

**DISCLAIMER:** Xena, Gabrielle, Argo, etc. are ©copyright MCA/Universal and Renaissance Pictures. I don't own them, I just play with them for a while and, like the good girl I am, I put them back when I'm done...okay, they get a little worn, but hey...I play hard! Absolutely no Copyright infringement was intended in the writing of this fiction. It's intended as flattery toward the creators, writers, and actors of the characters. All other characters that appear are ©copyright Devlin@xenafan.com. This story cannot be sold or used for profit in any way. Copies may be made for private use only and I'd appreciate if you included all copyright notices and this disclaimer.

**VIOLENCE WARNING:** There is violence (come on it's the Conqueror). The nature of the story is not nearly as dark as some Conqueror fiction, but it's essence is still the slave / master relationship that exists between Xena & Gabrielle.

**TIMELINE:** My own making. Xena is the Lord, Conqueror of Greece, but she is almost forty-five years old when she meets the slave, Gabrielle. Many of Xena's evil ways have been sedated, but not all. I call this Xena the "thinking woman's" Conqueror. She is a woman who wants to try to do the right thing, but doesn't always know how.

**SEX:** Yes, I'll have some, thank you. Oops! I mean, yes there is. It is our favorite two Soulmates, after all. It's not gratuitous, but it is quite explicit when it gets going. This story shows consensual as well as non-consenting love (master/slave), sex and yes, even some light bdsm between two adult females.

**HIGH ANGST WARNING:** I was threatened within an inch of my life if I didn't start putting this disclaimer on some (all?) of my work. I will henceforth rate the angst content with sad faces, one being the lowest and four being the highest. This story earns: L L (2 sad faces for those without TT Fonts)

**UNDERAGE WARNING:** Hey, the Supreme Court said in *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union (1997)* that laws against making available, online, certain "indecent" materials for those under 18 was unconstitutional...look it up! Besides, this is perfectly "decent." J

*\*\*Special thanks to Jim Kuntz for his permission in using any Lion of Amphipolis references.*

**The Conqueror Series**  
**Tale One: Journey's End**

**By LJ Maas**

**Prologue**

What an odd place to start a tale, at the end, but that is the way she says it is to be told and who am I to argue. I am only the ruler of this land known as Greece and she my slave, but even that will change in three days' time. My birth name is Xena, I am from Amphipolis, but most of this land knows me by my title, Lord Conqueror. It has been many seasons since anyone has called me Xena, yet now I hear it every day, and it thrills my heart. I never would have known how exciting the sound of my own name rolling from a lover's tongue could be, had it not been for her.

She tells me I am getting ahead of myself, talking about her, and I shush her and push her away from my writing table. First, she wants me to start at the end, now she says I go too fast. Gods, she is the paradox of my life. She alone holds the power to cause me to fall on my knees, professing my love for her. She alone can inflame me to moments of kindness and passion, and it is her also who can anger me until my arms go weak with the strain of not striking out at her. She is light and I am dark. I used to think I could survive alone in my darkness, but it was she who told me that dark does not exist without light, that we would not know one, if it were not for the other.

Now she tells me to explain what I mean by starting at the end. I hand her the quill and tell her to write since she obviously thinks I cannot. She smirks at me and turns away and I realize it was not that long ago that she would have been beaten to death for an act of insolence like that, and yes, beaten by me. My life has only held darkness, death, and destruction since my fifteenth summer. Numerous bards have regaled you with tales of my life already so I will not repeat the details here. Suffice to say that all the dark, hateful, lewd things that you have read about Xena, the Conqueror are absolutely true. Oh, there may be a few that have exaggerated, but most paint an accurate portrait of me. At least that was the me of my youth. I was filled with unquenchable appetites, of which sex and bloodlust were only two. I was insatiable whether it was in bed or on the battlefield and my temper and my orgies were both legendary.

I was in my forty-fourth summer when she came into my life. That is what I mean by starting at the end. Not that forty-four is by any means the end of my life, for now it feels like only the beginning, but I came to a point, before she came, where it certainly felt like the end. It is true that once I passed the age of forty, I finally began an attempt to temper my darkness, but only just. I was still a woman prone to violent fits of rage and jealousy, and my libido was still as strong as a warrior half my age, but by the time I was 44, I was slowing, not physically, but mentally. It was mostly because my life seemed very empty, that the only thing that surrounded me everyday was loneliness. The absolute truth is that for the better part of my life I neither cared nor loved anyone, well almost, but I suddenly felt alone because of it. Therefore, instead of becoming bitter in my solitude, I worked at becoming better. I began to

temper my judgments with leniency; I tried not to destroy things when I lost my temper, and most of all I tried very hard to treat the people around me, slave or nobleman, with more respect than I had in the past. I suddenly felt my age. I think many of those close to me thought it was madness or senility, although I noticed they never asked for the old Xena back. I'll admit that there were days when my newfound maturity was thrown out with the bathwater and I reverted back to my old ways, but I tried, nonetheless.

The truth is that the story of the Conqueror does not begin until *she* steps into the tale. For, the tale of the Conqueror cannot be accurately told without telling of Gabrielle.

