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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 24**

Queen Gabrielle leaned against her staff and listened to the last of Seven of Nine's words. After Seven of Nine was finished, her eyes flickered over to Commander Kaylee.

The stratègos brushed back her auburn hair behind her right ear. She then returned her hand to her hip. "If you regain your memory then it is plausible you may wish to leave the Nation."

"Perhaps," the automaton agreed. "But most likely I will have no desire to return to my home." She was standing in front of the bench, but she moved away from it and came closer to the queen and stratègos. "I will not adapt there."

"It will take time for you to fit in here," Kaylee reminded.

"You do stand a better chance here than out there," Gabrielle interrupted.

Seven of Nine looked between the pair then declared, "I will adapt here."

"The Nation will have to do some adapting to you," the bard informed. She straightened up better then explained, "This is going to take some convincing on my part and the stratègos's part."

"I understand." Seven of Nine slipped her hands behind her back and stood at attention.

The queen tapped her staff quietly against the wood floor. "We will see about having you released from

the jail. You will be guarded for awhile."

The stratègos broke into the conversation. "If you wish it, you can learn some Amazon training. This'll give you a feel for what we do in the Nation."

"Acceptable," the automaton agreed.

The Amazon Queen though stepped closer to the automaton and locked eyes with her. "If at any point, you become a threat, then I will order your death."

Seven of Nine kept calm and promised, "It will not happen, Queen Gabrielle."

The queen nodded then backed away. She went to the door and ordered a guard to get the door open too. "Commander Kaylee or I will be back after the meeting to inform you of the results."

The stratègos followed the queen out of the secure hut. She took the queen's side and headed to the administration hut where the meeting would be held as usual.

"This afternoon," Gabrielle informed, "I plan to spend it with the Conqueror."

Kaylee took the hint and promised, "We'll only contact you if it's an emergency."

"Thank you." The queen smiled appreciatively.

"How does the Conqueror fair?"

"She is well." Gabrielle kept her voice low. "It won't be long before she marches east."

Commander Kaylee shook her head and mentioned, "The battles must be wearing on her."

"I don't know." The bard thought back on prior conversations with Xena. "It's what she does, Kaylee."

The stratègos slightly grinned and remarked, "I command an army too, and I love it, but it is wearing after so long."

"Point taken," the bard agreed. She came to the administration hut now and smiled pleasantly at the hut guard. "Hello, Vara."

"Good morning, my queen." Vara bowed then smiled warmly at the stratègos. "Good morning too, stratègos." She grabbed the hut's door and pulled it open while reporting, "The council has already gathered, and Master Eponin passed only moments ago."

"Thank you, Vara." The queen entered the hut first. She and Kaylee went into the meeting room, which had a low din of chatter.

"My queen," Masika greeted first. She held out the report that Gabrielle had prepared and delivered yesterday. She also gave the stratègos's hers. "We're just waiting on Rufina."

"Better late," the stratègos joked.

"I heard that," Officer Rufina shot back from her spot in the doorway.

Commander Kaylee smirked over at the ilarchès. "You may command the cavalry, but you are not as speedy as your horses."

"I see the battle has done nothing to improve your jokes, stratègos." Officer Rufina smirked and retrieved her report from Masika.

"Let's start," the head councilor decided. She hoped it would end the banter. "My queen?" She indicated the empty chair at the other end of the meeting table.

"Thank you." The Amazon Queen went down the table and assumed her chair after she propped her staff against the wall behind her. She started the report session with the council as it was always expected of the queen.

The reports were rather mundane, but it was important so that the council had a clear understanding on what'd happened. They also liked to interpret the numbers on casualties and wounded. Then afterwards it went into a question and answer session that allowed for the council to find out any gray areas that they didn't understand. A main topic of concern was about Draco and what would be done with him. The queen merely explained that she allowed for the Conqueror to deal with Draco while the Amazons dealt with the automaton.

That was what led to the discussion about the automaton. Two of the council members deemed that there should be some punishment made on Seven of Nine. Two other members were willing to forgive and eventually forget as long as the automaton proved to be safe. Only Masika held her silence and seemed to listen to the council members argue amongst themselves.

"She a valuable asset to this Nation," Officer Rufina offered in between the arguing.

"She's also very dangerous," a council member reminded.

Officer Rufina huffed then debated, "If she joins the Nation then we have a very formidable Amazon in our military."

