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Violence: There is violence in this story.

Subtext: Any subtext becomes main text here.

Summary: The sequel to To Find What was Mine. It's been almost three years, Xena is now the ruler of southern Greece, and she sets her sights on northern Greece. Gabrielle now discovers herself at a crossroad when the Conqueror, her lost friend, begins her march north and closer to her Nation. Just when Gabrielle decides to seek out Xena, a warlord surfaces near the Macedonia Amazon Nation and threatens to spoil the subtle peace between the Amazons and Centaurs. Meanwhile the Conqueror must keep the Romans at bay before they breach the Greek borders, and her old hatred leads her into blindness.

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

To Take What is Mine

by Red Hope

Chapter 21

Queen Gabrielle watched Hercules pick up the automaton off the foundation. "Thank you."

The demi-god nodded and promised, "Iolaus and I will stay as long as it takes to sort this out."

Gabrielle brushed her hand over Hercules's arm and smiled at him and Iolaus. "I appreciate it. Be careful going back with her."

"I'll accompany you," Yakut insisted.

The queen nodded at the idea and watched them go with the automaton. She saw several Amazons were helping Hercules load the automaton into a wagon. Hercules then climbed into the wagon with Iolaus so they could keep an eye on her.

Gabrielle went to the steps of the temple and stood there. She stared down at her handful of Amazons that waited orders. She slightly turned her head to the left when the Conqueror took her side. She focused back on the group and locked on Ephiny and Solari. "Eponin... arrest Solari and Ephiny."

The weapons master shifted but several Amazons already surrounded Ephiny and Solari. "Hand over your swords," the weapons master ordered.

Solari and Ephiny didn't fight it and gave up their weapons.

The queen swallowed down her emotions that she felt for her friends. She was queen and had to act as such before her Amazons. "Take them back to the Nation... lock them up." She watched the four

Amazons escort Solari and Ephiny away then she looked back at Eponin. "Were there others?"

"Yes, my queen." The weapons master came to the bottom step. "I have rounded them up except for Melosa. I am sorry I did not discover the plot sooner."

Gabrielle shook her head and replied, "You did well, Eponin." Then her gaze wandered over to her fallen friend that was truly dead. She clenched her jaws and looked back at Eponin. "I need somebody to... put Faolan on Torqueo. I want him taken back to the village."

The weapons master nodded and turned to the Amazons. She ordered two of them to carry out the queen's orders.

Gabrielle faced the ruler beside her. "I want to go back to the battlefield. We have to make sure Draco is caught."

The Conqueror couldn't agree more. She saw that the Amazons had brought out Gabrielle's horse and were loading the dead wolf into the saddle. She looked back at the bard. "We'll go together."

The bard was grateful, but she ordered to Eponin. "You need to arrest Melosa as well."

"It is being done, my queen." Eponin watched the queen come down the steps. "You will be needed back on the battlefield." She then looked over to her right.

Andra held her blacksmith's hammer in her right hand. In her left, she had Gabrielle's staff. "Sister."

The queen took her famed weapon and sadly smiled at Andra. "Thank you, Andra."

The blacksmith didn't care about formality. She hugged her young sister and whispered, "Be careful... the day is not over yet."

Gabrielle hugged back then straightened up. "You will come?"

"I'll be there shortly," the blacksmith promised.

The Conqueror had gone to her horse and was up in the saddle.

Gabrielle hadn't noticed Xena moved away until now. She gazed up at the ruler proudly on the horse. She came over and took Xena's hand. She was lifted into the saddle and situated behind the ruler.

The blacksmith turned on her boots and watched the rulers ride back to the woods. She hefted her hammer some then turned to Eponin. "Thank you."

Eponin stayed stoic but honestly stated, "They only meant to protect her."

"I do it too," Andra agreed, "but breaking her trust is another matter."

"It is that." Eponin grasped the blacksmith's shoulder. "She is lucky to have you, Andra."

"And you her," Andra whispered. She realized that her and Eponin shared the same scroll when it came to Gabrielle. She smiled softly and for the first time, she saw Eponin smile too.

The Conqueror pushed Argo to go faster. She felt the strong arm across her stomach and Gabrielle's body pressed against her back. She sensed Gabrielle was using all of her reserves to stay in control of her feelings.

Gabrielle peered around the ruler's shoulder and spotted the opening to the valley. They came the ridge, and the Conqueror stopped the horse. Gabrielle looked down the valley and saw that the battle was

already over. She sighed in relief.

The Conqueror spotted Borias and Bastien together, and they were walking over to the enemy soldiers that had given up. Xena tapped Argo's sides and headed down the hillside carefully.

Bastien put his hand behind his back, but he looked from Borias to the approaching Centaur. "You must be Tyldus."

The Centaur leader nodded and looked between the two officers. "I am Tyldus."

The stratègos stepped forward and held out his arm. "I am the stratègos Borias."

Tyldus instantly took to the man's attitude. He shook arms and looked to Bastien.

The chiliarchès came forward and held out his arm. "And I am the Conqueror's chiliarchès... Bastien."

"It is a pleasure to meet you." Tyldus released arms then moved around on his hoofs. He looked at the captured soldiers. "How many?"

"So far the count is a hundred and three," Bastien reported.

