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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 7

Princess Gabrielle strolled through the woods at predawn. She felt a slight chill in the air today, but the sun would burn it off soon enough. She enjoyed how Helios's early rays pierced through the trees from the eastern direction.

At the bard's side was a beautiful white wolf, who bounced along on his paws. He rhythmically swayed his tail on the light breeze that flowed through the forest. He glimpsed up at his human friend and rolled out his tongue.

Gabrielle caught the look and softly smiled. She slightly bent to her right and swept her fingers through his soft coat. She straightened up just as she came up a small incline to a large tree; the Great Oak.

The Great Oak silently greeted the Amazon Princess back since yesterday. It warmly received the loyal Amazon's gentle touch on its bark.

The princess stepped closer until her boot tips almost touched the trunk. She already had the flat of her palms on the tree, and she now lowered her head until her forehead rested against the tree. She shut her eyes, then her lips moved but there were no words.

Faolan sat on his haunches and dropped his head back. He carefully observed the leaves that floated on the light winds. His ears flickered at the sounds of the rustling from the tree. He was almost sure he heard human like words float around him. The whispers became more certain, and he heard Gabrielle start to repeat them.

The hypnotic bard murmured, "Destiny... Now is the time... Take it... Now."

Faolan twisted his head when the wind increased. His gaze switched between the Great Oak and Princess Gabrielle.

Suddenly the wind calmed to a breeze, Gabrielle lifted her head, and a low snap above her was heard followed by a gentle clunk. The Amazon Princess stepped back once and scraped her hands off the tree. She had a slightly confused look, but she picked out the second clunk noise just above her head. She tilted her head back and caught sight of something falling out of the tree.

Faolan stood on all fours and stepped aside when Gabrielle moved swiftly.

The bard stepped to her right once and shot out her hand just in time. She tightly clenched the small object from the Great Oak until she retracted her hand to her body. She gingerly cupped the item then opened her hand. Neatly resting in the Amazon Princess's palm was an acorn.

"Rrrruh," Faolan murmured.

Gabrielle glanced at her furry friend then back at the acorn seed. She moved it around until it was locked in her fingers. She held it up closer to her face and observed it more carefully. After a beat, she cupped the acorn again and smiled up at the Great Oak.

Faolan turned his head to the right when he heard something else. He wagged his tail and called, "Grrrr."

Princess Gabrielle focused on what'd caught Faolan's attention.

"Good morning, princess."

The bard mock glared and scolded, "Ephiny."

Ephiny pulled her mask back and continued to near her friend. "You're up early."

"I can't sleep much," the princess confessed.

Ephiny had heard that Gabrielle was under great stress thanks to the pending wars. She too felt the pressure and wished it wasn't the case. "Sleep seems to evade many of us now." She gently petted Faolan. "Eponin mentioned you're trying everything to stop the war with the Centaurs."

"I am," the bard agreed.

Ephiny hesitated but then stated, "I hope you succeed. The Nation doesn't need this war."

Gabrielle sadly smiled at Ephiny's support. She stepped closer and asked, "How have you been?"

The Amazon understood what the princess was truly asking. She sighed some and replied, "Everyday is a step forward... not back."

The princess bowed her head some then lifted it again. "I'm glad to hear that." She hesitated but added, "I'm sorr-"

"It's okay," Ephiny cut off quickly. "You don't need to, Gabrielle." She licked her lips and considered something she'd been thinking about for a long time since her and Gabrielle separated. "Some things just are not meant to be... and other things are meant to be."

Gabrielle was confused and somewhat worried by those words.

Ephiny touched the bard's shoulder and stated, "I think we're always meant to be friends."

The princess's eyes stunning, but she quickly moved forward and hugged Ephiny.

Ephiny didn't hesitate to hug the bard back. She tightly held Gabrielle and whispered, "I'm always here if you need me."

"Thank you," Gabrielle whispered. "I love you, Eph."

Ephiny felt her last anger disappear at the words she'd missed. She kissed the bard's cheek and pulled back. "And I love you." She touched the bard's cheek. "We're okay?"

Gabrielle nodded, but she knew they both would still need some healing time. At least their friendship would be salvaged, and that made Gabrielle feel lighter. She affirmed, "Okay."

Ephiny smiled and pulled her hand away. "Where are you headed?"

"I was going to get some breakfast." Gabrielle tilted her head then asked, "Are you hungry?"

Ephiny smiled and replied, "I am almost off duty... by the time we make it to the village I will be."

