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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 27

"Please remain still so that I can treat your injuries... thank you. I'm sorry, did that hurt? I'll try to be more careful." Seven paused then continued in a monotone and bored voice. "Thanks for being a patient patient. Have a pleasant afternoon." She suddenly stopped and lowered the scroll in her altered hand. She gazed down at the young woman behind the desk and clipped, "This is absurd."

Cliona had a scroll too in her left hand. She lowered it to the desk and debated, "Not at all. Keep

going." She offered a smile and added, "You're doing fine."

Seven of Nine slightly lifted her metallic eyebrow and argued, "This vernacular is not applicable to my duties in the Nation."

The apprentice healer stood up from the desk. She wasn't exactly eye level with the automaton, but she had a better view. "We can tailor the vocabulary to your specific situations a little later. Right now it's the sentiment that counts."

Seven of Nine ignored the healer, and she placed the unrolled scroll down on the desk. "I don't see the relevance."

"I create these exercises," Cliona explained, "in hopes to help you with the... social graces." She considered a thought then added, "If you repeat them enough times then eventually it could become second nature." She tilted her head at the automaton. "A healer has to show the most sentiment towards a patient... and this could benefit you later."

Seven of Nine didn't seem convinced of the idea.

Cliona ignored it and insisted, "Let's continue." She lifted her scroll up.

The automaton resisted from sighing, but she picked up the scroll and focused on it.

"Exercise Two," Cliona began, "the workplace encounter."

Seven scanned down to the exercise further down the scroll.

The apprentice healer this time excitingly stated, "Now I'll be the apprentice healer, and you'll be the master healer."

The automaton sighed finally and lifted the scroll more. "Please hand me the pedestal and mortar."

"Of course, master healer immediately." Cliona pretends to hand over the imaginary items.

"Thank you," Seven replies, "Looks at instruments."

The apprentice healer shook her head and leaned closer to the automaton. She quietly informed, "No, no don't read that part, only the dialog." She then offers a smile and waits for Seven to continue.

"Excuse me, apprentice healer this is the wrong pedestal."

Cliona pretends to realize it's wrong, and she puts away the imaginary pedestal then looks for another.

"Would you mind finding the correct one," Seven continued.

"Not at all," Cliona remarked after she read her line from the scroll.

"Thank you," the automaton replied in monotone. "Did I mention you looked lovely today?"

"Oooh, master healer you're so charming," Cliona answered in a warm, happy voice.

Seven of Nine slowly turned her head to Cliona, and her clear annoyance was apparent. She handed over the scroll to Cliona and stated, "This lesson is terminated." Once the apprentice healer took the scroll, Seven started for the door of the healer's hut.

Cliona frowned, but she hastily followed the automaton to the open door. "I know it's awkward. And when I first started as an apprentice it was somewhat painful to be pleasant to the patient when you're

not in the mood." She put both scrolls into her right hand and lowered them to her side. "But I think you will find the rewards well worth the effort."

Seven of Nine was curious about that so she faced the apprentice healer, who was her mentor. "Rewards?"

"The ability to put others at ease... make them feel more comfortable around you." Cliona came over to the automaton and considered an interesting fact. "You're a lot like me when I first came to the Nation." She noted Seven's doubtful features so she quickly explained, "I was quiet... shy... I wasn't sure how to communicate with others. I didn't exactly have a mentor... I kind of learned on my own."

The automaton carefully listened this time.

Cliona showed a small smile. "Now I'm willing to share my wisdom... but..." She had a small grin and wandered behind Seven. "If you're not interested then fine. I'll just stick to your routine physical checkups."

Seven of Nine had a thoughtful look then she turned around to the apprentice healer. "I will examine your data." She lifted her left hand.

Cliona suddenly smiled and handed the automaton her original scroll. "Oh good." She then pointed at something on the lower part. "Pay special attention to exercise seventeen... Blacksmith Banter for Beginners."

The automaton accepted the scroll then strolled off to the open door. She stopped in the doorway, partially turned back, and considered her next words. In her best monotone, she offered, "Have a pleasant day." Then she was headed down the steps and gone.

Cliona slowly developed a smirk. Perhaps this whole mentorship for the automaton wouldn't be so hard after all. She had to admit that it's helped her stay focused both during work hours at the healer's hut and at home in the hut. That was helpful in keeping her mind off her mother's recent death in the Battle of the Fates.

Seven of Nine had the scroll rolled back up, and she marched across the village. She had an appointment with the queen, and she would be early to it. She went right to the administration hut and the guard there greeted her. Behind her, she noted how her four regular guards followed in her wake.

"The queen is expecting you," Vara mentioned.

The automaton merely nodded.

Vara then glanced at the four, young guards that were assigned to the automaton. "The queen instructed for you four to wait here." She then focused back on Seven of Nine. "I'll escort you to the queen's office." She opened left thatch double-door and guided the automaton into the hut.

Queen Gabrielle was steadily writing something out on a scroll. She'd just finished when the knock came at her door. She called for entry, and she set her quill into the inkwell once the tall automaton entered her office.