Tyldus nodded then his gaze floated down to the prize of them all. He followed the humans down to the last captive. "The great Draco."

"The former great," the Conqueror cut in. She stopped Argo and let the queen get down. She swung her boots out of the stirrups and hopped off. She took Gabrielle's side and surveyed Draco's bloody face. "It's been so long, Dan." She stepped up to him and enjoyed his broken appearance. "But I see nothing has changed... especially your losing streak."

Draco jerked forward but the hoplite behind him grabbed him back. He looked over at Gabrielle, and he was surprised she was alive. He couldn't imagine how that brainless automaton didn't get her. "And what will you do with me, Xena? Throw me into a trial?"

The Conqueror revealed a dark smile. "I can think of more fun things than that for you."

"My queen," Commander Kaylee greeted.

The bard was relieved to see the stratègos, and she asked, "How are you?"

"Bloody, wounded, and never better." The stratègos grinned but worriedly inquired, "What of the automaton?"

"We stopped her," Gabrielle softly confessed. "She's being taken back to the village to be assessed."

"She is being guarded?"

"Yes." Gabrielle spotted Eponin, Andra, and a handful of Amazons coming to them. She stiffened at seeing Melosa coming from the other direction.

Commander Kaylee followed the queen's concerned gaze and spotted Melosa.

Melosa joined the group and saw that the queen was fine. She slightly narrowed her eyes. "You defeated the automaton?"

"Contrary to what some people may think," Gabrielle clipped.

Eponin at that point was there, and she waited for her orders.

The queen stepped up to the former queen and softly informed, "I don't know what you planned or how you manipulated my friends against me." She shook her head and promised, "But it won't happen again." She looked at Eponin. "Arrest Melosa."

Melosa didn't fight it and handed her bloody sword to Andra. She was flanked by four Amazons and Eponin behind her.

Draco turned his head to the left where Gabrielle stood. "You did well, Little Bri."

The Amazon Queen coldly looked at the warlord. She stepped up to the warlord and held his eyes.

The Conqueror tensed at seeing them that close together. She didn't like it and didn't trust Draco.

Gabrielle was silent then her next words filled with amusement. "Look who's the hostage now." She grinned and coolly remarked, "And I don't care what Xena does to you this time... because you deserve every bit of it." She turned her back on him and walked away.

Draco suddenly slammed his elbow into the hoplite behind him. He pulled out a dagger from the back of his belt and came at Gabrielle. "Don't walk away from me, Bri!"

"Gabrielle!" Andra hollered.

Xena reacted fast, but she was two steps too short.

Melosa had seen it far in advanced. She escaped from her guards, went a step, and jumped for Draco. She got between the young queen and the warlord then ultimately took the dagger into her chest.

Gabrielle had turned around and witnessed the tail end of events. "Oh gods, Melosa." She panicked and dropped her staff as she went for Melosa.

The Conqueror had grabbed Draco and kicked him to the ground. She knelt down and pinched him in the neck before he could do anymore harm. "Get some shackles!" she snapped. She looked over at the queen, who cradled Melosa.

Eponin was hollering for a healer, and one came racing through the dead bodies littered on the field.

"What were you thinking?" Gabrielle whispered. She held Melosa's head in her lap.

"Contrary to what some people think," Melosa murmured, "I do care, Gabrielle." She closed her eyes as her body started to numb over her. "You are right to be queen." She forced her eyes open, and she sensed the healer trying to help her but it was useless. "You have made Terreis proud."

Gabrielle broke at that point and tears came down her cheeks. "Just hang in there, Melosa." She looked at the healer for help, yet a bloody hand grabbed her arm. She stared back down at Melosa, who was dying.

"You have honored Terreis memory with peace, and I have remembered her with hatred." Melosa felt tears come over her too at seeing Gabrielle's emotions. "I pray she will forgive me when I see her soon."

Gabrielle lowered her head closer to Melosa. "She will... don't go, Melosa. You've taught me so much... how to be a strong queen over these seasons."

Melosa lifted her hand and threaded her fingers through the bard's hair. She felt Gabrielle's forehead against hers. "You don't need me any longer, Gabrielle. You have succeeded where I have failed, sister."

She closed her eyes and whispered, "Remember that you cannot have peace without war."

Gabrielle recalled Melosa's favorite quote that she'd learned over and over during her seasons of training. She closed her eyes and kissed Melosa's forehead and whispered the other half of the quote. "And you cannot have war without peace." She rocked her and Melosa's bodies together.

"My queen," the healer tried, "she's gone." She carefully took Melosa from the young queen.

Gabrielle was breathing heavy from anger and rage. She looked over at Draco, who was seated but slumped. She thought of Faolan, Melosa, Galatea, and all the dead that littered the valley because of this one man. Why were the things she loved in her life taken away?

The Amazon Queen was on her feet, and she came at Draco in a fury. She kicked at him then launched into him.

Draco hollered, yet he was helpless because his hands were shackled behind his back. He took a hard punch to his face followed by another then a third.

"You fuckin' bastard!" Gabrielle yelled at him. She grabbed for her bloody dagger from her boot and brought it down at Draco's face. She caught his cheek and cut it.

The Conqueror had initially been shocked, and she now grabbed the bard. She snaked her arm around Gabrielle's waist and lifted her up. "He's not worth it, Gabrielle." She stopped Gabrielle's moving dagger by holding her wrist still. "Let it go."

