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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 23**

Gabrielle faintly shifted, but she was already very comfortable and warm. She then sensed her bedmate stirring too so she softly asked, "How did you sleep?"

"Good." The Conqueror stilled now yet adjusted her arms around Gabrielle's body. She was on her side too, and Gabrielle's back was snuggled into her front. "How'd you sleep?"

The bard was somewhat amazed because she felt more fitful than yesterday. She knew she'd been tired, but she didn't realize it until she laid down in the bed last night with Xena. As soon as her body sunk into the bed, she was gone. The previous day without sleep had caught up to her. She came back to the present though.

"Pretty good actually."

"Mmmm." Xena subconsciously rubbed her thumb across one of Gabrielle's ribs that she felt under the skin. It was a very old habit of hers that she use to do when they laid in bed together.

"What time you think it is?"

"Close to dawn," the ruler offered.

Gabrielle bit back a yawn and tugged the heavy, wool stuffed blanket back over her shoulder. "Another

candlemark at least."

Xena smirked at the bard's consistent habit to sleep in late. "Somethings-"

"Hush," the bard cut off. She grinned at Xena's low chuckle. "Admit it... you prefer this bed over the bed back in your tent."

"Hmmm." Xena didn't argue it or agree to it. She instead hid her face in Gabrielle's soft hair and closed her eyes.

The queen was content that she had won that little battle. She shut her eyes also and contently sighed. "Thank you... for last night."

"I was worried," Xena softly confided.

"I know." Gabrielle shifted her freehand under the blanket and covered it over Xena's down on her stomach. "I wanted to come over but I... I guess I chickened out."

"Why?"

The bard traced her fingertips over Xena's knuckles while she thought out the question. She grumbled but honestly answered, "I just didn't want to bother you with it."

"Since when has it ever been a bother to me?" the ruler debated.

Gabrielle sadly sighed, and she closed her hand overtop of Xena's much larger hand. "We're different now, Xena... I can't be sure about anything between us."

The Conqueror shifted her head some and drew back. "Did you think I lied back when we were kids, and I promised you I'd always be there for you?"

Gabrielle couldn't quite face her friend so she kept her position. She bit her lower lip and slowly opened her eyes. "You didn't lie then... I know that. But today we're not those kids, Xena." She finally rolled onto her back and studied Xena's slightly defensive features. "We're not... together like we were then. I can't lie to myself and just think it's all the same again because it's not." She searched her friend's eyes and whispered, "You know I'm right about this."

Xena lost the focus because she was carefully thinking. She came back and softly stated, "It will take some time." She now studied the bard's ruefully features. "It won't be the same... you're right." She then arched an eyebrow. "But some of it will still be the same."

Gabrielle couldn't predict what would be the same, different, and evolving between them. She didn't like it because where it'd been a sure thing in her past, it was now shaky.

Xena sat up but on her side so that she loomed over the bard. "I will always protect you," Xena definitely promised. "And I will always be there no matter what's happening between us."

Gabrielle clenched her jaw tightly because of the promises. She knew Xena's word was the most solid compared to anything else. She reached over with her right hand and grabbed Xena's hand on her stomach. She held it tightly and promised, "I swear I won't ever stop believing in you, Xena." She rarely promised anything in her life because she believed promises were too fragile.

"You did already," Xena painfully reminded.

"I did, almost," the bard sadly admitted, "and that's where I went wrong." She squeezed Xena's hand tighter. "I won't make that mistake again... not with you."

Xena felt the truth behind her friend's words. She didn't expect Gabrielle to be perfect all of the time, and it was Gabrielle's faults that made Xena smile often. After reading Gabrielle's honesty, she felt her deep wound stop its bleeding and something became settled between them.

Gabrielle decided to be bold, and she sat up just enough. She held up her body weight with her right hand while she freed her left. She placed her palm against Xena's cheek. She didn't think once and leaned in until her lips met Xena's.

Xena melted into the tender kiss, which was unusual for her. She'd received and given countless passionate, dominate kisses, yet she never found anything in the gentler kisses until now. She softly moaned at the instant contact of her tongue against Gabrielle's.

The bard started to lay back down, and she drew Xena with her. She felt assured about her move because Xena shifted over her body. The first kiss dissolved into a second one that grew from heated passion. Gabrielle couldn't deny the rise in her body or the unusual need she felt for Xena's touch.

The Conqueror pulled out of the second kiss with sheer strain. She had her hands pressed into the bed on either side of Gabrielle's head. She had dark blue eyes, and she glowed from desire. She breathed deeply and huskily stated, "We have to get up." She needed an excuse and quickly. "My army will be needing me."

Gabrielle decided it was best not to fight it. She brushed her knuckles across the ruler's chin. "I know." She would have to try a talk later. "Come on."

Xena was silently thankful, and she moved away. She and Gabrielle climbed out of the bed.

Together they each went about getting ready for today, and they hardly passed any words. After they were ready, Gabrielle and Xena left the hut and parted ways. While Gabrielle made her way through the still quiet village, she gazed off in the direction of the jail huts. She sent silent prayers to her friends, and she hoped that the automaton was finding her way with Kaylee's help. She wondered just how well the automaton was doing now.

In a jail hut, Seven of Nine experimentally opened her eyes because of the metal screech of the jail's heavy door. She was seated on the bench, back against the wall, and the dull ache in her body was quite apparent for once. She had remained in this position for several candlemarks and tried to collect sleep. Now the sun's morning rays were streaming through the door's window and crept closer to her muddy boots.

But there in the doorway stood the stratègos, and she was accompanied by two guards. The stratègos signaled for the guards to stay put, and she approached the automaton. She stopped a few steps away from Seven of Nine.

"Good morning," Kaylee carefully tried.

Seven of Nine regarded the proud stratègos for a moment. She then stated, "It is early."

"Yes." Commander Kaylee rested her hands on her hips and tilted her head to one side. "I want to take you to the bathing hut early."

The automaton suspected it was because the stratègos didn't want her to encounter other Amazons. In the dawn candlemarks it would be easier to take Seven of Nine and keep better security. She slightly straightened up and assumed a more strict position.

"So," Kaylee continued, "shall we?"

Seven of Nine slowly climbed to her feet and filled her full, impressive height. She glanced at the guards, who had grown slightly tense. But she noted that Commander Kaylee was far from being concerned.

"Follow me," the stratègos ordered. She spun on her heels and marched out of the hut. She barked at the guards to exit the hut, she followed, and Seven of Nine was last. She stepped aside and waited until Seven of Nine come out and was circled by the six guards.