The bard chuckled and offered, "Well, let's go." She glanced at Faolan. "Come on, boy." She patted her thigh, and he came to her side. Gabrielle started the trek back to the village where they'd be the first into the mess hut.

The two Amazons and wolf stole away in the mess hut for some time. The friends talked and caught up on recent news and ongoings. Ephiny had heard much from both Eponin and Solari, but she could tell Gabrielle had more details. Ephiny felt better that she'd spent the breakfast with her friend. The pair were about to get up from the table when they heard a familiar voice call Gabrielle's name.

Solari had surged through the open hut door. She jogged across the distance and stopped at the table. "There's a huge problem."

The princess tensed and demanded, "What's wrong?"

Solari inhaled sharply then replied, "The queen and council are signing the war declaration soon. And I mean very soon."

"What?" Ephiny barked. "They weren't suppose to until this afternoon."

"They pushed it up," Solari quickly explained, "Melosa wants to prepare the army today. She's sent out

a call for the stratègos, her officers, and Eponin to be at the declaration signing."

Gabrielle instantly stood up from the bench. "How long ago?"

"Right at dawn," Solari answered.

"Gods," the bard murmured. "I have to stop her."

Ephiny was confused, and she grabbed her friend's hand. "You can't stop her, Gabrielle."

"Yes... yes, I can." Gabrielle felt a fire build in her stomach, and it was rising. "If somebody doesn't stop her then the Nation could be destroyed."

"She can challenge Melosa," Solari piped up.

Ephiny's eyes widened slightly, and she looked from Solari to Gabrielle, who had an agreeing expression to Solari's idea. "Oh sweet Artemis, no." Ephiny's heart rate increased, and she held tighter to the bard's hand. "Gabrielle, you'll be defeated... or worse."

"I won't be," the princess hotly argued.

"Yes you-"

"Ephiny," Gabrielle snapped, "this isn't about me. This is about the Nation."

"The Nation?" Ephiny released the bard's hand and quickly stood up. "The Nation won't have a future if our princess ends up dead."

"There won't be a Nation for the princess if I don't do something," Gabrielle fought back. "I have to do this, Ephiny."

Ephiny lowered her head some, then she looked at Solari. "Well, what do you say?"

Solari sheepishly smiled and held up her hands. "Only Artemis hears my answer."

Ephiny glared at her friend's lack of defense. She turned back to Gabrielle. "Gabrielle-"

"Ephiny, please."

Ephiny knew she couldn't do much to stop her friend. She sighed and stepped over the bench. "We better go before it gets any later."

Solari quickly stepped aside when Gabrielle and Faolan came around the table.

"Solari?"

Solari turned to the princess and waited for her orders.

"Can you run to my hut and get my sword, mask, and staff?"

Solari smiled and nodded her head. "I will," she promised.

Gabrielle curtly nodded then asked Ephiny, "Are you coming?"

Ephiny could only move her head in agreement. She then hastily followed the princess out of the hut and through the village.

Princess Gabrielle felt her worries heighten about the signing. She suddenly broke into a run so Ephiny

and Faolan sped up too. Gabrielle only stopped once she was at the front door of the administration hut.

"Good morning, princess and Ephiny," Vara greeted.

Gabrielle had no time, and she urged, "Is the queen and council meeting?"

"Yes, my princess. The stratègos and her officers just entered."

"By Artemis," Gabrielle breathed. "Thank you."

Vara jumped and opened the door for the princess. She let them pass, then she closed the door. She sent out a prayer to Artemis that the princess would succeed in stopping the queen.

Gabrielle and Ephiny raced down the hallway to the meeting room, but Ephiny stopped short. "I can't enter."

Gabrielle stopped at the closed meeting door. She glanced back at her friend.

"Go," Ephiny ordered, "before it's too late."

Princess Gabrielle no longer hesitated, and she shoved the door open. She entered the room, which was quiet besides the queen's voice.

Faolan followed and took a seat by his friend's feet.

Queen Melosa stopped speaking when the intruder entered the room. She straightened up when she spotted the princess.

Councilor Masika was bent over a long scroll, quill in hand, and the quill's tip pressed into the parchment. She stopped and peered up.

"What is this, princess?" Queen Melosa's face became dim, and her tone sharper than a sword.

"Don't sign that war declaration." Princess Gabrielle stepped in more and scanned the councilors' faces, military officers, and stopped at Melosa. "You're signing for the Nation's death."

Queen Melosa narrowed her eyes and snapped, "You have no business here, princess."