Gabrielle wasn't sure what the ruler meant, but she dropped the dagger. She turned to her friend.

The Conqueror pulled Gabrielle into her body despite the awful condition hers and Gabrielle's bodies were in from the fighting.

Gabrielle had her arms locked around Xena's neck. She cried not only because of today's losses but from her long time of pain. The aged pain that Draco happened to make her face because he was from her past.

Xena looked over at Borias and nodded at him to handle things now. She then picked up Gabrielle and walked away from everybody so that she and Gabrielle could have personal space. She didn't want the Amazons to see their queen this way.

Gabrielle hadn't noticed the change until she lifted her face from Xena's neck. She felt the ground move under her, but had it gone that fast? She was now far from the battlefield, back in the woods, and under the trees' canopy.

The Conqueror had taken a seat against a tree and leaned her back into it. She looked over Gabrielle's dirty, bloody, and tear streaked face. She had to admit that past it all Gabrielle was still beautiful.

Gabrielle was situated in the ruler's lap. She was held close and away from all to see her. She brushed back her messy hair and whispered, "I don't know why I did that." She shook her head. "I just snapped."

The Conqueror completely understood what her friend meant.

"I thought about everything that's happened in my life," the bard confessed. "And I just went after Draco."

Xena was amused that Draco received Gabrielle's unexpected vengeance attack. But she was glad she'd

stopped the bard before it went too far.

"Why do the people I care about and love get killed?" Gabrielle became angry again. "It's like I'm some walking curse."

Xena carefully fixed the bard's hair. She gathered her words and softly argued, "If you're such a curse then why am I still here after so long?"

"And you wouldn't be this person..." Gabrielle signaled Xena's warrior attire. "If I hadn't been taken into slavery."

Xena leaned in some and locked eyes with her friend. "How do you know?" She waited a beat then whispered, "You don't. And all for we know, I could have been a worse person if I never met you." She searched the bard's red eyes. "This is is one Blame Game you're going to lose, Gabrielle." She had her legs propped up, and Gabrielle between them.

The queen swallowed and shifted some until she was better settled against Xena's body. She rested her head on Xena's chest and closed her eyes. "So many have died... first father then mother. Ly too." She shut her eyes tighter. "By the time we're in our thirties there will be nobody left."

Xena dropped her head back onto the tree and tried to control her tears. She blinked them back and whispered, "I'm not going anywhere." She lifted her head then brought her face down close to Gabrielle's head. "I swear it."

"You don't know that either," the bard insisted. She lifted her head and seriously studied her friend. "You could be killed at any of these battles."

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow. "Is that a challenge?"

Gabrielle felt the tears roll down her cheeks at her friend's classic determination against any challenge. She lifted her hand and touched the ruler's cheek. "If I lose you again..." She shook her head and didn't want to finish her thoughts.

"You won't," Xena promised, and a small smile showed. "I'm really hard to get rid of. Haven't you noticed?"

Gabrielle laughed at the joke and a few more tears came down her cheek. "But what if-"

"No, Bri." Xena became serious again.

Gabrielle lost her fight in the debate. She searched Xena's eyes and saw the clear promise there.

Xena leaned forward and placed her hand against the bard's cheek. She hesitated, but she pressed her lips against Gabrielle's in a soft kiss. She used her right hand to hold her body up especially when Gabrielle pushed into her for a deeper kiss.

Gabrielle tangled her hand through Xena's hair. She enjoyed her lips moving across Xena's then finally they both opened their mouths. She whimpered at the feel of Xena's tongue against hers.

The Conqueror came out of the kiss without a breath. She opened her eyes slowly and saw still concerned green eyes above her.

Gabrielle placed her hand back against Xena's cheek. She brushed her thumb across Xena's defined cheekbone. "You promise?" she hoarsely asked.

Xena held her eyes with Gabrielle's. She read the rare need for reassurance from her friend. "I promise you, Gabrielle." She still had her hand against Gabrielle's cheek. She drew the bard back down for another kiss and murmured between it. "I will... not... stop." She came out of the kiss some, and her lips moved across Gabrielle's when she murmured, "Ever." She continued into a third kiss that filled with more emotions than the earlier ones. She then tasted a tinge of salt because Gabrielle had started to cry again.

Gabrielle came out of the last kiss and breathed deeply. She leaned her forehead against Xena's and held onto the ruler tightly.

Xena pushed off the ground more with her hand and sat up better. She felt Gabrielle now seated in her lap and short yet strong legs came around her waist. She wrapped her arms around Gabrielle, and they held each other like they'd done so a long time ago as kids. It still seemed to be a safe and comfortable position for them to assume even today.

After a long silence, Gabrielle lifted her head from Xena's neck. She wiped her eyes clear because she couldn't see that well at first. She focused down on the blue eyes close to hers.

"Come on." Xena lifted her hand and brushed back a stray piece of Gabrielle's hair. "Let's go see to our armies." She and Gabrielle slowly climbed to their feet.

Gabrielle mentally pulled herself together while she and Xena trekked back down the valley. She observed Commander Kaylee conversing with Borias. She approached the pair first, which made them go quiet.

"Borias," Xena started.

