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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 9

"Welcome to the Nation, Hercules." Queen Gabrielle took the demi-god's arm to hers. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

Hercules returned Gabrielle's shake and still tried to absorb the recent news that Gabrielle was no longer the princess but the queen. "And thank you for taking my open offer for help." He released arms and smiled. "Iolaus and I will do everything we can to help."

"I appreciate it." The bard returned the warm smile. She then grinned when Iolaus came out of the

stables and was brushing his leather pants off. "Iolaus."

Iolaus approached his partner, but he smiled at Gabrielle. "It's been a long time."

"Too long, my friend." Gabrielle stepped forward and hugged her friend.

Iolaus returned the strong hug and pulled back with a glow on his face. "You've aged so beautifully."

Hercules rolled his eyes.

Gabrielle blushed and softly laughed. "Thank you." She stepped back until she was next to her stratègos, Melosa, and Masika. "I'd like you to meet a few of my officials." She turned and held out her hand to the stratègos. "This is the stratègos of the army, Commander Kaylee."

Commander Kaylee stepped forward and shook both men's arms. She gave them warm greetings.

The bard then introduced Melosa next, and she noted Hercules and Iolaus exchanged looks. Finally, she introduced the head of council, Masika. She could already tell that Hercules and Iolaus would get along well with the stratègos and councilor. She wasn't too sure about Melosa, who was most likely irritated by the surprised arrival of the demi-god.

"I know you both must be weary from your journey here," Gabrielle mentioned.

"We're okay," Hercules argued. "I know you must want to brief us on the situation."

The queen nodded then glanced at her officials for any rejections. She heard and saw none so she turned back to the newcomers. "We can go to a meeting room." She then instructed Commander Kaylee to take them because she wanted a moment with Gryta. Once they were on their way, Gabrielle disappeared into the stable and sought out the historian.

"Good afternoon, my queen," the Amazon greeted from behind the stall.

Gabrielle shook her head and grinned. "Hello, Gryta." She leaned against the stall's door and watched the Amazon brush down her horse. "Thank you for retrieving Hercules and Iolaus so quickly."

Gryta paused and glanced at the new queen. "It was my pleasure, my queen."

"Gryta," the bard warned about the formality. "I'm not as strict as Melosa was about titles."

Gryta smiled, which slowly formed into a grin. "I suppose many things about you are different than Melosa."

Gabrielle chuckled, yet she nodded.

Gryta pulled the brush away from the horse then came over to the queen. "I do have some news."

The bard grew tense but urged, "About?"

"The Conqueror," the historian informed, "she was in Aegae when we left this morning."

"Already?" Gabrielle murmured and bowed her head.

"You know?"

The queen lifted her head and replied, "She sent a message that she was joining us in battle against Draco."

"That's great," Gryta declared, yet she noticed the lack of enthusiasm from her friend.

Gabrielle sighed and shook her head. "It may complicate things." She saw the historian's concern and quickly retracted her words. "Don't worry, Gryta."

The Amazon grabbed her queen's arm and urged, "What is it, Gabrielle?"

The bard shook her head and softly mentioned, "It's complicated, Gryta."

The historian understood the queen had little time to talk about it all. She sighed, squeezed the queen's arm, and pulled away. "I'm here if you need anything, Gabrielle."

"I know and thank you." Gabrielle tapped the stall lightly. "I did more than enough by risking to retrieve Hercules and Iolaus."

"My feathers are safe now that you're queen," Gryta smugly argued. She continued to brush her horse.

Queen Gabrielle smirked and promised, "You are." She straightened up from the stall. "Thank you again, Gryta." She started through the stable, but Gryta's voice halted her.

"Congratulations, my queen."

Gabrielle stopped, half turned, and smiled at the loyal Amazon. "Thank you." She turned back and continued her slow walk through the stable. Her steps were echoed by her staff. When she came outside, she was greeted by her most loyal friend. "Hello, boy."

Faolan had briefly taken a walk away from the group when Hercules showed up. He'd detected that Gabrielle went into the stable so he waited by the entrance until she returned.