Seven of Nine debated whether to be insulted or complimented by the six guards. She set it aside and instead found it curious when the stratègos took her side in the circle. She remained quiet and followed the way to the bathing hut. During the brief journey, she had a chance to survey pieces of the Nation, and she was secretly impressed as well as curious.

Kaylee occasionally glanced up at the automaton, and despite Seven of Nine's stone features, she could sense the automaton's quipped interests. She made a mental note to later give the automaton a tour if everything went well with this bathing expedition this morning.

The party shortly reached the bathing hut, which was indeed empty upon the stratègos's orders. A guard opened the door and allowed for everybody to pass then she followed too. She came up behind them as they entered the large bathing room that was considered the community bathing pool. But the automaton was taken into a small bathing room just for precaution reasons.

The six guards lined the pool but the stratègos took the automaton to the single bench. She indicted the stacked items on the bench. There she pointed out the new, clean leathers that the stratègos hoped would fit the lanky automaton. Also there was a towel and a pair of new boots that matched the outfit.

"We will have your regular leathers cleaned and returned to you," Kaylee promised.

The automaton hesitated but stated, "I do not wish for them back."

The stratègos peered up into cool blue eyes, and she slowly nodded. "Alright." She then stepped away and informed, "The guards will return you to the hut after you're finished."

Seven of Nine moved her head in understanding then briefly watched the stratègos leave. She realized she felt slightly uneasy without the stratègos here. She'd grown accustom to the brazen woman being around her, but she was now left with these six babysitters.

The automaton turned her back fully to the guards and easily began to strip away her blood dried leathers. She could feel how much she needed to get clean, and she realized she was appreciative of the fact that she could bathe. Once she was bare, she could sense six pair of eyes on her back, but it did not bother her.

Seven of Nine set her leathers aside on the bench, and she removed one piece of jewelery, which was a plain, silver armband. She wasn't sure where it came from but only that she'd had it for some time. She then turned and only found that the guards had quickly diverted their attention to the cracks in the stone floor.

Her muscular body was a living contrast. She had smooth, tanned skin that was accented by steel skin that were remnants of her alteration. The liquid steel had been injected into her body through various locations and as a result some of the steel had oozed back out and cooled over her skin. The steel was very much apart of her anatomy and the removal of it would only harm her.

Seven of Nine descended into the warm water that instantly greeted her. She actually felt it ease some of her own tension that she was never aware of until now. She was still weary from dealing with her recent onslaught of emotions and free thoughts. She could barely organize them at first but the silence in the jail hut had allowed her time to adapt to them. She was an extremely fast learner.

She decided not to overly embellish herself with the bath. Soon enough she had an olive soap bar and proceeded to scrub away at the grime. Last was her long, thick hair that had slightly darken from dirt and blood, but after she the wash it returned to its sunny, golden hue. She worked out much of the water from her long hair then made the escape from the warm pool.

Again the guards cautiously studied the automaton's backside. Earlier they'd watched from the corner of their eyes but nobody was daring enough to look directly at the strange woman. They were quite intrigued by her altered body, but they weren't brave enough to entice her anger if she became uncomfortable from their stares.

Seven of Nine had finished toweling off. Then she finally had a closer look at the new leathers, which were rather different than her prior set. She slowly lifted her right eyebrow into a perfect arch. But she picked up the long, leather pants that were midnight black. She slipped into them, and they were snug against her muscular legs but looser at the ankles.

The pants were almost all black except that on the inner thighs they were a sharp red. The waist was cut short and small leather strings that laced up the front and had to be tied. Next came the top, which was in a vest design with only thin straps over the shoulders, and it too was mostly black but for the sides. Again the same red leather was sown into the side to make the entire outfit quite striking.

Seven of Nine at first wasn't sure what to make of the new attire. She disregarded it really because it shouldn't matter to her anyway. Yet for a single moment, she studied her new attire and had a hidden grin under her stone features. But she sat down and proceeded to get her new boots on and laced them up. Once the black boots were tied, she pulled the leather pants over top of them.

The six guards focused on the prisoner after she stood up. They were surprised by how different the new clothes made the automaton look. They then curiously watched her reacquire the arm bracelet.

Seven of Nine slipped the bracelet up her right arm until it became snug above her bicep. She gingerly squeezed it just to make sure it wouldn't loosen. She then just needed her steel pin to hold her hair into place. She went back to her old leathers and found the pin tucked away in its hidden spot. She efficiently pulled back her hair, twisted it, and pulled it up into a bun then pinned it into place.

The head guard stepped forward once she felt that the automaton was ready. She stated, "We'll return to the jail hut."

Seven of Nine bowed her head in agreement then followed out of the bathing hut. She hadn't thought the bath would help her, but she felt like so much more was washed away from her than just the blood, grime, and dirt.

The six guards returned the prisoner to her hut. Once the automaton was inside, three of the guards left the jail hut and went to the stratègos's office hut. One of them knocked on the door, and they were called to enter.

Commander Kaylee was busy writing a report on yesterday's battle. She finished her sentence then set the quill into the bronze inkwell. She lifted her eyes to the three Amazons in her office. "How did it go?"

"Well, stratègos," an Amazon reported. "She didn't cause any problems."

"Excellent." Commander Kaylee leaned back in her chair. "Did the leathers and boots fit her?"

"Yes," the same Amazon replied.

The stratègos nodded. "Thank you. Be sure to return to patrol duty... I know you only have a candlemark left but..."

"Of course, stratègos." The Amazon bowed and so did her comrades. She then filed out of the hut with the others.

Kaylee was prepared to return to her report, but a new knock at her door stopped her. "Come in," she called. She was pleased to see the queen. "Good morning, my queen."

"Good morning, Kaylee." The bard shut the door and came to a chair in front of the desk. She had her staff in her right hand, and she was dressed in her regal Amazon leathers for today's funeral pyres. She sat down, which caused her mask's straw to make a rustle.

"Did you sleep, Gabrielle?"

The queen slowly nodded. "Yes... I was far more tired than I imagined." She rested the staff across her lap then inquired, "Do you have the report ready?"

The stratègos held out her hand to the mostly filled scroll on her desk. "It is being finished now."

"I have to write mine this morning," the bard admitted. She leaned back into her chair. "I really came by to hear about the automaton."

Commander Kaylee understood so she too relaxed back in her chair. "Seven of Nine doesn't seem to be hostile."

"She hasn't escaped," the bard pointed out.

"No." Kaylee laced her hands together and rested them on her stomach. "She has no where to go... and I think she's curious about us."

"In a good way, I hope."