The Greek strategos switched his full attention to the Conqueror.

"The formalities shall we." The Conqueror held out her hand to the Amazon Queen. "This is Queen Gabrielle."

Queen Gabrielle stepped forward and extended her arm.

Borias had a confused expression, but he rid of it with a smile. "It's a pleasure, Queen Gabrielle." He shook arms with her then informed, "I have our healers assisting yours. Also we will help have the dead removed."

"They will need to be prepared," the queen agreed. "Thank you." She then glanced over at the line of shackled captives. "What of them?"

The Conqueror turned on her heels some and studied the prisoners. "They're war criminals." She returned her focus to Gabrielle. "They will be tried as such."

Gabrielle decided not to get details especially about Draco.

"And what of the automaton?" Bastien had spoken up finally.

The bard focused on the chiliarchès. "I currently have her in a jail hut. She will remain with my Nation until we can asses what to do with her."

Bastien was glad to hear that it had turned out well. He couldn't imagine how Queen Gabrielle managed to stop the automaton or what she thought she could do to keep the automaton locked up. But he noticed Queen Gabrielle was rather confident so he assumed the situation was handled.

The Conqueror took over the conversation. "I'm going to give Queen Gabrielle a ride back to the Nation." She noted from the corner of her eye that a few Amazons were beside Gabrielle. "Borias, handle things from here. I shouldn't be long."

"Of course." Borias bowed his head slightly.

Queen Gabrielle had been quietly conversing with Eponin, but she finished up now that Xena had brought Argo over. She touched Eponin's arm and quietly insisted, "See that you put her in her hut for now. She should be the first to be prepared."

Eponin nodded, but she reached to her side. She extracted the unique dagger that Gabrielle had dropped earlier. She held it out in her palm.

Gabrielle noticed that the weapons master had cleaned the blade. She picked up the precious dagger and studied the ivy design that twisted down the blade. "Thank you," she murmured.

"I'll bring your staff back," Andra softly promised.

The queen was grateful. She knelt down and sheathed her dagger then added, "Kaylee, find me when you're ready. I'll take care of the village side."

The stratègos watched the queen turn to the Conqueror.

Gabrielle turned to Xena, who was mounted now. Gabrielle climbed into the saddle but this time she was in the front. She like the change too, but she was given the reins.

"You navigate," the Conqueror softly instructed. She kept her hands on her thighs, but she squeezed Argo's sides.

The golden mare started the trek up the hillside. She kept a gentle pace and relaxing sway for the humans.

Gabrielle didn't mind taking the reins. She had her feet out of the stirrups, and she was settled into Xena's warm body. She then noticed once they were in the woods that Xena slipped her arms around her waist. Gabrielle smiled at the gesture.

"We're both going to need a bath," the ruler complained.

"I'm glad for that problem," the bard confided. She leaned her head back against Xena's shoulder. She then had a thought come to her so she grinned. "I'm riding with you... twice now."

The ruler chuckled and lowered her head some. "I knew I'd get you in the saddle with me, one day."

The bard kept up with the joke. "Oh your greatest fantasy come true." She then poked Xena in the side with her elbow. "You have any others from your childhood?"

"A few," the ruler admitted. She paused then taunted, "But they're my little secret."

"Oh come on." Gabrielle had a devilishly look. "If you can't tell me, who can you tell?"

"Argo," Xena quipped.

"The horse?"

Argo huffed and tossed her mane for a moment. She sighed deeply.

"Well then." Gabrielle chuckled and watched Argo's footing through the thick woods. "Come on, Xena."

You tell me yours, and I'll tell you mine."

The Conqueror decided to play along some and whispered, "Alright. You tell me one first then I'll tell you one."

Gabrielle slotted her eyes and read between the lines quickly. "Oh no. I know this trick. You mean, I tell you mine and you don't," she emphasized, "tell me yours." She elbowed the leather stomach behind her. "I know your tricks."

"I could never fool you," Xena taunted.

The bard huffed and freed a hand. She slapped Xena's right knee. "Thanks, smartass." She picked up the reins again. "You tricked me constantly. You were such a brat." She grinned at the memories of them playing, tricking, and roughhousing together. "If it's one thing you taught me it was that I needed to be one step ahead of you."

Xena laughed and tightened her arms around the bard's waist. "I suppose so huh?"

The bard had wistful features, but she softly mentioned, "But you always did protect me." And it was true since the first day they'd met, and it was how they met too. Xena had been protecting Gabrielle.

The Conqueror bowed her head some and murmured, "Always."

Gabrielle sadly smiled. She freed her left hand and covered it over Xena's. She took a moment to consider the outcome of the battle. She couldn't believe all that'd happened within one day, from the good to the bad. She didn't have any numbers yet about who died. It wouldn't be until later that she'd hear from Commander Kaylee about the numbers, status, and overall battle.

The Conqueror could tell her friend was in deep thought. She lowered her head some and whispered, "What is it?"

The bard shook her head and set her thoughts aside. "I'm just realizing how much work there has to be done to repair this."

Xena tilted her head and mentioned, "Today was a good day, Gabrielle." She already could imagine Gabrielle's disdainful expression so she explained her words. "I know you've lost a lot today, but you could have lost so much more. All the dead knew that they traded their lives for the better of their Nation. If Draco had succeeded then today would have been a bad day."

