face from Andra's powerful blow. She put her hands under her and started to get up.

The blacksmith moved fast and swung the hammer at Seven's head.

Seven took the harsh blow and blood flew from her mouth. She fell onto her stomach, but she still got up anyway.

Andra brought the hammer back around and swung it down again.

The automaton shot up her right hand and caught the hammer by the head. She ripped it from Andra's hands and tossed it. She then kicked Andra right in the stomach.

The blacksmith flew through the air and landed near the foundation's steps. She fell unconscious.

Seven shook her head to get rid of the fuzzy vision she'd acquired from the hit to the head. She looked over at the Amazon Queen, who struggled to get up too. "You..."

Gabrielle looked over at the automaton, who had red eyes from blood seeping into them. She couldn't imagine anybody surviving such a blow that Andra delivered. She tried to get past her pain and get to her feet.

"Amazons, attack!" Solari's voice echoed through the ruins. She and eight other Amazons erupted from the woods and raced after the automaton and queen.

"No," the queen hollered, yet it was too late.

Seven rushed for Gabrielle and tried to grab her. She succeeded just before the Amazons came at her. She wrapped the bard up into her arms and pulled out a dagger from her sheath at her hip. She put the blade against the queen's throat.

"Stand down," the queen ordered. "Stay away from her."

"Gabrielle, no." Ephiny stepped closer and lifted her sword.

"Stay back, Ephiny!" Gabrielle clutched the strong arm over her chest. "I'll go with you, Seven."

The automaton walked backwards. "Yes you will." She looked over her shoulder to make sure nobody was behind her. "Your life for your Amazons'."

"You swear by it?" the bard checked.

"Yes," Seven promised. She walked backwards but eyed the Amazons.

"Sheath your swords, Amazons."

"My queen-" Solari argued.

"Do as I say!"

Solari grounded her teeth, but she waved at her comrades to do it. She put hers away.

Hercules now appeared from out of the pit. He assessed the current situation and knew there was little that could be done.

"What if Draco doesn't keep to your promise?" Gabrielle tested. She needed more time.

"He will do so."

"And if he doesn't?" the bard tried again.

Seven didn't reply because she really didn't have an answer. She took another step back but something bristled at the back of her neck. Before she could figure it out, there was a predatory growl from behind her back.

Faolan had run up behind Seven and jumped at her exposed back. He sunk his fangs and claws into the automaton's back.

Seven was astounded by the surge of pain that she would have never expected. She released the queen and reached back for the wolf.

Gabrielle moved away and stumbled to her knees. She looked back at Seven and Faolan, who were on the ground and fighting.

Faolan's snarl rang out, and he was the only being that could enforce any pain on the automaton. It was his unusual gift from Artemis simply because Artemis saw this day coming. He performed his ultimate duty to protect the Amazons, who had the unique souls even if it meant stopping this lifeless Amazon.

Seven fought desperately against the fangs and claws that tore through her skin. Her wounds couldn't

heal fast like normal. She moved up her dagger and plunged it into the wolf's side.

Faolan cried in pain, but he didn't back down.

"Faolan!" Gabrielle took a few steps but strong arms grabbed her and stopped her.

"Don't go any closer," Iolaus instructed. He turned the bard away so her back was to it, and he watched over her shoulder.

"No!" Gabrielle tried to push Iolaus off, but he held her. Then Faolan's repeated painful howls made her try harder. "Faolan!"

Seven repeatedly plunged and ripped the dagger through the wolf's body until he stopped attacking her. She drove it harder than the last time and sunk the dagger deep enough that it pierced his heart. She felt him go still then his bloody, furry coat slumped against her body.

Seven extracted the dagger then rolled the dead wolf off her body.

Gabrielle knew it was over because Faolan's cries were gone. "No!"

Iolaus saw the dead wolf and Seven was getting up. He turned and shoved the queen to the Amazons in hopes they'd restrain her.

Hercules moved past everybody and took his partner's side. "You might want to get back, Iolaus."

"I've never stopped being by your side, Herc."

"I know." The demi-god raised his hands. "Just be careful."