"The Hades I do," Gabrielle hotly argued. "This is my Nation too."

The queen shook her head and looked at Masika. "Sign it, Masika."

Councilor Masika, who recently took the position as head councilor after her mother, now paused and stared at the line that was meant for her signature.

"Councilor," Gabrielle called, "think about the Nation's fate." She lifted her eyes to the queen and argued, "Queen Melosa wants this war so that she can seek revenge for Terreis."

Councilor Masika set the quill down then straightened up. She sensed that Melosa was about to fight the bard back, but she jumped ahead of Melosa. "Princess, I do know what I am signing." She paused then sadly added, "The majority of the council wins... and the majority has decided on war. With the queen's consent, then it must be so." She picked up the quill again. "I am sorry, princess."

"No," Gabrielle angrily demanded.

Queen Melosa lost her thin patience and snapped, "Step out, princess. This is not your place." She then looked to the stratègos and ordered, "Remove the princess."

Faolan stood up and tried to swallow his growl meant for the queen.

Commander Kaylee faintly hesitated, but she pulled away from the wall.

Princess Gabrielle ground her teeth and clenched her sweaty hands tightly. She hotly yelled, "I am making it my place."

The stratègos halted at those words, and she felt a faint grin touch her lips. She softly arched an eyebrow at the queen.

"Is that a challenge?" Queen Melosa growled. She stepped towards the princess and waited for the princess to back down finally.

Princess Gabrielle came closer and defiantly declared, "It is a challenge, my queen."

Masika inserted the quill into the nearby inkwell. "The challenge must be honored first, my queen."

Queen Melosa still stared at the princess, but she replied, "Then it shall be... and quickly."

"Name your weapon," Gabrielle offered.

Queen Melosa was briefly silent, then she made her choice. "Quarter-staffs." She planned to not only win but beat the princess at her own weapon.

"Done," the bard agreed.

Eponin, who had been silently watching from the side now couldn't hide her smirk. She sent a prayer out that Melosa wouldn't completely lose her face before the Nation.

Queen Melosa walked past the princess and left the room. The councilors followed her then the military officers, and the stratègos came to the princess.

Eponin though was slowly making her way around the table.

The stratègos was silent then politely offered, "Good luck, princess." She held confidence in her metallic blue eyes, and she quietly left the room.

Gabrielle then sensed the weapons master at her side.

"Are you ready for this?"

Faolan glanced between his friend and the weapons master.

The princess turned her head to Eponin. "More than ever." She received a smile from Eponin.

"Let's not keep the queen waiting then." Eponin touched the princess's back and guided her out of the meeting room.

Ephiny joined the ranks and followed the march out of the hut and through the village. She was none surprised to find a building crowd before the throne where all the challenges took place.

"My gods," Gabrielle whispered, "word spreads."

"Well," Ephiny teased, "I'm sure it had help."

The princess slightly grinned at Ephiny's reference to the Gossip Queen. She then hoped Solari had picked up her weapons and mask.

"Princess!" Solari broke through the crowd and stopped running once she was next to the bard. "I have your things."

"Thank you, Solari." Gabrielle felt relieved that she'd have her staff for the challenge. She hastily put her sword on her back then her mask followed. She carefully positioned the mask over her head and last she took her staff that Ephiny had given her.

"Come on," Ephiny urged.

The small group hurried to the circle of Amazons, however, only Gabrielle broke through the Amazons and stood on the edge of the circle. She knelt down and rested the staff across her lap.

Faolan sat down too, and he searched his friend's eyes.

Gabrielle softly smiled at her dedicated friend. She freed her right hand from the staff and still in her hand was the Great Oak's acorn. She curled up her hand and whispered, "I love you, Fao."

The wolf twisted his head and nuzzled his friend's right hand that held the acorn. "Rrrrr." He straightened out his neck then dropped his tongue out.

Gabrielle chuckled, then she quickly tucked the acorn into her leather halter top for later. She stood up and was met by the soft blue eyes of Andra. She was warmed to see her sister now.

Andra shook her head once then teased, "I won't bother to yell at you now." She bit her bottom lip yet pleaded, "Be careful."

"I will," Gabrielle promised. She scanned over her friends' faces. She didn't know what to say so she turned around and stepped into the makeshift ring made by the crowd of Amazons.

Queen Melosa stood on the last step of the dais. She held a black staff in her right hand. She stepped off the dais and checked her mask over her head to make sure it was secure. She walked up to the central spot of the circle.

Princess Gabrielle slowly approached the queen and stopped once she was five paces away. She lifted her staff horizontally.