"I believe so." Kaylee crossed her legs. "I'd like to give her a tour of the Nation if you'll allow it." She

watched the queen's nod so she continued to voice her thoughts. "If we play this right, we may be able to have her join the Nation. She would be a valuable asset to us, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen drummed her right fingers against her staff. She nibbled on her lower lip and tried to weigh the possibilities. "She has no memory though, Kaylee and that could change her direction once she gains it back. I think it's easy to get her to side with us now, but once she regains her memory then it could mean something else."

The stratègos silently agreed with the queen's assessment. She considered it more deeply. "If she regains her memory, I very much doubt that she'll want to return to where she once lived." She focused on the queen. "She won't fit in there. If the Nation makes her feel comfortable here then she may be more inclined to stay with us."

"She could be married with kids." The queen could tell she threw water on the stratègos's fire. "We have no idea about what her past may be." She sighed and offered, "I think we should keep her here as a guest as long as she remains peaceful. We'll keep an eye on her and see how she progresses. If she seems to be adopting to the Nation then we should offer her a position in the Nation."

"Perhaps by then she'll have regained her memory."

"Perhaps," the bard murmured. "If she does regain it and wishes to leave, Kaylee then we need to let her go." She saw that the stratègos wouldn't argue her. She drummed her fingers one more time then ordered, "She'll be your charge. You two seem to connect well."

"We do," Kaylee conceded.

Gabrielle nodded then decided, "I'll go see her, now." She knew she needed to assess the automaton's current state before she went to the council. "Once we feel it's safe to release her, I'll talk to the council."

"I'd like to join you," the stratègos stated.

The bard sadly smiled, but she nodded. "Our challenge will be convincing the council that Seven of Nine has changed."

"And that she's not responsible for her killings."

Gabrielle slotted her eyes because she realized she too had to convince herself. She was full of bitterness because of Faolan's death inflicted by the automaton. She prayed she could restrain her anger once she faced the automaton.

"We can't punish her for what the gods did to her," the stratègos reminded.

"I know... you're right, Kaylee." Gabrielle now stood up with her staff at her side. "It is going to take some convincing though."

Commander Kaylee straightened up and seriously studied the queen. "If anybody can convince, it is you, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen wistfully smiled at her friend. "Thank you... I think." She and the stratègos chuckled together, but she headed to the door. "I will let you know how it goes with her." She then was

gone.

Commander Kaylee stared at the closed door that the queen had vacated through. She sighed and hoped that Seven of Nine and the queen would mesh better than earlier.

Gabrielle silently made her way through the Nation, and she arrived at the heavily guarded jail hut. She approached the head guard and inquired, "How does she fair?"

"Well, my queen." The guard reached to her belt and freed a ring of keys. "She was recently at the bathing hut."

"How did it go?"

"She was docile, my queen." The guard went to the door. She unlocked it and yanked open the heavy door.

The queen passed the guard and entered the torchlit hut. She stared at the seated automaton, and she waited until the door slammed behind her and locked. She swallowed and tightened her grip on her staff on instinct.

Seven of Nine raised her head, and her hooded eyes locked on the petite, young queen. She estimated though that the queen was just slightly younger than she.

Queen Gabrielle carefully walked closer to the prisoner, but she stopped several paces from her. She realized that the automaton was no longer chained, and she imagined by Kaylee's orders. She prayed that Kaylee knew what she was doing, but Gabrielle trusted Kaylee's judgment.

"I was told you were taken to the bathing hut." Gabrielle nervously fisted her left hand at her side. "You also have new attire...?"

Seven of Nine decided to start off on the right foot so she stood up to her full height. She was able to properly demonstrate her new attire just by standing, and she placed her hands behind her back. She stood almost stiff but rather formal. "Yes, thank you."

Gabrielle had to tilt her head back some just to take in all of the automaton. She blinked at the appreciative words and how the automaton said it rather cut and dry. She licked her lips then walked off to her right for a few steps. She turned and faced the prisoner.

Seven of Nine kept her eyes locked on the petite queen.

"Commander Kaylee tells me you do not remember anything about your past." Gabrielle leaned against her staff for support. "Your memory has been lost because of a hammer blow."

The automaton never broke her eye contact with the Amazon Queen. "I have only retained fragments but nothing is solid."

"Do you remember your name?" Gabrielle tempted.

"My designation is Seven of Nine," the automaton factually answered.

Gabrielle straightened up and gently argued, "That is your code name." She now walked back to the center of the jail and faced the prisoner. "You were seven of nine test subjects." She carefully watched

Seven of Nine's expression to see if she could gauge any emotions. "You were the only subject to survive Hephaestus's experiment." She decided to leave out the part about Seven of Nine possessing an original Amazon's soul.

Seven of Nine clenched her jaw because of the sudden surge of emotions that hit her. Briefly she heard her own scream echo in her head just before something sharp was injected into her spine. It was a memory, a painful memory for her, and it fizzled away.

The bard waited another beat then tried, "Do you remember who were the other subjects?"

The automaton focused back on the queen and stated, "Their designations were One of Nine, Two of Nine, Three of-

"What were their names?" Gabrielle cut off. "What did their faces look like? How did their voices sound?" She slowly neared the automaton. "Were they male or female?" She finally stood toe to toe with the automaton. "Did they have families they were stolen from?"

Seven of Nine had a influx of emotions, but this time she was ready for them. She clenched her hands behind her back and amazingly kept her tone even. "Hypnos of Corinth, Forbes of Thebes, Tulio of Rome, Satum of Tarentum, Ario of Tarraco, Tedra of Athens, Jayson of Troy, and Siti of Alexandria."

Gabrielle remained quiet and still. She absorbed all of the names and places that the automaton listed off to her like it was a dinner invite.

"Hypnos of Corinth was a former hoplite, but he was discharged from the army once the Conqueror took over." Seven of Nine had a stern stare. "Forbes of Thebes was a former hippies, but he was removed from position once the Conqueror passed laws that forbade upper class citizens to be automatically considered as hippies." She tilted her head. "Tulio of Rome was a former Roman legionnaire, who was badly burned by the Conqueror's Greek Army, and he fled from battle. As a result, his life was forfeited, however, he escaped and was hunted since by fellow legionaries."

Gabrielle already saw the apparent pattern. It would seem each subject was hand selected to already have an agenda against the Conqueror.

"Shall I continue?"

Queen Gabrielle kept her calm composure. "What of you, Seven of Nine?" She had a curious look. "What is your name? Where are you from?" She moved away and questioned, "What is your vendetta against the Conqueror?"

"I am not aware of one, currently." Seven of Nine rotated her head to the right as Gabrielle went over there. "I do not recall my name nor my place of birth."

"You said you remember fragments," Gabrielle tried.