"She's a risk, ilarchès. And are you willing to sacrifice a few Amazons' lives when she suddenly turns against us?" The council member's glare bore into the ilarchès. "She was made by the gods to destroy us. What makes you think that's still not her mission?"

"She would have already done it by now," Officer Rufina snapped.

"Perhaps she's just waiting for the right time," another councilor tested. "A moment when we're not watching her."

The stratègos could tell Rufina was about to explode so she cut into the debate. "Seven of Nine is an individual... just like any of us." She lowered her cold stare to the two councilors, who refused to accept the automaton.

"Commander Kaylee is right," the queen interrupted. "That was Draco's mistake. He treated her like a weapon, and she was controlled as such." She studied the councilors' faces. "She's free from that control. She has emotions, and she can rationalize now." She leaned forward from her chair. "The stratègos and I have spoken to her regularly. We have given her the option to leave the Nation, and yet she refuses to do so. She doesn't make it apparent, but she is fearful."

"Of what?" a councilor challenged. "Of being hunted?"

"No." The stratègos strolled over to the queen's chair. "Seven of Nine fears not being accepted." She stopped by the queen's side and faced the councilors. "She sees the Amazon Nation as a place where she can develop and grow into her own individual."

"The Amazons can provide Seven of Nine a sense of identity, routine, order, and even worship." Gabrielle could see her and Kaylee's words were penetrating. "She can be accepted here." She laced her hands over top of the table. "It has been Amazon tradition to welcome any peaceful woman into our Nation. Have we led astray from that tradition now?"

"Peaceful, yes," a councilor fought. "This... woman has killed several Amazons including our polemarchos."

"She was being controlled by the gods at that point," Officer Rufina hotly reminded.

"And what's to say she won't be again?"

Officer Rufina sighed in frustration and walked away from the table so she could calm down.

"Yakut has freed her from the gods," Queen Gabrielle explained.

"So say you," an angry councilor barked at the queen.

The stratègos took high offense to the comment, but somebody beat her to the fight.

"I was there," Master Eponin spoke up from her silent spot. She peeled off the wall and stepped up to the table. "I witnessed Yakut, the queen, and the Conqueror defeat Seven of Nine." She gathered her next words. "More happened there in the fallen temple than any mortal's eyes can see." She paused but honestly stated, "I not only believe but I also know that Seven of Nine is her own individual now. I do not begrudge her for those that fell before her. To not welcome and forgive her is a breach in Amazon tradition, and I for one am Amazon."

Queen Gabrielle blinked once at the speech from the weapons master. She then quirked a smile.

"Thank you, Master Eponin," Masika offered.

Eponin slightly inclined her head then went back to her original spot.

The head councilor then grew an agitated look and directed it at the earlier councilor, who insulted the queen. "Naida, perhaps you wish to retract your earlier remark."

Naida, who was a new council member since Masika's mother's retirement, turned her grave features to the queen. "I apologize, my queen. I was presumptuous and disrespectful."

"We all fault," the bard reminded. She had no hard feelings about it. She then returned to the earlier topic. "I believe it is in our best interest to continue Amazon tradition with Seven of Nine." She saw how the two councilors, Naida and Elysa were still uncomfortable with the idea. "But the stratègos and I want to put a sun up and sun down guard on the Seven of Nine until we're a hundred percent that she's not a threat. I have made it clear to her that if she becomes a threat at any point that she'll be immediately struck dead."

"How do you purpose that could be done when she heals so fast?" Masika checked.

"A dagger or arrowhead through her eye to her brain will kill her," the stratègos replied. "It is the quickest way, and her head is the weakest point."

The head councilor nodded then turned her attention to the Naida and Elysa. "What say you, councilors?"

"I am in favor of her," Tanya spoke up first.

"I am in favor," Hersilia chimed in next.

Naida slowly nodded and agreed, "I am in favor." She glanced over at Elysa.

"I am in favor."

Masika sensed all eyes on her, but she focused on the queen. "As am I, my queen."

"Thank you." Queen Gabrielle slightly relaxed now that one dispute was down and one left to go.

"Next is the conspiracy and treason committed by six Amazons," Masika brought up. She picked up a scroll to her right, unrolled it, and read, "Adonia, Deka, Ephiny, Jocasta, Solari, and Teresa." She looked up from the scroll. "According to the report, they conspired with Melosa to kidnap the queen if it so happened the outcome of the fight between the queen and the automaton went sour. Melosa expected the six to remove the queen from a dangerous threat so that she may survive and continue to lead the Nation after the battle ended." She pushed the open, short scroll aside. "Master Eponin, you discovered the conspiracy, effectively disassembled it, and arrested the guilty parties." She laced her hands together and questioned, "What is to be done with these Amazons?"