Gabrielle knew her friend was right. She slightly shook her head because it still didn't take away the weight of the deaths. Why couldn't there been another, peaceful way to handle this?

"I could have saved Melosa," Gabrielle murmured, "And I could have saved Faolan. They traded their lives for me. How do I get over that?"

Xena understood how the bard felt because there were many dead hoplites and warriors that traded their lives for her. The hoplite today that'd offered his shield was another example of their willingness to protect her. She tightened her arms around Gabrielle's waist. She knew Gabrielle always looked to her for answers and whether it was because Xena was older, she was never sure.

"I can't answer that question," Xena confessed for the first time. "Maybe because there's nothing I can say to take away that feeling you have. You want to know that what you did was for all the right reasons. But, with that pain in your gut and the weight on your shoulders the best you can come up with was that it was a good day of fighting. I can see all the changes you've made... things I could have

never expected from you, but I should have. As hard as your changes have been, you've got to know that it's all been for a reason."

Gabrielle moved her hand and rested it over Xena's. She squeezed tightly.

"All this," Xena whispered, "All this is for a reason, otherwise, what's the point?" She lifted her head then softly finished, "I was asking that same question after I lost you."

Gabrielle worked down the lump in her throat. She briefly had flashes of the horse chase back in Potidaea when she and her family tried to escape the raiders. She could still hear her own voice cry out Xena's name.

"How do you do it?" the bard horsely questioned. "How do you... do this so often?" She shook her head.

The Conqueror interpreted the question easily. She gently sighed then thought out how she did go to war so constantly. "Sometimes I think it's in my blood." She felt Gabrielle's hand squeeze hers more. "Everybody has a destiny in life, and what they're good at doing will get them there. I have all the right skills to be a warrior and a ruler. And is that fluke?"

The bard considered the question because it reminded her of her talk with Priestess Maired awhile ago. "No, it's not."

Xena did agree too. She considered the original question then confided, "The deaths are not easy no matter who it is. I will take it to Tartarus with me, but when it is my time I know I did all I could to change my polis for the better. I will unify Greece again and protect her from any that bare ill will on her."

Gabrielle rubbed her hand over Xena's for some time. She stopped only because her thoughts about her own Nation ceased. She started to understand how Xena felt, and she could apply that to her Amazon Nation too. Her Nation depended on her to keep it unified and protected no matter her personal costs. On her last day of life, Gabrielle would be able to rest easy knowing she did everything possible to make her Nation strong.

The Conqueror detected some of the tension receded from her friend. She was relieved and decided on a change of topic. "Do you know what you'll do with the automaton?"

The queen wasn't completely sure because she wasn't ready to face Seven personally. "It's hard to say yet how she'll be once she awakens. I'll have to talk to Kaylee first."

Xena considered it then thought about her own plans. She mentioned, "It'll be several days before we march east to the Macedon Kingdom. If there's anything I can do to help with her then let me know."

"Thank you," the bard murmured. She removed her hand from Xena's because just ahead were the gates to the village.

Argo approached the closed gates at a fast walk. She was steered through the large, open door and directed to go to the stables. She was soon stabled and getting a nice feed bag.

The Conqueror and Amazon Queen walked together to the healer's hut. The bard was fairly quiet, but she struck up a conversation. "We have a hot springs bath here that you're welcomed to at anytime." She then peered up at Xena. "If you'd like you can stay in a guest hut. I know a camp may not be setup in time by sunset."

Xena smiled at the offer.

Gabrielle smiled back and tried to entice the ruler further. "Our beds are filled with sheep's wool to make them soft."

Xena felt her smile shift into a grin. "You won me back at the hot springs bath." She then had more of a smirk and teased, "I see you haven't forgotten my disdain for hard beds."

Gabrielle chuckled softly and nodded. "How could I forget? You wouldn't let me whenever we stayed up in the loft and there was no hay or straw." She caught Xena's low chuckle, but she looked at the healer's hut. She noticed there were many Amazons waiting to go inside so she decided she could wait until later.

"My queen," the head healer greeted. She was mixed in the Amazons and was prioritizing who needed to be checked first to last.

"Hello, Etana," the queen replied.

Etana sifted through the Amazons and approached the queen. "You came to be checked over?"

"It can wait until later," Gabrielle refused. She diverted the topic quickly before the healer made any instances. "How are things looking?"

Etana shifted closer and lowered her voice. "We're obviously swamped, but I have every healer here except for..." She stopped herself and shook her head.

Gabrielle touched Etana's arm, and she studied the elderly Amazon. "What is it?"

Etana leaned in closer then replied, "Cliona isn't here."

"Is she okay?" Gabrielle had a fondness for the young Amazon that'd been in a fair share of trouble. She could still recall going to Cliona's mother and telling her that Cliona had been kidnapped. That indeed was a bad day.

"She received word that her mother was killed in the battle," Etana replied. "I told her to retire to her hut for the day."

"Oh gods," the bard murmured. "How was she handling it?"

The healer became gloomy and replied, "She was in shock, my queen. I don't know how..." She shook her head again. She had to chase Cliona out of the hut just because Cliona refused to stop working. "It's hard to say how she'll handle it. Cliona is fairly strong, but she was very close to her mother."

