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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 25

Seven of Nine adjusted the silver bracelet on her left arm then she stepped out of her hut. She was quickly greeted by her silent guards, but she merely ignored them as she began her journey through the early morning. She observed the low sunlight in the eastern skyline. She still mixed in the late darkness of the early morning thanks to her black leathers; however, her golden hair glowed.

The automaton was headed in a specific direction according to a request. She already had the mental map up in her mind and targeted a certain location. Soon enough, she approached a thatch door and knocked on it.

"Enter," called a commanding voice.

The automaton pushed open the door and discovered the petite yet dominate Commander Kaylee seated behind her desk. Seven of Nine glanced over her shoulder when two of her four guards followed her.

The stratègos rose to her feet and ordered, "You may wait outside."

The guards, Ephiny and Solari, nodded then disappeared out of the office. They made sure to close the door as well.

Seven of Nine stood in the middle of the office, her legs slightly parted, and her arms linked behind her back. Her cool eyes were fixed on the petite stratègos.

Commander Kaylee slowly came around the desk while she spoke. "Seven of Nine, you've promised to stay here and not continue anymore attempts for the queen. And I want to believe that's true."

The automaton kept her eyes on the stratègos and remarked, "I assure you it is."

Commander Kaylee seemed to accept the statement. She leaned against the front of her desk and folded her arms. "I've decided you'll be given a temporary position here in the Nation. You will be working with our blacksmith, Andra, who will need your assistance. You will follow our rules. You'll be expected to follow our protocols. You'll report directly to Andra and obey any order she gives you."

Seven of Nine carefully listened to the speech then replied, "I understand."

The stratègos nodded and straightened up from the desk. She started around her desk and mentioned, "One more thing, your name... your designation... Seven of Nine. It's a little cumbersome. Wouldn't you prefer to be called by another name?" Commander Kaylee now stood behind her desk. She rested her hands on the back of her desk chair.

"I have been Seven of Nine for as far back as I can recall."

The stratègos bit her lower lip and considered it. "Alright." She quietly drummed her right fingers on the chair once. "But maybe we could streamline it a little. How would you feel about... Seven?"

The automaton took a deep breath as if collecting herself. "Imprecise." She raised her chin some. "But acceptable."

"Excellent." The stratègos dropped her hands from the chair. "Andra will be expecting you within a candlemark. See that you eat then report to her."

"Yes, stratègos."

Commander Kaylee was satisfied and ordered, "Dismissed."

The automaton took the hint, turned on her heels, and marched out of the office. She was followed by her shadows as she went to the dining hut across the village. She soon had a lonely yet tasteful breakfast then she continued on her way to the smithing hut. She noted the smoke already flowing from the roof.

The blacksmith, Andra, had her back to the entrance, but she sensed a presence. Her skin crawled some, yet she turned around and faced the tall beauty in her smithing hut.

Seven of Nine instantly recalled Andra as the Amazon who struck her in the temple. Now the blacksmith's hammer made sense to her. She stayed ridged and reported, "The stratègos informed me

that I am to report to you."

Andra cleared her throat quietly and removed her gloves. She tossed the worn, dark gloves onto her workbench then came around it. "Yes." She wasn't too thrilled about the stratègos's request yesterday to have the automaton work with her in the smithing hut. She'd at first fought it tooth and nail until her blood sister, Gabrielle, asked her to do this. Andra could no longer say no.

"I'm the blacksmith here in the Nation." Andra came a few steps from the automaton. She folded her muscular arms, which shined from the thin sheen of sweat she'd already worked up this morning. "I also have the daunting task of armoring and brandishing this Nation of featherheads."

Seven of Nine slightly tilted her head at the remark about 'featherheads' because she couldn't decipher it.

Andra sighed and shifted all her weight to her right foot. "There are roughly two thousand warriors in this Nation. That means at least three thousand swords, sheaths, gauntlets, and lots of jewelry." She walked away and added, "A bare minimum of twelve thousand arrowheads. And at least three thousand horseshoes." She stood behind her workbench and held onto the edge with her hands. "It gets a little busy around here."

Seven of Nine gradually arched her right, metallic eyebrow. "I concur."

The blacksmith nodded then scanned about her smithing hut. "First, let's outfit you..." She locked on what she needed and went over to her right and rummaged through some drawers. She selected a pair of work gloves that were once her father's, and she imagined they'd fit the automaton's large hands.