## Chapter 1: A Meeting with Destiny

“Lord Conqueror, it is an honor to fight beside you in battle.” The Governor of Thessaly said as he grasped my strong arm with an equally powerful hand.

I had been brooding of late, missing what I didn't have, yet unable to formulate what the missing factor was in my life that caused me to be so out of sorts. The small civil war that broke out on the coast, near Ambracia, gave me a reason to get out of the palace at Corinth. I think I surprised quite a few men on the battlefield today, my own as well as the enemy. The bloodlust no longer ran as strong in me, but it was enough to turn me into a terror on the field of war.

“Tell, me Telamon,” I asked the Governor, “Do you expect any more trouble from these coastal pirates?”

Telamon was a short man, yet full of muscle, and the appointed official laughed heartily. “I believe, Lord Conqueror, that all I will have to do in the future is to tell them that the Conqueror of Greece will ride against them and they will scurry like rats from a burning ship.”

A number of cries and one or two screams were heard from the great hall and we all seemed to move that way as the female prisoners were brought through. It was customary for the official of the area to take his pick of the female prisoners before they were sold as slaves on the auction block. So, Telamon's Lieutenant, Darius, brought the lot through for inspection.

“Lord Conqueror,” Telamon began, “I respectfully offer to you, my customary pick.

I sighed. They always did this, thinking to gain my favor. Some, honorable men like Telamon, did it simply because it was the respectful thing to do. Only problem was that I hated it. Oh, there was a time when I would try to ascertain which among them was a virgin, then that's the one I would break in as my newest body slave, but life was much different for me now. I hadn't shared my bed with anyone beyond the occasional whore for the past two seasons. It worried me at times, as to why my sexual drive deserted me. However, I still had a reputation to keep up, so I usually took a girl and made a great pretense of sitting her on my lap all night while my soldiers and I drank until dawn. I would make sure everyone heard my lewd remarks and saw the way I touched her. Then when the sun came up, I would end up passing out in bed and the next day my captain, Atrius, would find the girl work in the castle kitchen.

I fixed a leer on my face and added a little exaggerated swagger to my stride as I strolled past the women, young and old, that had been taken from the pirates. Most left quite a bit to be desired and I was just to the point of refusing the Governor's first choice when two women stepped apart and behind them a blonde head hung down, staring at her bare feet. Now, I don't know why the girl caught my attention. I couldn't even see her face and she was a tiny thing, Gods, I'd probably break her like a twig if I'd had any inclination to bed her. There was something about this one though.

When I walked toward the girl the people in front of her stepped away. She never looked up, but she must have known I stood before her by the shadow I made across her body. I reached out two fingers and lifted her chin. I'm not sure how long I stood there not breathing, but I know that I had to clear my throat to cover the large gulp of air I finally took in. She had irises

the color of an early morning forest, all lush and green. She tried to lower her eyes from mine even though I now held her chin firmly tilted up in my grasp.

“Look at me.” I ordered and she hesitantly raised her eyes to meet mine.

She seemed unable to fix her eyes on me and lowered them again, submissively. I moved my hand up to brush away the locks of dirty blonde hair that fell across her face, that’s when I saw it. When my hand moved toward her, she flinched. Not physically, but I saw it in her eyes. Her eyes drew back and I realized she must have been a slave for most of her life, for one so young to act this way.

“What is your name?” I asked, but before she could answer, there was a chorus of muffled snorts and laughter from the soldiers.

I turned, glaring toward Darius, Telamon’s Lieutenant, for explanation.

“Forgive the outburst, Lord Conqueror, but you may want to choose again.”

“And, why is that?” I asked.

“This one’s been used so much even the soldiers don’t want her.” He answered to more snickers from the men.

I turned back to the young girl. “I asked you what your name was.”

“Gabrielle, My Lord.” She answered and I new I was in trouble. Those eyes were drawing me in and that voice, it sounded as smooth as silk when she spoke. The odd thing is that she called me, My Lord, as if she belonged to me already. No one called me anything but Lord Conqueror.

Then, tears began to fill her eyes, as the men could not stifle their laughter. She didn’t try to wipe them away or pull back from me and I felt the wetness splash onto my fingers.

“Why do you cry girl? Is it because Darius here lies?” I prodded, wishing she would stop her tears. I didn’t understand why, but they made me feel uneasy.

“No, My Lord.” she responded softly. “My tears are because the Lieutenant speaks the truth.” and suddenly the whole room went silent.

I’m still not sure why, but I heard my own voice as if someone else were using it. “Atrius,” I called to my captain. “See that she is taken to my quarters, fed, bathed and dressed properly. I may have need of her services.”

When I turned to leave the great hall I paused momentarily to see if any of the soldiers had enough nerve, or stupidity, to laugh now. No one did. They never do.

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I was feeling my wine to be sure, but the satisfying fact was that most of the men who challenged me to the drinking contest passed out long ago. Content in the knowledge that I

still had a bit of my youth left, I walked out of the banquet hall on the way to my room. I must have been listing to port slightly because Atrius was suddenly there and I had to rely on him to lead the way to my quarters or I could have been wandering the halls all night.

“Will there be anything else this evening, Lord Conqueror?” he asked as I opened my door.