The queen felt that earlier ache return stronger. "I'll stop by and see her."

Etana nodded then glanced at the queen's hidden wounds under all the dirt and grime. "I should check you, my queen."

"I'm fine," the bard insisted. "I'll be back later, and you can poke and prod me then." She grinned at Etana's lack of amusement. "I also want a report on the wounded."

"Of course," the master healer promised. She then watched the queen and Greek ruler walk away.

"Cliona was the Amazon that'd been kidnapped?"

Gabrielle nodded at her friend's question.

The Conqueror sighed, but she stopped once they were far from the healer's hut. "I need to return to my army."

The queen faced the tall ruler. "I understand. I need to take care of things here." She curiously studied Xena's face. "Will you stay tonight? I'll have a hut prepared."

"If it's not much trouble."

Gabrielle sadly smiled. "It won't be." She then faintly grinned and teased, "I'll give you a tour of the bathing hut."

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow but coolly remarked, "I'll count on it." She then walked away after she briefly caught Gabrielle's dumbstruck look. She was quite satisfied with herself.

The Amazon Queen watched the Conqueror make her way back to the stables. She took a deep breath and slowly let it go, but she wouldn't let the day catch up to her yet. She had too much to do before sunset came in a couple of candlemarks.

The first item on her list was to deal with certain somebodies that were locked up in a jail hut. Before coming back to the Nation, Eponin had quickly relayed what she knew about the plot. Gabrielle was partially touched by her friends' dedication, but she was mostly upset because it happened behind her back.

Queen Gabrielle decided to get this over with so she headed through the village. She first went to the jail hut that had the automaton in it. She stepped up to the three guards and asked, "Is she awake?"

"She's still unconscious, my queen," the right guard informed.

The bard considered this then checked, "Has a healer seen to her?"

"No, my queen."

Gabrielle decided it was for the best so she ordered, "Ask Etana to send a healer. Make sure you three stay beside the healer in case she wakes up." She paused then tested, "She is shackled?"

"We have manacled her hands and shackled her leg to the floor," a guard reported.

The bard doubted it'd do much good, but it would at least warn somebody she was free if the chains were snapped. "And you do know where Hercules's hut is located?"

"Yes, my queen." The guard looked at the other two, and they nodded in agreement.

"Good." Gabrielle moved away but paused and mentioned, "Commander Kaylee may be by later. Her, myself, and Master Eponin are the only two allowed in the hut unless I give authorization otherwise."

"What is the authorization code, my queen?"

Gabrielle tilted her head and considered it. She simply replied, "It'll be hippothoe."

The Amazons exchanged looks because they knew that was the ancient Greek word for Amazon. They all moved their heads in agreement.

The bard now strolled off and went to a neighboring hut that was being guarded by only one Amazon.

The guard bowed some then softly greeted, "My queen."

"I'd like to speak with them," Gabrielle informed.

"Of course." The guard pulled off the key from her hip and went to the door. She unlocked it, pulled the door open, and held it for the queen. Once the queen passed, she closed it back up and locked the door.

Three of the Amazons were seated on the bench with their heads down. They each lifted their heads when the newcomer entered. Then three Amazons were spread out in the jail hut, but they faced their queen too.

Gabrielle scanned each face and mentally stated their names; Ephiny, Solari, Jocasta, Adonia, Teresa, and lastly was Dekka. She read their grim features, and she tried to come up with the right words for this situation. She folded her arms and reminded herself she was the queen at this moment, and she couldn't be their friend first.

"Melosa is dead," the queen declared in a strong voice.

Ephiny dropped her head.

Solari climbed to her feet from the bench. "She was killed in battle?"

"No." Gabrielle observed the Amazons then explained, "Draco was taken as a prisoner. He tried to attack me, and Melosa got between us and took his dagger."

"Oh gods," Solari murmured, and she walked away. She stopped beside Teresa and turned around.

"Between Eponin's report and Melosa's last words, I have a fairly good idea what's happened here." Queen Gabrielle looked over the Amazons then continued to speak. "All six of you have been my friends since I came to this Nation." She held Ephiny's gaze. "Some of you more." She hesitated but made herself go forward. "As your friend, I can appreciate what you were attempting to do. Melosa's last command was to save me from what she thought was my death. And she trusted you six to perform such an act against the Nation because she knew how much you care for me."

Gabrielle reached up and removed her mask. She tucked it under her arm and waited until the colorful straw quieted. She kept her voice steady and her features calm. "But as your queen, I can't ignore the fact that you disobeyed my orders. You plotted behind my back and behind the Nation's." She looked over at Solari and Teresa then over at Dekka and finally down at Ephiny, who was beside Jocasta and Adonia. "I cannot let this go unpunished because if I do that then I send the message that any Amazon could do such. I nor the council or Commander Kaylee will not condone disobedience. We cannot tolerate such acts especially during times of war. As a leader, we can't second guess whether our orders will be followed or not." She stopped but stated, "The decisions I make as your queen are for the good of the Nation. You must support me because it is for the good of the Nation. And some times the personal costs are high, but I chose this position... I fought for this position. Just as you did for yours, Amazons."

Ephiny looked over at Solari.

Solari met Ephiny's gaze briefly, but she dropped her eyes.

