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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 22

Queen Gabrielle tied the sash around her waist so that her robe would stay closed. She combed her hair back then picked up the clean towel and robe from the small table. She was ready to get her bath so she stepped out of the small changing room.

The Conqueror sat in the foray, and she was already prepared for her bath. She had her legs crossed, and her robe had slipped down and revealed her muscular leg. She peered up when the Amazon Queen entered the busy foray. There were many Amazons getting a bath tonight after the battle.

Gabrielle paused and waited until the ruler was at her side.

Xena came close and followed the queen to the large, community bathing pool. She entered the room and the steam instantly absorbed her.

"It's rare I pull my queen strings to get a private bath," the bard comment. She went to the left, yet she glanced over at the busy bathing pool. "But for once I don't mind."

The ruler grinned because she sympathized completely.

"This way." Gabrielle came to a wood door and pushed it open. She was immersed in thick steam, but it cleared rather fast.

The Conqueror scanned the private bathing room and truly looked forward to get cleaned. She rarely had this opportunity unless she was settled in a city or large town.

The queen stopped beside a bench, set her clean robe and towel down, and proceeded to slide her feet out of the sandals.

Xena set down her robe and towel too then pushed off her sandals. She untied her sash slowly but walked over to the steps of the pool. She spotted the dish on the opposite side that held two soaps of different colors. She imagined they were uniquely scented.

Gabrielle had her back slightly to Xena. She was nervous to do this despite she and Xena had bathed as kids. But this was far different, and they'd both changed physically. She was suddenly shy again like this was the first time.

The Conqueror though was never shy and what faint shyness she'd had as a kid was far gone. she slipped out of the robe, which fell and pooled at her feet. She gracefully took the first step and seemed to flow down into the warm water.

Gabrielle had undone her sash. She had her head bowed, and her side was directed towards Xena. She mentally patronized herself and pushed past the minor fears. She pulled off the white robe then set it down on the bench. She came over to the steps, but she didn't meet Xena's obvious gaze. She started to realize that Andra really did have a good point last night.

She also recalled the time seasons ago when she'd taken a bath with Ephiny. She could still feel Ephiny's stare back then. She wasn't sure if Xena's was any different or if the ruler was just curious. Gabrielle finally made it into the steaming water and felt relieved on many levels.

Xena settled against a side. She'd watched Gabrielle and what'd grabbed her attention mostly was the slavery brand. She'd seen that tattoo a few times in the past, but it was different actually seeing it on Gabrielle's hip. She wanted there to be a way to erase it. She realized her and Gabrielle hadn't really discussed Gabrielle's enslavement.

The bard came over and took a seat beside Xena. She sat on a small stone that protruded out from the wall of the pool. It was meant for people to sit on and just relax in the water. "This is amazing."

The ruler lowered her head back and closed her eyes. "I am jealous."

Gabrielle smirked and teased, "It actually beats your mother's hot baths."

The ruler sadly smiled, yet she went along with it anyway. "Just don't tell her." She then traded for another topic. "Find out anything about the automaton?"

The queen sighed and opened her eyes. "I have Kaylee working with her. I'm not quite ready to face her." She pulled her hands out of the water and used them to pushed back her bangs. "Seven doesn't have any previous memory about who she was. Yakut seems to think that's a little odd because she should have gained her memory back now that she's freed."

Xena furrowed her eyebrows and lifted her head up. She looked at Gabrielle. "When you were fighting with her... did she get hit in the head?"

Gabrielle met Xena's curious stare. "Yes, Andra hit her rather hard with her blacksmith's hammer. It didn't seem to bother her."

The Conqueror sighed and explained, "Her steel reinforced head would have taken the brunt of the blow, but I highly doubt all of it."

The bard grew concerned. "I noticed after Andra hit Seven that her eyes started to go red. I imagine that

was from blood."

Xena silently cursed because she now understand what may have happened. "Most likely her brain has been injured. She's lost her memory."

"Is there anything that could help her gain her memory back?"

The ruler had become a healer over her time and one herb came to mind quickly. "Ashwagandha."

Gabrielle had her eyebrows drawn together. She shook her head because she had no clue what Xena meant.

"It's a common herb used in India."

"By the gods," Gabrielle murmured, "there's no way my healers will have something like that."

The Conqueror slightly grinned. "Maybe not, but I carry an ample supply." Her grin widened, and she joked, "I use it when I get hit in the head too many times."

"Funny," the bard muttered. She became more serious. "Will it really help?"

"It's not a miracle herb, but it can help." Xena tilted her head then added, "I can't promise anything. The human brain is tricky. She may be able to heal herself."