Seven of Nine took in the worn, leather gloves when Andra neared her with them. The gloves were held out to her, and she gingerly accepted them. After she put them on, she found them to be a perfect fit.

Andra had thin lips, but she was satisfied and stated, "Let's begin with the basics. Follow me." She guided the automaton behind her workbench and began the training she'd mapped out in her head last night. She would soon discover how quickly the automaton, Seven of Nine, learned and retained new information.

Across the Nation, the queen had risen and dressed in her plain leathers. She planned to get moved into the queen's office in the administration hut. She'd been delaying it with good reasons, but she planned to take care of it today. She also needed to retire Melosa's queen mask so that hers could be designed. However Melosa's queen mask was currently being hung on Melosa's front door in common tradition. Amazon tradition was that after an Amazon passed away and submitted to the funeral pyre then their mask was hung on their hut door in respect.

Queen Gabrielle stood near her desk, and she stared at it. She came out of her thoughts then went to the front door. She first collected her sheathed sword and brought the strap across her chest. Next she grabbed her staff and quietly left the hut. She had a lot to do today besides just moving into the queen's office. She also needed to help with preparations for the festivities tonight as well as check on Seven of Nine's progress.

Solari leaned against the hut's corner and crossed her arms over her busty chest. She sighed and stared up at the white, puffy clouds. She glanced over at her comrade.

Ephiny was back to her pacing because she could rarely stand still.

"Ephiny, stop," Dekka hotly insisted. "You're going to wear a hole to Hades."

Ephiny shot a glare over at Dekka, who stood next to Solari.

"I hope Teresa is back soon with water," Solari tried in hopes to stop Dekka and Ephiny's fussing.

Ephiny made no remark.

Dekka just decided to lean against the smithing hut too. She shuffled her lightweight duster around so it wasn't tight against her.

"I'm going to check on them." Then with that, Ephiny marched into the smithing hut.

Dekka turned her head to Solari.

Solari just shrugged at Dekka's annoyed look. "Ephiny believes in the check system."

"Apparently," Dekka muttered.

Solari was going to say more but a certain somebody caught her attention. "Look alive... stratègos straight ahead." She and Dekka both straightened up and acted like professional guards.

Meanwhile, Ephiny had silently entered the smithing hut. She remained still and merely watched the blacksmith teach the automaton the art of smithing.

"Punching is the fifth essential technique done in forging," Andra explained. "When you do punching you're either putting a hole into the metal or just giving it a depression." She grabbed her tongs and grabbed for a u-shaped metal that was now orange from the fire. She removed it and set it on her anvil. "You can use a tool to do this." Andra indicated one off to the right that leaned against her workbench. "Grab that for me."

Seven of Nine stepped over there and easily lifted the pointed, long tool. She studied it and quickly deduced, "This tool fits into the... pritchel hole." She came over to Andra, who still held onto the orange metal.

"Yes." Andra partially smiled at the automaton's keen observation. "Can you manage it into the pritchel hole?"

"I believe so." Seven of Nine efficiently maneuvered the pointed tool's round end into the hole while the pointed end remained upward.

Andra now demonstrated how to punch a hole into the u-shape metal. She made two exact holes with her lighter hammer. She then lowered it and ordered, "Your try."

The automaton said nothing but took the hammer then the tong, which still held the u-shaped metal. She mimicked Andra's exact demonstration.

"Five on each side," the blacksmith carefully instructed. She watched the automaton make the holes in the u-shape metal. Once the work was complete, she instructed, "Dip it in the water bucket."

Seven of Nine lowered the hammer to the ground then plunged the hot metal into the water. After several sizzles, she removed it and held up the odd item.

Andra folded her arms over her leather apron and stated, "Congratulations... you've made your first horseshoe."

Slowly the automaton looked from the horseshoe to the blacksmith. "Obviously this is designed for a horse's hoof. But I have not heard or seen such an invention."

Andra chuckled and reached for the cooled horseshoe. "It's fairly unheard of, yes." She plucked the shoe free and examined it. "My father and I learned of shoeing a horse from the Gauls." She lowered the horseshoe to her side. "It's an excellent way to save the horse's hoofs from wear and tear."

The automaton logically considered it then replied, "I concur." Now she focused on something behind the blacksmith.

Andra turned and spotted both Ephiny and the stratègos.

The stratègos had her hands behind her back, and she softly directed her words to the guard. "Excuse us, Ephiny."