"Law states that treason is not to be tolerated," Councilor Tanya recalled. "The penalty can be death or banishment from the Amazons depending on the severity of the case."

Gabrielle mentally groaned at what her friends got themselves into now. She inwardly sighed and hoped her powers of persuasion were not worn out today.

Master Eponin came over again and provided further insight. "I have trained all six Amazons. I also have befriended them."

"Ephiny is your blood sister if I'm correct," Councilor Hersilia pointed out.

"She is," the weapons master agreed. "I know them well. I know they did not act in malice."

"Melosa selected them," Gabrielle spoke up, "because they are some of my closest friends. She trusted them, above any other Amazons, to protect my life. They believed I would die by Seven of Nine's hands, and they planned to take me to safety whether or not I would go freely."

"That does not excuse them from breaking orders," Councilor Masika reminded.

"No... it doesn't," Gabrielle relented. "But on the other hand, it does fall in line with serving our Nation. They have vowed to protect the Nation, and the queen is often seen as the Nation." She tilted her head. "How is that treason?"

"We have six Amazons that merely disobeyed orders," the stratègos clarified. "Their intention meant well but unfortunately the disobedience cannot be overlooked."

Queen Gabrielle was grateful that Kaylee was backing her up. She focused on the councilors again. "I am their queen... and I am their friend. I have a duty to both sides and neither are easy." She searched the faces around the table and pleaded, "But right now I am speaking to you as their friend. And I'm asking you to absolve them of treason and punish them for disobedience."

"If we were to do that then the punishment would fall into your jurisdiction." The head councilor silently drummed her fingers on the table once. She studied both the stratègos and queen carefully. "If we absolve them of treason, can we be guaranteed that you and Commander Kaylee will punish them?"

"Of course," the stratègos answered.

"May we inquire what punishment you would seek?" Councilor Naida broke in.

Commander Kaylee was about to reply, but she stopped when a soft hand was on her wrist. She peered down at the queen and let the queen take the question.

"They wanted to protect me from Seven of Nine," the bard explained, "I don't see why they can't continue that mission."

The councilors all looked between each other except for Masika. Masika sat back in her chair, and she couldn't hide her smirk at the queen's idea. How Masika would enjoy these coming seasons as the queen grew and matured even further. Queen Gabrielle would indeed develop into a fabulous queen, who would be long remembered.

Soon enough the councilors all agreed to the idea. They absolved the Amazons of treason and left it to the stratègos and queen to carry out the punishment for disobedience. Once that was finished so was the meeting, and everybody roused to leave the meeting room. The queen and stratègos lingered out of the administration hut because they were busy talking.

Gabrielle though paused because she spotted Eponin just ahead of them outside the administration hut. "Eponin," she called.

The weapons master stopped and waited until the pair joined her.

"Thank you for your help," Gabrielle insisted.

"I am Amazon, but I am also a sister." Eponin sadly smiled at Gabrielle because she knew the queen understood.

Gabrielle nodded and squeezed the weapons master's shoulder. "I know they'll appreciate it."

The weapons master smirked and leaned closer to the queen. "Perhaps not once they hear their punishment."

Kaylee cut into the conversation. "Lucky for them it is the queen administrating the punishment and not I."

Eponin smirked at the true statement. "Well, I will have their swords returned."

"That'd be perfect, Eponin." The queen briefly watched the weapons master go then she focused back on Kaylee. "Let's take care of the six first then take them to Seven of Nine."

Kaylee accepted the idea and followed the queen to the jail huts. She decided to let Gabrielle handle the six alone while she waited outside of the jail hut.

Queen Gabrielle discovered her six friends spread out in the jail hut. They'd gone quiet as soon as she came in, and they waited to hear what would happen to them. Gabrielle took a deep breath then informed, "You've been absolved of treason."

Solari was seated on the bench, and she slumped now. "Thank Artemis," she muttered.

"I think we better be thanking Gabrielle," Adonia reminded.

Solari nodded in agreement, and she returned her attention to the queen. "What's going to happen?"

"I've been left in charge of your punishment." The bard slightly leaned against her staff.

Jocasta groaned and muttered, "Oh Hades."