Seven of Nine approached the seated queen behind the desk. She heard Vara close the door behind her.

"Sit down," Queen Gabrielle offered. She pointed at one of the two open chairs.

"I prefer to remain standing."

The queen decided not to argue so she leaned back in her chair. She had to recline her neck some to help her take in Seven's full features.

The automaton seemed to fill the room. She had a ridged back, her legs slightly parted, and her hands linked behind her back. She now only wore the black leather pants and vest-style top that she was given many days ago by Commander Kaylee. The red trim in the leather stood out in contrast to the black. She kept her hair pinned up in a tight bun.

"I asked you here to just kind of report with me," Gabrielle explained. "I want to know how things are working out... how you feel here." She hesitated then brought up, "Commander Kaylee said you're slowly gaining your memories back."

"I am," the automaton agreed.

"Do you mind telling me what you've recalled?" The bard shifted in her chair. "Do you know your real name or where you're from?"

Seven of Nine was quiet as she considered her response. She finally answered, "My real designation is Anke... Anke of Cirra."

"Cirra," the queen softly repeated. She considered her mental map. "That's not too far from here.. five to seven days ride." She focused back on the automaton. "Do you know how you became an automaton?"

"I do not," Seven replied. She hesitated yet explained, "My family is originally from Germania, but I was born here in Greece... so was my brother."

"Germania," Gabrielle whispered. "That would explain your physical features. You're certainly not of Greek origins." She tilted her head. "How did your family arrive in Greece?"

"I am unsure." Seven of Nine lowered her eyes then lifted them back to the queen. "May I inquire about the Conqueror?"

The bard had straightened up in her chair earlier, but she leaned back in it again. "Of course."

"Where will the Conqueror march to next?"

"East," Gabrielle answered, "to the Macedon Kingdom." She bit her lower lip. "She means to conquer King Cortese. He's not a very... honorable king."

Seven of Nine remained silent for a beat but spoke again. "You and the Conqueror have intimate relations, correct?"

The bard took a moment to catch up to what the automaton just asked her. She suddenly flushed once she understood, and she had to clear her throat. "Uh no... no, we don't, Seven." She then furrowed her eyebrows. "Why do you think the Conqueror and I do?"

"I observed the other night that I am not the only one making the hypothesizes that you and the Conqueror have intimate relations."

Gabrielle was still rosy around the cheeks, and she thought back to the other night. That was the night of the party so it now made sense. She shook her head and explained, "The Conqueror and I purely have a friendship."

Seven of Nine gradually lifted her metallic eyebrow. She then coolly remarked, "I see."

Gabrielle decided it was best to put the conversation back on track. "How do you like it here in the Nation?"

"I am adapting," the automaton answered.

The queen didn't take that as good or bad but just factual. "Do you like it here?"

"It is acceptable."

Gabrielle inwardly sighed, yet she understood the automaton's attitude. She'd come to realize the automaton was straight forward and honest. She figured if Seven of Nine didn't like it in the Nation then it would have been made apparent some time ago.

"Do you wish to remain here still?" the bard checked.

"Yes... I find it becoming familiar to me."

"Do you enjoy working with Andra?"

Seven of Nine slightly nodded then affirmed, "She has taught me a great deal in these past few days."

"She seems to think you have a natural talent with smithing." Gabrielle had been surprised by the blacksmith's revealing report about the automaton's progression. "I hope you will continue with her...? That is up to you."

Seven considered the request for a beat. "Yes, I would like to continue." She took in Gabrielle's warmer features so Seven took that as a good sign. "May I inquire when will my probation terminate?"

Queen Gabrielle tilted her head to the side. "It may be awhile, Seven. It's not only myself and Commander Kaylee, who have to feel comfortable about you... it's the entire Nation." She straightened up again. "They need time... just as you do." She nibbled on her lower lip. "But perhaps in half a moon or so we can reduce the number of guards."

Seven bowed her head and stated, "Acceptable."

The bard was relieved to hear the automaton's agreement. She then reminded, "If you need help or to talk to somebody, Commander Kaylee, Cliona, Andra, and myself are all here."

Seven of Nine carefully recalled Cliona's lesson today about showing sentiment. She calmly offered, "Thank you."

The queen felt a faint smile tug at the corner of her lips. "You're welcome. Now, is there anything else?"

"I do not believe so."

"Good." Gabrielle then decided how to end the conversation and leaned towards a more formal approach since Seven seemed to be comfortable with such. "Then you're dismissed, Seven."

The automaton nodded, turned around, and headed to the door. She opened it yet hesitated at recalling her earlier lesson with Cliona. She twisted her head back and offered, "Have a pleasant afternoon." She didn't wait for a response and quietly left.

The Amazon Queen gave a small chuckle, and she shook her head.

Seven of Nine exited the administration hut rather quickly and her four guards took up file behind her.

She merely ignored them and headed to her hut so she could drop off Cliona's scroll. She also decided she needed a walk just to clear her head. It was a suggestion that the strategos had given her.