The young Amazon bowed her head then exited the hut.

Commander Kaylee stepped up to the workbench that separated her from the blacksmith and automaton. "How is the progress?"

"Excellent." Andra set the horseshoe on the workbench.

The stratègos didn't need to hear anymore because Andra was always honest in her word choices. She shifted her interests to the automaton. "See that you stop by my hut by sunset, Seven."

"Yes, stratègos." The automaton watched Commander Kaylee leave then she switched back to Andra.

The blacksmith continued to train the automaton throughout the day. Never did the stratègos stop by again, and Ephiny only rarely poked her head in for a bit. Then it wasn't long before Andra had a leather apron on Seven of Nine, and they were working together to design a simple dagger. The project would take the rest of the afternoon but Seven of Nine would succeed in making her first weapon.

A little before sunset, Seven of Nine parted ways with Andra and marched over to the stratègos's office. She was called to enter after she knocked on the door. She didn't expect to find the Amazon Queen in the office with the stratègos.

Queen Gabrielle stood up and lifted her staff from her lap. She faced the automaton and greeted, "Good evening, Seven."

Seven of Nine placed her hands behind her back and assumed her formal position. "Good evening, Queen Gabrielle." She wasn't too accustomed to normal socializing so she often found it acceptable to repeat the person's greeting.

"How did you make out with Andra today?" the queen probed.

"Acceptable."

Gabrielle wasn't sure whether to continue the conversation. It came natural to her to converse, but she found it truly hard with the automaton. She merely nodded at Seven of Nine's word, and she turned to the stratègos. "Find me before the festivities begin."

"Of course, my queen."

The queen then parted from the hut. She needed to finish the last preparations for the celebration tonight, and then she imagined that the Conqueror would arrive shortly. She just hoped she could make a quick stop at the armory hut for something. She also expected Hercules and Iolaus to join before they left tomorrow morning. But if anything, at least she was moved into the queen's office hut.

Just as the sun hugged the western horizon, the slightly parted western gates along the Nation's walls were filled by three guards. The three Amazon guards didn't have their weapons out, and they pushed back their masks upon the visitors' arrival by horseback.

"Evening, Conqueror," a guard greeted.

"Queen Gabrielle invited us for the celebration tonight."

"Yes," the same guard agreed, "we were informed of your arrival. May we take your horses?"

The Conqueror adjusted the reins in her hand then replied, "Just point us in the right direction to the stable."

The guard stepped aside and pointed towards the stables. "The keeper will be there." She lowered her arm. "Have a good evening, Conqueror."

Xena nodded then gently tapped Argo's sides. She led Borias and Bastien to the stables and found the appropriate one for them. She dismounted just as the stable keeper joined them. She handed over her reins and so did her subordinates.

"Good evening, Conqueror," a warm, gentle voice called from behind.

The Greek ruler turned on her boots' heels. Her features remained still yet a glow entered her eyes. "Good evening, Queen Gabrielle."

The queen came closer to the three guests. She slightly inclined her head to the Conqueror, who did the same in return. Gabrielle then smiled at Borias and Bastien. "Welcome, stratègos and chiliarchès."

"Thank you for the invite, Queen Gabrielle," Bastien offered.

The Conqueror silently took in the Amazon Queen's new attire. Gabrielle's top was a soft, brown leather that had a swirl pattern across it. The straps were connected to decorative metal pieces that came down her shoulders and connected to wrist bands and gauntlets. The gauntlets themselves were a combination of leather and metal but fully resembled feathers. Her matching skirt was knee high and plain except for the decorative flap that lay across her front. A small, green gem stood in the front, and it was surrounded by tiny feathers and woven pattern.

And Xena found Gabrielle very sensual and commanding tonight. She hadn't seen Gabrielle's hair glow such a golden hue. She'd grown accustomed to the bard's short hairstyle and found it rather attractive too. She only came out of her daze once Gabrielle spoke again.

"Follow me." Gabrielle led the guests to the center of the village where the music was the loudest and the voices grew in strength. There was already singing and dancing around a large bonfire.

The queen first showed the guests what was involved for the celebration and festivities. She then introduced Bastien and Borias to Hercules and Iolaus. She noticed how they were engrossed in various conversations so she slipped away with Xena at her side.

The Conqueror tucked her hands between her back and cape. She slowly followed Gabrielle towards the tables of food and drink.