"We have company, come on." Gabrielle patted her leg and headed for the administration hut and went to the meeting room. She found that everybody was sitting around the table and that the head seat was left open for her. She quickly claimed it after propping her staff against the wall, and she glanced at Faolan, who sat next to her chair.

"Shall we begin, my queen?" the head councilor inquired.

"Yes." Gabrielle checked her mask because it was slightly askew. She switched her focus between Hercules and Iolaus while she spoke. "I asked you here because the Nation is at war with a warlord known as Draco."

"We've never heard of him," Iolaus mentioned.

The bard sighed and replied, "None of us have until I met him a few days ago." She slightly darkened and explained the situation. "Draco's real name is Dan... Dan of Amphipolis. I'm originally from Potidaea, however, I use to go to Amphipolis regularly."

"So you know him," Iolaus concluded. "Why is he here?"

Hercules leaned against the table some and carefully listened.

"Well, Draco also knew my best friend at the time." Gabrielle hesitated then filled in the gap. "My friend was Xena."

"By the gods," Iolaus muttered and looked to Hercules.

Hercules shifted in the wood chair and leaned back now. "It's making sense now."

The queen sighed and slightly nodded. "It's a bit of a reunion, I suppose... not a happy one. Draco and Xena have an ugly history... she's use to get into fights with him often. Draco and his friends were local bullies in Amphipolis, but Xena never answered to them."

Iolaus chuckled because it didn't surprise him in the least since she was such a powerful ruler now. "So he's here for you then?"

"I'm afraid so," Gabrielle confirmed.

"What of the Centaurs?" Hercules had already heard between rumors and Gryta that the Amazon and Centaurs had sticky relations.

"Well," the queen replied, "Draco has been trying to form an alliance with the Centaurs. The Centaurs are not too keen on him and are afraid he'll betray them."

"And the Amazons?" Iolaus tried.

Gabrielle caught Melosa's annoyed features, but she ignored it. "I'm working at saving the relations. I spoke to Tyldus the other day. He's more confident that we can work together to stop Draco."

"That's great," Iolaus praised.

The queen nodded once then went into greater detail about Draco. She didn't want to explain yet that the Conqueror could possibly be here tomorrow. She figured Hercules and Iolaus already knew that since they just came from Aegae.

"The part where we really need your help is with Draco's automaton," Gabrielle started. "I'm not sure what Gryta told you, but Draco has one of these mythological creatures." She shook her head and argued, "It's no longer myth... she's real and she has a name." She glanced between Hercules and Iolaus. "Her name is Seven although I can't imagine that's her real name. She's been built by the gods, and she has bones made from steel, strength of ten men, and skills of ten warriors."

Iolaus huffed and gazed over at his partner. "She sounds like your type, Herc."

The demi-god smirked but became serious and questioned, "Who are the gods?"

"Ares and Hephaestus," Gabrielle replied. She instantly noticed Hercule's darkened features.

"Ares of course," Iolaus muttered.

"It seems Ares isn't too fond of the Conqueror's honorable conquest." The queen laced her hands in her lap. "Supposedly if Draco defeats the Amazon Nation then Ares promises to give Draco an army of automatons."

"To use against the Conqueror," Hercules summarized. "What happens if he fails?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "I suspect he loses his life." She tilted her head and mentioned, "He's not expecting the Conqueror to be here anytime soon."

"The problem is," Hercules spoke up, "she's only in Aegae."

Queen Gabrielle nodded a few times. She was right when she assumed Hercules already knew where the Conqueror was located. She had a messy job ahead of her. "Currently, we're trying to find a way to free Seven from her bonds. She only takes orders from Draco." After Hercules's nod, she continued to explain the situation. "We're worried we may not be able to help her."

"That's where we come in," Iolaus agreed.

"Yes," the bard agreed, "if we can't help her, then we'll have to stop her."

Iolaus glanced at his partner then focused back on the queen. "What were you planning to do to release her from Draco's control?"

Gabrielle thought to reply, but she decided it was more Commander Kaylee's duty. She signaled for the stratègos to speak.

Commander Kaylee straightened up when all eyes were set on her. She'd recently spoke to the shaman, Yakut, about what could be going on with the automaton. It was news to her too. "Right now, there is a shaman in our village," she started. "Her name is Yakut. She's actually a special kind of shaman known as a two-spirit, which works out well for us."