Soon enough, the automaton headed out of the main gates to the west. She entered the forest and noticed that two of her guards took to the trees while two others stayed on foot. Lately her memories were coming back but at times they were during her sleep. She wasn't positive whether those dreams were fact or fiction – possibly a bit of both.

"I can't imagine where she's headed," Solari commented to Teresa.

Teresa just shrugged and followed along side Solari. She briefly glanced up into the trees and spotted Ephiny and Dekka pass between the branches.

"You know," Solari mentioned, "I'm getting the best gossip by guarding Seven of Nine."

"But?" Teresa prompted. She had a faint grin at Solari's annoyed look.

Solari grumbled and explained, "With only eight hour breaks, it's not enough to spread the gossip."

Teresa snickered and shook her head.

Solari sighed and focused back on her task at hand.

Seven of Nine knew exactly where she was headed now. She recognized the area so she went north.

"She's headed for the ruins," Teresa pointed out.

Solari didn't say anything, and she didn't much like it either.

The automaton came out of the woodland and entered the ruins of Gaia's temple. Earlier she had a powerful, fast walk but now it slowed. She finally came to a stop just at the base of the steps.

The four guards halted a few hundred paces behind the automaton. They let her be and only observed her.

Seven placed her right foot on the first step then lifted her left foot. She slowly climbed the steps until she was on the floor of the temple. She scanned the skeleton of the fallen, aged temple. She considered how old it could possibly be and why it was forgotten. She concluded that most likely the Amazons may have used it at some point. But why would Amazons worship a forbidden Titan then later forget these lands?

The automaton shifted into the center of the large temple and scanned around it. Then suddenly a sharp scream tore her attention away. Her head quickly turned to the right once the scream repeated.

The four guards focused on the direction of the screams, yet they hesitated on what to do.

"Solari, Ephiny you should check what it was," Dekka quickly suggested. "Teresa and I can stay with Seven."

The automaton had easily overheard the conversation, and she rushed down the steps. "We all will go," she declared. She heard a third scream and this time she deciphered it better. "It's a young girl screaming." She suddenly took off in a run.

"Holy Hades!" Solari yelled. She chased after the fast automaton, but she could barely keep up. Behind her the three other Amazons ran too.

"Help! Help!" a young voice cried out.

Seven of Nine jumped over a fallen tree. Just ahead she picked out the low roar of fast moving water. She came around some tall brush then spotted a young Amazon on the edge of a gorge.

The young Amazon was on her stomach with her right arm stretched down. "Grab my hand, Naia!" she hollered downward to her friend, another young Amazon.

"I can't reach!" Naia cried out. She frantically tried to grab her friend's hand, but she kept missing. She kicked at the wall of the canyon.

Seven of Nine came to a fast stop beside the Amazon on her stomach. She gazed down at the dangling Naia, who clung to a thick vine. "Do not thrash about or else the vine will break," she coolly remarked to Naia.

The Amazon on her stomach, Tedra, peered up with shocked features at Seven of Nine. She was stunned and had wide eyes.

The automaton hastily got onto her stomach then stretched out her hand, which had visible steel veins.

Naia was just as shocked at Tedra. She didn't budge.

"Take my hand," the automaton instructed to the girl. She tried to stretch her hand further down.

Naia snapped out of it, and she extended her hand back up. Her fingertips brushed past Seven's. "I still can't reach."

"You must," Seven quickly replied.

The four guards rushed up to the scene. Ephiny and Solari stopped at the edge and peered over.

"Oh gods," Teresa gasped once she saw what was happening.

Deka recognized Tedra and quickly picked her up. "It's not safe for you, Tedra." She pulled her away.

Solari quickly got to her stomach and tried to grab for Naia too, but she could barely reach like Seven of Nine.

The automaton pushed further out and tried to stretched down. "Climb up to my hand."

Naia was shaking from fear, yet she reminded herself that she was an Amazon and had to be strong. She forced herself to focus, and she started to climb the vine. She dug her boots into the cliff side. She edged closer to Seven's hand and once close enough, she reached up with her right hand again.

Seven of Nine felt the small fingers lace into hers. She quickly intertwined Naia's into hers.

Naia lifted herself some more with her boots, but suddenly her foot slipped when the cliff gave out under her boot. She screamed and managed to jerk hard on the vine. Quickly the vine snapped and slid down the cliff side towards the dangerous river far below. However Naia remained dangling in midair thanks to Seven.

The automaton dug her left hand into the cliff side to hold her and Naia. She tried to get a better grip, but she calculated that Naia's hand was far too sweaty.

"Naia, climb up," Tedra frantically suggested.

Solari gave another shot at trying to get the girl, but her fingertips just brushed past. "Gods be

damned," she hissed.

Naia desperately fought to climb the wall, but she made it worse. She sensed her hand sliding out of Seven's, and she began to cry.

Seven of Nine quickly looked at the distance between the top of the cliff to the river. She did rapid mental calculations then released Naia's hand.