"Any word of your joining army?"

"They will arrive the day after tomorrow," the ruler informed.

The bard softly nodded and kept her voice low. "You plan to march the day after then?"

"Most likely," Xena agreed.

Gabrielle felt her stomach knot at that information, but she set it aside. Tonight was a happy celebration about their victory and the end to Draco's threat. She came to the food line and took a spot at the end. She carefully composed her next words. "Will you be back through western Macedonia?"

"Not for several moons," Xena revealed. "After the Macedon Kingdom and Thrace are taken then we will march to Illyria."

The Amazon Queen was quiet then softly posed, "Do you think you can conquer Illyria without any trouble?"

"I do not see why not." The Conqueror tilted her head some and studied her friend's still features.

"Is there any one ruler in Illyria?" Gabrielle shook her head and confessed, "I'm not familiar with Illyria... the people, government... culture."

"There is a king," the ruler explained. "King Gentius." She revealed her hands from her back and picked up a wood plate once she and Gabrielle actually entered the buffet line. "He's from the tribe known as the Labeates."

"So Illyria is mostly tribal?" the bard questioned. She picked up a plate next and followed her friend into the food line.

"Yes and no," Xena replied. "Another tribe called the Dalmatians has recently declared themselves independent from King Gentius reign."

"Illyria is having problems with Rome?"

The Conqueror started to put some food on her plate while she spoke. "Rome already tried to invade Illyria about half a generation ago, but they failed."

"I presume that's what brought the tribes together?"

"Yes," the ruler agreed. She moved down the line. She glanced at the queen, who was filling her plate. "Now it seems that the Republic has set their eyes on Illyria again."

"Along with Greece," Gabrielle muttered.

"Hmmm," Xena softly agreed. She now piled some cheese onto her plate then went towards the utensils and merely picked up a small cloth and Roman fork. "Illyria is a strategic move more than a conquest for Rome."

Gabrielle followed her friend and picked up a mug of wine just like Xena. "A step closer to Greece?"

"Not just that," the Conqueror rebuked.

The queen switched her mental gears and tried to think about why Illyria was so important. "More coastline," she realized aloud. She now guided Xena through the people and hunted for an open spot to sit and eat. "That'll give them more ports to tie up their ships... move the army closer to Greece."

"Yes." Xena spotted the table that Gabrielle had in mind. She took to one side and Gabrielle on the other. She sat down with the bard so that they faced each other. "I'm not sure how apt you are on military warfare."

The bard shook her head and picked up her fork. "I'm learning, honestly. The queen doesn't have to have extensive military knowledge or knowhow. That is Commander Kaylee's position."

Xena already understood that about Amazons. She liked the system too, but it could have its flaws. She decided to go back to the original topic. "For any good invasion on foreign soil to work, the invading army must have naval support."

"Why is that?"

The Conqueror picked up a few cubes of cheese and ate them while she spoke. "Food... supplies and support." She tilted her head and mentioned, "Do you recall the Battle of Thermopylae?"

"Who could forget?" the bard insisted. "The famous three hundred Spartans and seven hundred Thespians that fought to death to stop the Persians." Her eyes were lit up by the ancient, famous story of the heroic Spartans and Thespians that fought to their last breath to stop the Persians. "Xena, I am a bard."

The ruler chuckled but became serious after a moment. "What the bards forget to tell is the part about the naval battles fought just off of the cape of Artemisium." She picked up her fork and pushed some of her lamb slices. "Themistocles led a naval squadron of over three hundred triremes and fought against thousands of Persian ships. Themistocles was brilliant in his strategy and attacks... if he hadn't stopped the Persian naval ships then King Leonidas would have been defeat long before hand."

Gabrielle thought about it then tried, "If the Persian fleet made it past the cape then they would have landed behind King Leonidas... surrounded them."

"Exactly."

Gabrielle considered this while she ate a mouthful of warm lamb meat. She then asked, "So if Rome takes Illyria then it'll be impossible to stop them from invading Greece?"

"It will be hard," Xena corrected. She then touched her wine of mug but didn't pick it up. "The other attraction about Illyria is the gold mines."

The queen had a surprised look when she looked up from her food. "No wonder... not only is it a strategic move it's also an economical move."

"Very much so," the Conqueror agreed. She set down her mug after a drink.

Gabrielle considered all the facts for a moment then stated, "So... it's a race for Illyria then." She tilted her head and challenged, "Can Illyria hold back Rome until you arrive?"