"I do." The automaton studied the small queen. "However there is nothing solid."

The bard decided to let it go for now. She remained off to the side, but she faced the captive. "Later today the stratègos will give you a tour of the Amazon Nation." She lifted her hand up her staff and clutched the upper portion. "To be frank and honest, if you show improvements then you can be released from the jail hut."

Seven of Nine didn't expect such since all that she'd done to the Amazons. She set aside her thoughts and inquired, "What will become of me?"

Gabrielle lowered her hand back down on the staff and came over to the automaton. "Truthfully that is up to you." She paused but explained, "I don't plan to allow the Nation to punish you for something you could not control. But at the same time, if you prove to be a danger to my Nation then..." She let her words hang in the air.

"I understand," the automaton confirmed.

"See that you do," the Amazon Queen ordered, "because there has been enough bloodshed in my Nation." She warningly eyed the automaton. She was clearly marking out her ground and protecting her Nation. "I do not wish to add another to the pyres... even yours." She then walked away and went to the door. She knocked on it softly then glanced back at the automaton. "I will return for another visit." She exited the jail hut and left Seven of Nine to her thoughts.

Queen Gabrielle traveled through the village and on her way to the healer's hut. She wanted to see if Etana's report was ready, but she doubted it. She noticed that there were no patients waiting outside of the healer's hut, however, it was still busy inside. She caught up with Etana then was on her way. Gabrielle needed to work on her own report. Tomorrow she, Commander Kaylee, and several other officers would be due to go before the council and give their final, official report from the battle.

The queen disappeared into her hut and started on her own report. After two candlemarks, she was interrupted by the stratègos, who informed that the pyres would be ready for sunset. Kaylee also asked how things went between the queen and the automaton. She happily found out that the meeting hadn't gone too bad. Perhaps there certainly was hope for the automaton, and Kaylee would do everything she could to make it happen.

Commander Kaylee then left the queen's hut and went directly to the jail cell. She informed the guards that they would accompany her and the automaton on a tour around the Nation. The guards pulled the heavy door opened, left it, and patiently waited.

Seven of Nine rose to her feet, and her hands went behind her back. She stood formally. Those sharp blue eyes of hers locked on the petite stratègos.

Commander Kaylee placed her hands on her hips and remained in the center of the cell. "It's time for that tour."

"And if I refuse?" Seven of Nine slowly inclined an eyebrow into a shape arch.

Commander Kaylee's lips twitched with a grin. "I don't take kindly to 'no'."

The automaton tilted her head. "Indeed," she murmured then proceeded to follow the already moving stratègos out of the hut. She occupied the stratègos's right side as they entered the mid afternoon day and behind her were the three guards.

The stratègos began her talk by discussing the general setup of the Nation. She defined the designated line of authority then explained each department. While she spoke, her hands move about, and she occasionally pointed at certain buildings that were of keen interest.

Seven of Nine intently listened, and it seemed as if she was recording ever last detail. She studied her

surroundings with accuracy. She was observant and curious about the Amazon Nation.

Commander Kaylee led the way out of the east gate, which was smaller than the main gate to the south. She led the way to the Agricultural Department that had as much land as the village itself along with countless sheds, buildings, granaries, and in ground cellars that either held supplies, crops, wine, or olive barrels. Eventually they made it to a crest of a hill, and the stratègos stopped them at the top.

"Along here is our small vineyard." The stratègos scanned over the valley below.

Seven of Nine edged closer and studied the impressive vineyard, which didn't have anything growing currently, but it wouldn't be long from now. She counted at least twenty rows that stretched across the valley. Then on the opposite hill was a white windmill that slowly turned in the low breeze.

Commander Kaylee shifted her hands onto her hips and mentioned, "You see where the windmill is located? On the other side of that hill is another valley where we grow olives."

The automaton couldn't help it and asked, "May I see?"

Commander Kaylee's lips curled into a grin. "Of course." She started to move down the hill. "This way." Seven of Nine took her side and behind them were their shadows. She guided them through the hibernated vineyard then came up the neighboring hill. She went to the other side of the windmill and brought the automaton to an amazing view.

Seven of Nine craned her neck then she absorbed the countless olive trees that spread out through the much larger valley. "Impressive," she murmured.

"We cultivate three different types of olives." The stratègos pointed at the distinct group of trees that were closest to them. "This is the majority, which produce the Kalamata olive."

"A large, black olive often eaten," Seven of Nine deduced.

"Yes." Commander Kaylee then directed to the middle portion. "This grouping is far more rare and harder to produce. These are Koroneiki olives."

"They are very difficult to produce," Seven of Nine stated. She curiously studied Commander Kaylee. "But they are sought for their high quality of oil they produce."

Commander Kaylee smirked. "That's why we work so hard to grow them." She then pointed at the last, countless grouping of olive trees far away in the valley. "Those produce Chemlali olives."

Seven of Nine fisted her hands behind her back once then loosened them. She had a slightly peculiar look on her face. "I am not familiar with Chemlali."

"Not many are," the stratègos relented. She turned on her heels some and faced the tall yet strange beauty. "It's from Northern Africa actually, and we've done some modifications to grow it here. But the oil it produces is very good for burning and used in rituals." She started the walk back to the village.

Seven of Nine followed along side but inquired, "How did the Amazon Nation obtain such olives? It requires importation."

The stratègos watched her footing back down the vineyard hill. "A few of our sisters many, many

moons ago took a trip to Egypt. It was there that they came across this olive, and they were very fascinated by it. They brought back as many seeds as possible and spent many long seasons trying to get it to grow here."

"The winter climate is too wet and cold."

"It is," the stratègos agreed. "Luckily, our cultivators were able to devise a way to grow the trees in a warm environment over the winter." She glanced at Seven of Nine. "Those Chemlali trees are or almost are dead. They'll be removed, turned into lumber, and new ones from our hot shed are planted in the late spring."

"Hot shed?"

"Mmmm." Commander Kaylee softly smiled at the automaton's quipped interests. "It's a rather large, long shed that was built for this Chemlali trees that has a furnace attached to it. The cultivators feed the furnace with the lumber, keep the shed warm, and the Chemlali trees can continue to grow through the winter."

Seven of Nine filed away the information. She kept pace easily beside the stratègos because of her long legs. She raised her eyebrow again which in turn lifted the steel ridge on her brow. "How long has the Nation resided here?"

"Queen Gabrielle is the twelfth queen." Commander Kaylee came back up the hillside. "I am not as knowledgeable about this Nation's history."

"Then you are not from this Nation originally."

"No, I'm from the Thessaly Nation."