"Nooooo!" Naia screamed. The fear gleamed in her eyes brightly, and her heart pounded wildly.

The automaton gripped the edge of the cliff and pushed off it with a powerful force. She went over the edge and plummeted downward towards the river and Naia. She knew in five heartbeats she would have Naia because she weighed far more than the girl. She then already calculated she'd have fifteen heartbeats before she'd hit the cold water below.

"By the gods," Solari whispered in awe. She watched in amazement and fear as the automaton quickly caught up to Naia.

Ephiny and Teresa realized what was about to happen next so they took off down the side of the gorge. They knew about several thousand paces ahead that the gorge tapered off and there was some shoreline.

Seven of Nine extended her arms once she was close enough to Naia. She pulled the young Amazon into her body and instructed, "My body will protect you from the impact! Release me after we hit the water!"

Naia was panicked and clung to the large, strong woman.

The automaton managed to roll their bodies in midair so that her back faced the raging water. She had Naia on top of her just as her back slammed into the brisk water. She and Naia were engulfed by the fast water, and Seven quickly used her arms to thrust Naia off and up to the surface while she sunk deeper.

Naia surged to the top and popped up with a desperate gasp. She hastily fought against the rapids just to keep her head above the water.

Seven of Nine, however, had a losing battle against her weight, the momentum she'd built up while falling, and the water's control. She actually hit the black bottom and slammed the back of her head into a rock. She couldn't see anything, but she sensed her vision jarred by the hit. She recovered and managed to push off the rock.

The automaton fought against her large odds and tried for the surface. She could slightly make out the sunlight that streamed through, but it was so far away. Her heart's beat was frantic, and her chest was tightening up. She shut her eyes and desperately battled the water's tow and her heavy steel frame. But Seven of Nine's logical mind had already calculated that it was impossible – she knew the results before she even pushed off the cliff to save the girl.

The young Amazon, Naia, swam sideways with the river. She went with the flow somewhat and made her way to the shore that was quickly approaching. She heard women shouting but couldn't make anything out. She just focused on getting to shore.

Naia spotted the shoreline not far away. She knew she would make it, and she hoped she was strong enough to crawl onto it at least. She estimated her angle and once close enough, she made a frantic grab for the rocky shore.

Ephiny suddenly appeared in front of Naia. "I gotcha!" She had the girl's left arm.

Teresa rushed over and hopped into the water. She lifted up Naia and carried her from the cool water. "You're safe, Naia." She sat down on a large rock and pulled the cold Amazon into her lap. She hoped her body heat would help Naia.

Ephiny knelt beside the pair, and she carefully prodded over the young Amazon. She found a few scratches and bruises would later show.

"The automaton," Naia gasped. "What happened-" She coughed hard and got out some water from her lungs.

Ephiny straightened up once she realized Seven of Nine was nowhere to be seen.

Teresa peered up at Ephiny. "She must have... sunk."

"We have to help her," Naia fought. She tried to get up, but Teresa stopped her.

"You can't do anything," Teresa insisted.

Naia was upset and distraught. She looked up at Ephiny for help.

Ephiny had a bad feeling in her stomach, and she gazed out at the river.

"Ephiny," Teresa warned, "don't even think about it."

"Just... take care of her." Ephiny rushed to get her boots off, she tossed her sheathed sword, and hastened to the water.

"Ephiny!" Teresa yelled, "you'll get killed!"

Solari came onto the shoreline and watched Ephiny dive into the river. "Ephiny!"

Seven of Nine had two heartbeats left, and she needed five more to make it to the surface that was so close. She lifted her right hand up to the sunlight that streamed through, but it was out of reach. Then her last heartbeat came to her, and the sun's rays faded away. The river's roar died and became silent. Seven no longer felt the extreme chill in her body, but she was warmed by a familiar heat.

Slowly, a blacksmith's hammer rapped against hot metal, and it progressively became louder. Seven focused on the hammer's beat, and she felt invited by it. A smile came over her because she loved the smell of molten iron and fire.

"Hello, Anke," greeted a gentle, warm voice.

Seven of Nine tilted her head some and her eyes softened at seeing her father. "Hi, Poppa."

Konrad pulled his hand from his glove and ruffled his daughter's golden hair. "You finished your chores already?"

"Yes, father." Seven of Nine, or rather Anke absolutely adored her father. She also enjoyed coming to his smithing shop whenever she had the chance. Her father was known as the best blacksmith in the three surroundings villages.

Konrad knew how much his child love the shop. He decided to amuse her and offered, "Would you like to help me?"

"I would love to," Anke gleamed. She followed her father to the forge where the fire was strong.

"Put your gloves on first," Konrad reminded.

Anke quickly picked up her small gloves that hung near the forge. She had them on then went back to the fire. She spotted the tongs in her father's hands.

Konrad first gripped the horseshoe inside of the firepit. He then handed the tongs to his child. "Now careful."

Anke managed the bright orange horseshoe from the fire, and she carried it to the anvil close by. She handed the tongs to her father.