"I believe so."

The Amazon Queen softly sighed and went back to her meal. She now thought about Xena's future and realized how much Greece and the people relied on her. Without Xena's leadership, Greece would remain in tyrannical hands until Rome could conquer it. Then who would know what Roman rulership would be like under the Republic. Gabrielle inwardly sighed at now seeing the weight placed over Xena's shoulders.

Xena sensed a shift in the bard, and she gently questioned, "What is it?"

The bard peered up. "There are hundreds of thousands of people depending on you... on you succeeding."

"There are," the ruler softly agreed. She sighed and became slightly dim. "But I chose this path, Gabrielle... just as you chose yours as the Amazon Queen."

Gabrielle nodded once then set her fork down. She mentioned, "The weight of this... the rulership, Xena..." She shook her head. "All of Greece and Illyria?"

The Conqueror already knew and accepted the weight of being a ruler. She simply stated, "As heavy as the crown." She studied the bard's concerned features then altered her words. "As heavy as the mask, Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle let out a deep breath and bowed her head. She gradually raised up her head and met Xena's piercing blue eyes. She knew; she knew a long time ago. "You went from commanding friends and horses... to commanding citizens and armies."

"I only command one thing," Xena debated, "I command respect."

Slowly, Gabrielle smiled because she knew it was true. She also understood at one point Xena most likely commanded fear but today it was different.

The Conqueror now pointed her fork at the bard's plate and commanded, "Eat."

The bard laughed and shook her head. "Yes, Xena the Great." She waited for her friend's immediate reaction.

"Oh please," the ruler muttered. "Don't start that with me again." She glowered despite she was mentally taken back to her childhood and across the table sat a younger Gabrielle. By the gods Gabrielle use to call her that nickname all the time. "And I promise if I hear anything... anything about Xena the Great I will know who to come after for it."

Gabrielle smirked and her eyes slotted some in a devilish way. "You can't tell me it doesn't have a nice ring to it?" Her smirk curled deeper. "You played Alexander the Great so well when we were kids, Xena."

"Don't test me, Roxana," the ruler toyed with the bard.

Gabrielle chuckled at the role-playing name she was given when she, Xena, and Lyceus use to act out the Alexander the Great tragedy. Xena always played as Alexander III and Gabrielle was the famous ruler's second wife, Roxana. "Xena, you are taking a liking to Alexander the Great."

"I have enough titles," Xena dangerously reminded.

"What's one more?" Gabrielle taunted.

The Greek ruler gave no verbal response, but she shot a warning look at her friend.

Gabrielle was far from worried, and she merely chuckled.

Xena decided to change the subject and asked, "How does Seven of Nine fair?"

The queen decided to go with the new topic and answered, "She's starting out." She cut up her last slice of lamb while she spoke. "She seems to have trouble with integrating into... I guess society." She pierced a piece of lamb.

"Most likely she's been away from society for some time," the ruler offered. "Plus her alterations from the gods are no help."

"That's what Kaylee and I believe too." Gabrielle thoughtfully munched on the lamb then mentioned, "Kaylee thought of assigning somebody to help her adjust... to teach or reteach her social norms."

The Conqueror considered this for a beat then nodded. "It most likely will benefit her. It would help her adjust." She then grabbed the last piece of cheese on her plate that she was saving for the end. "Is she contributing to the Nation at all?"

The queen moved her head then explained, "Today she worked with Andra and is learning smithing. Andra could use the help."

Xena grinned some and teased, "I am sure your blood sister loves the arrangements."

Gabrielle sighed and admitted, "It took some convincing on my part, yes. But you know me."

"Winning tongue," the ruler taunted. "The word 'no' is a rare word told to you, Gabrielle."

"And I prefer it that way," Gabrielle joked. Her eyes were sparkling.

The Conqueror softly laughed, yet she gazed past the bard and spotted Commander Kaylee. Her eyes followed the stratègos, and she watched the stratègos join Seven of Nine in a dim corner of the celebrations.

Commander Kaylee carefully took the automaton's side and mentioned, "The food is excellent tonight."

Seven did not reply, but she only nodded.

The stratègos then tried, "How are you tonight, Seven?"

"I am running at optimum levels, stratègos."

Commander Kaylee wasn't sure how to take the answer, but she realized how formal and literal it was from the automaton. She moved her head in acknowledgment. "Have you tried... mingling at all tonight?"