"Especially considering she can heal so fast," Gabrielle agreed. "Hopefully we'll be in luck." She then asked, "Can you give it to her tonight?"

"I have some in my saddlebags," the ruler agreed. "I wouldn't mind also inspecting her. I'm curious to how she was altered by the gods."

Gabrielle could tell her friend was naturally curious. She bit her lower lip but revealed, "If you want to see her at any point then tell the guards hippothoe."

Xena appreciated that Gabrielle trusted her with the authorization to go into the jail hut. "Thank you."

The bard softened and a faint smile touched her lips. She leaned back some and relaxed against the the side of the pool. She closed her eyes.

The Conqueror did much the same and stretched out her legs in the water. She was amazed by the fact that she and Gabrielle could sit in a peaceful silence. She could remember a time when she could never get Gabrielle to be quiet for very long. A distant grin show on her lips from the memory of those days.

"You know," the bard started, but she stopped because of Xena's unexpected laugh. She lifted her head and partially glared at her friend. "What?"

Xena's laughs faded away, and she revealed her amused eyes. "I was just thinking about how I use to make you play the Silent Game."

"Please," the bard muttered. "I can be very quiet nowadays."

"I'm sure." Xena had a glow in her eyes, and it was obvious she really didn't believe Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen scowled her friend and wagged a finger at her. "You think you know me. I've changed just as much as you have."

The ruler leaned slightly closer and commented, "And somethings never change, Bri."

"I have changed a lot, thank you." Gabrielle was clearly annoyed. "You're the one that's hardly changed. You're pigheaded, overly competitive, and you still think you're always right."

"Any other compliments you have for me?" Xena jested.

The bard slotted her eyes and shot back, "As a matter of fact..."

Xena suddenly splashed water at the bard and cut her off.

Gabrielle wiped the water away from her face and showed a surprised expression. "Did you just..." She became irritated.

The Conqueror devilishly chuckled, but she moved away from her prey before she became a target. She went across to the other side of the pool and turned around. She showed a smirk and taunted, "Somethings never change."

Gabrielle slipped off her seat then came to the center of the pool. She held Xena's intense gaze, but she warned, "One thing that's going to change is your winning streak."

Xena tensed at those words that most likely meant a pending war. She had her hands under the water, but she was clearly ready. She watched Gabrielle's body language very carefully. Then she saw it just in time.

Gabrielle started the first battle. She furiously splashed her friend with amazing effort.

The Conqueror retaliated instantly, which caused Gabrielle to scream. Her evil laughed echoed in the bathing room.

The bard though was surprised when the splashing stopped in her direction. Once the water settled, she was stunned to realize Xena was gone. "What..." Then it occurred to her all too late, but she felt the tall form looming behind her back. Gabrielle dropped her shoulders and muttered, "Damn it."

Xena gave an evil laugh from behind the bard. She then repeated, "Somethings," she emphasized deeply, "never ever change." She then snared Gabrielle around the waist and towed her underwater.

Gabrielle's yelp briefly sounded then it was gone. Then suddenly her gasp for air was clear once she broke the surface back by the side of the pool. The bard clung to the side of the pool and glowered at the bemused ruler nearby.

Xena casually went over to her sitting spot from earlier and relaxed there. She was quite smug.

The queen held her tongue, but she collected herself then reclaimed her same spot beside Xena. She took a deep breath and relaxed after just being hauled underwater. She grinned some then gently splashed water at the ruler again.

Xena cracked her left eye open and lightly splashed back in warning.

"Okay." Gabrielle held up her hands out of the water. "Truce."

The ruler closed her eye and never lost her grin. "For now."

"For now," Gabrielle agreed.

Xena contently sighed, but after a bit she moved and went to the soaps. "Any preference?" She noted the two washcloths by the dishes.

"There's lilac and a mild olive." The bard shrugged. "I'm not particular."

The ruler decided on the olive for them both. She came back over to Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen noted the faintly green bar. She commented, "We actually make that here from our olive groves. The lilac soap we buy from Aegae."

Xena softly grinned at the explanation. She then offered, "I'll do your hair first." She detected the faint hesitation in the bard. "Come on," she gently urged.

Gabrielle knew she was being silly. She dived into the water just to make sure her hair was plenty wet. She surfaced right in front of Xena and turned around. She soon felt long fingers pulled through her hair, and she was surprised when it turned into more of a head massage. She ended up closing her eyes and finally relaxing.

Xena noticed the change, and she smiled at it. She shifted a little closer but made sure not to let her body pressed into Gabrielle's. She wasn't sure how Gabrielle would react then or even herself for that matter.

"Mmmm," the bard murmured, "it's been a long time for one of these."