Konrad kept the shoe on the anvil and grabbed his hammer. He now completed the finishing work on the horseshoe for his customer. He was well known for his horseshoes because they were virtually unheard of in Greece. At first his concept was barely taken to until one customer tried them, and the customer raved about how wonderful the shoes kept the horse's hoof from wearing. Soon after, more customers followed and praised his work.

Anke observed her father work the horseshoe into perfect, custom form. She listened to the rapping of metal against metal, and how she loved it so.

Konrad carefully worked, but since his daughter was here he decided to add to her adventure into the shop. He recalled a song that his father had taught him. He breathed deeply then sang, "My fire is extinct, And my forge is decayed, By the side of the bench, My old vise is laid."

Anke had heard the song, A Blacksmith's Prayer, several times before, and she chimed in, "My anvil and hammer, Lie gathering dust, My powerful bellows, Have lost all their thrust."

Together, Konrad and Anke sung the last verse. "My coal is now spent, My iron's all gone, My last nail's been driven, And my day's work is done."

Konrad hit the shoe a few more times then let his hammer hit the anvil in a final, victorious blow.

Anke stood mesmerized by her father's work. But the hammer's last great boom rushed her away from her childhood memory to a much earlier time. The same smell of liquid metal and fire were apparent, but this time it brought a sickening feeling to Seven of Nine.

Seven had aged to twenty-two, but she had yet to acquire the designation Seven of Nine. She was only known as Arcadia, and there were none left that knew her as Anke. That smithing scent turned her stomach but what had made her vomit on a few occasions were the screams of her counterparts from other cells.

The recent scream clearly came from Tulio, who was from Rome originally. He was a middle aged man, but he was heartedly built thanks to his countless moons as a legionnaire. It wasn't long ago that he'd been badly burnt in a battle against the Conqueror's famed army. He'd fled from battle and as a result his life was automatically forfeited by Roman army law. His fellow legionaries hunted him, and Tulio did all he could to hide. He, like the nine others, had an angry and dark past with the Conqueror.

Tulio, Anke, and seven other people were stolen away late at night when nobody would hear them cry out. Nor would anybody listen because these nine captives were either forgotten, unknown, or worthless in many people's eyes. The captives hadn't see the light of day for one moon now. They were occasionally fed, never bathed, and kept locked up in cells. It was quickly discovered that they were handpicked for an experiment that would either destroy their identity or kill them. They all hoped for the latter because the experiment was brutal.

Today, Tulio was taking much of the testing, and his screams continually echoed down the dim hallway that had countless cells. Anke's cell was directly across from his. She was slumped on the floor, dirtied, weak, and broad shoulder set against a cold bar. She just mindlessly stared at Tulio's cell and wondered when it would be her turn again. She was always after him, always.

Anke lowered her gaze to the wood sign that half hung and half dangled from the horizontal bar on Tulio's cell. She read the chalked, messy writing that simply said Six of Nine. That was Tulio's code name, and Anke learned that hers was Seven of Nine. Just before she would be dragged from her cell, she would hear the guards yelling for the seventh prison to be brought out. All she could do was pray to any listening god that she would finally die this time.

Just then the heavy, wood door grunted open and a deep voice bellowed, "Bring out the seventh. Toss him back in." There was a low groan because Tulio was tossed down the steps below the door.

Anke closed her eyes as the guard's dreadful footsteps marched down the stone corridor. She didn't make a move and listened to the guard's key work the lock. Soon there were rough, cold hands on her arms, and she was dragged down the corridor to the wood door.

Tulio was dragged past her. He was unconscious, bloodier than normal, and strange metallic pieces were over his skin. It made no real sense to Anke.

The seventh of nine subject was brought through the doors and into the well lit testing room. She was hastily tossed onto a used, bloody wood table. Next, her arms and legs were strapped down along with her waist.

Anke then would find herself alone with a tall, large man. She'd never seen his face because he always wore some mask. He never spoke to her. He merely performed his experiments and tests on her that often ended in sheer pain. Occasionally she was forced to drink gagging liquids that usually left her vomiting for sometime in her cell.

But today was different for some reason. The man spoke his first words, and they were defining for Anke. He said it quietly and only once. He merely promised, "You will be the one."

It was after that point that Anke lost her humanity, and she only remembered her life as Seven of Nine, until now. Seven of Nine continued to relive her hidden memories as her body shut down in the cold water.

Back in the Nation, everything was busy like normal. The Amazons were in full swing and preparing for the spring that was upon them. The crops and herds were starting their early flourish. The woods around the Nation were sprouting leaves, which always brought promise to the Nation. Just half a candlemark away from the Amazon territory there was a large valley, and it was just as busy if not busier than the Amazon Nation. In that valley were countless hoplites, who belonged to the Greek Army.

At the head of the great army was the Conqueror, and she was mobilizing them today. She'd finished up and let Borias handle the last of it. She'd spotted her visitors that came to say goodbye to her so she dismissed herself from her subordinates then marched through the bustling camp.