Seven of Nine gradually rotated her head to the petite stratègos and informed, "Automatons do not... mingle, stratègos."

The stratègos cleared her throat. "My mistake," she teased in her sultry tone. "I suppose automatons do not dance either?"

Seven had her hands behind her back, and she was ridged. "We do not participate in such an inefficient use of time."

Commander Kaylee bit her lower lip then started to move away. She paused and peered up at the tall, blond bombshell. "And standing around is far more efficient, right?" Then she was gone but not without saying, "See you at sunrise, Seven."

Seven of Nine glowered at the retreating stratègos because she felt she was learning much about the Amazons by studying them from her spot. She was trying to learn what brought these women together so tightly. She had yet to conclude a definitive answer.

The automaton continued to let her gaze wonder over the celebrating women. She briefly watched Hercules, who was speaking to the Conqueror's stratègos. She'd heard of his legend but to her he was no legend because she was far more superior to him. She knew she already matched him in brawns, and her clear advantage was her extensive intelligence that she was given by the gods.

Seven now gazed over at the countless tables that were packed with Amazons. She pinpointed the Amazon Queen, who Seven highly respected. She had not expected the queen to fight her days ago in the Battle of the Fates. Seven knew she was physically superior to the Amazon Queen, but she was well matched by Gabrielle's intelligence and technique. Seven would never forget the day in Gaia's temple ruins.

Then there was the Conqueror, who sat across from the Amazon Queen at the table. The automaton felt some source of venom for the ruler, and she was unsure why. Perhaps because she knew, like the other automatons, that she was handpicked by the gods because an eerie history with the Conqueror. Seven could not recall hers, but she believed her memory would return to her in due course. And would it be a memory she was willing to face?

Seven of Nine remained in the shadows with her four guards in close proximity. She continued to study and mentally record the Amazons. She was very intrigued by all but mostly by the Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle.

After a candlemark, the automaton decided she'd had enough so she proceeded to leave. She roamed through the quiet village and went to the huts. She sensed the guards on her heels, but she merely ignored them. She came upon her hut, entered it, and found that a few candles were already lit. She summarized that somebody must have gone around to the huts and lit them for safety reasons.

Seven of Nine first made a small fire then placed the iron gate in front of the fireplace. Next she efficiently stripped away what little items she had on her body then washed up. She finally got into bed, on her back, and remained in that still position for the night. It did not take her long to mentally shutdown her mind and drift into her dreamscape. But her dreamscape was something foreign to her because under the gods' control, she never experienced them until tonight.

Seven of Nine entered her dreamscape as a young girl, who was between thirteen to fifteen summers old. Seven had no steel implants, and she wore common peasants' clothes except for the arm bracelet that wrapped around her right arm twice because it was somewhat too big for her.

Seven focused on her immediate surroundings, but it was hard because her eyes burned from something in the air. She realized she smelled fire, and she finally drew attention to the burning home in front of her.

"Anke!" called a fearful woman.

Seven of Nine slowly wondered towards the burning home. She wiped away the wetness from her eyes and coughed.

"Anke!" hollered the woman again.

Seven stopped several paces from the burning home that was familiar to her. Suddenly a strong hand grasped her arm.

"Anke," the woman hotly urged, "did you not hear me?"

Seven of Nine tilted her head back some and took in the tall woman now in front of her. She focused on the chiseled features and hazy blue eyes that held fear.

"We must hurry," the woman spoke. She glanced at the burning house. "It's too late." She captured Seven's small hand.

Seven switched her fearful features to the older woman and demanded, "Where's father?"

"Your father and Sanders went to get your uncle. We must hurry."

Seven didn't argue anymore and quickly followed her mother to safety.

The mother guided Seven through the chaotic village. She ducked behind homes to avoid the riders that were on large steeds and waved swords.

Seven stayed close to her mother and whispered, "Who are they, mamma?"

"Raiders," the mother uttered. "Hush now, Anke."

"What about father and Sanders?" Seven questioned anyway.

The mother was watching the horseman fly past, and she waited for an opening to sneak past in the opening. "We are to meet them in the fields of wheat."

"But what if they need help?"

"They will be fine, daughter," the mother urged her child. She then glanced around the side of the house and saw that they may have a chance any moment to dodge across the open space.

"No, we have to help father and Sanders." Seven suddenly broke away from her mother's grasp and took off at a run.