Gabrielle leaned back in her chair and carefully listened. She'd had no chance to speak with the stratègos prior.

"Yakut seems to think that either Ares or Hephaestus has a lock on her soul. She's betting that it's Ares."

"Most likely it is," the demi-god agreed.

Commander Kaylee nodded then continued to speak. "Yakut believes it may be possible to free her soul from Ares and break this... control link between them."

"If that is done, how do we know the automaton will stop fighting?" Masika focused her question at the stratègos.

"There's no guarantee," the stratègos replied.

"How can her spirit be freed?" Iolaus encouraged.

Commander Kaylee sighed and laced her hands together on top of the table. "Yakut is the only person that can do it. She can't promise she'll be able to break the link." She hesitated then simply reminded, "We are dealing with the gods."

"How can she break the link?" Gabrielle prompted.

The stratègos turned her head to the queen. "Yakut couldn't explain, but she did say she has to physically touch Seven. She explained that her powers as a two-spirit only work when she has physical contact."

"So we need to restrain her," Hercules concluded.

"And we have to get close enough," Iolaus reminded. He peered up at his friend.

The stratègos shifted some in her chair then returned to the conversation. "For us to restrain her, it will be hard. I believe she could break any manacles we put on her... if we could get them on her."

"She could also cause a lot of damage during a battle." The demi-god dipped his head and tried to think of a sound plan.

Queen Gabrielle gazed down at Faolan, who revealed his bright green eyes. She stared deep into them for only a few heartbeats, yet it seemed longer. She felt something pass between her and Faolan; she was never sure what, but she lifted her head with a determined expression. "I'm the bait." Suddenly everybody turned their heads to her, and she honestly stated, "I'm the target here. She'll be after me."

"My queen," the stratègos started and stopped at the queen's warning look.

"It makes sense, commander." The queen licked her lips, yet she shoved her nervous feeling away. She didn't have time to be even remotely fearful. "I can lure her away from the battle. We can setup a trap and capture her. If Yakut can't free her then... she'll have to be killed."

Melosa said nothing and kept reserved. Inwardly she was somewhat impressed that Gabrielle would sacrifice herself. Earlier when Gabrielle had asked Melosa to still pose as queen to help hide Gabrielle's slavery brand, she'd wondered what Gabrielle was thinking or not thinking as it were. Melosa was a heartbeat away from refusing, yet she hadn't done it. She instead accepted and certainly not to help Gabrielle, but Melosa saw an opening to remind Gabrielle that she wasn't meant to be queen. Melosa now just had to play her cards right.

"We're going to need a Hades of a trap," Iolaus softly murmured.

Hercules slotted his eyes and stated, "I think I can restrain her."

Gabrielle brushed her bangs back then argued, "She'll be strong, Hercules."

Hercules grinned.

Iolaus chuckled deeply. "So is Herc. If he can't do it, then nobody can."

Gabrielle slowly nodded and gave into the idea. She ran the rough concept through her head, and her hand slipped down to Foalan. She idly petted him while she considered the idea.

"It may work," the stratègos agreed.

The queen could tell that Commander Kaylee wanted to give the plan a try. She had to agree that it may work, but she wasn't so sure how they could kill an automaton.

"The river," Melosa softly mentioned. She'd been in her own thoughts, but she focused back on the group. "The Axius River... it's perfect."

The stratègos had a confused look, yet she quickly caught onto Melosa's brilliant idea. "Melosa is right. If we can't free her then we can shove her over the gorge and into the Axius River. If the river's rushing waters don't kill her then certainly her own body will do it."

Gabrielle now understood what they were thinking. "She's made of steel... she'll sink."

"And drown," the stratègos finished.

The head councilor had silently listened, but she now asked, "And if we free her. What will become of her?"

"I think that's up to her to decide," the queen answered. "We'll deal with that problem if it occurs. I think for now we have a better plan than where we were." She watched everybody nod, and she continued. "We'll need to..." Her words died when there was a loud banging at the door.