The ruler frowned at the statement. She would have expected somebody else to have take this over. Hadn't Gabrielle mentioned that she been with somebody for awhile?

"Xena?"

The Conqueror leaned over the bard some just so she could hear the bard's gentle voice.

Gabrielle sensed Xena closer than earlier, but it didn't bother her in the least. She now felt Xena's hands work down lower to her neck where she still had that cramp from days ago. She imagined Xena planned to work it out of her neck and shoulders.

"You'll go to the Macedon Kingdom next, right?"

"Yes." The ruler tried to decipher what Gabrielle may be trying to figure out. She also remained focused on her task to massage out the knots in the bard's shoulders. "After Macedon we'll head to Thrace."

"When will you begin the march?" Gabrielle kept her voice even. She wasn't really sure what to think yet because there was so much to consider now.

"I should be receiving word soon from my joining army from Athens, Sparta, and Thebes." Xena considered her plans that she'd devised some time ago. "Once they arrive, we'll continue the march." She tilted her head despite she was watching her hands over Gabrielle's shoulders. "I imagine it'll be about five days... give or take."

The queen somewhat nodded. She didn't reveal anything else.

"How does the wound feel?"

Gabrielle opened her eyes and studied the old wound on her shoulder. "It's getting there. I'm starting to feel the strain on my other side," she admitted.

"You were compensating," the ruler concluded.

"I think so." Gabrielle now touched the wound and saw that the heavy, dark scab was somewhat soft

thanks to the water and steam. "It is improving."

The Conqueror remained silent, but she concluded that Gabrielle would now have time to properly heal. After a few more beats, she ended the massage.

Gabrielle dove under the water and worked the soap out of her hair. She came back up a few paces away, yet she faced Xena. "Your turn."

Xena nodded and picked up the wet bar from the tray. She handed it off to her friend then turned around.

The Amazon Queen efficiently washed Xena's hair, and she made sure to make it a rather rigorous massage not just because Xena enjoyed it that way but also to get the grime out. She then gingerly touched Xena's shoulder in hidden signal that she was done.

The ruler sunk into the water and fussed to get the soap out of her hair. Then she and Gabrielle spent a few, quick moments just washing cleaning their bodies with the washcloths and soap.

Gabrielle went around her friend and deposited the soap and cloths back in their home. When she turned around, she ruefully smiled. "I think dinner will be shortly. We should get ready."

Xena slowly arched an eyebrow and nonchalantly inquired, "So, does the Conqueror merit a seat at the head table?"

Gabrielle chuckled and made her way to the stairs. "Perhaps." She could imagine the smirk on Xena's face, and indeed it was true. She went up the steps then quickly collected her towel.

The Conqueror wasn't far behind, and she too lifted her towel from the bench. "Tomorrow will be a day of mourning for the Greek Army."

The bard bowed her head slightly at those words, but she continued to dry herself. "We will be begin the pyres tomorrow." She now slipped into her clean robe and tied the sash. She physically felt much better now that her skin and hair were clean.

Xena set her towel down then put on her robe too. She slowly tied the sash while she spoke. "Let me know if the Nation needs any help."

Gabrielle lightly touched the ruler's arm, and she found curious blue eyes on her. "You've done plenty." She tilted her head. "Besides, this is Amazon tradition."

The ruler faintly nodded. She felt a faint pang in her chest, but she set it aside.

The bard removed her hand and scooped up her towel. "We should get to our huts." She brought the towel over her right shoulder and mussed with her short hair.

Xena grabbed her towels too and mimicked Gabrielle's motions to put on the sandals. She and the bard left the warm room and passed the public bath. They came outside, and Xena promised to see Gabrielle at the dining hut soon.

The sun was had begun to crawl below the western horizon. For a final ending, it streaked the clouds with shades of red and orange until it faded black in the eastern horizon. In the east there were sparkles developing in the black sky.

Across the village in a jail hut, there was an automaton, who lifted her head at hearing the door being unlocked. She held her breath when Commander Kaylee reentered her jail. Seven of Nine admired the

stratègos's bold attempts.

Commander Kaylee stepped into the jail, waited for the door to be relocked, and she remained still. She studied the slumped automaton on the bench. To Kaylee, the automaton did seem broken.

Seven stared back at the stratègos, and she noticed there was a tray of food in the petite woman's hand.

The stratègos cautiously neared, but she went to the empty side of the bench. She set the food down and mentioned, "I know you have to be hungry by now."

Seven lowered her gaze and studied the wood floor. She wasn't hungry despite she most likely needed to eat.

Kaylee took a few steps away, but she wasn't sure what to say let alone do.

"My designation is Seven of Nine," the automaton whispered. She shut her eyes and hotly added, "But the voices are gone. Designations are no longer relevant. I am... One."