Seven was breathing hard, and she glared at the demi-god, his partner, and those Amazons that wouldn't stop protecting their queen. She wanted to kill all of them to make this end. She sized up Hercules and hotly whispered, "You're Hercules... a legend."

"I'm a little more than that," Hercules smartly replied. He then came at the automaton before she could act first.

"Let me go." Gabrielle tried to fight against Ephiny and Solari. "I have to get to Faolan."

"No, Gabrielle." Solari restrained the queen.

"We have to get her out of here," Ephiny reminded. "Time for plan c."

Solari nodded.

Queen Gabrielle knew nothing about an alternate plan. "What are you talking about?"

"We have to get you to safety," Solari explained. "There's no hope in stopping her now, Gabrielle other than killing her."

"I have to be the one." The queen tried to get free from the Amazons.

"No, the Nation needs you. We won't let Gaia's prophecy come true." Solari almost lost her grip on the queen, but she barked, "Ephiny, do it."

Gabrielle was stunned because somehow her Amazons knew about what Gaia told her in the temple. She was about to try another fight. "No, you don't know what you're doing!"

Ephiny hated it, but she raised her sword's hilt up and prepared to slam the queen's in the back of the head. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle." She brought her hilt down.

Solari caught the falling queen. "Let's get her out of here."

Ephiny looked over at the automaton, who fought with Hercules and the Amazons. She helped get Gabrielle's slumped form into Solari's arms.

Andra at that point had gotten up and witnessed the entire mess several hundred paces away. She groaned and got to her feet. She then saw that her blood sister was unconscious. She stumbled over that way and started to find her equilibrium. "What's happening?"

"We have to get Gabrielle out of here," Solari explained. She was walking backwards quickly. "Ephiny, get her feet."

"Are you two fools?" the blacksmith snapped. She started to realize what'd happened. "You betrayed the queen's trust!"

"I rather betray it than have her killed," Solari growled. She walked faster. "Signal for the wagon."

"No," Andra hissed, "put her down." She reached for her sword at her back.

"Andra, this is no time for a crisis of sides," Ephiny fought. "We're trying to save her."

Andra pointed the sword tip at Ephiny's throat. "You are interfering with what she has decided... with her orders."

"She doesn't understand what this will do to the Nation!" Solari yelled. "She is a good queen... and good friend." She choked on her words.

"And what are you two?" Andra snarled. "You knock her out and hide her away."

"It's not just us," Solari debated. "We have orders, Andra. If you don't help us then you're committing treason to the Nation."

"I rather commit treason to the Nation than betray Gabrielle's trust!" Andra slipped the blade down Ephiny's throat. "Let her go, now."

Solari glanced over at the fight then at Ephiny. She nodded.

Ephiny lowered Gabrielle's feet to the ground. She then jumped for Andra and punched her.

Andra lost her sword and struggled against Ephiny. "Don't do this, Ephiny!"

"I won't let her be killed!" Ephiny yelled.

Solari continued to move the queen back to the woods where she hoped the wagon waited. She then heard a bunch of movement from the woods, and she prayed it was the wagon. But she stopped at seeing six Amazons come out of the woods.

Eponin had her sword out, at her side, and she raised it at Solari. "Put her down, Solari." She shook her head and hotly whispered, "I taught you and Ephiny better than this."

"You taught us to protect who we love!"

"And this isn't the way, Solari." The weapons master signaled the six Amazons to free the queen. "She has her destiny." She studied Solari's upset features. "Don't think that orders from Melosa are always

good ones."

Solari gave in and knelt down. She lowered the bard carefully.

Eponin looked at the six Amazons and ordered. "Stop Ephiny and Andra then help Hercules." She came over and knelt beside the young Amazons. She peered up at Solari, who was clearly distraught and upset.

Yakut appeared and knelt down beside the queen. "She has to be awake." She looked between Solari and Eponin.

"For what?" the weapons master asked.

"For... everything." Yakut looked between the Amazons. "She's the key." She lowered her eyes to Gabrielle and feared that now destiny would end in the queen's death.

Gabrielle remained still and unmoving. She may have been unconscious but her eyes were moving fast under her eyelids. As if she was searching for something or somebody.