Seven of Nine considered the Thessaly Amazon Nation then stated, "Queen Antiope. She is Queen Hippolyta's sister." She slightly narrowed her eyes. "Why did you transfer to this Nation?"

"I was actually recruited by Queen Melosa to be the next stratègos." Commander Kaylee placed her hands behind her back once they were over the hill. She slowed her walk while they headed back to the gates. "I was trained by Penthesilea."

Seven of Nine knew of the great Amazon, who was a famous legend throughout all the Greek lands. "Indeed she has taught you sufficiently."

Commander Kaylee made no comment back, yet she suspected it was a backwards compliment coming from the strange automaton. She spotted the gates not far away so she remarked, "We have one last stop." She remained quiet but made a beeline to the temple. She couldn't imagine how this would go, but she had every intent to take the automaton into the temple.

Seven of Nine eyed the temple that stood out from the rest of the buildings in the village. She stopped at the base of the steps when the stratègos did the same.

Commander Kaylee glanced back at the guards. "Wait here. We'll only be a moment." She could see a guard was prepared to reply so she shot the Amazon a dark warning. She was satisfied that they would follow her orders so she proceeded up the marble steps.

Seven of Nine hesitated for some reason, but she steeled her emotions just as her body. She climbed up the steps then followed Commander Kaylee into the temple. She scanned over the inside of the temple that was lined by art, statues, and columns. She then slotted her eyes at the gigantic statue of Artemis, which was located behind the alter.

The stratègos crossed through the temple, and she spotted the priestess, who came out the side door.

"You are late, stratègos," Priestess Maire declared. She stopped in front of the alter and remained poised in her dark green leathers.

Commander Kaylee suddenly had silver eyes because she didn't understand the priestess's words. Had the priestess really been expecting them?

Seven of Nine carefully eyed the priestess, and she sensed something that didn't make any sense to her. There was something about the priestess that was familiar yet foreign too.

Priestess Maire rotated her head to the tall automaton and gently smiled. "Good afternoon, Seven of Nine." She tilted her head. "I am sure the stratègos provided an in depth tour of the Nation to you."

"It was sufficient," the automaton stated.

The stratègos cleared her throat then cut into the conversation. Her authority instantly took over. "Seven of Nine, this is our priestess... Maire. She has been the priestess for eight seasons now and before her was her mother."

Priestess Maire kept her focus locked on the automaton. She was clearly interested. "Our goddess, Artemis, is considered one of the most protective gods... particularly over her Amazons."

The automaton cocked her head and factually stated, "She is rather lacking then considering the hundreds of Amazons that died yesterday."

Commander Kaylee prickled at the words, and she grew tense.

But Priestess Maire chuckled and revealed an amused smile. "Seven of Nine, you do not know all of the battle that she fought." She slowly let her mirth fade away then continued. "Artemis does indeed bleed for every Amazon that dies, but she also seeks new ones or frees some." She tilted her head and stared deep into ice blue eyes. "When one Amazon dies another is born. You will come to appreciate this some day soon."

Seven of Nine kept a stoic expression and tried to decipher what the priestess may mean. Suddenly her attention was stolen by the side door creaking open. She lifted her chin and her jaw clenched as a familiar Amazon appeared.

Priestess Maire held out her hand to the hesitant, newcomer. "I'm sure you recall the shaman Yakut."

Yakut gathered her nerve and tried to ignore the automaton's burning glare. She approached the automaton and stopped a few paces from the tense automaton. "Hello, Seven of Nine."

"It is you who took me from the gods." Seven of Nine started for the small shaman.

Commander Kaylee moved fast and came between them. She faced the automaton and held up her

hands, but she didn't go for her sword. "She freed you from the gods."

Seven of Nine lowered her chilled eyes to the stratègos. She had her hands clenched at her sides. "I will terminate her."

"There have been enough deaths," Commander Kaylee hotly cut through. Her words seemed to phase the automaton's determined streak.

The automaton slowly backed off and a majority of the tension receded from her.

The stratègos lowered her hands but remained between the pair. She stayed in control of the situation and faced the shaman.

"Has your memory been returning to you?"

Seven of Nine almost refused to answer, but she clipped, "It has failed to do so."

Yakut sighed and adjusted the headdress for a beat. "Unfortunately it's not something I or Priestess Maired can remedy from what the stratègos has told us."

Commander Kaylee placed her hands on her hips in usual fashion. "The Conqueror has provided a herb to expedite the healing process."

"I hope it is the answer then," Yakut agreed. She glanced over at the automaton.

The stratègos concluded it was best to leave because of the thick air. She glanced back at the priestess.

Priestess Maired instantly understood. "Thank you for coming by." She looked between the stratègos and the automaton. She then directed her words to Seven of Nine. "You are welcomed here at anytime."

Seven of Nine wasn't sure how to respond so she held her silence.

"Thank you, priestess." The stratègos then glanced at the shaman. "Yakut."

The shaman merely nodded.

"Follow me," Commander Kaylee commanded. She directed the automaton back to the heavy wood doors. She opened one, held it, and waited for Seven of Nine to pass.

The automaton stopped in the doorway, glanced over her shoulder, and stared at the green eyes from the Artemis statue. She felt like they were real, but her logical mind told her otherwise. She turned away and passed through the door.

They started to make their way back to the jail hut, but nobody spoke. The automaton did notice an increase in activity in a centralized location of the village. She gazed over in that direction and tried to discern what was happening. The stratègos noticed the automaton's interest so she walked slightly closer.

"Today we mourn our fallen sisters," the stratègos explained.

Seven of Nine didn't show any reaction, but she faintly nodded. She was taken back to the jail hut, and Commander Kaylee informed that most likely the queen would stop by tomorrow or so. Seven of Nine

didn't say anything and watched the stratègos leave the jail. Once the stratègos was gone, she went over to the small, bar window that on the right wall. She peered through the bars and focused on the rising smoke.

The automaton lifted her right hand, gripped a metal bar, and she squeezed it without much consideration. Her emotions uncontrollably bubbled to the top, yet she quickly gained control of them. What she didn't notice was the fact that the bar in her hand had been deformed to shape her hand after her powerful grip.

The smoke rose higher into the sky over the Amazon village. Next came the distinct chanting and songs that were in Ancient Greek tongue. Almost every Amazon was forming around the gigantic pyre. They circled around the pyre and joined the choir of song.

The Amazon Queen sifted through the crowd, and she had on her royal leathers, no staff, and her mask rested on her head. She had a dire expression on her face, but she remained poised beside the hot pyre. She glanced back at the crowd and searched the countless faces for a distinct individual.