The stratègos carefully considered the words then stated, "Yes, you are."

Seven of Nine quickly opened her eyes and angrily declared, "But I cannot function this way... alone." She kept her head down and now pressed her right palm against her pounding forehead.

"You're not alone. I'm going to help you."

The automaton lifted her head finally. The anger was clear in her eyes. "If that's true you won't do this to me. Take me back to my own kind."

Kaylee kept her stern features and stayed calm. "There are no others like you." She then added, "You are with your own kind... humans."

"I don't remember being human." Seven of Nine stood up, and her chains rattled. "I don't remember who I am." She clenched her hands tightly. "I don't know what it is to be human." She moved away from the stratègos and put her hand back against her aching head. Why couldn't the infernal pounding in her head stop?

Kaylee didn't move closer, but she hopefully insisted, "If you give it time you can remember. There's so much you can learn about who you are that you don't know." She took a step closer. "Did you have siblings? Or friends? Who were your parents? What providence you were born in?" She took another step closer. "Where were you educated? What... was your favorite color?"

Seven of Nine was breathing heavily, and she thought about all those questions. She didn't have answers. They became too much for her, and she suddenly lunged for the stratègos. "Irrelevant!"

Commander Kaylee was ready and jumped out of the way so that the chains snagged on the automaton.

"Take me back to the gods!" Seven yelled.

The stratègos didn't believe the demand because otherwise Seven of Nine would have broken free long ago. "I can't do that."

Seven slumped forward and clutched her head with both hands. "It's quiet," she emotionally rasped, "No voices."

Kaylee stood rooted but tall despite her short height. "One voice can be stronger than a thousand voices. Your mind is independent and free now with its own unique identity." Seven began to look up at

her again.

"You are forcing that identity on me," Seven of Nine snapped. "It is not mine."

"Oh yes it is," Kaylee charged back. She carefully neared the automaton. "We're just giving you back what was stolen from you. The existence you were denied and that life is now yours to live, again."

"I don't want that life," Seven painfully argued. She was still slumped forward and peered up into silver-blue eyes.

Kaylee leaned over the automaton and declared, "It's what you are. Don't resist it."

"No!" Seven came at Kaylee again and swung a worthless punch. She completely missed because the stratègos dodged the swing, and Seven lost her balance.

Kaylee reacted quickly and caught the falling automaton. She then pushed them both towards the bench and managed Seven onto the bench. She sat behind the automaton.

Seven of Nine placed her hands on the bench to keep herself up, but she was bent forward. She was breathing heavy, and the insanity in her head was too much.

Kaylee said nothing, but she gingerly placed her hands on the automaton's broad shoulders.

Seven closed her eyes then warmth on her shoulders shattered her ramped thoughts. She slowly gained control over her breathing. Something in her finally reconciled the fact that there was no going back now.

Kaylee rubbed Seven's shoulders some, then she tilted her head.

Seven of Nine raised her head up and opened her eyes slowly. The thoughts were almost clear in her eyes. She seemed to realize a cold fact about herself, and she murmured, "I have killed so many." She seemed to be gaining control of herself finally.

"You had no control over that," Kaylee reminded. She dropped her hands once Seven of Nine straightened up.

The automaton turned on the bench so that her back was against the wall. She didn't look at the stratègos. She stared down at her hands. There were steel veins that sat on top of her skin because it'd been one of the many locations where the liquid steel had been injected into her body.

Commander Kaylee tilted her head back and waited. She then found soft blue eyes that swirled with emotions.

"I am a monster."

Kaylee lifted her hand and gingerly brushed her fingertips against Seven of Nine's defined cheek. She sighed when Seven of Nine turned her head away so that their contact was broken. She didn't let it go and instead hooked the automaton's chin and turned her head back. "The gods are the monsters." She sadly smile when she stated, "But you're free from them, and you have a chance to live again."

"I do not know how to live," the automaton softly admitted.

"You're already doing it." Kaylee's smile lost the sadness. "And I'll show you the rest." She could tell that Seven of Nine had no more words, but she felt that the automaton may have believed her. She hoped over time she could prove it to Seven of Nine. She finally relinquished her touch. "You should

eat and rest."

Seven of Nine watched the stratègos stand up. She glanced at the food, which had quite an assortment.

"I wasn't sure what you may or may not like." Commander Kaylee rested her hands on her hips in usual fashion. "I will be back later this evening." She needed to get to dinner herself, but she knew she was already late. "Perhaps we can talk more then."