Queen Gabrielle straightened up from leaning against her staff. She softly smiled at her approaching best friend.

The Conqueror offered a smile back to the queen. She then focused on Commander Kaylee and Yakut.

"We wanted to see you off," Gabrielle mentioned to the ruler.

"I appreciate it," Xena confessed.

"You will head to the Macedon Kingdom?" Kaylee inquired.

"Yes," the ruler answered, "I will continue to expand Greece."

"King Cortese will not surrender easily," Yakut mentioned.

Xena's attention flickered to the shaman. "He shall learn how to kneel."

"I hope so." Yakut hesitated then tried, "Queen Cyane will expect to hear from you most likely."

"She will."

Yakut nodded once then promised, "I will prepare her then." She stepped forward and surprisingly hugged the ruler. "I will see you again, my friend."

Xena returned the hug and whispered back, "Much sooner this time." She released Yakut.

The Amazon strategos shifted a step forward and extended her arm. "Good luck, Conqueror. It was a pleasure to fight beside you."

"Likewise." Xena shook arms.

Commander Kaylee broke the shake then looked to Yakut in hidden signal.

"We'll wait for you," Yakut softly mentioned to the Amazon Queen.

"Thanks." Gabrielle appreciated her friends' consideration. She waited until they were out of earshot, and she fully focused on her childhood friend. "It'll be some time before I see you again." She didn't ask when or how long because she could not ask that of Xena after everything.

"It'll be sooner than this time," Xena promised.

The bard dropped her right temple against her staff and gazed up into sky blue eyes. She had a wistful look now. "I never imagined you here... the future ruler of Greece."

"And did you imagine yourself as the youngest Amazon Queen?"

Gabrielle chuckled and shrugged. She lost her smile though. "You promise I'll see you again?"

Xena edged closer to her best friend. "You know me and promises."

And Gabrielle did know about that. Xena rarely made them to her, but if Xena made a promise then it would happen. She just hoped this one time that Xena would agree to one.

"I will keep in contact with you," the ruler continued.

The bard crinkled up her nose and joked, "Now that you know where I live."

The Conqueror huffed, but she actually showed a grin.

Gabrielle straightened up and stretched out her freehand. She gripped the ruler's bare forearm. "Be careful, please." She pressed her lips tightly together and pushed down on the rise of emotions. "I'll be thinking about you." She dropped her hand and didn't wait for anything else. She turned away and headed off.

The Conqueror watched her go for a beat then she was fast, very fast.

The Amazon Queen came up short when the tall, dark ruler suddenly stood in front of her. She had a skipped heartbeat, but she couldn't say anything. Instead she found her lips taken into a sweet kiss, which caused a gentle moan to escape her.

Xena savored every part of the kiss and slowly pulled away. She found herself staring into the meadow green eyes that she fell for as a kid. She had her right palm resting against the bard's cheek, and she ran her thumb across Gabrielle's soft lips.

Gabrielle had no words. She could only stare back at Xena and hoped what she felt showed.

Xena leaned in one last time and placed a light, quick kiss to the bard's lips. She withdrew just slightly then whispered, "Promise." With that, she straightened up and walked away before it became any harder for either of them.

Gabrielle shut her eyes and listened to the ruler's boot steps fade away. She then turned around part of the way and twisted her head around. She sadly watched her best friend become smaller in the distance then reentered the busy camp. She forced her body to go so she climbed up the valley's side and sought out Kaylee and Yakut. She was able to walk away, but she knew her heart still remained with Xena.

Yakut easily read the queen's distraught emotions, yet she nor Kaylee would say a word. She took Gabrielle's side and Commander Kaylee had the queen's other side.

"How long will you stay yet, Yakut?"

"I'm not sure," the shaman confessed. "This battle has thrown my schedule off."

"Hopefully not needlessly," the queen bantered.

Yakut smiled at the queen's attempt. "Not at all."

Gabrielle walked at a slow pace with her staff. She wore her regular garb of plain leathers and her sword across her back. She glanced over at Commander Kaylee. "Have you heard from Cliona about Seven's training?"

Yakut intently listened because she always wondered how the automaton was making out.

"I haven't had a chance." Kaylee reached up and adjusted her mask some. "Cliona only started today with her."

"I would imagine she'll be a tough student."

Kaylee softly shrugged and reminded, "And that's why we picked Cliona."

"Yes, and I think-"

"My queen!" a voice called through the woods.

The strategos quickly pinpointed the voice's location. She, the queen, and Yakut stopped and waited for the Amazon to arrive.

The Amazon dove out of the trees, and she was breathing hard. "There's a problem." She sucked in some air then hastily explained, "Two girls were playing near the gorge, and one fell over the side."

"Oh gods." The queen suddenly surged with fear. "What happened? Is she okay?"

"She's alive and okay," the Amazon hastily answered. "But there's a problem with the automaton."

Yakut glanced at the queen and stratègos, and she immediately saw the instant fear grip the leaders.

"Where is she?" the stratègos demanded.

"Follow me," the Amazon decided. She quickly took off.