Gabrielle bit back her grin at Jocasta's remark. She instead remained stern. "The automaton, Seven of Nine, has requested to remain in the Nation. Currently, she has no memory of who she once was, but we're hoping it will return to her. Until that time, we are welcoming her to stay in the Nation as well as offer her some training."

Ephiny was against the wall off to the right. She folded her arms and continued to listen.

"Is she becoming an Amazon?" Solari checked.

"As of now, no." Queen Gabrielle moved her hand down the staff some. "We plan to wait until she regains her memory if it so happens. Once she has, and she still shows interest in remaining here, then it is possible we'll offer her a permanent life in the Nation."

"You can't be serious." Solari stood up and came over the queen. "She tried to kill y-"

"Kidnap me," Queen Gabrielle corrected.

"She killed several others," Dekka reminded.

The queen sighed and focused on Dekka. "She was being controlled by the gods at that time." She looked at her friends. "She hasn't made any attempt to escape or harm anybody."

"It could be an act," Teresa calmly suggested.

"Listen, I don't expect you all to instantly accept her." Queen Gabrielle took on her role and formally assumed it by not slouching against her staff in usual fashion. "I'm actually counting on you not to do such."

Solari didn't like the sounds of it so she glanced over at Ephiny.

Ephiny caught the look then decided to put the question out there. "So what is our punishment?"

The Amazon Queen suddenly smiled devilishly at her friends. "I'm so glad you asked." She would thoroughly enjoy this because she believed it was a perfect way to not only punish these six but also evaluate Seven of Nine. "Starting today, you six will be guarding Seven of Nine on every candlemark. You will only receive a break to eat dinner and retrieve sleep." She refrained her chuckle at seeing Jocasta and Solari's bug eyed looks. "I expect four guards, who are awake and alert around her at every moment. If I discover otherwise then it'll be changed to six guards without any breaks until I deem you've made up for your lapse."

Solari went back to the bench and slumped down beside Jocasta and Adonia. "For how long?"

The queen shrugged. "Until the council, stratègos, and I have decided she is not a threat. It could be a couple of days to a full moon... whatever is necessary."

"You said we start today?" Adonia brought up.

"Yes." Queen Gabrielle lost her slight amusement and continued to explain the situation. "You will report to me first and foremost otherwise it'll be the stratègos or Master Eponin. The stratègos will brief you on more details."

"And if we refuse to do this?" Ephiny tested.

Gabrielle seriously regarded her former lover. She honestly answered, "If anybody can't handle this simple punishment and would prefer an audience then it can be arranged. It's each Amazon's choice." She waited a moment and looked over her friends. "Anybody prefer an audience over the punishment?"

Slowly each Amazon shook her head, and Ephiny pushed off the wall. "When can we start today?"

Gabrielle sadly smiled and replied, "There's nothing like the present." She went to the jail door, knocked on it, and it was quickly opened. "Kaylee, they're ready."

The stratègos nodded and signaled a guard to come in with her. The guard, who followed her in, had an armful of swords, which were the prisoners'. Kaylee ordered the guard to hand them out to their respective owner. As that was going on, she briefed the six on what their duties would be and Seven of Nine's current state.

After all was settled, the stratègos and queen marched the six, temporary guards out from the jail hut and took them next door. Queen Gabrielle told them to wait outside with the hut guards until they briefed Seven of Nine of the current situation. She and Kaylee entered the jail hut to find the automaton waiting for them.

Seven of Nine climbed to her feet and filled her impressive height. She met the two leaders in the center of the jail hut, and she placed her hands behind her back. She waited for the judgment.

"You are being released," Queen Gabrielle reported.

Kaylee sensed some tension leave the automaton. "The Nation welcomes you to stay here as long as you'd like. However we will place a guard detail on you until we're completely confident that you don't pose any threat."

Seven of Nine remained proud. "Acceptable."

"You will be assigned a hut, which Commander Kaylee will show you to." Queen Gabrielle studied the automaton's stone features. "You are not allowed to handle any weapons unless authorized by either myself, Commander Kaylee, or our weapons master Eponin." She paused then another thought came to mind. "If you have any questions or concerns then you may contact either me or Commander Kaylee."

"Understood," the automaton agreed.

Queen Gabrielle nodded and seemed to hesitate. Did she expect a thank you or maybe an apology from the cold automaton? She looked to the stratègos and said, "I'll let you handle it from here."