“No, I’m done in for the night.” I called after him once he turned to go. “Atrius...um...thank you.”

Atrius never spoke much. He bowed his head slightly and gave me a small grin. We were both warriors and he knew how hard I was trying to become a more gracious ruler, let alone a decent human being. He accepted my hesitant thanks with a civility that was unique for a soldier.

I entered my room and nearly fell over the girl who sat, kneeling at the foot of my bed.

“Who in Hades are you?” I shouted at her. She surprised me and I don’t like surprises.

The small face instantly looked up in alarm and I barely recognized this beauty with her golden hair and freshly scrubbed face.

“Oh.” I said, unable to think of anything else to say. I recognized the slave that I selected earlier, but just barely.

She bowed her head again and seemed to be waiting for me to command her in some way. It’s been quite some time since I owned a body slave and I have grown rather unaccustomed to this behavior. She was breathtaking now that she was cleaned up and I noticed my personal maid dressed her in one of my older silk robes. It was rather large on the small frame and hung off one shoulder, exposing lovely pale skin. If she hadn’t planned that maneuver herself, she should have. It was as seductive as it could be.

I admit I wasn’t very sober, but I crossed the room to get a glass of wine anyway. After I’d downed about half the glass I turned and the girl was in the same submissive posture, kneeling on the floor at the foot of my bed. I can only assume that’s what she’d been taught. Either that, or Sylla, my maid instructed her to do so.

My libido went south on me in the last season or so, but as I stared at the small blonde, her hair falling forward from her bowed head, covering her face, I felt a warm need clench at my belly. I gulped down the rest of the wine to beat back the headache I could feel coming on. My neck was beginning to get stiff, and my back ached, a sure sign that I would have one Tartarus of a hangover in the morning.

I walked to the bed and sank heavily onto the soft mattress. My fingers were having a hard time working the laces of my shirt and I finally gave up. What was this girl’s name?

“What’s your name again?” I gave in and asked.

“Gabrielle, My Lord.”

“Gabrielle, I need you.” I responded and she stood in front of me and let her robe fall to the floor.

All I could do was stare at the gorgeous body in front of me. For being a slave, she had few if any lash marks on her body. Usually there’s only one reason for keeping a slave in good condition like this and that is if they’re good at what they do. That thought made another white-hot bolt of warmth sear through my belly.

“Put your robe back on, Gabrielle.” I said quickly, looking at my own boots.

I had no idea why I was holding back from simply taking the girl, it’s what I usually did. If I saw something I wanted, I made it mine. Well, it’s what I used to do. I was trying not to terrorize young women so much anymore. It started to get empty somewhere along the way, having women in my bed that were there simply because I commanded it to be so. I felt something beyond physical lust for this small blonde, and that worried me, but I didn’t feel like facing that kind of a demon tonight.

Gabrielle reached for her robe and I could see the confusion written across her features. I could also tell why the soldiers downstairs didn’t want her.

Those kind of men wanted a woman to fight back a little, so even if it wasn’t true, they could think they were bad asses by taking women against their will, as if taking a defenseless woman that way made a man out of anyone. I looked down at the slave that knelt and bowed her head in front of me. *Who rode all the fight out of you, little one?* It probably wasn’t one, but a hundred different masters. She existed in a slave’s world by cowering and apologizing, and begging forgiveness. She did as she was told, exactly when she was told, and she stayed alive for it. She was a young girl, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a person, man, or woman, whose eyes displayed such absolute and utter defeat before. She didn’t even appear to know how to think for herself, and why bother. She must have spent most of her life being told what to do and when to do it. I’m sure she learned at a very young age that slaves who think don’t live long.

“Forgive me, My Lord, I thought...I didn’t mean to presume that you wanted to be pleased.” She apologized.

“I don’t...I mean I do, look...just not tonight, okay?” I uncharacteristically stammered. I think I was a little disappointed that her body was covered again.

“Help me undress, Gabrielle.” I commanded and immediately she set about the task.

She removed my boots, not even caring that they were still covered in dried blood and mud from the battle.

“You can wash your hands in the bowl over there, there’s water in the pitcher.” If I hadn’t of said anything, I’m sure she would have wiped her hands on herself before removing the rest of my garments.

She untied the laces of my shirt and I pulled the top over my head. She looked up only once, as if seeking permission to continue, when she prepared to remove the breeches I wore under

my trousers. It was the last item of clothing I had on and she paused. For some reason I wasn't sure if I wanted her hands that close to my need and I removed the underwear myself.

I rolled into the middle of the bed and lay on my stomach, my arms wrapping around the softness of a pillow. The sheets felt cool against my naturally heated skin and I breathed deeply at the smell of the fresh linen. The smell reminded me of a time very long ago, when I was a small child.

“A backrub, Gabrielle. That's what I need.” I finally mumbled to the kneeling girl.

I heard her robe fall to the floor again and I this time I permitted her to disrobe. I figured that I was naked; she might as well be too. I spread my legs apart and she took the silent invitation to kneel there and begin to knead the muscles in the small of my back. Those small hands had an incredible strength to them, while feeling gentle and sensuous at the same time, and I slowly began to feel my muscles become warm and pliant under her touch. When she moved to another spot, it seemed as if she knew exactly where my pains and old injuries were and gravitated toward them first.