Back in the battlefield, the Conqueror had grown powerful on the field despite Draco's foot soldiers arrived. Draco's army was weak and tried to gather back at the mouth of the valley to regroup in a solid force.

The Conqueror feared that the warlord would try to flee. She then gazed past the mouth and saw a glowing pool of hoplites that was commanded by Borias. She grinned.

Borias blocked the warlord's army from going anywhere. He ordered the hoplites to march into the valley, but he halted them just a few hundred paces. He was high on his steed and held out his hand at the hoplites behind him. "Prepare your dorus, hoplites!" He heard the movements behind him.

The Conqueror looked back over her shoulder and yelled, "Bastien, now!"

The chiliarchès was still safely located in the center of the box formation. He barked out, "Hoplites, surge forward!"

Borias dropped his hand and let the hoplites rush past him.

Draco lost all hope. He watched in horror as the boxed hoplites pushed forward and so did the hoplites at the mouth. He knew his dwindling army's fate. "Retreat!" he screamed.

The Conqueror stabbed an opponent through the chest. She lifted her head at hearing Draco's order. She wasn't about to let him get away. She was so close to him now. She began to slash her way through the enemy and edged closer to Draco, who was still on horseback.

The Conqueror fought a new opponent and cut his sword arm off before he dropped. She was about to move, yet she stopped and looked off to her right. She sensed something wrong despite her winning odds. She knew it had to be Gabrielle because she never had this feeling unless Gabrielle was in trouble.

The Conqueror suddenly disengaged from getting Draco. She rushed through the battlefield and broke free. She scurried up the hillside and entered the woods. She stopped for a beat and scanned the quiet woods. What was she to do? What if she overacted and doomed them all by letting Draco free? She gazed back down at the battlefield and listened to the call and screams of the battle.

Xena raised her eyes to the bright blue sky that matched her eyes. She whispered, "The sky." She

thought back on Priestess Maired's words back in the temple. "We can't survive with out the other." She shook her head and looked back at the woods. "And when we're close then we're at our strongest." She now understood the priestess's words clearly.

The Conqueror hoped her luck was still with her. She whistled for Argo and waited a moment. She then saw the golden mare, who galloped towards her. She smiled at her loyal horse, but she hastily got into the saddle. "Yaaa, Argo!"

The golden mare rode hard and easily maneuvered through the dense woods. She jumped over fallen trees and large roots. She huffed loudly but just ahead she saw an opening in the woods.

The Conqueror already knew the exact location of the ruins from studying a map last night. She ducked her head just as Argo made a jump over a fallen log. She lifted her head and pulled Argo's reins. Just ahead she spotted the automaton fighting against the mighty Hercules. She scanned around and looked for Gabrielle and Yakut. She spotted them slightly hidden behind the temple's foundation.

She raced that way and feared the bard was hurt or worse. She came to a sharp halt because Hercules was suddenly thrown aside like a rag doll. The Conqueror made adjustments then spun her sword.

Argo was signaled to stop suddenly. She skidded and watched her mistress sail overhead.

"Chaaaaaaya!" Xena cried out. She landed on the ground right between the automaton and the Amazons. She pointed her bloody sword at the automaton. "My you look like you've had a rough day." She can over Seven's bloody, ripped, and arrowed body. "And nothing to show for it."

Seven snarled at the joke. She came at the ruler.

Xena expected it, and she ducked away from Seven's punch. She then used her sword to attack the automaton.

Seven lifted her arms and used them to parry away the attacks. She easily kept up with the relentless ruler.

"Gabrielle, wake up," Solari pleaded.

Yakut patted the queen's cheeks. "Come on." She looked over at seeing Xena trying to slow down the automaton. "We need you, Gabrielle." She pressed her hand against the bard's cut up chest.

Gabrielle suddenly shot up with wide eyes. "Xena?" She tried to get up and Yakut held her still.

"She's here... she's slowing Seven down."

The queen hastily tried to clear her head and ignore the pain. "I know what we have to do now."

The shaman sadly smiled and whispered, "Then we should begin." She, Solari, and Eponin helped the queen to her feet.