Gabrielle took a step more into the center of the jail hut. She waited a beat then swore, "I will speak on your behalf to the council, but I'll only speak as your friend. I will try to have your punishment kept minimal because of your intent." She was quiet and saw that her friends were almost saddened by her gesture as if they didn't feel they deserved it. "In the future, I beg you not to do something this radical again. I chose to be queen because it is who I am destined to be. And I'm asking you, my friends... my sisters to help me be the best queen possible. I am not a queen without you."

The Amazon Queen felt like she'd said plenty. So she put on her mask back over her head and went to

the door. She prepared to knock on it but Ephiny's voice stopped her.

"You were our friend first. You will always be our friend first." Ephiny stood up from the bench. She approached the bard, who turned to her. "But we promised to serve this Nation... to serve you." She watched Gabrielle's emotions, but she explained, "Somewhere in there protecting you fits too." She glanced back at her friends then back at Gabrielle. "I know this Nation cannot run without a queen, and you are the most competent queen this Nation has seen in a long time. We are not a Nation without a queen."

Gabrielle shifted closer and softly reminded, "And there is no queen without a Nation." She gently touched Ephiny's cheek. "A queen is easily replaced compared to a Nation that must be born, nurtured, and grown. You know this, Ephiny."

"I do." Ephiny took the queen's hand from her cheek and held it. "And I know... we all know that a bad queen can also ruin a Nation."

"I'm not the only leader of this Nation," Gabrielle softly reminded. "I'm asking you to see that the Nation will go on with or without me. But I can help the Nation continue on a better track no matter my sacrifices. The sacrifices that you have to make for the Nation." She tilted her head and asked, "Why did you choose to take your feather?"

Ephiny knew the answer, and she lowered her head some. She studied her hand in Gabrielle's, and she lifted her head. "To be apart of this family... a way of life." She felt the sting behind her eyes at the reminder of her honor as an Amazon.

"And the costs that we pay to protect this family is nothing in the large scheme of things." The queen squeezed Ephiny's hand tightly. "If we don't do our duties as Amazons then our way of life will be lost."

Ephiny slowly started to nod. She mostly accepted the queen's points, but she still didn't reject the notion that she felt she had to protect Gabrielle.

Queen Gabrielle gazed back at her other friends, who had been listening too. "I wasn't born Amazon like the rest of you." She looked back at Ephiny but her words went to everybody. "But as an outsider, who was a slave I can see why I must do what I can to protect this family. I never want to lose this, and I don't want anybody else to lose this." She let go of Ephiny's hand and tapped on the door.

The guard didn't hesitate to open the door. She held it until the queen left then she sealed it back up. She'd heard much of the queen's speech and felt rather moved. She didn't say anything though.

Queen Gabrielle ran her hands through her messy hair that really needed to get washed. She needed a bath, but it would have to wait until this evening. She glanced back at the jail hut that held the automaton, and she noticed that the guards were gone. She suspected they were actually inside, which meant the healer was there now.

The bard was relieved despite she was still angry about Faolan. There was much of her that wanted to let the automaton rot in pain, but she chided herself for it. She had to be bigger than her anger and set it aside. Right now, she wanted to find Yakut and discuss what could be expected from the automaton now that she had her soul back.

"Queen Gabrielle," the stratègos called. She jogged up to the queen.

Gabrielle met the stratègos halfway. She noted that Kaylee had her shoulder wrapped, which meant that a healer most likely checked her wound. "How does it feel?"

The stratègos understood that Gabrielle meant her shoulder. "The arrow didn't go deep, luckily." She placed her hands on her hips. "I have the dead being wrapped and brought back to the Nation. Have you heard any report on the wounded?"

"I asked Etana to put together a report," Gabrielle replied.

"Good." The stratègos nodded once then switched over to another topic. "What of the automaton?"

Gabrielle sighed and glanced in the direction of the jail huts. "I requested a healer to check her wounds. She was still unconscious."

"Do we have any idea what she'll be like once she awakens?"

The bard shook her head. "I was going to speak to Yakut about it. She may not know at all." She wanted to explain that Seven most likely had a soul of an original Amazon, but she knew Kaylee had little or no knowledge about the legends.

Gabrielle then thought back on something she'd noticed during the battle. She asked, "Why did Seven not kill you?"

"I've been wondering the same thing," the stratègos replied.

The queen thought about this more then made a decision. "I want you to handle her." She slightly narrowed her eyes and explained, "Once you assess what her state is like then I'll speak to her." She then quietly added, "Hopefully I'll be ready to face her by then."

Kaylee touched the queen's good shoulder. "I'm sorry about Faolan."

Gabrielle didn't want to think about her friend's death. She shook her head and sincerely replied, "Thank you." She felt the hand leave her shoulder, but she kept her emotions down. "Will you be able to handle Seven?"

"Of course," the stratègos confidently replied. "I'll keep you up-to-date."

"Thanks, Kaylee." Gabrielle took a step away. "I'll let you know what Yakut has to say."

Kaylee nodded then headed off too. She figured she'd go and see how the healer was making out with the automaton. She came to the jail hut and found it unguarded until the door swung open.

Two guards filed out, a healer, and another guard. The last guard shut the door but didn't lock it because of the stratègos.

Commander Kaylee turned to the healer. "Eilis, how is she?"