Seven could tell the stratègos expected a response so she bowed her head some. "Acceptable." She then watched the stratègos leave the hut. She waited until the stratègos was gone then investigated the food tray. She carefully tried each item and was fairly pleased by the tastes. She could recall that the food Draco offered wasn't nearly as good.

And Commander Kaylee was true to her word. She returned a few candlemarks later, but this time she had company. Seven jumped to her feet upon seeing the famous Conqueror in her cell. Seven stood ridged and stared coldly at the ruler.

Kaylee knew she needed to settle things between them. She carefully explained, "The Conqueror wants to help."

The automaton wearily eyed the dark ruler.

The Conqueror stood slightly behind the stratègos. She wasn't in her normal leathers and armor because they had to be cleaned. Instead she wore her brown leathers that were similar to her black ones, but they weren't as flashy. She then had on swirling bronze armor that glowed in the torchlight from around the cell. Her sword was at her back, chakram hooked to her side, her greaves and gauntlets matched, and she wore no cape.

Kaylee came closer to Seven. She glanced at the tray, which she happily noted was empty of any food. She peered back up at Seven. "Our shaman, Yakut, she says that you should have regained your memory after being freed from the gods."

"But I have not," Seven of Nine replied.

The stratègos nodded then continued to speak. "We believe that the blow you took to your head from the blacksmith's hammer has caused you to lose your memory. We're hoping it's just temporary." She then held out her left hand to Xena. "The Conqueror wants to look over you and give you something that may help you regain your memory."

Seven of Nine's eyes flickered between the stratègos and ruler. She may have not fully trusted the Conqueror, but she did trust Kaylee. She finally nodded her agreement.

"Sit down," the Conqueror instructed. She approached the automaton, who reclaimed her seat. "Kaylee, can you get a torch?"

The stratègos went to a corner of the cell and freed a lit torch from its ring. She came back over.

Xena had a full waterskin in her left hand, which she set on the bench next to Seven. "I need you to tilt your head back and keep your eyes open wide." She slightly bent over the seated automaton.

Seven of Nine dropped her head back as told and opened her eyes wider.

"Closer," Xena instructed to the stratègos. She placed her fingertips against Seven of Nine's chin, and she carefully inspected Seven's eyes. She clearly picked out the redness around blue eyes. She turned Seven's head to the right and ordered, "Look to the left." She waited a beat. "Now the right."

Seven of Nine did as she was told again.

The ruler turned Seven of Nine's head the other way and repeated the same directions. She couldn't imagine how the automaton could see when there was that much blood in her eyes. She sighed and dropped her hand. "What side of your head were you hit on?"

"My left."

Xena raised her right hand and gingerly felt around Seven of Nine's skull. She was amazed that there wasn't any fracture or dent, but Seven's skull was fine. She now took a step back next to Kaylee's side. "Do you have a headache?"

"Headache?" the automaton echoed; the confusion in her question.

"Does your head hurt," Kaylee clarified.

Now it made sense to Seven of Nine, and she muttered, "Hemicrania." She focused back on the pair. "Yes, I have a... headache."

The Conqueror faintly raised her right eyebrow at the old Greek word for headache. She wouldn't have guessed that the automaton knew Ancient Greek. She shifted and picked up the waterskin. "I have two herbs in here that'll help settle your headache and hopefully speed your memory back up." She held it out to the automaton. "I suggest you do not drink it too fast.. only in moderation. The side effects can be ugly if you're not careful."

Seven of Nine hesitated, but she accepted the waterskin. "How much shall I consume?"

"No more than a quarter a day," Xena replied. "And trust me, you'll barely be able to get it down." She folded her arms and smirked. "It has a foul taste."

The automaton was naturally curious so she uncorked the skin. She was immediately hit by the noxious smell. "I concur." She hastily recorked it.

The Conqueror decided that was plenty for tonight. She would try later to inspect Seven's body. She glanced at the stratègos then back at Seven of Nine. "I will return tomorrow to check on you." She went to the door and banged on it.

Commander Kaylee took a moment to replace the torch, and she saw that the Conqueror was gone. She decided to take a seat beside the automaton. "You ate well."

Seven of Nine looked at the empty tray then replied, "I require a lot of nutritional substance to properly operate."

"I can see." Commander Kaylee had a glow in her eyes because she was amused. "I'm glad you ate." She became more serious though. "Tomorrow morning we're going to take you to the bathing hut so you can get cleaned up."

"Must I remain in here?" Seven of Nine tried.

"For now," Kaylee replied. "I cannot release you from the jail until the queen authorizes it." She tilted her head and didn't care to explain that the queen had to speak to the council too.

"Queen Gabrielle will not allow it then." Seven of Nine already saw her sentence.

"You don't know our queen very well." The stratègos offered a faint smile. "She's a very forgiving and

understanding individual."