"It's not too late to retract your challenge, Gabrielle," Melosa politely offered.

The princess shook her head and shot back, "And it's not too late for you to stop the war."

"The Centaurs and Amazons will always be enemies." Melosa's words were almost lost in the increasing winds.

"And the best allies were once enemies," Gabrielle called over the wind. "Your blindness will not destroy my Nation."

"It is not your Nation," the queen yelled. She suddenly lunged for the bard.

Gabrielle raised her staff and stopped the reckless attack. She stepped back once then a second time. She spun her staff and mentally prepared for the fight. She shook her head to rid of the hair in front of her face.

Queen Melosa gave a warcry then came at her opponent.

The princess raised her staff and blocked the attack again. She spun away then tried for Melosa's backside.

The queen caught the attack then quickly turned around. She gave a hard thrust at the bard's stomach.

Gabrielle parried the queen's staff away and brought her left end back at the queen's side.

Melosa didn't recover quickly enough and took the blow to her side. She stepped back and sharply inhaled against the pain.

The crowd cried out at the princess's move.

Queen Melosa narrowed her eyes and hastily brushed her hair back because of the wind. She raised her staff and stepped to her right.

Gabrielle moved to her right, but she kept her full attention on her opponent. She watched how Melosa's body moved and each muscle reacted to the movements. She then focused on the queen's dark eyes and read deeper into them than she'd ever done. Gabrielle swiftly dropped when she saw a change in the queen's motions.

The queen's staff passed over Gabrielle's head. Melosa then brought her staff downward and stopped Gabrielle's swipe at her feet. She stepped back once and raised her staff again.

Gabrielle was back up, and she bounced on the balls of her feet unlike Melosa. She twirled her staff clockwise then counter clockwise.

Queen Melosa swiftly jumped forward and snapped the staff's right end at the bard.

Gabrielle parried it, then she gave a solid kick at the queen's throat.

Melosa caught the bard's boot on the center of her staff. She then gave a cry and yanked back hard on the staff.

Gabrielle wasn't fully prepared for the move. She sensed her left foot sliding off the ground, and she was lifted into the air. She yelped then slammed on her back. Her sword made the landing even harder and knocked the air from her lungs. She gasped for air.

The queen spun her staff around, stepped forward, and brought an end down at the bard's chest.

Gabrielle heard queen's boots scrape. She still had her staff in her left hand, and she quickly brought it over her chest just in time.

A loud crack rang out and the Amazons responded with cries or yells.

Gabrielle mentally shook away her haze. She told her body to move, and she flipped onto her feet from the new surge of strength.

Melosa stepped back, but she hastily raised her staff when Gabrielle came at her.

The princess repeated rapid attacks with the ends of her staff. She pushed forward harder and made Melosa step back. She then raised her next end up closer to Melosa's head.

Queen Melosa took a direct hit to her right temple. Her head snapped to the left then blood flew from her mouth and nose. She stumbled back and landed onto her right knee.

Gabrielle listened to the Amazons scream and holler. She shoved the voices aside and raised her staff when Melosa's angry face locked on her.

Melosa climbed to her feet and lifted her staff. "Very nice, Gabrielle." She freed a hand and wiped the

blood from the side of her face.

Gabrielle made no retort yet merely raised her staff.

The queen felt her vision fuzzy, but she'd ignore it. She blinked once then stepped up to her opponent.

The princess stepped to her left and swiftly moved her staff to her right side when Melosa attacked. She blocked the blow then tapped away Melosa's second attack near her left shoulder. She counter attacked and went for Melosa's stomach.

Melosa swept the attack back then tried her own kick. She hit Gabrielle's left hand. She saw the staff drop from the bard's injured hand, and she went for a second kick.

Gabrielle felt her heart still when her staff was airborne. From the corner of her eye, she watched it land about fifty paces from her. She slotted her eyes at the smirking queen.

Queen Melosa yelled then charged for the weaponless bard.

Gabrielle stepped back and ducked when the staff went over her head. She leaned to her right when it came at her left shoulder. She recalled the many lessons Eponin had given her when she was weaponless. She ducked again then popped up faster than Melosa was recalculating. She grabbed Melosa's staff with both hands and held tightly.

The queen's face darkened with anger. She hadn't expected the princess's attempt, and she tried to jerk the staff free.

Gabrielle slightly smirked and held strong.

Queen Melosa growled then thought of a quick solution. She dug her boots into the ground and started to spin around in a circle.