Eilis came closer to the stratègos. "It is remarkable that she survived what's happened to her." She shook her head and mentioned, "I've never seen anything like this before."

"I don't believe anybody has, Eilis."

"I agree." Eilis shifted the medical kit in her hands. "The wounds will heal in due course. I will continue to check on her." She then mentioned, "She awoke just as I finished up." She headed off without another word.

Commander Kaylee looked at the guard by the door, and she simply nodded.

The guard opened the door for the stratègos. She was going to follow inside, but a hand at her shoulder

stopped her. "Stratègos, it isn't-"

"I'll be fine," the stratègos promised. She saw the guard relent and closed the door. She focused back on the prisoner, who sat on the wood bench.

The automaton had her head down, but she lifted it at hearing and partially seeing the stratègos. She revealed her slightly red eyes most likely from the hammer blow to the head. Her body was heavily clawed thanks to the white wolf. The remainders of the arrow impacts were hardly apparent now.

Seven coldly regarded the stratègos. "Commander Kaylee... if you come any closer, I'll kill you."

The stratègos raised an eyebrow then coolly stated, "I don't think you will." She was confident but not arrogant. She approached the automaton and visually assessed the wounds.

Seven stood up, which made the chains rattle. She was ridged and cold in her manners. She watched the Amazon with close intent.

"You could break those chains." Commander Kaylee pointed at them. She then walked off to the right and turned. "You can break out of this jail." She put her hands behind her back. "Yet you refuse to do so." She strolled back over and asked, "Why?"

Seven broke her eye contact and turned her head away. "I cannot hear... I cannot hear the others." A brief moment passed where a few emotions showed, but she hid them again.

"The others?" Kaylee tried. She came closer and studied the automaton's profile. "Who are the others?"

Seven looked back at the stratègos. "I am automaton. We follow orders."

Kaylee started to piece it together carefully. She suspected that the others were orders that Seven may be hearing in her head. Perhaps the gods did it to keep a constant control over her. "You don't hear the orders then?"

Seven walked away, but she didn't get far because of the chain on her ankle. She had her back to Kaylee. "I hear nothing but silence." She then clenched her jaw and snapped, "Instead I feel my own thoughts, and I cannot stop them."

Kaylee suspected that Seven meant feelings rather than thoughts. She came over to the automaton. "That's only natural."

Seven sharply turned and grounded out, "For you humans it is. I am automaton."

The stratègos decided to tread in new territory now. "But from the looks of it you were most likely human before being an automaton."

"That is irrelevant," Seven hotly fought. "I am Seven of Nine. I am automaton."

"That is your name?" the stratègos carefully tried. "Seven of Nine?"

"Yes," the automaton answered. She walked away again and put space between them. Her ankle chain dragged across the floor. She quickly turned back and demanded, "What has been done to me? You must fix what has been broken."

Kaylee was careful in her next words. "We already fixed what was broken. I want to help you, but I need to understand what you're going through."

"Do not engage me in superficial attempts at sympathy," Seven coldly remarked.

"It's obvious you're in pain." The stratègos had a concerned look, but she didn't come any closer. "You're frightened... that you feel isolated... alone."

The automaton refused to listen and turned to the stratègos. She came closer and declared, "You are an individual." She came slightly closer and stated, "You are small." She glared at the petite stratègos. "You cannot understand what it is be automaton."

Kaylee partially shook her head and whispered, "No." She paused but held the blue eyes above her. "But I can imagine." She walked behind the automaton. "You had no emotions." She noticed how Seven closed her eyes as if reflecting on the new emotions that'd been awoken. "You just had voices that told you what to do." She walked around Seven and continued to speak. "Do not resist... ignore the pain... follow your orders." She stood back in front of Seven. "The security behind that must be welcoming. Now you've lost that."

Seven brushed past the stratègos and softly spoke, "This automaton is small now." She stopped and lowered her head. "One voice." She hung her head and closed her eyes tightly. "So many emotions. This silence is unacceptable... I need the voices."

Kaylee came over and ignored the anger in Seven's tone. "I can't give you back to the gods, but you're not alone." She now stood beside the automaton. "You're apart of a human community now. We may be individuals, but we live and work together. We have our orders too." She found confused blue eyes on her. "You can have that right here in the Amazon Nation."

Seven was quiet then proclaimed, "Insufficient."

Kaylee wasn't deterred and stayed stoic. "It'll have to do." She then tilted her head and mentioned, "And the fact is this community needs you." She walked away some but mentioned, "The skills and intelligence you poses could help this Nation greatly."

Seven glared at the stratègos and questioned, "And if I refuse?"

Commander Kaylee came over and put her hands behind her back. She tilted her head and used the very words that she suspected Seven often heard in her head. "You must comply."

Seven of Nine stared at Commander Kaylee, and the shock was evident on her face. She back stepped a few times until she sunk down on the bench.

The stratègos said nothing else, went to the door, and rapped on it. She left the automaton alone so Seven could get accustom to having emotions and thoughts now. She would try again later, but she wanted to find out what she could from the queen.

Seven remained motionless against the bench. She then dropped her head and lifted her hands to her face. She repeatedly whispered, "One... One." She shut her eyes tightly in hopes it'd block her rising emotions. "I am One now."

To be continued.