She popped some bones in my back and I could feel the ache lessening already. When she moved to my shoulder I think I must have winced, because she apologized profusely. She kept up the massage in the painful area, going slower with each circle of her hand and suddenly paused.

“This might hurt, My Lord. Shall I continue?” she asked.

I grunted my approval, and I could feel the weight of her small frame press in on her hand. There was an audible pop and a sharp pain that began to recede right away. I realized the shoulder I dislocated on a routine basis, must not have been replaced correctly. I popped it out again during the battle this morning. I made a mental note to remember to visit the Governor's battlefield healer again before I returned to Corinth. He and I needed to have a talk about his abilities.

“Where did you learn how to do this?” I finally asked, trying not to groan in pleasure while I spoke.

“One of my masters had a healer who was from the land of Chin. He was very happy to teach me the ways of his art, My Lord.”

I was well acquainted with Chin and with the healing arts from that land. I learned quite a bit in my youth from a lover that I had briefly. I hadn't thought of Lao Ma in quite a long time. She was perhaps the only woman who ever loved me for myself. I had nothing then, I was young and wild and she tamed me for a spell. I was also brash, foolish, and consumed with a lust for power. When I left her and the land she loved, I thought I would never go back there again. I did, some ten seasons later. I slit the throat of the Emperor who called himself the Green Dragon. I never knew who he was, but once I arrived in Chin I was told that he tortured and killed Lao Ma for her peaceful beliefs. Why she allowed him to, I will never understand. She possessed a mighty power and I wonder to this day, why she never used it on the bastard.

I felt Gabrielle lean into me and rub small circles into my lower back with the heel of her hand. I could feel her thighs pressing against the insides of mine and when she leaned her

weight in to place more pressure on her hand, I felt the silky curls covering her mound lightly brush against my backside, and that warmth in my lower belly returned with a vengeance. She paused momentarily when she reached my hips, as if she didn't know in which direction to continue. I wasn't quite ready to give up the feeling of her hands on my body and so I commanded her to continue.

"Lower," was the only order I gave.

I held the pillow in my arms tighter as she kneaded the flesh of my backside, wondering if she had any idea how wet she was making me. She eventually moved down each thigh and along the backs of my legs, and the things she did with her thumbs against the arch of my foot caused me to moan in pleasure.

It was the first sound I made and I believe it startled her. By the time she slowly worked her way up to my backside again, the sounds coming from my throat were continuous. It was a little hard to hide my desire at this point since I was sure she could see how drenched my sex was. Partly it was the wine, but the other part was the wonderful things this girl was doing to my body with her massage. I couldn't remember if I'd ever let any man or woman take me in such a submissive position, but I pulled one knee up, spreading myself open and issued one command.

"Touch me." I rasped.

She knew what I wanted and I could tell by her hesitant touch that she wondered at the position herself. She left one hand to continue kneading the flesh of my buttock and her fingers worked their magic in the wet flesh between my legs. It was like throwing cold water on a red-hot piece of steel. I was surprised there wasn't steam and I groaned long and loud at the exquisite touch.

I remembered a time when three women could pleasure me at once and I never made a sound, being in control every step of the way. Even in my release, I was always in command of the pleasure I was receiving. I don't know if it was the alcohol or not, but I think I lost control the minute I let this girl touch me. Now she was between my legs and I was moaning out a plea for her not to stop.

It quickly became apparent why Gabrielle had not a mark on her. She was extremely good at what she did. I ground my hips into the mattress to try to force her hand harder against my clit. It wasn't enough and I growled in frustration.

"Inside...now!" I commanded and I grunted, feeling a warm sensation of gratification wash over me.

She slipped her fingers inside of me and I pushed back hard, impaling myself even further. It's been so long since I felt any of this, a desire to take someone, let alone allow anyone to fuck me. I was lost to how it looked or how it sounded to anyone else. It felt damned incredible and I didn't want the pleasure to end.

She kept perfect pace with her thrusting, to match the speed my hips dictated. Her free hand moved and she splayed her fingers across my backside, moving her thumb along the crack toward my center. She continued that way, back and forth, spreading my own juices up until I

felt where she was headed. She paused and began to gently rub the puckered flesh at that dark opening, pressing lightly, but not penetrating. Frankly, the sensation was driving me wild.

In all my years, no one ever touched me there and I've experienced sexual pleasure from some of the best. My refusal to ever allow anyone access to that part of my body was something that I couldn't explain, as if I had one piece of myself I would never give up, but it was all flying out the window now. Gabrielle kept up the thrusting of her fingers inside me and I could feel how close I was. She continued to run her thumb back down to pick up more lubrication, returning and pressing a little harder each time. Finally, she stopped and pushed against the reluctant opening, her thumb covered in my own wetness. I could feel her slide inside me the smallest bit and suddenly I craved the sensation of her entering me there.

"My Lord?" she questioned, knowingly.

It was as if, it was someone else controlling my body, as I heard my answer in my own low voice.

"Gods, yes!" I snarled and in one smooth motion, she penetrated that tight opening with her thumb.