"My queen!" Vara broke into the meeting room and hastily explained, "I'm sorry, but we have a major problem."

Commander Kaylee stood up and demanded, "What's happened?"

"Several young Amazons were out in the woods on a walk." Vara stepped more into the room. "They were secretly meeting up with some Centaur kids to play with." She hesitated then revealed, "Draco

attacked them... killed two Amazons, the three Centaurs, and kidnapped two Amazons." She swallowed and finally mentioned, "Only one Amazon made it back."

"By the gods," Gabrielle whispered in fear. She briefly had flash of her walk in the woods so long ago that ended in Terreis's death. She shakily climbed to her feet and demanded, "Who were the children taken?"

Vara clenched her hands at her sides. "They took Cliona and Amarice."

The bard automatically recalled Cliona, who was the young apprentice in the healer's hut. Cliona was around fifteen or so Helical Risings and was due to become a full healer soon. And Amarice, the bard ran through her memory bank, but she didn't know any young Amazon by that name.

"We need a rescue mission," Melosa coldly stated.

"No, wait." The queen grabbed the edge of the table. "I want to speak to Draco first."

"He won't hand them over," Melosa snapped.

"We don't know that," Gabrielle argued. "I want to try this peacefully so these children don't join their sisters soon."

Melosa held her tongue, yet she knew what would ultimately happen here.

Queen Gabrielle looked to the group. "Hercules, Iolaus please work with the stratègos to make better plans. Keep me informed." She sadly smiled at the two outsiders. "Thank you again for coming here." She then turned to Masika. "Councilor, I will need your help if you'll come with me." She stepped around the chair, and Faolan followed. "Vara, I want to see what's happened." She scooped up her staff quickly.

"Of course, my queen." The hut guard waited until the queen and councilor were with her, and she escorted them out.

Commander Kaylee, Melosa, Hercules, and Iolaus remained in meeting room. They worked out more solid plans on how to lure Seven away from the battle. They hoped it would work and that Yakut would agree to it.

Queen Gabrielle and Councilor Masika walked on either side of Vara. And Vara was taking them to the Amazon that'd requested for the queen's presence immediately.

"Have the Centaurs been contacted?" the queen inquired.

"I believe a runner has been sent," Vara answered.

The bard nodded then directed her next words to Masika. "I'll need your help with this, Masika."

"Of course, my queen."

Vara spotted an Amazon running to them. She stopped once the Amazon was upon them and breathlessly spoke.

"My queen, I'm sorry for what's happened." The polemarchos, Galatea, was in command only after Commander Kaylee. "We... we failed."

Queen Gabrielle touched the polemarchos's arm and argued, "Nobody could have expected it."

"We should have," the upset polemarchos fought.

"Let's not focus on the should have's." Gabrielle released the Amazon's arm and inquired, "What exactly happened?"

"I'll show you."

Vara stepped back once. "I must return to the administration hut, my queen."

"Thank you, Vara." Gabrielle briefly watched the guard go, then she and Masika joined the rushed polemarchos.

"All the kids were meeting just between the open lands between the Amazons and Centaurs," the second in command explained. "It seems like these kids have been meeting up quite often, for some time."

Gabrielle was surprised because even she hadn't heard anything, yet she was also glad to hear the acceptance. She focused back on the topic and questioned, "The patrol didn't spot them?"

"No," Officer Galatea answered, "the Amazon kids always sneak out of the borders. I assume the Centaur kids do the same. They meet halfway between the borders so they can play together."

The queen shook her head and had to give Amazonian creativity some credit. She picked up the pace of the walk so that she could stay at the second in command's side. "Have the Centaurs been contacted?"

"Yes, I sent a runner. We should hear shortly from the Centaurs." The polemarchos considered it then added, "They should meet us there."

The three Amazons hurried out of the closed gates, and they went deep into the forest until they came out on the eastern side of the territory. Gabrielle found it strange that Draco had his men on the eastern side of the Nation when they were camped west of the Nation. Officer Galatea seemed to think that Draco's men may have been stalking these children for some time and only planned to attack until now. Something was in the air.

"Here we are," Officer Galatea informed. She pushed aside some low tree branches. "This'll be hard to see." She held a note of sadness in her voice.