The automaton wasn't so sure, and she shook her head.

Commander Kaylee knew she couldn't convince Seven of Nine and that the queen would just have to do it. She stood up. "The guards will take care of your personal needs. You just need to tell them." She then reached into her left gauntlet. "In the mean time..."

Seven of Nine was surprised to see a key flash in the stratègos's hand.

"You won't be able to sleep very well in those chains." Commander Kaylee knelt down and reached for Seven's chained hands. She inserted the key into the hole and easily popped the lock. She let them fall to the floor then leaned forward more to get the ankle chain. She tossed it aside, picked up the manacles, and stood up.

Seven of Nine rubbed her wrists and was grateful they were gone. She realized that the stratègos was trusting her too. "Thank... thank you."

"You're welcome." Commander Kaylee picked up the tray, and went to the door. She knocked on it with her freehand. She looked back at Seven and politely called, "Goodnight, Seven of Nine."

The automaton saw the door open now. "Goodnight, stratègos." She watched the older woman leave and the door shut again. She looked at the waterskin next to her and debated whether to consume any of the disgusting liquid. And would it really help anyway? She gave in, uncorked it, and tilted her head back with the waterskin lifting to her lips.

Meanwhile, Queen Gabrielle was making her way across the village. She'd just finished visiting with Cliona and seeing how she was doing after her mother's death. Gabrielle could tell the young apprentice was very stricken, and it would take some time. She and Cliona were able to pass understanding since they both lost loved ones to the battle.

The queen now approached her hut that softly glowed in the torchlight. Previously she'd considered going to see Xena, but she was just too weary tonight. She stopped at the hut's thatch door and became hallow of emotions because she was about to enter the empty hut without Faolan. She glanced off to the right but her faithful companion wasn't there. She willed her erratic feelings to stay at bay so that she could somewhat sleep tonight.

"My queen," called an aged but strong voice.

The bard turned on her heels and twisted her head around at hearing the familiar voice. "Kalonice," she surprisingly greeted.

Kalonice, the former stratègos, neared the young queen. "I must have a word with you." She stopped a step away from the queen. "I know it's late but there is something we must discuss."

Gabrielle scanned over the elder Amazon's worn, bruised, and cut features from today's battle. "Come inside." She pushed open the door and became somewhat grateful for Kalonice's distraction tonight. "Take a seat while I get a fire started."

Kalonice went to the desk, which had a few candles already lit up thanks to patrol. She picked up a candle and lit a few more candles in the hut so that it would help.

Gabrielle was an expert at stoking and lightening her fireplace. She had it done in a matter of moments and came over to the seated elder. She picked up the back of an empty chair by her desk and faced it

towards Kalonice. She then sat.

Kalonice crossed her legs at her ankles and started. "I'm sorry it's late, my queen."

"Kalonice, you know to go by my first name," the bard curtly reminded. She always took it as somebody being in trouble if they overly used her title in private settings.

Kalonice inclined her head some and put her thoughts together. She captured the queen's gaze again once she lifted her head. "I know about Melosa." She noted the queen's curious stare. "It's actually my fault that this has happened."

"How so?"

The former stratègos softly sighed and shook her head. "Narkissa confided in me about Gaia's prophecy... that you could be killed by the automaton."

The bard had a confused look and questioned, "How did Narkissa know of the prophecy?" Despite that Narkissa was a retired priestess it didn't explain how Narkissa knew about it. As far as Gabrielle was concerned, she believed she was the only one that had spoken to Gaia about it. Perhaps it wasn't all just a hallucination.

"Artemis and Narkissa still speak," Kalonice explained. "I believe her daughter, Priestess Maired, also spoke about it too." She hesitated and shook her head. "Narkissa confided in me about what she'd learned."

Gabrielle heard from the rumor mill that since Kalonice left her position as stratègos and Narkissa resigned as priestess that the two were now seeing each other. It seemed that the aged moons of the seeming scraps between the two was what attracted them. The bard set aside her thoughts and chewed on her bottom lip. She stated, "You went to Melosa then."

"Yes," Kalonice admitted. "I was fearful about what could happen to you... so was Melosa." She had worked beside Melosa for many moons so she, like Melosa, had worked hard to mold Gabrielle into this Amazon of today. "She only meant well... she always has, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle bowed her head and murmured, "She never showed it, Kalonice."

The elder leaned forward and grasped the bard's bruised knee. "She did in her own way, Gabrielle." She found sorrow filled eyes upon her. "Melosa's ways were hard because she believed in tough love." She tilted her head. "Melosa saw so much of Terreis in you... you were Terreis to her again. Melosa was never hard on Terreis, and she felt that was what led to Terreis's death. She thought if she'd pushed Terreis harder in her training then she would have been better prepared for that surprise attack."