She proceeded to do what she does best, I assume, and fucked me until I thought I couldn't possibly hold back my release any longer. I began pushing back hard against both of her hands moving inside me, and when I heard my own scream rip from my throat, I thought it couldn't possibly be me making those sounds.

She slowly removed her thumb, but I could feel her hand still inside me and before the last tremors of my powerful orgasm eased, she was moving her fingers inside me again. She twisted her fingers up high and deep, rubbing the velvety spot inside and I was groaning aloud again. She brought me to release again, and finally a third time with that technique, until my body slumped forward in an unmistakable posture of defeat.

The battle, the wine, and the explosive sex, all combined to drain even my body. I felt the slave's weight as she got up from the bed and washed her hands. Forty-four seasons in this body were what I attributed my exhaustion to just before I passed out, face down in my pillows.

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I woke with a start, feeling someone else in the room. The sky outside was a predawn gray and my head throbbed painfully. I noticed a mug of water was placed on the table beside my bed and I downed it in two gulps, realizing the slave must have left it there. Strangely considerate for a slave, but I let my body relax in the knowledge that it was the girl whose presence I felt. She was not in the bed beside me and I looked around the room in the scarce light and found her.

She knelt beside my bed, much as she had earlier in the evening. Her head bobbed and I wondered in amazement if she was sleeping that way or struggling to stay awake. Either way, it touched something in my sleepy brain. I hadn't dismissed her, and like the obedient slave that she was, she never left her position of servitude. *Hades*, what was her name again? That's it.

“Gabrielle?”

She was alert at once, but looked up with tired emerald eyes.

“My Lord?” she answered in a sleepy voice.

“Come to bed, Gabrielle. When we go to Corinth you will have your own rooms, but until then, you’ll have to sleep in my bed.” I responded.

She seemed unsure at such an unorthodox request, but she obeyed, as I knew she would. She lay down and left herself uncovered as a good slave would, but I was just too tired to take advantage. I pulled the sheet over her body and rolled over, facing away from her.

“Good night, Gabrielle.”

“Good night, My Lord.” She answered.

I almost laughed at the sound in her voice. She was confused and was probably thinking the Conqueror was turning into a senile fool, as she grew older. I wondered at my treatment of her myself. I never once cared what any woman thought of me, let alone what a slave thought or felt. Slaves were objects; things you owned and you had every right to treat them how you desired. They weren’t considered people, with real emotions and feelings. I treated every piece of horseflesh I owned better than any slave I ever shared my bed with. In twenty seasons as ruler of Greece, I don’t think I ever once felt sorry for the life that the fates chose to call down on a slave. I just never thought about them or their circumstances.

This girl was affecting me all right and I heard myself saying things that I couldn’t believe were my own thoughts. Why did I tell her where she would sleep when we returned to Corinth? I never kept the women I was offered. Why did I say she would have rooms in the palace? I thought of the pleasure she gave me earlier and the memory caused a tightening between my legs. I thought of her lying completely available next to me, and although my mind was willing, my body craved nothing more than sleep.

I knew, in moments like this, where much of my recent melancholy came from. I spent more than half my life doing evil, despicable things to those who were weaker or less fortunate than myself. It took growing older to realize that the brooding anger and the actions of my youth left me without family, friendship, or love. Somewhere deep inside, I wondered if this small blonde, who was easily half my own age, could ease any of these losses.

I realized, in those hazy few moments before Morpheus seduced me into his realm, that I would indeed keep this slave, and although I didn’t fully understand why, I felt drawn to her; drawn to her quiet and submissive obedience. And so, Gabrielle came, not only to my palace, but also into my life. I felt needs around this small blonde that I couldn’t always put a name to, but for the first time in my life, I fell asleep wondering what someone else thought of me.

## Chapter 2: Testing the waters

I felt another's presence in the room before the heavy tapestry was moved away from the main window, early morning sunlight causing me to wince, even though my eyes were still closed. Sylla went about the room silently preparing for my morning. As my personal maid, she carried out her orders with a dutiful silence. Whether I slept all night or passed out on the floor in the pre-dawn light, Sylla woke me as the sun rose every morning. I was usually already awake, many times working at my writing table long before she entered my rooms.

Sylla usually let the early morning light into the room, and then set about lighting additional lamps or candles. She would pick up the clothes that I had scattered about when undressing the previous evening, have my bath prepared, and then bring up my morning meal. It was no different when I traveled, either. Her routine never varied and I know she was thankful my demeanor mellowed over the years. She used to take quite a bit of verbal abuse from me, but on mornings like this, when I was hung so far over I wanted to die, I did tend to revert back to that old Xena.

The funny thing was, Sylla never argued back, never left the room in tears, and even more astounding was the fact she didn't pack up and leave. She was a hired woman, not one of my slaves, which in itself, was odd enough. She came into the castle when her father died, a dedicated soldier in my army of some little battlefield reputation. On the day that Delia asked if the girl could work for me, I did what I always did back then, some ten seasons ago. I scowled and shrugged my shoulders as if I didn't care.

Now, Delia was another story. She asked me because she was the only one who could get away with it. I can honestly say that back then if anyone but my cook, Delia, would have asked me that same question, I would have grabbed the young girl and taken her, right there in front of my men, then allowed her to work for me. Why? Mostly, because I could I suppose.