Gabrielle sucked in her breath when she entered the large clearing. She swallowed hard against the thick lump in her throat, and she stared at the dead Amazon children on the forest floor. Then beside them were the Centaur children, who did not stir either. The arrows protruded from their chests, limbs, and stomachs, and Gabrielle stared at the distinct fletching at the top of the shaft. The bard instantly was hit by her childhood memories from so long ago.

"What is that?" young Ephiny uttered. She bent her knees and eyed the woods in front of her. She'd heard an odd yet distinct sound coming from a certain direction. She noted her friends Gabrielle, Terreis, Solari, and Eponin were trying to figure it out too.

"It sounds like..." Eponin lost her words as she tried to concentrate on the faint noise, which sounded like wood bending. Then there was a sharp whistle, and she became bug eyed. "Arrow!" she screamed.

Before anybody had a heartbeat to react, Terreis screamed. Everybody turned to her and took in the arrow that stuck out of her chest.

"No," Gabrielle screamed. She could hear another arrowing headed for Princess Terreis. She jumped and pushed Terreis down onto her back. Finally she covered the princess's body in a protective manner.

The three remaining Amazons quickly circled the fallen girls, and they waited for their attackers to appear.

Terreis was crying from the pain, but she lifted her head and stared at the arrow.

"Relax," the bard coaxed, "everything will be fine." Gabrielle though knew it wasn't true. She visually traced the arrow's shaft up until she met the feathery fetching at the top.

Gabrielle faded out of her memory, but the arrow's fetching remained the same as it was from so many moons ago. The queen carefully approached the young Amazon, who had golden hair and peaceful features. Gingerly, she touched the familiar fetching on the arrow's tip.

Faolan moved closer to the children. He sniffed them then moved away and investigated the Centaurs too. He then peered up at his human friend.

Masika sensed something out of place with the queen. She stepped closer and asked, "What is it?"

"I know this arrow," the bard hoarsely murmured. She released the golden fetching and peered up at the second in command and councilor. "It has the same markings as the one that killed Terreis."

After the queen's words, the surrounding Amazons that'd been guarding the area quickly focused on the queen. They were surprised by her words, but it was the head councilor that spoke first.

"That's impossible."

Gabrielle glanced back at the arrow's fetching. "I know how it sounds, but I remember this arrow." She shook her head and sadly added, "I won't ever forget it."

Masika saw Officer Galatea's surprised face. She couldn't argue either that Gabrielle would ever forget such a life altering experience. "There's a lot more going on here than we know," she mentioned.

"What are your wishes, my queen?" The polemarchos tried. She was still trying to absorb the fact that the same arrow that killed Terreis now had killed these children.

"Their mothers need to be told." Gabrielle swallowed then shook her head. "I'll talk to them." She stopped staring at the dead children. "They need to be prepared for a proper funeral pyre." She then focused on the head councilor. "Masika, Tyldus will be here soon. I need you to speak to him and handle this situation."

"Where will you be, my queen?" Councilor Masika couldn't guess why the queen didn't want to handle the situation herself. It didn't make sense.

"I'm going to speak to Draco... about the children taken hostage." Gabrielle bit her lower lip. "The Centaurs will fight Draco now." She glanced back at the fetching on the arrows then coldly stated, "Now we have the proof that Terreis was never killed by the Centuars." She stepped closer to the edge of the clearing, Faolan followed her. "Polemarchos, I'll need you to inform the stratègos of what's happened."

"Of course, my queen." Officer Galatea bowed her head then straightened up. "Be careful with Draco, my queen. He is more clever than anybody guessed."

Gabrielle glanced one last time at the dead children. She hefted her staff and sadly remarked, "Yes... yes he is." She turned and hurried into the woods, and the white wolf bounded after her. She raced back to the Nation and went to the military division of the village. She easily sought out a dozen Amazons to accompany her, which included Solari and Ephiny too. She then hastened everybody to the stables and

corrals for the horses.

Hercules and Iolaus were headed across the village when they spotted the Amazon party headed for the gates. Hercules caught Gabrielle and asked, "What's happening?"