Commander Kaylee nodded and watched the queen go. She knew Gabrielle would tell the six new guards to enter the hut so she waited a moment. Soon enough the jail hut was filled up and the air was so thick her sword could have cut it.

Seven of Nine looked over the six faces and only two did she recognized from the fallen temple days ago. She returned her focus to the stratègos.

"These are your six guards. Four of them will be on duty at a time." Commander Kaylee decided to to introduction so she went down the list of names and pointed to that Amazon. She then ordered, "Let's take you to your assigned hut."

The large group went through the village, which gathered a lot of attention too. They soon came to the side of the village that had the residential huts. Commander Kaylee paused for a moment and pointed out her hut then the queen's in case the automaton needed to speak to either of them. She then went deeper and came to an empty hut. She opened the door for them and escorted just the automaton inside of it.

"This'll be your hut." Commander Kaylee scanned about the bare hut, but it had the essentials like a bed, desk, fireplace, and a washroom. "The guards will also help you get around the village if you lose your way."

Seven of Nine stopped looking at the hut's insides then turned to the stratègos. She remained tall, hands behind her back, and her stance rather ridged.

"You will also be visited by the healer and most likely the Conqueror." Commander Kaylee rested her left hand on her hip while her left was raised up. Her fingers slightly moved while she spoke. "Let's see how things go over the next moon. We'll consider removing the guard detail once we can trust that you won't harm anybody again."

Seven of Nine didn't outwardly react, and she swore, "It will not happen again."

The stratègos remained quiet and seriously weighed the automaton's words. "Good." She tried to relax and offered, "If you need anything... contact me." She then started for the open door so that she could leave the automaton to her quiet space.

Seven of Nine fully faced the inside of the hut and heard the stratègos's footfall almost gone from the hut. "Red," she called.

The stratègos stopped just outside the door. She turned some and twisted her head sidelong. "What?"

Seven of Nine kept her back to the stratègos. "You asked what my favorite color was. It is red."

Commander Kaylee could tell that was all Seven of Nine would say to her. She had a faint smile then walked away. She hadn't expected it from the automaton and perhaps there was hope afterall.

Just outside the gates of the Amazon Nation, the queen stood and waited for her ride with empty hands. She had dropped off her staff at her hut and expected her sword to be plenty of protection in case her and Xena ran into trouble, but she doubted it.

Gabrielle leaned against the wall that surrounded her Nation, and she scanned the line of trees for her friend. She first heard the horse before she spotted it and its rider. She smiled and pushed off the wall.

The Conqueror slowed Argo once she was close to the Amazon Queen. She softened at Gabrielle's smile, and she stopped her mare. "Hi," she gently greeted.

"Hey." The bard neared the ruler and horse. "I can drive."

The Conqueror grinned, pushed her boots out of the stirrups, and slide back in the saddle after she lowered the reins. She then helped her friend climb up into the saddle.

Gabrielle became comfortable in the saddle then picked up the reins. She waited until Xena had her boots in the stirrups because she nor Xena wanted to readjust the stirrups' length. She clicked at Argo and directed the mare back to the woods.

Xena kept her hands to herself until they were safely away from the prying eyes of the wall guards. She then slipped her arms around the bard's waist. She lowered her head closer the bard's. "I think you enjoy being in the saddle with me."

The bard laughed at her friend's playful tone. "Apparently not as much as you do."

"Well it was my fantasy," the ruler teased.

Gabrielle released the reins from her left hand and gathered them into her right. She rested her hand on Xena's knee. "My fantasy requires the wheat field back in Potidaea and a warm night."

"Mmm I know," the ruler murmured.

"You do huh?" The queen chuckled and shook her head.

Xena decided to hold her silence to that and instead asked, "How did it go with the council?"

"Well actually... better than I hoped."

"You're always prepared for the worst," the ruler remarked.

"Isn't that the truth," Gabrielle muttered. She sighed but perked up at the thought of today's meeting. "We've released Seven of Nine from the jail but not without guards."

"Good."

"Guess who are the guards?" Gabrielle had an amused tone.

The Conqueror hummed for a moment as if in serious consideration. "I would imagine your six friends." After Gabrielle's chuckle, she grinned. "My wicked streak does occasionally show in you,

Gabrielle."

The bard patted the ruler's knee and replied, "Thanks too by the way." She then twisted her head around and showed the glint in her eyes. "Pray you're never on the receiving end of it one day."

"I won't even bother to pray because I imagine it will bite me back, eventually."