"Anke!" The mother chased after her child, who was very fast with her long legs.

Anke recalled that her mother mentioned that her father and brother were helping her uncle. So she headed across the village, and she dodged around galloping horses. She spotted her uncle's house and grew excited at the prospect of seeing her family.

The mother chased after her child, but she wasn't aware of the raider coming after her. She only made it a few more steps before the raider behind her made a jump for her and knocked her down. She tried to struggle with him and hollered, "Anke!"

The raider hissed and brought his sword's hilt across the woman's head. He was satisfied when she fell unconscious.

Seven raced up to the corner of her uncle's house, and she clung to the side of the house. She breathed heavily and rasped. Her attention was taken to the steps where the painful cries arose. She developed wide eyes at the horrific scene on the steps of the house then she raced around to the front and stumbled up the steps.

"Calli," Seven fearfully called.

Calli lifted her tear stricken features and studied her older cousin. "Anke... they killed father." She still cradled her bloody, dead father.

"Oh gods.... no," Seven pleaded. She looked at her uncle's stomach, which was stricken with a sword wound. She shook her head and begged, "Where's Aunt Charlize?" She watched Calli shake her head then she tried, "My father and Sanders were coming to help."

Calli bowed her tear streaked features. "They did not come." She stared at her dead father and whispered, "Daddy?"

"Anke?" hollered a familiar, deep voice.

Seven was seated on the steps next to her cousin, and she looked over her shoulder. Through her blurry eyes, she recognized her brother and father racing towards them.

Sanders bounded up the steps and joined his sister and cousin. He stared in disbelief at his dead uncle then looked to Calli. "Who did this? Where is Aunt Charlize?"

Calli shook her head.

Sanders grabbed his young cousin's shoulders and demanded, "Where is Aunt Charlize?"

"They took her," Calli cried back.

"Which raider?" Sanders urged.

Calli freed her right hand and pointed in the direction that the raiders walked off with her mother.

Seven followed her cousin's pointed direction, and she focused on the three raiders that towed along a slim figure of a woman. One raider was tall and bulky plus his bronze armor reflected in the sunlight. Another raider was short but had sunny hair. And the third raider had a sleek form along with a black, wavy mane that fluttered in the breeze.

"Anke, where is your mother?"

Seven became distraught as she realized she'd lost track of her mother. "I... I don't know, father." She became frantic and rambled, "She was just behind me. I don't know what happened. I..."

The father looked to Sanders and ordered, "Go find your mother. I'm going to see if I can free your aunt." He then switched his stoic features to his daughter. "Stay here with Calli, Anke." He then rushed off to go after his sister-in-law.

Seven lowered her grim features to her cousin. "Calli, what happened?"

Calli shook her head and refused to tell the story.

"We should go inside," Seven decided aloud. "It'll be safer." She grabbed her cousin's wrist. "Come on, Calli."

Calli first refused, but she relinquished her hold. She stumbled up the steps with Seven's help. She entered the house, yet she paused when her other cousin, Sanders, raced back to the house.

"Anke, they have mother."

Anke stood in the doorway, and she tried to absorb her brother's words. "Gods... no." She felt dread and guilt claim her for leaving her mother's side and what would happen now. She bounded down the steps. "We have to find her."

Sanders stopped his sister at the bottom of the steps. "We can't, sister. We have to stay here until father returns."

"No!" Anke tried to shove off brother's grip. "Let go, Sanders!"

Calli watched her quarreling cousins then she spotted a few horseback raiders racing towards them. "Raiders!" She pointed.

Sanders and his sister stopped then turned their horrified faces to the approaching raiders. "Get inside!" He shoved his sister up the steps.

One raider had pulled out a bow and arrow and strung up the arrow. He confidently aimed at the two kids at the base of the steps.

Seven hustled up the steps and yelled at Calli, "Go hide! Hurry!"

Calli didn't argue and disappeared into the house to find a safe spot.

Sanders was rushing up the steps behind his sister, yet he screamed in agonizing pain and fell onto the steps next to his uncle. His face became coated with cooling blood from his uncle.

Seven was on the top step and became paralyzed at seeing her fallen brother and the arrow sticking out of the back of his thigh.

"Go, Anke! Hide!" Sanders hollered, and he struggled to get up.

Seven ignored the order and raced back down to help her brother. She grabbed his shoulders and tried to get him to stand, but he was far larger. She then paused when she heard the raiders dropped to their feet from the horses.