The princess tried to stop Melosa, but she wasn't as strong as the queen. She soon found her feet up in the air, and she was spinning in a circle. If it was one thing Gabrielle could count on it would be her stomach bringing up her breakfast any heartbeat. She had no choice plus her sweaty palms were making it harder.

Melosa laughed when she saw the princess lost her grip finally.

Gabrielle let out a scream, and she flew through the air. She'd made some earlier calculations that she prayed were right on key. She watched the world spin around her, then she made a hard crash on her left side. She groaned briefly, however, it was the rough feeling on her backside that comforted her.

Queen Melosa faced the princess and felt she was close to the finish of the challenge. She decided a final, harsh blow would end Gabrielle's last fire.

Gabrielle lifted her head when she heard Melosa's boots moving fast on the ground. She ignored the painful aches in her body and used her hands to get up.

Queen Melosa was at a full run, and she lifted her staff for the last blow.

The princess bit her lower lip, and she got onto her right foot and left knee. She reached behind, and her hands wrapped around a familiar shaft.

Melosa lost her warrior like expression when she saw the princess had her staff. She mentally realized that Gabrielle had landed next to the staff. She was just upon Gabrielle, and she knew it was far too late

to stop her body's motions.

Gabrielle gave a piercing warcry for the first time, and she brought her staff's end into a thrust. She made a direct aim for Queen Melosa's stomach.

Queen Melosa harshly collided with end of the staff, and she lost her footing. Her weight went completely against the princess's staff.

Gabrielle's warcry repeated, and she used all her body muscle to lift Queen Melosa's larger body. She lifted the queen up into the air with her staff and brought Melosa over her head then behind.

Queen Melosa screamed, lost her staff behind Gabrielle's back, and she flew through the air. She skimmed over the ground for several paces, then she went face first into the harsh dirt. She skid through the dirt for a few paces then stopped. The wind collected a large cloud of dust over her and slowly settled over her body.

Gabrielle climbed to her feet then turned around. She tapped her staff against the ground, stepped over the queen's staff, and started for the queen.

Melosa coughed and moaned against the intense pain in her stomach. She rolled onto her back when cloud dust was blown away and a shadow was over her.

Princess Gabrielle moved her staff and shoved the butt end into the queen's throat. "Yield, Melosa."

The queen blinked away some of the dust from her eyes. She focused on the fuzzy outline of the princess. The anger boiled in her especially when the princess said only her name. "I will not," she spat and tried to swat the bard's staff away.

The princess kept the staff's end in place. She didn't want to have to go to this place with Melosa. "Yield," she coldly ordered.

Queen Melosa snarled then grabbed at the staff. She gave a powerful yank and tore the staff from her throat. She gave a solid kick at the bard's stomach.

Gabrielle took the hit to her lower stomach, and she crumbled to her knees beside the queen. She still held the staff in her right hand, which she grabbed with her left.

Queen Melosa had her hands on the staff too. She first tried to free it from the princess, but she found it coming down at her.

Gabrielle held strong and gritted her teeth. She used her upper body strength with her arm muscles and lower the staff closer to the queen's throat.

Melosa snarled and pushed up with her left leg. She rolled her body and managed to slam Gabrielle down. She was now on top of the bard.

The princess shook her head clear after it'd smacked the hard ground. She focused on the queen's close face above hers, and she still struggled with her staff for control.

Melosa straddled the small princess, and she now took the advantage. She brought the staff closer to the bard's throat. "Any Amazon that feels for the Centaurs is too weak, Gabrielle."

The princess shut her eyes and urged her arms to stop the descending staff.

Queen Melosa had a dark face, and she didn't enjoy what she had to do. She knew it had to be done

despite the burden it would bring on the Nation later. She pressed the staff down harder to the bard's neck. "Just let it go, Gabrielle... you don't belong here."

Gabrielle shook her head and cried out when her staff touched her neck. She dug her nails deep into her staff and demanded her staff to listen to her.

"You'll be with your family soon." Melosa released the last of her restraint and pushed the staff into the bard's throat. "And free of your slave bonds."

Gabrielle tried to scream, yet her staff's pressure broke her cry. She arched her stomach into Melosa's as her world darkened and air became a luxury.

Queen Melosa leaned in closer and whispered, "Tell my sister she'll be avenged soon."

Princess Gabrielle's dark world collected a flash of familiar, warm faces. She sensed her grip loosen on her staff as the faces became more solid and their voices spoke to her.

"Gabrielle, hurry along," Herodotus called, "your mother's dinner is getting cold." His face faded away and Lila now showed.