"Nobody had anyway of knowing about that," Gabrielle sharply reminded.

"No," Kalonice agreed. She pulled her hand away but stayed slightly bent forward. "But Melosa has never been the most reasonable person in her thinking." She sadly sighed but kept talking. "Melosa wanted to give you what she didn't give to Terreis. She knew you'd be an amazing queen someday, but she feared you wouldn't succeed if you didn't have the right strength."

Gabrielle started to make sense of much of it. She could recall some of the harsh tests and examples that Melosa put her through during her training as princess. Gabrielle's emotions often rejected them, but she understood the logic behind them too. Overtime, Gabrielle's emotions and logic began to balance out, and Melosa had been receptive.

"We knew, Gabrielle," Kalonice spoke up after a brief silence. Those curious green orbs were on her again so she explained, "We knew you were a slave before you joined the Nation."

The bard stiffened at the news. "H-h-how?"

The former stratègos slightly smirked and answered, "We check into any outsider's background." She became more serious. "Not all the Nations do it because of limit resources or the policy just hasn't been approved. But not long before you came to the Nation, the council and queen had approved of the policy." She noted the bard's distraught look. "It's on a need to know basis... only the stratègos, council, and queen know about this policy and what information we find out about an outsider."

"Gods," the shocked queen muttered. She had no clue about it.

"After Melosa learned that you were a slave, she realized she had a lot of work to perform. She wanted to override your slave training." Kalonice now sat back in her chair. "She would have never told you this, but she was proud of your growth and development over the moons." She paused but clearly added, "She told me in private a few times."

Gabrielle sunk back in her chair. She couldn't believe all that the retired stratègos was telling her. It was almost like Melosa was two people in one to her. With her right hand, she tried wiping away her dumbfounded expression. She focused back on Kalonice. "Melosa risked treason and conspiracy just to keep me alive?"

"Yes." Kalonice folded her hands in her lap. "You are the Nation's future... and you are a bright future, Gabrielle." She tilted her head and declared, "Even Melosa acknowledged that because you proved it to her over and over."

The bard's emotions bubbled to the top. "Gods... I... before she died, I was so angry at her for betraying me." She dropped her eyes to the floor. "Why could she not have told me how she really felt?"

Kalonice shook her head. "You know now about the policy for giving out praises, Gabrielle."

"Yes but that is during training for one's mask," the queen slightly snapped. After she'd earned her mask, she'd learned that it was customary for an Amazon to not give a training Amazon any praises because it may have made a training Amazon's confidence boost without true merit. Once Gabrielle claimed her mask, she then was reward by praises and congratulations for working so hard to obtain her mask.

"And Melosa chose to be that way with you," Kalonice explained. "She had to keep training you, Gabrielle. She was your queen first and foremost therefor she had to act as such. Even after you took the queen's mask, she continued to challenge you and train you. She expected the best from you, and if you couldn't deliver then you weren't meant to be queen." She sadly smiled now and stated, "Happily you are meant to be."

Gabrielle felt her heart fall at the former stratègos's words. She bent forward and leaned her elbows on her knees. She shut her eyes and muttered, "I spent so many of my first moons just cursing Melosa. I could not understand why she treated me so harshly. My first days... they were such a struggle with her. I did not think I would survive them."

"But you did, Gabrielle." The elder Amazon leaned forward and rested a gentle hand on the bard's wounded shoulder. "Those first moons were meant to make or break you, and they made you. After that, Melosa saw nothing but hope in you."

Gabrielle kept her head hung. She swallowed back aged emotions from those days. She could still

recall restlessly falling asleep in her bed, and her pillow being soaked from tears. She'd never felt a greater pressure since her days in Hecht's slave compound.

Kalonice moved her hand and placed her fingertips under the young queen's chin. She lifted Gabrielle's head until she had those fuzzy green eyes on her. "Gabrielle, you fulfilled and succeeded Melosa's expectations. She has been and is very proud of you." She studied the bard's mixed emotions.

Gabrielle shut her eyes, but the tears still came. "I wish... I had known, Kalonice." She opened her reddening eyes. "At times I wanted to hate her for her treatment." She shook her head. "And now I understand she was trying hard to prepare me." She shut her eyes and muttered, "How can I now tell her how sorry I am? How can I tell her I understand now? Or that I'm grateful."

Kalonice felt deeply for the queen. She brushed her hand over so that her palm rested against Gabrielle's heated cheek. "She knows, Gabrielle. The dead can hear our thoughts... you just told her."