Delia is the closest thing to a friend that I have in my life. She was the wife of the most trusted Captain I ever had. Galien was more than a soldier; he was a mentor and confidante, perhaps the only father figure I ever accepted. When he lay dying on a battlefield in Gaul, I held him and watched as he bled to death, knowing there was little I could do to save him. I told him that whatever wish he had, if it were within my power, I would grant it. He extracted a promise from me on that day, to see that his wife would always be cared for. When I returned from that campaign, Delia entered the castle.

She is the one and only person in all of Greece who doesn't seem to fear me. She argues with me, cusses me, and generally treats me like the spoiled child I act like much of the time, and I care for her because of it. She grew bored with nothing to do in the castle and when she began to cook for me, I tossed the old cook out on his ear. She was a culinary Goddess and the table I set, in the palace at Corinth, became the envy of my entire empire.

I leaned up on one elbow and slowly opened my eyes, which only increased the ache in my skull. I watched for a moment as Sylla went about her morning routine. I looked down at the slave sharing my bed. Her face looked less tense as she slept and I couldn't stop myself from reaching out and brushing my fingertips across her lips. Her eyelids shot open, revealing startled green orbs.

“My Lord.” Gabrielle exclaimed as she practically threw herself from the bed, to her kneeling position on the floor.

Well, that’s not exactly what I had in mind, but it was hard not to smile at the young slave. She was naked and didn’t seem phased by the fact that Sylla moved around her.

“Good Morning, Lord Conqueror.” My maid said. “The young men are here with water for your bath.” Sylla’s eyes indicated Gabrielle’s nude body and I wasn’t sure whether my maid’s concern was for Gabrielle or for the young men from the kitchen.

A feeling passed through me quickly and I realized that I didn’t want anyone seeing Gabrielle naked, but me.

“Gabrielle, get back in bed. Sylla thinks you’re going to catch a cold down there.” I chuckled.

Gabrielle eased herself back under the covers that I held open for her and I nodded to Sylla, who let several young men in with buckets of water for the large tub I used for my bath. They had to make a few trips, but kept their eyes in their head, all except for one youth. The temptation to see the Conqueror in bed together must have been too much and so he raised his eyes and fixed them, not on me, but on my slave. I had a flash of a previous time in my life and I could see myself rising from the bed and gutting the boy with my sword.

Instead, a low growl rumbled from my chest and I could see Gabrielle out of the corner of my eye. She quickly looked over at me; I’m sure wondering where the sound came from. When I was angry it could sound like the snarl of a dog, and when aroused, like the purr of a panther. Right now, it sounded anything but content or seductive.

‘If you want to live past today, boy, you’d better fix those eyes somewhere else.’ I snapped.

Sylla saw the impending trouble and quickly intervened before it escalated into anything more.

“All of you boys...be about your business. That’s enough water, out of here with the lot of you.” Sylla waved the boys from the room, down the back stairs.

I lay my head back down on the pillow just as someone began pounding on the main door in the outer room.

“Ares Balls! Does anyone know what time I went to sleep last night?” I bellowed, causing my head to pound even worse.

“It’s your Captain, Lord Conqueror.” Sylla informed me.

“All right, all right.” I motioned for Sylla to let Atrius in.

“Lord Conqueror.” Atrius said quietly, which earned him points considering the way my head felt. He lost them, however with the look of amusement on his face upon seeing Gabrielle still in my bed.

“Atrius is there a reason for disturbing me before I’ve even had a chance to bathe?”

“Forgive the early hour, Lord Conqueror, but you expressed a wish to be on your way back to Corinth as soon as the trouble here had ended. Is today soon enough?”

I thought about that for a moment. I was anxious to return home now and I wondered if it had anything to do with the young woman in my bed.

“Yes...today will be fine, looks like we’ll have the weather for it. Can we be ready by midmorning?”

“Aye, Lord Conqueror.” Atrius replied.

I nodded my head in a dismissive gesture and pushed the pillows up to the head of the bed. I sat there and watched as Gabrielle laid there, her hands folded across her stomach. I thought about indulging myself with the pretty slave, but thought better when I realized that in a few candlemarks my army would be ready to march back to Corinth.

“It looks as if we go home today, Sylla. I’m afraid Gabrielle here is not dressed for a journey. Take her to the market and purchase what she’ll need until we get back to the palace. Do you have something you can lend her in the meantime? I don’t want any of these soldiers seeing her in her robe.”

“Yes, Lord Conqueror.” Sylla answered.

“Gabrielle, go with Sylla and Gods on Olympus, open your mouth or she’ll end of clothing you like a Hestian virgin.”

I gave a wry smile to both of them, but only Sylla smiled back, shaking her head at my manners. Gabrielle looked a bit dazed and confused by all that transpired in the last twelve candlemarks. She followed along behind Sylla, dressed in the robe she wore last night. Her face as impassive and unreadable as ever. I wondered how long it had been since that girl smiled last.