"Come on, Bri... only boys can do that sort of thing." Lila giggled and stole the little bard's scroll from her. "I've never heard of girl bards before." Lila rapidly aged and hair turned blond until she was now Hecuba.

"You will go on," the mother murmured. She rested on a worn bed, and the fever ravaged her body and mind. She took in a wheezy breath but coaxed her daughter. "You will grow into a famous bard." Hecuba kissed her child's creased forehead and whispered, "And you will be free."

Finally Hecuba's hair darkened and darkened until it matched the night. Her green eyes swirled and softened into a vivid blue. Her cheekbones became chiseled and her jawline well defined. Finally her lips filled out until they matched that of Xena's. Xena's voice was a rich timber that Gabrielle had never heard. "Gabrielle, take your destiny... now!"

"Aaaaaaaaah!" Gabrielle cried out, and she threw all her energy into her muscular legs. She rocked her and Melosa's bodies up and over.

Melosa hollered when she was thrown forward and hit her back. She then lost the air in her chest when the princess slammed her body into her already pained stomach. Last her legs were locked down onto the ground by Gabrielle's much more muscular ones.

Princess Gabrielle rammed the staff down until it was pressed hard into Melosa's throat. She was breathing hard and fueled by anger. "I will kill you, Melosa if you do not yield." She clenched her teeth and pressed down.

Melosa shut her eyes when the position was now reversed on her. She grew desperate for air since she'd already lost most of it.

"I won't let the Nation be destroyed by your hatred," Gabrielle whispered. She inhaled sharply then uttered, "There's so much you can still offer the Nation. Don't let the Nation lose you to your pride."

Queen Melosa felt her hands slipping off the staff. Brief flashes of lights passed over her eyes, and she gurgled some. She shook her head a few times when the staff began to crush her throat.

"Please, Melosa," the princess begged, "Help your Nation... yield."

The queen took her last breath that she was allowed then after a beat, she gasped, "Yield."

Gabrielle held her breath at the unbelievable words from the proud queen. She retracted the staff.

Melosa gasped for air then repeated, "I yield." She dropped her hands to the ground when the staff was far from her throat. She took gulps of air and felt the bard's weight leave her body. She tried to gain some control over her frantic heartbeat.

Princess Gabrielle flexed her left hand, which was sore from the fight. She switched the staff into her left hand then flexed her right hand. She breathed deeply a few times before she held out her right hand.

Queen Melosa touched her aching chest briefly. She spotted the hand above, and she took it. She was helped to her feet and stood before the small princess.

Gabrielle lowered her staff's end to the ground yet still gripped it.

Queen Melosa studied Princess Gabrielle, then she nodded once. She reached up to her mask, removed it, and knelt down onto her right knee. She held up her mask in offer and bowed her head.

Princess Gabrielle stared at the mask in disbelief. She lifted her shaky right hand and clutched the mask by its beak. Then after a beat the full weight of the mask was in her hand when Melosa released it.

Councilor Masika appeared from the crowd, and she stepped past the edge of the circle. She placed her hands behind her back then announced, "The mask of the queen has been challenged and has been won by Princess Gabrielle." She stopped and searched the silent crowd then stilled her view onto the kneeling Melosa and standing Gabrielle. "As of now the reign of Queen Gabrielle begins!"

Once Masika's words faded there was a surge of cheers and screams for Gabrielle's reign. The Amazons started to break apart and fill the circle. The din of voices grew louder, and everybody talked at once.

Melosa was on her feet. She stared at Gabrielle for a beat, then she turned.

"Wait, Melosa," Gabrielle tried and took a step forward.

Melosa was quickly swallowed by the crowd of Amazons.

"Melosa?" The bard called, but she couldn't find the former queen.

"Let her be, Gabrielle," Eponin advised. She touched the bard's shoulder.

Gabrielle stopped and lowered her right hand, which held the mask, to her side. She faced Eponin, who had Andra, Ephiny, and Solari next to her.

Faolan squeezed through several Amazons and appeared at the bard's side. He sat and sniffed the queen's mask in his friend's hand. He sneezed and shook his head.

The bard smirked down at the wolf. "I don't think it's my size anyway, boy."

Faolan stuck out his tongue in agreement.

"Well done, Gabrielle," the weapons master praised. She squeezed Gabrielle's shoulder and released her.

"It was damn close," Solari argued.

"A breeze," Gabrielle joked, yet she still hadn't absorbed the fact that she was now queen.