Gabrielle took the elder's large hand from her cheek. She held Kalonice's hand in hers, and she stared down at Kalonice's hand in hers. She sniffed and swallowed again. "I always looked up to Melosa despite everything." She lifted up her head. "She taught me so much, Kalonice. I never thought I would have the strength to be queen... but she showed me I did have it within me."

Kalonice ruefully smiled at the statement. "Melosa was much like you when she was at your age. She was bubbly... chatty.... I remember how she was after she was birthed. Her mother had a time with her but after her mother's murder... it... changed her forever." She sadly sighed and whispered, "Terreis's death was... worsened it. I think the only reason Melosa never stepped into complete darkness was because of you."

Gabrielle didn't understand how she could have done that for Melosa.

"She saw a lot of hope in you, Gabrielle... she saw herself in you. She saw the better queen she could have been." Kalonice released the bard's hands and patted the muscular thigh under her hand. She withdrew and stood up. "You should rest, my queen." She waited until the queen stood then carefully offered, "I am sorry for what's happened, Gabrielle."

The bard slightly lowered her head and considered what Kalonice had told her tonight.

"Your friends in the jail hut were doing what they believed was best for their friend." Kalonice started to the door slowly. "That is why Melosa asked them to help. She knew she could trust them to safely get you away from the danger if things looked like they would go sour."

"I know," Gabrielle softly spoke. She grabbed the door's wood handle, but she paused. "Thank you for coming to me, Kalonice."

The former stratègos didn't feel great about what'd happened. "I pray there's something that the queen can do to help them."

Gabrielle opened the door but stopped about halfway. "Not the queen, but their friend can do something."

Kalonice faintly smile but her eyes held sadness in them. She could appreciate that Gabrielle was trying to balance a dual role as both queen and friend. "Goodnight, Gabrielle." She headed out the now open door and entered the brisk air outside without a cloak or duster.

The queen briefly watched the elder Amazon leave, then she shut the door. She turned and faced the quiet space of her hut, and she suddenly felt very alone. She lifted her hand and pulled her bangs back

but held them. She tried to recall what her life was like before Faolan was in it, and that's when she felt her heart break.

Gabrielle took very slow steps into her empty hut and went over to the foot of her bed. She seemed so mechanically as she turned, sunk to the floor, leaned back against the bed's foot board, and lifelessly stared at the fireplace. She use to do this many nights with Faolan beside her, and she'd stroke his fur for candlemarks on end while she thought and relaxed. Tonight though it was different, so very different.

Gradually the bard pulled up her legs and pressed her bruised knees against her chest. She wrapped her arms over her legs and ignored the painful strain across her wounded shoulder. She then lowered her chin onto her knees and continued to stare at the dancing flames several paces away. Then eventually her cheeks glistened from moisture tracks. Gabrielle shut her eyes.

The repeated knock came at the door, and they were gentle. So gentle that Gabrielle didn't even notice it. Then they echoed again in the hut yet slightly louder this time. And Gabrielle came out of her dark thoughts with her eyes hastily opening. She quickly got to her feet and her boots scuffed across the floor. She soon had the door open again.

There in the dim, cold outside was the tall and muscular form of the Conqueror. Her blue eyes were sharp in the darkness, and they seem to instantly absorb what was wrong. The corner of the Conqueror's lip pulled with a frown.

"Can I come in?"

Gabrielle merely nodded, stepped aside, and pulled the door wider for her childhood friend. She then shut the door but momentarily stood facing the thatch door. She eventually dropped her hand from the handle and turned around to Xena.

The Conqueror untied the cloak's string from across her throat. She removed it then tossed it neatly onto the back of nearest chair by the desk. She approached the quiet bard and already knew what she needed to do.

Gabrielle still said nothing as her friend came closer. She lifted her head and studied the concerned blue orbs that gazed back at her. She finally took a step towards Xena.

The Conqueror responded in time by opening her arms. She pulled the small body against her larger frame. She snaked her arms tightly across Gabrielle's back and held her close.

The bard was surrounded by the mix of leather, metal, and olive. She was chilled by the cool bronze armor but also warmed by Xena's body. Gabrielle rested the side of her head on Xena's familiar chest and tried to gain her composure.

Xena bowed her head down to Gabrielle's and whispered, "Is there anything I can do?"

Gabrielle swallowed and hoarsely replied, "You already have." She felt Xena's arms tighten slightly more then Xena's cheek met the top of her head. She shut her eyes and remained in Xena's embrace because it returned some peace to her that she hadn't felt since she was a child. How did Xena always manage to have the right, exact timing for such moments like this? Gabrielle had yet to ever understand that secret, but she knew she was very grateful for it.

To be continued.