The priestess materialized from the crowd. She approached the queen's right side and faced the pyre.

Next Queen Gabrielle scanned for one more, and she nodded at the Amazon to come forward.

The shaman slipped through the crowd too. She adjusted her headdress and made her way to Gabrielle's left side. She mimicked Priestess Maired's stance.

"Yakut," Gabrielle softly spoke, "I'd like for you to follow the shaman tradition." She then turned her head to the priestess. "Maired?"

Maired merely bowed her head in understanding. She then leaned closer to the queen and mentioned, "Have you heard the name of the battle?"

Queen Gabrielle had been mentally preparing her speech, but she faltered at the priestess's question. She swallowed. "No. What are they calling it?"

Priestess Maired turned her head to the queen. "They are coming to the temple... they are calling it The Battle of the Fates." She noted the queen's twisted features and the questioning in the queen's eyes. "It's a rather fitting name for the battle." She said nothing else and studied the pyre again.

Queen Gabrielle heavily sighed then refocused on her task at hand. She inhaled deeply then called out, "Today is a day of mourning in this Amazon Nation." She paused until the choir faded away. "Today we not only mourn our sisters' deaths but also the life they have given us. We will not forget our sisters, and we will see them again." She waited a beat and scanned the faces of her Nation. "We honor our sisters as they have honored us." She then held out her hand to the priestess.

Priestess Maired inhaled deeply and recited a traditional chant that was in Ancient Greek tongue. The words could hardly be translated by anybody, but they were easily understood by every Amazon. Slowly the priestess finished her ancient blessing then she signaled for the shaman to proceed.

The shaman remained silent for a moment then she called out, "Our holy word is 'courage'. There is nothing stronger than courage for an Amazon." She tilted her head back some. "I will safely guide our sisters to the Amazon Eternity!" She then closed her eyes, raised up her hands, palms spread, and she loudly chanted something that nobody would understand; not even Priestess Maired.

Queen Gabrielle turned her head to the right and stared at the opening in the crowd. She gave the signal to proceed while Yakut chanted.

The first dead Amazon rested on a common wood pallet. The pallet was raised up high overhead of the four pallet barriers. The lifeless Amazon was dressed in her regal leathers, wounds visible, her mask on top of her head, and her feathers of honor and royalty were visible. Her body glowed brightly from the olive oil that was carefully spread all over her skin. And her peaceful face was that of Melosa.

Queen Gabrielle clenched her hands at her side as she watched her former mentor, queen, and even silent sister be placed over the flames. She restrained the tears that would wait until the end, and she honored Melosa's final moments.

The flames embraced the former queen and instantly swallowed her thanks to the added oil. The hot pyre did not take long to release Melosa to the skies so she could be taken to the Amazon Eternity.

Next was Officer Galatea, who was carried by the stratègos, Officer Rufina, Eponin, and the blacksmith. They carefully slipped the pallet into an empty location on the pyre then stepped back once the flames took the body. Eponin and Andra remained there for a moment before they quietly left together. Officer Rufina bowed her head, touched the stratègos's shoulder, and disappeared back into the crowd.

The stratègos kept her head up, and she watched with pride. She paid her last respects to her officer then whispered Galatea a safe travel to the Amazon Eternity. She then moved away.

Queen Gabrielle saw that the third body was ready to be sent to the pyre. She clenched her teeth because the pallet barriers waited for her signal. She couldn't do this.

Priestess Maired leaned closer to the queen and murmured, "He would want this, Gabrielle."

"But it's not what I want," the queen choked.

"Honor him right. He is one with Artemis again." Priestess Maired then softly added, "Honor him with your heart, Gabrielle."

Queen Gabrielle understood the priestess's words rather quickly. She uttered, "Will you..."

"Of course," the priestess promised. "Go ahead."

Queen Gabrielle nodded then broke away from her spot. She marched over to the two pallet barriers that had Faolan's body lifted to the sky. She went directly to the front pallet barrier and gently ordered, "This is my honor."

"Of course, my queen." The Amazon carefully gave the pallet's handles.

The bard raised the pallet overhead despite the strain on her shoulder. She then realized her sister, Andra, had arrived.

The blacksmith went to the pallet barrier at the rear. She remarked, "This is my honor."

The Amazon exchanged position with the blacksmith then backed away.

Gabrielle didn't need to say anything to her sister, but she was truly grateful. She then looked to the

priestess.

Priestess Maired gave the signal to proceed.

Queen Gabrielle didn't hesitate and began the march to the pyre. She and Andra slowly came closer to the flames. Each step seemed to break Gabrielle's heart deeper, yet she never faltered.

Faolan was unmoving on the pallet. His fur was weighed down by olive oil, and he glowed a soft yellow once his body came next to the flames. He then was carefully pushed into the flames, which embraced him. Instantly his soul was released from his animal form, and he rose to the skies to return to Artemis once again.

Gabrielle stepped back from the inferno and came to Andra's side. She tried desperately to hold back her tears, and she almost wanted to look away. But she watched the ritual.

Andra rested her left hand against the queen's back in silent comfort. She clenched her jaw, yet she found the tears coming down her cheeks. She then murmured, "Sister, he would want you to cry."

"I know," the bard muttered. Gabrielle no longer had control, and the tears silently slid down her face. She waited for awhile with Andra at her side. She finally whispered, "I love you, Faolan."

Andra stepped away from the pyre once Gabrielle moved. She separated from her sister and rejoined Eponin in the gathering.

Queen Gabrielle removed the wet tracks on her face. She assumed her position between the shaman and priestess. She continued the countless signals for an Amazon to be brought to the pyre. Each dead Amazon's release brought out a handful of Amazons from the crowd, who paid their respect for those last moments.

The funeral went on for several candlemarks into the night. The dinner that night was pushed back rather far so that the funeral pyres could be properly held. Once the funerals were finished then the Amazons slowly trekked to the dining hut for a silent meal. The gigantic pyre was left to burn until all of the wood was gone and only hot embers would remain.

A similar funeral ritual was taking place but outside of the Amazon Nation. Down in the valley where The Battle of the Fates took place there were hundreds of hoplites being placed upon their shields. The Conqueror and Commander Borias walked together down the rows of dead hoplites.

The Conqueror was back in her black leathers, wire armor, and cape since the attire had been cleaned. She had a hefty bag of drachmas in her left hand, and she sung a low song in Ancient Greek. She came to the next hoplite, who she recognized as the hoplite that tried to give her his shield.

Borias looked at the next name on the list. He then proudly read, "Teodor of Dium."