"Obviously." Ephiny had her arms folded, and she surveyed the cuts and small gashes over the bard's body.

The blacksmith kept silent and just shook her head.

Gabrielle saw the look from her sister. She knew she'd be on the receiving end of a lecture from her sister, but it truly didn't matter now. She then glanced to her left when Councilor Masika pushed through the crowd of Amazons.

"My queen," the councilor greeted and bowed her head. She lifted her head and took in Gabrielle's slightly shaken expression from the new title. She bit back her grin and formally stated, "The council and your officers await the decision on the war declaration."

"Of course," the new queen agreed.

"We must return to the meeting hut," the councilor added. "I will gather the council and officers."

"Thank you, Masika."

Masika just dipped her head then disappeared into the crowd.

"Well, you better get to it, my queen," Andra teased.

"Duty calls already," Solari thoroughly tormented.

Gabrielle slightly pointed her staff at Solari. "Watch who you're talking too, Solari."

"Yes, my queen." Solari laughed deeply.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and willed her body and mind to work together now. She smiled down at the wolf and gently ordered, "Come on, Fao."

"Rrruh." Faolan was very happy to pass through the crowd and follow his friend.

Gabrielle received endless congratulations and many thank yous from Amazons. She was mostly shocked by the thank yous, but she warmly received them all. She finally broke through the crowd and headed back to the administration hut. When she came to the large hut, she was met by Vara.

"Congratulations, my queen." Vara gave a deep bow then straightened up. "The head councilor and several councilors have already entered."

"Thank you, Vara."

"My pleasure," the guard replied and opened the door.

Queen Gabrielle entered the cool hallway of the administration hut. She decided on a slow walk down the hall because she needed a few beats to catch her breath. Everything was happening so quickly, and she couldn't believe it just yet.

Faolan stopped by the meeting room door and peered up at his hesitant friend.

Gabrielle faintly smiled at the wolf, and she shook her head. "I would say it was damn luck, Faolan, but I know it wasn't by far."

Faolan nodded once then sniffed at the thatch door.

"Come on." Gabrielle tucked the queen's mask under her arm, opened the door, and silently entered.

Once she was close to the large table, she set the queen's mask down near the edge. "Is everybody here?"

"Almost, my queen," Masika reported. "Would you like a seat?"

"I'm fine... thank you." Gabrielle approached the handful of councilors. She gazed over the war declaration, but she stopped when the door opened again.

Commander Kaylee came in, followed by her officers, Eponin, and the last two councilors that were required for the meeting. The stratègos ordered her officers stand off to the right, and she stood in front of them.

Councilor Masika extracted the quill from the inkwell and bent over the scroll. She went to Melosa's signature and drew a line through it. "My queen, it is yours to approve." She held out the quill to the new queen.

Queen Gabrielle took the quill and briefly glanced at it. She wasn't sure how to do this, but she was a bard with an imagination. First she returned the quill back into the inkwell then stated, "I will not approve of the war declaration."

"My queen," a councilor spoke up, "the Centaurs have repeatedly broken Amazon laws."

"Since when?" the queen fired back. "I have been working with them for four seasons now." She glared at the councilor. "You'll have to try better than that." She then picked up the war declaration from the table and held it by its parchment. "This will seal the Amazon's death." Gabrielle searched the councilors' faces. "We will be at war with the Centaurs and Draco." She then looked to the stratègos. "Commander Kaylee, what is your prediction that we can defeat both the Centaurs and Draco?"

The stratègos felt all eyes go to her. She was confident and stepped forward from her spot. She had a rough voice when she replied, "We will mostly likely fail, my queen. Our forces are strong but not strong enough to take on a warlord and the Centaurs simultaneously." She paused then honestly stated, "It's suicidal."

Gabrielle nodded then turned back to the councilors. "Are all of you prepared to sign this?" She held out the scroll to them. "Think about it carefully because you're sending your Nation into this war... your sending your daughters, sisters, and for some your wives." She stopped and searched the councilors faces and read that they were backing down from the declaration. "Who of you will sign first?" She held out the war declaration to the councilors and patiently waited.

Councilor Masika also waited a certain time, then she turned to the queen. "I believe there's a new majority, my queen."

"There is," Queen Gabrielle agreed. She placed her staff on the table and grabbed the scroll by its parchment side. She then proceeded to rip it apart. "There will be no war against the Centaurs. Our enemy is Draco, and we will write and sign a declaration for him." Gabrielle had the declaration in pieces, and she slammed it on the table near her staff. "What is the majority?"