The queen, stratègos, and shaman raced after the Amazon in hot pursuit. Everybody was plagued by the thought of something happening to the automaton despite the bitter history held with the automaton. For some reason, the queen, Kaylee, and shaman felt some connection with the automaton that superseded the recent past. Perhaps it had something to do with being Gaia's Amazon.

The patrol Amazon raced through the woods at an alarming rate. She guided the group to the opposite side of the territory until they broke through the forest and into the openness. They ran past the ruins and hastened along the river's cliff side, which snaked along.

Queen Gabrielle was in such a rush that she slightly stumbled down the path along the gorge. She spotted one of her friends and hollered, "Teresa!"

Teresa still held Naia in her lap. She twisted her head around and spotted the running group. "Over here!" She was able to stand from the chilled rock, but she kept Naia's hand in hers. "Deka found you?"

The patrol Amazon nodded while she tried to catch her breath.

The Amazon Queen was breathing hard, yet she ignored it and demanded, "Where is Ephiny and Solari?"

"I... I'm not sure," Teresa confessed.

"What about Seven of Nine?" Commander Kaylee interrupted.

Teresa was clearly distraught. Her voice was slightly shaky when she spoke. "Ephiny and I pulled Naia out of the water. We couldn't spot the automaton... we figured she drowned, but Ephiny..."

"She went after her," Gabrielle concluded.

"Yes." Teresa looked between the queen and stratègos. "Solari jumped in after Ephiny." She lifted her eyes and gazed past Yakut, who was by the water's edge. "They're down stream somewhere."

"There's another shoreline further down," the patrol Amazon, Acacia, reminded. "They would most likely aim for it."

Gabrielle hastily thought of a plan and focused first on Acacia. "Get back to the Nation. Go to the healer's hut and tell Cliona to come down here." She then considered the fact that Seven of Nine weighed quite a bit. "Then have somebody come down here with a wagon and horse... blankets too."

The patrol Amazon nodded then promised, "I'll be swift, my queen." She dashed off to carry out her orders.

The queen turned to Teresa and the child. "Wait here, and we'll come back with the wagon to get you two."

"Yes, my queen." Teresa tugged on Naia's hand so they could go sit again.

Gabrielle then signaled for Yakut and the stratègos to follow her. She headed down the shoreline and back towards the land. She jogged and told the others, "Keep your eyes open for them. And holler for them. We're not going back until we find them." She then glanced back at the shaman. "Any extra help

would be great, Yakut."

"I will do my best," the shaman promised.

Gabrielle followed the edge of the river, which became a hill again and another cliff started. "Ephiny!"

"Solari!" the stratègos hollered.

The shaman was quite, yet she was working hard to focus her two-spirit on any of the three women in the water.

"Ephiny!" Kaylee called out with her hand cupped over her mouth. "Solari!"

The Amazon Queen frantically scanned over the surface of the water below, but she didn't spot anybody. She became more frightened by the heartbeat that somebody could be dead.

"Ephiny!" Commander Kaylee hollered.

Yakut abruptly stopped and whispered, "Over there." She became more frantic and loudly repeated, "Over there!" She extended her arm in the direction her two-spirit told her and pointed at the Amazon coming up out of the water.

"Help us!" Solari yelled, and her voice echoed up the canyon walls.

"Solari," Gabrielle called back. "Are you okay?!"

Solari wiped her hair back then sunk below the water for a moment. She came back up and yelled, "We need help!"

"Where's Ephiny?"

"Right there," the shaman murmured. She was right because Ephiny emerged beside Solari. But Yakut had a lost expression and quietly stated, "The automaton is gone."

The stratègos heard Yakut's words and glanced at her.

"Ephiny!" Gabrielle called down. "Are you two okay?"

"Barely," Ephiny replied. Her voice bounced up the cliff side. She suddenly gritted her teeth and sunk back underwater. "Solari, I can't-"

Solari dove under rapidly.

"Hades," the queen hissed. "Come on." She took off at an amazing speed and followed the cliff's edge. She approached another downhill and half ran and jumped down it. She heard the others behind her. She watched her footing and spotted a gigantic rock just ahead. She came right at it, lifted her staff higher in her right hand, and jumped up onto the rock. She bounced off it, hit the sandy ground, and made a sharp left onto the shoreline. She came to a sudden stop at the water's edge.

Yakut and the stratègos came up to the queen's side. They all scanned the river and looked for the two Amazons.

Suddenly the murky water broke with three heads this time. Solari and Ephiny were holding up Seven of Nine's head above the water. But the automaton had closed eyes, and she only moved to the water's demand.

"Over here, Ephiny!" Gabrielle hollered.

Ephiny and Solari struggled to stay above water as well as keep the heavy automaton with them. They fought nonstop against the river's pull and aimed for the small shoreline that wasn't far ahead.

Ephiny was wearing out faster because she'd originally found Seven of Nine. She was relieved when Solari arrived and helped her lift the automaton out of the deep waters.