"We're going to meet with Draco." Gabrielle adjusted Torqueo's reins in her hands. "I want to get the Amazons back."

The demi-god sympathized. "Can you wait for a moment? Iolaus and I will come too." After the queen's nod, she added, "I want to meet what kind of man kills children and takes them hostage." He signaled for Iolaus to follow him to the stables.

It wasn't long before the Amazons party, which included the demi-god and his partner, were headed out of the gates and gone west through the woods. They rode hard until they came out onto the open lands that were near the warlord's camp. The queen slowed the group and finally stopped them when they were not far from the camp. She knew it was dangerous to be this close, but she wanted Draco's attention.

Soon enough Draco marched out of the camp with twenty of his warriors and also his automaton. He stopped a few paces away from the Amazon party. He placed his hands on his leather hips. He had a smug face and mentioned, "You're awfully bold for coming this near, Gabrielle."

"And so are you," the bard coldly remarked.

The warlord tilted his head and smiled darkly. "So I take it you found my... little gift."

Gabrielle was angry, and she never felt more disgusted by the warlord. "Where are the other two Amazons?"

Hercules was listening to the conversation, but he also examined the woman that obviously was the automaton. He was quite impressed.

"Where are the other two Amazons," Draco mocked and teased, "Please?" He turned to one of his men behind him and signaled him.

The warrior turned and waved at somebody back in the camp.

There was a brief silence then suddenly two girls' screams echoed away from the camp. Cliona and Amarice were locked inside of a wagon and only yelled when they spotted their fellow Amazons.

"They're safely tucked away," the warlord joked. He folded his arms over his chest.

"What do you want for their return?" Gabrielle urged.

Draco pucked his lips and pretended to consider the request. He focused back on the bard. "This is the part where I ask you to hand yourself over or I'll kill the girls."

The queen also expected the same. She clenched the reins harder and just waited.

"Honestly, I'm not too concerned with that." Draco inhaled deeply then exhaled. "I'll have you either way, and I'm truly looking forward to destroying the Nation." He pretended to consider something then he nodded quite finally. "I think I'll sell them for a favor."

"Don't you dare," the bard snarled. "You do anything to them, Draco, and I swear I'll-"

"What?" Draco stepped slightly closer, but he noticed that white wolf again.

Faolan shifted closer to the warlord and revealed his sharp fangs.

The warlord ignored the wolf and smirked up at Gabrielle. "You'll what, Little Bri? Go running to your best friend?" He smirked at how Gabrielle was growing angrier. "Oh, and don't think I don't know." He had the sliest grin. "The Conqueror is just in Aegae... right on schedule."

The Amazon Queen's became wide eye. She didn't know that Draco expected Xena here so soon. She was indeed missing a piece of the puzzle, and she felt it in her gut. "What are you planning Draco?"

Draco shrugged and walked back to his men. He turned his head sidelong and casually remarked, "Go back to your Nation, Gabrielle. Wait around for your destiny." He ordered his men to head back to the camp.

Faolan moved forward and growled at the retreating enemy.

"Fao," Gabrielle softly called.

The wolf stopped his growl and turned back to the Amazons.

Hercules moved his horse around and came near the queen. "Do you think he knows about your reign?"

"I'm not sure," the bard murmured.

"He seems to keep a pretty good eye on things," Ephiny argued.

"Too good." Gabrielle shifted in the saddle. "Did you get a good look at Seven?"

"We did," Iolaus replied.

Gabrielle nodded, but she turned her long stare to the enemy's camp. She could make out the wood wagon that held the girls captive. She didn't like Draco's suggestion that he would sell them. Was this favor he was trading for really worth two Amazons?

"Let's head back," the queen decided. She led the group back to the Nation. Faolan easily ran along side the queen's horse. Just like last time, he wanted to bite that warlord.

Queen Gabrielle returned to the Nation, but she didn't have time to untack Torqueo so Ephiny took care of him for her. She and Faolan went in search of the stratègos, who was just leaving the temple. Gabrielle and Commander Kaylee met halfway in the middle of the village.

"Galatea informed me." Commander Kaylee rested her hands on her hips. "I'm sorry, my queen."