"Draco," a councilor spoke.

"Draco," repeated another councilor.

Each councilor repeated the decision until it finished with the head councilor. The queen then continued to speak about working out relations with the Centaurs to help them defeat Draco. The only fear was that the current, thin relations that Gabrielle had produced with the Centaurs were already severed. She

planned to see to that this afternoon and meet with them. She prayed news of her new rulership would waver the Centaurs.

At the end of the meeting, the councilors left the room and went to work on a new war declaration. The military officers and the weapons master also left. Faolan took his spot beside his friend when she came closer. The stratègos had remained behind and wished to speak alone with the new queen.

"We stand a higher chance of success with the Centaurs' help," the stratègos offered.

Gabrielle had collected her staff, and she now picked up the queen's mask. "I think we do too." She glanced at Faolan in hidden signal to go.

Commander Kaylee stepped through the open door once the white wolf passed. She took a spot beside the queen's only open side. "I do fear this strange woman that Melosa told me about."

The queen slowly strolled down the torchlit hallway and went to the main doors. "Seven is an automaton."

The stratègos's head slowly bobbed, and she quietly considered the problem.

"I have a friend that may be able to help us," Queen Gabrielle gently mentioned.

Commander Kaylee was surprised by the news, but she stepped closer to the bard. "Who, my queen?"

"Hercules," Gabrielle simply supplied.

The stratègos stopped by the closed double-doors of the main entrance. She turned to the queen. "Hercules?" She shook her head. "My queen, he is an enemy of Queen Hippolyta."

Gabrielle leaned against her staff some then corrected, "Was. And he's a friend of mine." She shook her head once. "Commander, if he can help us stop this automaton, then I think we need to accept it. We don't have the luxury to figure out some plan."

Commander Kaylee placed her hands on her hips and briefly looked away. She focused back on the young queen. "You're right." She clenched her teeth some then tried to relax. "I don't think killing her is the answer though."

The bard was somewhat surprised by the stratègos's words. She even felt relieved. "The gods control her... that's going to be hard to beat."

"And the gods are responsible for her actions... not her." Commander Kaylee nodded at the entrance door and opened them. She let the queen and wolf pass first then followed. She briefly nodded at the guard but continued along the queen's side. "We have to try something, my queen."

Gabrielle stopped walking once she was far enough from the administration hut. She turned to the stratègos. "I don't argue your point one bit." She sighed and looked away for an instant then back at the stratègos. "We have to be ready for the part where we can't help her. We are dealing with the gods here."

Commander Kaylee brushed back her auburn hair, which was shoulder length. She locked her steel blue eyes on the new queen. "I concur."

Gabrielle felt slightly relieved that the stratègos now sided with her. "I do have an idea, but I won't have time to prepare it."

Commander Kaylee slightly grinned and commented, "I believe I have some time."

The bard smiled at those words. "You've met the shaman Yakut?" After the stratègos's nod, Gabrielle continued to speak. "A shaman works in the spiritual world... I'm hoping there's something that Yakut can do to help Seven."

Commander Kaylee couldn't imagine what it was that Yakut could do. She shook her head yet replied, "I'll talk to her."

"Thank you, commander." Gabrielle offered a smile then started to move away some. "I plan to talk to the Centaurs today. I'm praying we haven't lost our relations with them."

Commander Kaylee raised an eyebrow and smirked. "My queen, if anybody can salvage the relations it would be you."

The bard laughed and shook her head. "Let's hope so." She then touched the stratègos's bare arm with the outside of her hand. "Call me Gabrielle."

The stratègos slightly lost her commander mask and replied, "Only if you call me Kaylee."

"Deal." Gabrielle wrinkled up her nose in an innocent look.

Kaylee chuckled and stepped away once. "I look forward to working with you, Gabrielle." She turned on her boots and marched off without another word or look.

The new, young queen blinked at the backwards compliment from her stratègos. She slowly smiled and peered down at her furry friend. "Well, this might just work out, Faolan."

"Rrrrr," the wolf replied.

"So, ready to see Tyldus, boy?"

"Rrrrrruh," Faolan replied.

Gabrielle shook her head and faintly grinned. "You just want some bones from him." She lifted her head and raised the queen's mask up to her face. She stared at the mask's front and stared deep into the empty eyes. She found it hard to believe she was now queen, but yet it felt fitting to her. Slowly a smile eased over her face when she realized all the potential she now held to better her Nation. Her Amazon Nation had an endless destiny in Gabrielle's eyes.

To be continued.