"They're not going to make it," Gabrielle muttered.

"Swim harder," Commander Kaylee loudly ordered to them.

The queen already sensed that her friends wouldn't make it especially because of the automaton. She also knew they would refuse to give up even if the automaton was dead now. These Amazons swore to their duties and would die by them too.

Yakut touched the bard's shoulder and supplied, "Get in the water." She then pointed at the queen's staff.

Gabrielle quickly understood, and she plowed into the cold water. She stretched out her staff and yelled, "Ephiny, Solari grab my staff when you pass." She realized it may just work.

Solari was the closest the staff, and she swam hard for the salvation that waited. She had her arms around the automation, but she freed her right and reached out as she came closer. She managed her wet fingers around the wood anchor.

Gabrielle was hauled into the water deeper. "Oh gods," she hissed, and her arm muscles bulged.

The stratègos rushed in next and gripped the staff too. She was small, like the queen, but she too was plenty strong. She grounded her teeth and pulled.

Yakut tore off her headdress and tossed it aside. She knew her leathers could weigh her down, but she took the risk. She jumped into the water and hastily assisted Ephiny and Solari with the automaton.

"Bring her to shore," the stratègos ordered.

The three Amazons in the water struggled to swim and pull the automaton into shore. The queen and stratègos slowly started to pull the group in closer and closer.

Ephiny was losing her energy, but she fought the water's grip. She started to lose her hold on the automaton, and she was tired. She then was surprised when a strong hand grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her into shore. She realized it was the shaman.

Solari's boots finally hit the rocky bottom, and she was able to draw Seven of Nine in closer with much more ease.

Yakut took Ephiny's spot and hooked her arms under the automaton.

The queen freed her staff and set it aside. She and Kaylee grabbed the automaton from Solari and together she, Kaylee, and Yakut drug Seven onto the shoreline. They managed to get Seven from the shoreline and into the grass. The stratègos and shaman stayed with Seven of Nine and hastily checked over her.

Gabrielle raced back to her friends, who were coughing up river water and holding to rocks for support. She looked between both Amazons and snapped, "Are you two crazy? You both could have been killed and for what?" She pointed back at Seven of Nine. "A corpse?"

"Does this mean we'll be... punished... again?" Solari cracked. She had a weak grin.

The queen clenched her teeth, but she bit back her remarks. She dropped her arm and set aside her unexpected anger. She was upset and scared that she'd lost her friends. "Come on, rub your skin." She came over to Ephiny, who was seated. Gabrielle knelt in front of her friend and hastily rubbed her palms up and down Ephiny's arms.

Ephiny was huddled on the ground and her back against a cold rock. She had her arms wrapped around her propped up legs. She tried to fight the chattering, but it was hard.

"I sent for a wagon and blankets."

Ephiny was relieved to hear the good news.

Solari tried to stand and walk around to keep her blood flowing. She rubbed her arms too. She glanced over at the fallen automaton then muttered, "I hope a healer too."

Ephiny had her head bow, but she heard her friend's comment. She glanced over at Seven of Nine and softly concluded, "I think it's too late for a healer now."

Commander Kaylee pulled away her two fingers from the automaton's cold neck.

Yakut grimly stared down at the dead automaton then peered up at the stratègos. "We're far too late... she was gone awhile ago."

The stratègos clenched her jaw tightly. She heard soft footsteps so she lifted her head and took in Teresa and Naia. For some reason, Teresa and Naia had decided to follow them despite the queen's earlier orders.

Teresa didn't need to be told that the automaton was dead. She wanted to quickly remove Naia from the scene, but she failed.

"Is she dead?" Naia questioned.

The stratègos focused on the young Amazon then honestly replied, "She's gone."

Naia became confused, and upset showed on her face. "But she saved my life."

Commander Kaylee climbed to her feet and stepped in front of the young Amazon. She cut off Naia's view of the dead automaton. "Sometimes we have to sacrifice our life to save others."

Naia shook her head. "It doesn't happen like that... in the stories."

Kaylee was heartbroken at the girl's naive and distraught realization. She gently touched Naia's shoulder and whispered, "Nor do the stories tell about a real hero."

"Come on, Naia," Teresa cut in. She hoped to get the child away from the scene and not thinking about it. She already knew that Naia would relive today over and over in her memories.

Naia left with Teresa, but she kept glancing back at the dead automaton.

Kaylee turned back to Seven of Nine and stood motionless. She felt a fracture inside her emotions at the automaton's needless death. Whether or not Seven of Nine was truly one of Gaia's Amazons, Kaylee saw Seven of Nine as an Amazon of this Nation. There were few outside the Nation who would give the ultimate sacrifice to save a life. Now all that was left was to honor the automaton and properly put her to rest.

But what saddened Kaylee far above all was that she, nor anybody else, would honestly know Seven of Nine's true or full story. How can the tales be told about this woman, who was forever altered by the gods and discovered her humanity through death? Kaylee could only pray that Seven of Nine, Anke of Cirra, found the peace that was always stolen from her since childhood.

The End