The Conqueror now finally knew his name. She had thin lips at her dark thoughts, yet she kept to tradition. She knelt beside the fallen hoplite, who was strapped to the top of his shield. She used her freehand to open his mouth, she produced a drachma, and she carefully slipped it under his tongue.

"To your honor."

Borias lowered the scroll some then chimed, "To a free Greece."

The Conqueror closed his mouth then whispered, "Safe travels across the River Acheron, brother." She then rose up and continued down to the next dead hoplite.

Again Borias proudly read off the name and where the hoplite came from within Greece. The process would continue until finally Borias and the Conqueror went to every fallen hoplite. By first light, the fallen hoplites would be carefully placed in large wagons then a procession would begin to return the hoplites to their homes.

Long ago, the Conqueror had formally setup a proper policy to outline how fallen hoplites were honored. When a new hoplite was conscripted it was made sure his hometown was record along with his known family. If he were to fall during battle then his body would certainly be returned to his family and respectfully carried upon his shield. Finally, the fallen hoplite's surviving family would receive so many drachmas from the polis as form of compensation.

And to handle such an endeavor, the Conqueror had developed a branch of the military, who solely focused on returning the bodies to the hometowns. These hand selected officials kept detailed records of each hoplite and made vows to return a dead hoplite to his family no matter the costs. Despite these officials' grim task, they were highly regarded because every hoplite looked to these officials as their last means to return home.

This extension of the military had been a key component to the Conqueror's revision of the Greek military. The Conqueror believed that the polis at least owed the return of sons, husbands, and brothers back to their families. In the end, this fostered a better relationship between the people, the polis, and the military. The Conqueror's new policy had ultimately caused an influx of new hoplite recruits plus a new undercurrent of pride not just within the hoplites but also in the Greek homes.

After the Conqueror stood up from the last, dead hoplite, she realized a couple of candlemarks had passed since sunset. She now had a very slim pouch of drachmas, and her chiliarchès had joined them at sunset to provide some light.

Bastien shifted his grip on his torch then remarked, "I will alert the Honor Unit that you have finished, my liege." The Honor Unit was the unofficial name of the officials and hoplites, who vowed to return the dead to their families.

The Conqueror nodded in agreement.

"They may want to get an early start," Borias suggested. He proceeded to roll up the list of fallen hoplites.

The ruler focused back on Bastien. "Tell them they may begin tonight, but they can wait till dawn if they wish it." She was always flexible with the Honor Unit because of their daunting task.

"I will mention it." Bastien partially bowed then marched off with his torch in hand.

The Conqueror and stratègos were left in the dimmer light that came from surrounding sources along with the moon overhead. The Conqueror merely nodded to her right in hidden signal that they leave the dead to rest. The death never use to both her until more recently once she became deeper involved in the people and their lives. Now that they looked to the Conqueror as a hero and liberator of Greece, she felt much more different.

Borias carried the rolled up scroll in his left hand and kept close to the ruler. "Draco is being shipped to

Athens."

"Excellent." The Conqueror slipped her hands between her back and cape. "I'd like a few spies to be sent to the Macedon Kingdom."

"I'll have them do some reconnaissance work." Borias slightly tilted his head. "The Romans are involved?" He long ago understood Xena's hatred for the Romans.

The Conqueror developed an dark look. "Yes, King Cortes has an alliance with them."

"There is a legion located in Macedonia Salutaris."

The ruler stopped and turned to Borias. "Legio IV Macedonica," she factually stated. "Caesar levied it himself. I don't doubt for a beat that he placed it there just to irritate us."

"They have never entered Macedonia Prima." The stratègos folded his arms over his chest but the scroll protruded out. "If Rome is allied with the Macedon Kingdom, and we march there then I suspect Legio IV will most likely join the battle."

"I wouldn't be totally certain of that," Xena refuted. "Caesar is never the one to keep to his... alliances." She smirked at Boria's low agreeing grunt. She continued the trek back to the camp with Borias at her side. "He does what is best for Rome... for him."

Borias had his arms unfolded, and he tapped the scroll against his leather pants. "Have our spies from Rome revealed any news?"

"Nothing about this," the Conqueror sadly replied. She sighed and tried to decide what Caesar's game would be in the near future. "The arrows that killed the children were Roman. Queen Gabrielle believes that the same arrows were used to kill Princess Terreis several seasons back."

Borias slowly narrowed his eyes. He too didn't like the implications. "This is no different then when Rome was suppling weapons to Athens, Sparta, and Corinth."

"They've been toying with Greece for too long," the ruler agreed.

Borias tilted his head and considered an idea. "Perhaps we should send several thousand hoplites to Macedonia Prima."

"Bastien would be apt for it," the Conqueror softly agreed. She liked the idea. "We'll discuss it further tomorrow. We should hear word from the joining army." She stopped once they came into the camp. "I will stay in the Amazon village again."

Borias remained silent for a moment but a question was apparent in his eyes. He finally gathered his nerve. "This is the same Gabrielle, isn't it?"

The Conqueror already knew Borias's thoughts about Gabrielle. At first she wasn't going to reply so she moved away, but she stopped and turned back to the stratègos. "She's not such a ghost after all, Borias." She then left his side.

"Indeed," Borias muttered. He watched Xena's back until she disappeared deeper into the camp.

Xena went to the corral where her mare was located. She ordered the handler to get her horse, and she

would tack her horse herself. She rather efficient in getting Argo ready then she was mounted for the short ride. She pushed Argo into a canter after they were out of the camp. Once she was absorbed into the Amazon woods, she heard the birdcalls that followed her overhead. She suspected that warning was being sent to the gates about her arrival.

The Conqueror slowed Argo to a walk once she was close to the gates. She noted that the gate's door was being hauled open for her already.

"Good evening, Conqueror," a guard greeted.

"Evening," the ruler replied.

"The queen is currently at the funeral pyre." The guard stepped aside when the golden mare passed through the door. "She waits for you." The Amazon then set out to close up the large door.

The Conqueror quickly took Argo to the stable and made Argo comfortable in an empty stall. She then briskly walked out of the warm stable and into the cool night. She already knew where the funeral pyre was located thanks to the smell and remaining smoke that lingered in the night sky.

Queen Gabrielle was one of very few remaining Amazons at the dying funeral pyre. She had her arms crossed over her stomach, and she stared mindlessly at the slowly receding fire. She now smelled of fire and wood. Her eyes were watered over from the smoke that occasionally washed over her.

The bard didn't bother to look behind her when she sensed the presence. She was already familiar with it from her childhood, and she was grateful for it.

The Conqueror took the Amazon Queen's side, and she studied the fading pyre. "For every Amazon's death there is a new Amazon born."