Gabrielle had a smug look, but she made no comment. Instead she focused on the ride and enjoyed the passing silence between her and her friend. Gabrielle realized, with a smile, that Xena was indeed her friend again despite there were some hurdles to still cross. As she guided Argo through the forest, it dawned on her that she didn't exactly know where they were headed.

As if sensing Gabrielle's thoughts, Xena bowed her head closer and softly offered, "Wherever there's a secluded spot."

The Amazon Queen twisted her head around and warmly smiled at the ruler. She knew the spot that would do nicely. She tapped Argo's sides gently and urged the mare to go faster. The ride was a little bouncier, but she looked forward to seeing the old lake nestled under the plateau that extended from the mountain. She'd done many runs up and down the ridge to that plateau ever since her first class on the run with Eponin.

The Conqueror scanned the open lake once they emerged from the forest. She gently smiled at the peaceful feeling it already evoked from her. She eyed the perfect spot under a tree that was speckled with green buds, and she wondered if Gabrielle would go there. Slowly her smile curled into a grin as Argo beelined for the tree.

Gabrielle halted the horse then prepared to dismount with Xena's help. She landed neatly on her boots, and Xena landed beside her. She waited until the ruler's cape settled then she turned to her friend. "Does that thing ever get in the way?" She indicated the cape.

The bemused ruler grabbed the material in question and brushed it back some. "No." She made no further comment and shifted down Argo's side to get the saddlebags.

The bard folded her arms, faced Xena, and leaned against Argo's side. "I imagine that's why it has so many tear and rip marks on it huh?"

The Conqueror yanked the saddlebags off and rotated her head to the smaller woman. She had a calm look, but she wasn't about to respond.

Gabrielle freed her right hand and scratched her nose for a beat. "Well..." She dropped her hand. "I suppose if it makes you feel taller or something then why not?" She shrugged casually, pushed off Argo, and strolled over to the tree.

Xena huffed, which grabbed Argo's attention. She looked at her mare, who had twisted her head around. "You should see her after she eats headbang, girl." She listened to Argo's snort as she passed the horse.

Gabrielle stood motionless between the tree and lake. She was mesmerized by the still lake, and she tried to count the occasional, faint ripples from the fish.

The Greek ruler deposited the light saddlebags down by the tree trunk. She turned and now had an

angular view of her childhood friend. She stared only for moments, but she knew that Gabrielle had grown and changed dramatically over the long seasons. It seemed like nothing about Gabrielle was at all familiar and yet the very center of Gabrielle had never died. Perhaps someday soon Xena could say the same about herself.

Gabrielle continued to study the lake, and yet she listened to Xena toying with Argo's tack in the background. She then noted it stopped then warm hands were at her shoulders.

"Are you hungry?"

"Have you learned how to cook?" the bard lightly bantered.

"Gabrielle," the ruler warned.

The queen chuckled and peered up at her tall friend. "Some things never change." She enjoyed those blue eyes rolling, but she turned and followed Xena to the saddlebags under the budding tree. She tilted her head some and observed the green, young leaves that were trying to come to life. "Spring is not far."

Xena was knelt beside the bags and rummaged through them. "It is already here." She knew the bard was still standing so she gently ordered, "Sit."

The Amazon silently agreed and took a seat on the cool ground. She folded her legs and went back to watching the lake. She imagined in another two moons or so it would be warm to swim in again.

The Conqueror took a moment to spread out the assortment of food for them. She imagined the bard still had an appetite like the old days. She also couldn't guess whether or not Gabrielle's tastes had changed over time, but she knew her own had done so.

Gabrielle smiled at the selection, and she was pleased by all the tastes when they started to eat. After they finished the meal, they were only left with two apples so each took one. Gabrielle took a first bite and thoughtfully considered her current situation with the ruler. She tapped her apple once on her right knee then decided to take the plunge.

Xena sensed the bard's curious green eyes on her, and she knew what it could mean. She waited for it.

"How did you survive the cross?"

The ruler heard the gentle, quiet question but bit into her apple a second time. As she chewed on it, she was able to build not her words but her control over her darker memories. "A Gallic slave, M'Lila, saved me."

"She freed you?" the bard murmured. After Xena's nod, Gabrielle pressed forward. "What happened afterwards?"

Xena turned the apple in her hand a couple of times then mentally walked back into her past. "After M'Lila freed me from the cross, I escaped to a healer in the nearby mountains. My legs had been broken by the Romans, and I could not walk so the healer, Nicklio, reset my legs. Within a few candlemarks...." Xena continued her story for her friend.