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By the time I was cleaned and dressed for traveling, Sylla led Gabrielle back into the room where my breakfast was laid out. My maid stood waiting for my attention as I used my signet ring to seal a message to be sent ahead to Corinth. For some reason I thought it important that the rooms across the hall from my own in the palace, be made ready for Gabrielle’s arrival. I laughed at myself. Gods, you would think I was bringing my Queen to the palace. In some strange fashion, that’s exactly how I felt.

As usual, Gabrielle kneeled down, head bowed, waiting patiently. When I looked up, I barely recognized her. She looked thinner with clothing draped over her slight frame and I thought our first task should be to feed the girl properly.

“Very good. You’ve done well, Sylla.”

“Thank you, Lord Conqueror.” My maid responded with a small smile.

My compliments were rare, but I was learning that better results were obtained, whether it was from hired help or my slaves, when I tossed in a little praise now and then. It didn't come naturally to me, treating people with compassion. I didn't understand why, but then again, I never really stopped to examine my life until recently. Why did sullenness and jealous anger seem such natural emotions to me? I look back on my life and I can see only a fog of darkness that surrounds me, unable to be penetrated by light. Some days I wonder if there is a light bright enough to dispel this kind of dark. I usually think that just about the same time I wonder if trying to become a more benevolent ruler at this stage of the game will mean anything when I meet up with Hades. Could anyone overcome a past such as mine?

“Sylla, we'll be leaving soon, I'll send one of my guards for you. I want you riding with Kuros, in the healer's wagon. Gabrielle will ride with me.” I finished, dismissing the young woman. Sylla's eyes went round when I told her where my slave would be riding, but she held her tongue and left the room.

Gabrielle barely moved a muscle in all this time.

“Gabrielle, are you hungry?” I asked.

“I don't require much My Lord.” She answered.

Every answer she gave was trained to be ambiguous in every way. It's one of the ways she stayed in her master's good graces. I now doubted she would be able to answer a question directly without a little prodding.

“Look at me, girl.”

Gabrielle slowly raised her head, so as not to disobey, but I could see she had trouble looking me in the eye.

“Are you hungry?” I asked the question again, enunciating every word.

She nodded her head, lowering her eyes at the same time. “Yes, My Lord.” She answered in a very uncertain voice.

“Then come up here and eat.”

She looked up and then bowed her head again, but not before I saw more confusion in her eyes. I suppose she thought that I would hand her food or set a plate on the floor, I've even trained body slaves to eat only from my hand, reinforcing the idea that I alone owned them. I had no intention of keeping a slave like that again.

I rose from my chair and got down on one knee in front of her. I gently lifted her chin and could see by the way her eyes shrank back from me that she expected a blow from my hand. I used it instead to brush the blonde hair from her face. I stroked her cheek with my thumb for a few heartbeats, as if I were gentling a frightened colt, coaxing it from its mother's side for the first time.

“It's all right,” I said and I stood, pulling her with me. “When I eat, it will be at the table, that's where I wish you to dine also. Sit down,” I positioned her down into the chair opposite

mine, and pushed two trays in front of her. “Eat your fill of anything here, Gabrielle. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, My Lord.” She answered.

I turned and walked across the room to another small table, busying myself on the pretense of pouring a small cup of wine. I actually wanted to see if the girl would eat the food set before her. I poured a mug of water as well, brought both of them over, and set the water in front of her, keeping the wine for myself. It was a rare occasion when I allowed slaves alcohol.

Gabrielle timidly bit into a sliced fig and nibbled at the piece of fruit for long moments. I sat down across from her and pulled half a dozen scrolls from a case on the table beside me. I read the scrolls, mostly petitions and requests that were as boring as Tartarus, but I pretended to be engrossed, paying little attention to the young woman across from me. My peripheral vision is excellent and as I read, I watched Gabrielle.

Once she realized I meant what I said about the food, she began to eat in earnest, and I thought the girl must have been starving. One tray of food disappeared and she was halfway through with the second when she apparently ran out of energy. She picked up the mug of water and downed it all in a few swallows.

“Gabrielle,” I said distractedly, never raising my eyes from the scroll I read, “If you’re still thirsty, you may pour some more water from the pitcher on the table.”

I again pretended not to care what she was doing after having given her permission, but unobtrusively watched from within my field of vision. She looked over at the pitcher, and then looked to me again. It was obvious the girl wanted another mug of water, so why didn’t she get up and get it? Her hands knotted around the mug and I could see her knuckles were white with what I could only assume was fear. She finally rose and poured the water, watching me the whole time. She poured three mugs and downed them all before returning to her seat. I would have laughed at her antics had they not saddened me so deeply.

Gabrielle was the epitome of the defeated slave. She didn’t need to have scars on her back to know what punishment was, especially as a body slave. Imagine a slap across the face, not hard enough to bruise or cut the skin, or a kick to the shin, only enough for you to trip and skin your hands, even being denied food for days at a time. Those were the ways you punished a slave whose body needed to remain pristine. Had previous masters played the take away game with this girl to get her to act like such a whipped cur? Had they given her permission, only to punish her once she took it?

Of course, they did. It’s what I used to do, if for no other reason than because it amused me.