Gabrielle found her balance again and gazed over at her old friend single handedly fighting the automaton. She looked over at Iolaus, who was near Hercules and checking on him. "Iolaus, we need Hercules's help."

Iolaus nodded and struggled to get his partner up. "Come on, Herc."

Yakut and Gabrielle climbed the steps to the foundation. They stood in the center of the fallen temple and stared over at the automaton fighting the ruler.

Xena kept stalling for time in hopes Hercules would rise up. She glanced at him and saw him awake finally. She moved backwards faster and went up one step of the temple. She lost some focus, and Seven grabbed her sword then threw it.

Seven rushed the ruler and got her hand around Xena's throat.

"No!" Gabrielle ran towards the fight. She jumped up high, lifted her right leg up enough, and pulled out her ivy dagger. She came back down but towards the automaton and Xena, who was being choked. Gabrielle cut her knife into Seven's right shoulder and held onto the large body. "Let her go!" She wasn't about to watch another loved one die.

Seven was more interested in getting Gabrielle. She dropped Xena and reached for the queen. Just before she had her hands on the queen, her feet were suddenly take out from under her.

Gabrielle landed on her feet. And she raced to Xena's side. "Xena?" She still had her dagger, but she tucked it away in the boot.

Hercules had come up from behind and grabbed the automaton by the ankles. He yanked her down the steps and tossed her like she was a rock.

"Come on," the bard urged her friend.

Xena stood up and followed the queen to Yakut. She looked back at Hercules and Seven, but she grabbed for her chakram.

Hercules went up the steps and backed up until he was near the women. He held up his hands when the angry automaton came up the steps.

Seven looked over the determined faces before her. She hotly yelled, "Resistance is futile!" She came at Hercules first.

The demi-god struggled to get a hold on her.

"Restrain her," Yakut ordered. "I need to get close to her again."

The Amazons lined the steps and watched the struggle. They had their swords ready, and they would strike if it meant saving the queen. Iolaus stood in the front and wanted to help his partner, but he knew he couldn't do anything.

Hercules started to get a handle on Seven. He twisted her around and locked her right arm behind her back.

Gabrielle shook her head because the wind had picked up and blew her hair in the way. She felt the same sensation from last night when she was here. She turned to the ruler and yelled, "Do you know what we have to do?"

"I understand now," the Conqueror called over the wind.

Gabrielle faintly smiled now that her friend believed too. She looked back at Hercules, who finally had Seven down on her knees and restrained. "Yakut!"

The shaman hurried over to the automaton in the center of the temple. She looked at Hercules, who was working hard to keep the automaton immobile. She looked back at Gabrielle and Xena, and they were right behind her.

"It's time," Gabrielle told the shaman.

Yakut silently agreed, and she knelt in front of Seven. She placed her hands against the automaton's cheeks. "Resistance is futile, Seven." She closed her eyes just as a small hand came on her right shoulder. She then felt a larger hand on her left shoulder grip her.

Yakut's two-spirit was intensified two fold because she was joined by Xena and Gabrielle. At first she heard Seven's scream, but it washed out against the increasing winds. She then softly chanted, "ελεύθερος αυτή."

Xena translated the words in her head, but she joined in the chanting. "ελεύθερος αυτή."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and focused on the words she couldn't truly understand. She too repeated the same words. She then stretched out her left hand to Xena.

The Conqueror took the small hand into hers and held tightly. She completed the triangle.

Seven's scream broke louder, and she looked up at the sky. She swore she heard voices all around her then inside of her, but she had to be imagining. Then there was a face in the sky that smiled at her as if it knew her. Suddenly her eyes softened to the same blue of the sky, and her eyes rolled up into her head. Then the wind cut off oddly.

Hercules felt Seven collapsing so he let her go.

Seven remained still and on her back. She didn't seem to be breathing. Slowly smoke appeared off her body and floated over her.

Yakut pulled her hands away and opened her eyes. She studied the broken automaton at her knees.

Gabrielle gradually revealed her green eyes after the out of body experience. She focused back on the present.

Xena knelt beside the automaton and pressed her fingertips into Seven's throat. She felt a weak pulse. "She's still alive."

The shaman sadly smiled and whispered, "And she's free."

To be continued.