Gabrielle carefully listened to every detail. She hardly interrupted and only asked questions when Xena

seemed to slow down. She was surprised that Xena was so upfront about what'd happened and yet perhaps Xena was being selective too about the details. Regardless, Gabrielle appreciated the fact that Xena opened up to her, and soon she returned the favor.

The Conqueror had finished her apple so she threw it down at the lake and watched it roll down the rest of the way into the water. "What happen to you after the raiders took you?"

The Amazon Queen set her apple core down on the ground, next to the waterskin. She gently sighed but recalled those ugly days from her past. "Lila, mother, and I were taken to Bracis's camp. We were tied and stowed away in a tent... under guard. They barely fed us." She was silent for a moment but swallowed. "I think back on it now... I imagine they wanted us to be weak so we couldn't run if we did escape. They also wanted us weak for... other reasons." She peered up at Xena.

The ruler captured the bard's gaze. She held it as she asked, "How many women were taken? Do you remember?"

Gabrielle lost her focus and murmured, "Almost fifty... there were women from other villages... like Stagirus." She shook her head and lowered it. She stared at the apple core that rested on its side. She licked her lips as the memories flashed through her mind. She closed her eyes at the repeated, different screams that echoed in her head. "You know you'd... accidentally protected me then." She opened her eyes again and whispered, "They never raped me or Lila because we were worth more as virgins."

Xena understood Gabrielle's reference back to the night in the wheat field when she gave the bard the necklace. She sadly sighed because she realized that most likely Hecuba had been raped, and she didn't need to ask.

Gabrielle looked up at Xena now, and a gloss coated her eyes. "I couldn't do anything... nothing to stop them. Lila and I had to watch."

The Conqueror grew darker at the bard's implications. She couldn't imagine being Gabrielle or Lila's age at the time and witnessing their mother being raped.

Gabrielle looked back at the lake because she couldn't bare the underlying anger rising in the ruler. "We were taken to Hecht's compound about a moon later. I really don't recall how long. We spent a season at Hecht's compound and were trained to become a house slave with some amount of skill. It made us worth more to have a particular skill." She shook her head and mentioned, "I learned to cook, sew, and stitch." She paused then explained, "But what honestly made me worth wild was that I could read and write." She huffed.

"That is a rare skill for a slave... or peasant," the ruler agreed.

"Yes," the bard murmured, "and Hecht had me schooled to expand my vocabulary." She now considered when she was first sold to Michulus and why she was probably chosen. "Before the slave auctions... the biddings begin there is a slavers' scroll posted on the wall."

"It lists the skills, abilities, and general information for each slave," Xena agreed.

Gabrielle nodded and further explained, "Mine obviously had that I could read and write. I was sold to Michulus, who was into politics. I sometimes think he chose me because I could read and write."

"Perhaps to dictate his scrolls and such," the ruler theorized.

The bard moved her head in agreement.

"So you were sold to Michulus... then what?" the ruler carefully tried.

The Amazon Queen continued her story about how she escaped Michulus house when it was burned to the ground by the villagers. They'd gone to Michulus's father, Cornelio, who happily took them in along with his daughter-in-law. And it was there that Gabrielle was given a chance at a new life, and it was a life she never imagined. It eventually led her to today, to be the next Amazon Queen of the Macedonian Nation.

The Conqueror remained silent and digested the entire story. She leaned backwards until her hands and arms kept her propped up from behind. She then stretched out her cramped legs from her earlier position. She lifted her blue eyes until they met the matching sky.

Gabrielle stayed cross legged, and she studied the thin pieces of grass that was sprouting through the ground. She lifted her right hand, faced her palm to the ground, and grazed her hand just over the tips of the short, young grass. In response, the grass wiggled out of the ground as if they were trying to grow to her hand.

"Why now though?" the bard murmured. She straightened up and studied the ruler's profile. "Why have we stayed separated for so long and why now do we meet again?"

The Greek ruler shrugged and remarked, "Fluke."

"I don't think so." Gabrielle shook her head. "Everything happens for a reason, Xena." She drummed her fingers on her knees and dared, "Do you really think it's a fluke?"

"You mean do I prefer to think that all this has happened because the gods willed it?" The Conqueror shook her head then met Gabrielle's stare.

Gabrielle sighed and argued, "What if there's something bigger than the gods? Something that even the Fates cannot control."