Gabrielle held up her hand briefly. "The best thing we can do is properly remember those girls and avenge them by getting the two back." She put her hand back down. She heard Faolan's low sigh to her right.

"What was Draco's response? Ransom?"

The queen darkened and replied, "He's using them for a favor."

"For what?" the stratègos murmured.

Gabrielle tried to think about why. "He knows the Conqueror isn't far."

"Damn." Commander Kaylee was hoping the Conqueror would be the initial surprise plus Hercules's help. "If he knows the Conqueror is coming, then he realizes he can't win."

"Plus he just turned the Centaurs on himself." Gabrielle shook her head then guessed, "Maybe he's getting somebody's help."

Commander Kaylee quickly agreed to the assessment. "Who though?"

Gabrielle started to walk towards the military sector of the Nation. She had the stratègos on her left side while Faolan stayed at her right. "I'm not sure, but I do want scouts posted near his camp. I want to keep an eye on those girls."

"We can't touch them as long as he has them in that camp," Kaylee reminded.

"I know," the bard murmured. "We'll have to think of something else."

The stratègos hated to agree, but it was true. "That damn bastard." She and the queen came past the smithing hut then Eponin's office hut. She knew they were going to her office hut. "I've increased patrol. I would like to also invoke a curfew and temporary law for the children."

Gabrielle nodded and followed the stratègos into the office hut. She let Faolan pass first, then she entered. "We don't need a repeat of those events."

"I concur," Kaylee replied. She stepped around her desk then sat. She motioned for the queen to sit too. "I also spoke to Yakut and explained to her the plans."

"Do you think it's plausible?"

The stratègos was silent and seriously considered the rough plans. She leaned back in her chair and heavily sighed. "I believe so. It's risky, but if it works then we'll be saving that woman's life."

Gabrielle nodded and leaned back in her chair too. She gazed down at Faolan and watched him.

Kaylee considered the young queen and wondered what she was feeling. Kaylee couldn't imagine because she never took a high ranking position until she was in her early thirties. The stress and pressure to be a queen was great, but even greater when the queen was shy of twenty Helical Risings.

"Gabrielle," the stratègos softly called. Once she had the queen's returned attention, she continued to speak. "I admire what you're trying to do for the Nation." She tilted her head and her steel blue eyes locked on the forest green ones. "There are few queens in a Nation's history that sacrifice themselves for the good of the Nation." She hesitated then decided on her next words carefully. "To be truly honest, those queens are well remembered for two reasons. They're revered for their selfishness and hated for their sacrifice."

The bard was shaken by the stratègos's words. She hadn't expected them at all.

"There is a fine line between sacrificing yourself for your Nation and endangering your Nation." Kaylee straightened up and leaned against her desk. "The queen is the Nation just as much as the Nation is the queen. You must never forget that."

Gabrielle picked up on the fact that Kaylee was hinting at her recent choice to use Melosa as her mask. She struggled with herself for several candelmarks, but she still felt like it was best for the Nation. The brand forever marked on her hip would always be her shadow.

The bard nodded and sat up in her chair. "Thank you, Kaylee. I will remember." Later she would consider the stratègos's words again and again. She switched to another topic. "I expect to hear from Tyldus soon."

"They'll join the Nation to stop Draco," Kaylee concluded.

"I would assume so." Gabrielle stood up and brushed her hands off for a beat. "Tomorrow though the Nation must morn." She quietly patted her leg for Faolan to follow her. "I have to speak with the mothers now."

Commander Kaylee came around her desk and followed the queen to the door. "I'll keep you posted on the scouts' reports."

"Please do." Gabrielle had the door partially opened, but she held it still. "I want to know everything that happens to those girls. As soon as we find our opening to free them, we need to move quickly."

The stratègos fully agreed. "I'll keep things on alert."

The queen touched the auburn commander's muscular arm and whispered, "Thank you." She then left with Faolan at her side. She listened to the stratègos's door close, and she stopped. She scanned the busy village and recalled she was about to do one of the hardest things in her life. She was going to inform certain mothers that their daughters were either dead or held hostage now. Nobody ever warned her that this would be included in the role of Amazon Queen.

To be continued.