The three raiders laughed and unsheathed their swords. They eyed the young kids.

Sanders struggled to push his sister away, yet she refused to leave him.

"Get them," a raider ordered.

Seven screamed as the raiders surged up the steps and captured her and her brother. She fought against them, but it was useless. She managed to kick one raider in his chin, which only angered him. She soon took a hard slap to her cheek and tears welded in her eyes.

"What about the other girl?" another raider questioned.

"No time for it," a raider replied. "Burn the house down."

"No!" Sanders hollered.

Seven tried to struggle again but the raider kept her hands locked in place, and she couldn't move.

"Calli!" she screamed.

A raider approached the house with a burning torch that he'd just lit with flint stones. He let the fire burn the steps near the dead man. He then went up the steps and set the thatch door on fire followed by the side of the doorway. Finally, he tossed the torch into the middle of the room.

"Calli," Seven yelled, "get out of the house!" She took another hard smack to her right cheek.

"Let's get them out of here," a raider ordered.

The three raiders tied up the kids then hauled them through the burning village. Seven lost her fight because her wrists were bound tightly. She started to weep. Her brother though remained strong on the outside but the anger rose within him.

Young Seven and her brother were taken to where the raiding party was rejoining. She was directed towards a wagon, and Sanders was separated from her. She tried to call for Sanders, but she had no idea where he was taken. She instead was put into the line to the back of the jail wagon, which was loaded with women.

Seven scanned all of the returning raiders. She grew dark when she looked at each of them. And there

was the distinct smell of fire on the breeze from the burning village.

"Stop him!" a raider commanded in anger.

Seven glanced sharply to her right to see her father fighting a few raiders. She felt her hopes lift up despite the overwhelming odds that stood against him.

Seven's father, Konrad, had a raider's sword in his hands. He was bloody from previous fights, yet he was highly skilled from past history. He took on three raiders that came at him. He sliced down one but two more replaced that raider's spot.

Seven helplessly watched her father's failing attempt. She then became confused when she saw a female raider, who joined the fight.

The female raider efficiently disarmed Konrad just after he took a blade to his right arm.

Konrad lost his sword and stood defenseless before the circle of raiders. He spit at them and glowered at the female raider, who he lost his sword against.

The female raider was young and had a dark mane. She sharply ordered, "Give up, and you'll live."

Konrad bared his teeth and seethed, "A Germanic never gives up." He suddenly lunged for the young, female raider.

The female raider heard her name cried out in warning. She came at her opponent and tried her best to subdue him with her blade. She put her sword through his leg, and he collapsed in pain.

Konrad was on his knees and tilted his head back. Now he had a sword tip pressed against his throat.

"Surrender," the female raider demanded, but it was more of a plea.

Konrad stared at the raider's face. He only whispered, "I will be one with Wōðanaz." He made his final choice and grabbed the raider's blade.

The female raider was shocked by the villager's fast movements. She watched her blade be rammed into the villager's throat.

Konrad's lungs filled with blood, and he raised his eyes to the sky. His last thought was for his wife and children.

"No!" Seven screamed, "No!" She tried to break from the line but a guard caught her. "Noooo!"

The female raider was still shocked, yet she withdrew her bloody sword. She watched the dead villager fall to his face then the girl's screaming caught her attention. Slowly, she twisted around and stared across at the screaming girl.

Seven let out another cry for her father. She was only pulled back towards the wagon. She focused on the female raider, who was older than her. Seven took in the raider's wild, midnight hair and those crisp blue eyes. She would never forget her father's murderer, never.

Suddenly, Seven of Nine sharply escaped her dreamscape and hastily sat up in bed. She was in a dim firelight from the fireplace and coated in sweat from her nightmare. She quickly scanned the hut and there was nobody around.

The automaton tossed the heavy cover off her hot body. She climbed out of the bed and stood on shaky legs. She made it over to the table in her room and leaned down against it with the palms of her hands.

She stood nude beside the table in a weakened posture and dropped head. The steel that marked her body glowed in the firelight brighter than the sheen of sweat.

Seven of Nine shut her eyes and the nightmare's images rapidly bombarded her again. Her memories from her childhood were slowly awakening. Now she was remembering her individuality that the gods stole from her. An individuality that Seven of Nine was not sure she wanted to have returned after this taste.

To be continued.