Xena merely arched a challenging eyebrow. "Destiny," she murmured.

"Yes," Gabrielle softly agreed. "Even the gods have a destiny that they cannot deny." She looked back at the lake. "That they most likely fear."

The Conqueror stayed silent, but she was carefully processing her friend's thought pattern. She had no arguments, but she didn't voice any agreement. It was undoubtedly true that the gods did indeed exist as Seven of Nine proved as well as Faolan. They were both too unusual to just explain away.

Gabrielle knew the ruler was contemplating so she gently offered, "I think in due course we'll understand it better." She sighed and sadly mentioned, "I have to be heading back soon."

Xena came out of her thoughts and focused on the present.

"The Nation will be celebrating our victory," the queen continued. She smiled up at Xena. "I wanted to invite you, Borias, and Bastien to join in the festivities."

Xena nodded and softened at the gesture some. "I will attend. I will ask Borias and Bastien, but I can

almost guarantee they will join." She then proceeded to collect the waterskin. "Let's get you back. By now Bastien is probably worrying his bronze off about me."

Gabrielle chuckled and climbed to her feet too. She brushed off any dirt from the back of her leather skirt then watched the ruler tuck away the almost empty waterskin.

The Conqueror was knelt beside the saddlebags. After stowing the waterskin, she fished around for something else and soon felt it. She tightened her fingers around the hard object hidden away in her saddlebags.

Gabrielle was slightly curious about what Xena was pulling out of the saddlebags now. She thought they were going to get moving yet Xena stood up with a brown object mostly hidden in her large hand. Gabrielle confusingly peered up at her friend, who came in front of her again.

Xena swallowed and peered down at the brown, wood object cloaked in her hand. She raised her eyes to Gabrielle's curious face. "I haven't forgotten what today is... from sunup to moonset."

The bard racked her mind about what was so special today for Xena. She couldn't come up with anything so she started to search deeper in her memories.

Xena stretched out her right hand in a giving motion and spoke. "I think you've forgotten because you don't want to remember anymore... the memories are too painful." She turned her hand over so that the object faced down to the ground. She waited for Gabrielle to reach up with cupped hands. "Because only your family knew about today... family you thought you've lost."

Gabrielle cupped her hand around the wood object, and it brought back an old, hard memory. She now understood what Xena was telling her. "Oh gods..." The sudden sting built up behind her eyes.

"But you haven't lost all of your family. I am here." Xena released the wooden object into Gabrielle's hands and pulled her hand away.

Gabrielle sensed the familiar weight, and she bowed her head. Through the fuzziness of her stinging eyes, she studied the wooden toy in her hands. She ran her fingers over swirly patterns that mimicked wool, then she touched the muzzle. She lifted her head just as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Xena stood still and painfully watched the tears.

Gabrielle again studied the wooden lamb nestled in her hands. Xena had given her the wooden lamb originally, and the lamb marked the beginning of their friendship from childhood. It'd taken Xena a solid moon to carve the lamb with such precise detail. However Gabrielle believed that the lamb had been lost during the raid but apparently it survived.

Very slowly the lamb was rolled onto its back. There, clearly etched into the belly, were the two Greek letters for Xena and Gabrielle's initials that were joined. And Gabrielle gingerly ran her fingertip along the etching just as she'd done so many seasons ago when Xena first gave it to her.

Xena kept her hands clenched at her side as Gabrielle raised her head again.

Gabrielle tried to swallow the pain down, but it was too hard. She simply yet painfully rasped, "Thank you." She clutched the wooden toy harder because she desperately wanted to hug her friend.

Xena sensed Gabrielle's need, but she wasn't sure how to act upon it. She flexed her hands in a unsure, nervous manner, which was rare to see of her.

Gabrielle uselessly fought her tears, but it seemed to make it worse. She hated the still seeming awkwardness between them, and she decided to finally break it down now. She kept the toy in her right hand then moved forward.

This time, Xena was prepared, and she welcomed Gabrielle into her arms. The relief flooded through her as she drew the bard into her. That familiar sensation of Gabrielle's cheek at her collarbone returned, and she closed her eyes.

Gabrielle had her arms tightly around her friend. She still clung to the lamb, and it rested against the ruler's back shoulder blade. She shut her eyes and kept the side of her face against Xena's warm skin.

Xena bowed her head, closed her eyes, and softly whispered, "Happy birthday, Gabrielle."

**To be continued.**