Gabrielle blinked at the famous Amazon quote that Xena spoke. She had forgotten that Xena had once been an Amazon too. They hadn't discussed it at all.

Xena turned her head to her silent friend. "Have you eaten?"

"I've considered it," Gabrielle weakly joked. She thought about the quote and met Xena's stare. "If there's a new Amazon for every dead Amazon then who is there new for Faolan's death?"

Xena tilted her head at the question.

Gabrielle watched her friend's somber features then studied Xena's bright blue eyes. She watched how the golden flames danced in the ruler's eyes. She slightly furrowed her eyebrows because she realized she already had her answer to that question.

Xena returned her to the normal posture once she sensed Gabrielle had her answer. She then gently offered, "Let's get something to eat."

"Yeah," the bard murmured, "I think I'm finally hungry." Gabrielle stole a last glance at the pyre, but she was able to walk away now.

The Conqueror took pace at her friend's right side, which had always been Faolan's spot. She walked slightly closer than normal but neither she nor Gabrielle noted it. "What are your plans tomorrow?"

"Well in the morning the council expects the full reports. So Kaylee, Eponin, Rufina, and myself have to do that." Gabrielle bit her lower lip and considered another problem. "We also have to discuss punishment for the six Amazons."

"And what of Seven?"

The queen sighed and ran her fingers through her short hair. "I need to talk to Kaylee again. I also need to visit Seven again." She dropped her hand to her side. "It seems like Seven is showing an interest in staying here, for now."

"She is valuable, Gabrielle."

"You know that, I know that, and Kaylee too... but we have a lot of convincing to do." The bard shook her head.

"What of Hercules and Iolaus?"

Gabrielle peered up at the ruler. "I'll probably tell them they can go on their way anytime they're ready. I don't think Seven will be a problem any more." She then edged closer to her friend and asked, "What do you think of them? I mean Hercules and Iolaus."

"I'm not sure," the ruler honestly replied. "I've known of them for some time." She slightly narrowed her eyes and mentioned, "I'm not quite sure why we've never crossed paths sooner."

"Sorta like how you and I haven't sooner," the queen pointed out. She then sighed and shook her head. "I've known Iolaus longer... that's how I met Hercules." She let the topic die off, but she had another concern that'd been floating in the back of her head for awhile. She sharply ended her walk and grabbed the ruler's arm.

Xena was surprised and had stopped. She faced her friend and took in the bard's worrisome look.

"Xena, I never believed in those stories I use to tell... about the Titans, gods, and monsters." Gabrielle shifted closer and lowered her voice. "But this is real." With her freehand, she pointed in the direction of the jail cells. "I have an automaton made of steel that can heal fast and has the strength of Hercules." She dropped her hand and added, "And why? Because two gods got together and decided to experiment. And one of those gods has a personal disdain for how you conquer Greece. Aren't you remotely worried about that fact?"

"It has crossed my mind," the ruler casually remarked. But she sighed because of Gabrielle's warning look. "Gabrielle, I don't have room to fear what the gods may or may not think of me. Nor do I answer to any god's demands. All that I do is for Greece."

"And I can appreciate that because what I do is for the Amazons."

"But," Xena argued, "the Amazons are for Artemis."

Gabrielle slightly glared at the logic. "No," she debated, "when I am put on that funeral pyre it will be because I died trying to protect my sisters. I don't do this in the name of Artemis."

"Don't cross Artemis," Xena gently taunted. A glow filled her eyes.

"Please," the bard muttered, "you and I never worshiped any god." She shook her head then released Xena's arm. "And that's what I don't get, Xena. If all this original Amazon, soul... stuff is true. Then why were we picked as... carriers? We've never believed in the gods so why were we chosen?"

Xena lowered her head closer and arched an eyebrow. She suddenly had a sly grin. "That's because the original Amazons came from a Titan."

The bard opened her mouth, yet the words failed her. She peered up at Xena's smug features and huffed. "You always do that." She then continued the walk to the dining hut, and Xena joined her. "So does that mean Gaia is really who we should be worshipping?" She was confused and almost lost.

"Technically," the Conqueror explained, "yes. Artemis was selected as a protector and so were the Amazons."

"So, would Artemis be more of our protector than our goddess?" Gabrielle shook her head because of the confusion. Then Xena clasped her shoulder and stopped her.

"Look, Gabrielle." The Conqueror made the bard turn and face the direction of the temple. They'd been passing it when the realization struck Xena.

The Amazon Queen faced the temple like her friend. "What am I looking at, exactly?"

"The doors." The Conqueror pointed at the doors. "What do you see?"

Gabrielle wondered if it was one of Xena's trick questions, but she knew Xena was serious. She studied the door then replied, "Its a carving of the Great Oak Tree."

"Yes, the Great Oak." The Conqueror lowered her gaze to the bard. "It's not a moon or a stag."

"The symbols of Artemis," the queen murmured. "The Great Oak is a symbol of Gaia." The same epiphany hit her, and she excitedly peered up at her friend. "You're a genius, Xena."

"Well," Xena joked, "I do have a reputation to maintain."

"Let's just hope Artemis doesn't smite us," Gabrielle weakly teased. She continued the walk to the dining hut, which wasn't too far now.

"She would have done it long ago," the ruler pointed out. She then switched topics again. "Tomorrow you have the reports. Anything else?"

Gabrielle recalled this line of questioning because it was Xena's way of making plans together. She bit back a grin and replied, "I do need to get moved into the queen's office." She glanced up at Xena. "Although it can wait." She then decided to help Xena along so she inquired, "Do you have plans tomorrow?"

The Conqueror quietly cleared her throat then casually replied, "I have a few things to take care of in the morning."

The bard couldn't hide her grin any longer. "You know, if you're free afterwards we could..." She halted at the open entrance of the dining hut. She didn't want to go in just now because of the noise that may cause her to miss out on any of Xena's pending words.

The Conqueror revealed a smile. "We could... go for a ride perhaps."

"That'd be nice," Gabrielle agreed. "I know exactly where we can go." She tilted her head to the side. "Some time to catch up, alone."

"Catch up, yes." The Conqueror's voice was hush, and she had eyes only for the bard. She nodded at the entrance and suggested, "Let's eat."

"After you, Warrior Princess," the bard taunted.

The Conqueror huffed and entered the still busy dining hut. She felt the Amazon Queen on her heels, and she gently smiled. They certainly would catch up tomorrow. Xena had certain plans because she knew what tomorrow meant; not just to her but to Gabrielle too, yet she highly doubted Gabrielle remembered. Xena was mapping out a way for Gabrielle to recall how special tomorrow use to be to them.

**To be continued.**