### Chapter 3: The Journey Home

The soldiers began to march out by the time I said my farewells to Telamon. I made my way down the stone steps, enjoying the coolness of the spring breeze. It was chilly enough to wear a cloak during the day, which would precipitate the need for a tent at night. The wagons that held the supplies, food, and tents for our caravan came last. I saw Gabrielle standing quietly beside Sylla and my healer, Kuros.

Kuros was an odd little man, another of my hired workers as opposed to slave. He was an Etruscan from a land far to the north of Greece. In my pirate days, before I was even known as the Destroyer of Nations, I defeated a band of Etruscan pirates near Corsica. The healer on board the ship was adept in a number of healing arts that I was not familiar with. In exchange for his freedom, Kuros taught me the seemingly magical healing techniques he knew. Once faced with freedom, the small man promptly turned around and asked to be my private healer.

Sylla said something to Gabrielle and the blonde nodded as my maid climbed into the wagon beside Kuros. I walked up to Gabrielle and indicated that she should follow me. I had to slow my naturally long stride considerably and as it was, Gabrielle was still nearly running to keep up.

“Lord Conqueror,” Atrius said, handing me the reins to my horse.

Tenorio was a midnight black Stallion that had the power of a bull and the grace of a butterfly. He was a warhorse unlike any other and I considered his worth beyond all the gold in Greece. The proud animal never felt anyone’s seat on his back but my own, but I had faith that the animal would accept the small additional load that I had in mind.

“This is my new...personal slave,” I said to Atrius, not really knowing why I refused to use the words, *body slave*. “Her name is Gabrielle.” I finished and Atrius nodded his head in the girl’s direction.

“Gabrielle, this is Atrius, he is the Captain of my armies. If I ever become separated from you, then his is the face you are to look for. Do you understand?” It seemed as though I had to ask Gabrielle specifically whether she understood me or I would never hear her utter a word.

“Yes, My Lord.”

I vaulted onto the stallion’s muscled back and held out my hand to Gabrielle. I could see her swallow and when she reached for my hand, I noticed that she was shaking. I leaned back into my saddle.

“What are you afraid of?” I asked in confusion.

She looked up and it was the first time her eyes met mine, without me forcing the issue. She looked at the beast again and said softly, “He is very large, My Lord.”

I laughed and those around us turned to watch. It was a rare sight indeed to see me laughing, but the small girl’s fear seemed to make perfect sense. She was at least two heads smaller than I, and I thought that if I had her build, I’d be a little worried too.

“Give me your hand, Gabrielle.” I commanded and she obediently did as I asked.

I lifted her easily into the saddle in front of me; after all, she weighed no more than a sack of figs. I settled her so she was leaning against my body and the warmth that caused between my legs was a sensation I had long grown accustomed to being without. She peered over the side of the horse’s back and leaned back once more.

I gave her a sincere look as we set off. “Don’t worry, Gabrielle, Tenorio won’t let you fall.” That being said, I put my arm around her waist and pulled her back against me. It was a long time before I removed my arm from her waist.

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A few candlemarks passed and I began to notice Gabrielle squirming in the saddle. I could have asked her what was wrong, since I already had my suspicions. The girl drank four mugs of water just before we set off and I suspected she was beginning to feel it. I wanted Gabrielle to speak for herself, though, and this was my subtle training technique. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life with a young woman who was afraid of her own shadow, so I decided to be as kind to the girl as my limited temper would allow.

Gods, what was I thinking lately to say things like that? How does one consider spending their lives with a slave, one that I really know nothing about? A master and her slave can carry on many types of relationships, but not as ruler and consort, it’s just not done. Is it?

She lasted one more candlemark until my uncanny hearing picked up the small request for attention.

“My Lord?” she whispered.

“Yes, Gabrielle.”

“I...may I have permission...for a trip to the bushes?” she finished.

I veered Tenorio off the road and Gabrielle looked genuinely surprised that I didn’t merely deposit her at the side of the trail. With my soldiers marching along, the last thing I wanted was my personal slave relieving herself in full view of them. We rode up a slight incline, into a forest glade and I dismounted first. Once set down on the ground, Gabrielle seemed unsure if she could continue. Suddenly feeling rather ill at ease, I backed up, the horse’s reins in my hands.

“I’ll just...um, be over...so you can have some privacy.” I muttered awkwardly.

It was the first time I’ve said the word, *um*, since I was twelve years old. What was coming over me? Gabrielle looked at me as if I’d suddenly grown another head. Privacy? Slaves don’t care about privacy! I turned and walked back the way we came, strolling along, letting Tenorio drink from the small creek that crossed our path. It wasn’t long before I heard Gabrielle return to my side.

“Feel better?” I asked with an amused grin.

Again, that surprised expression on the girls' face. Gods, did no one ever talk to her? I had to keep reminding myself that Gabrielle was a slave. In the last few seasons I surrounded myself with so many hired men and women, that it was taking me a little time to remember what a slave's life was like. Of course, no one spoke to her, least ways to ask her opinion or how she was feeling. She was property and most slave owners thought that asking a slave how they felt would make about as much sense as asking your horse the same question.

I saw Gabrielle nod and I cleared my throat before I spoke.

"Gabrielle," I paused until she looked up at me. "I can only assume that in the past you have either been ignored or abused in some way for revealing your opinion. I think it's important for us to establish some rules to this relationship of ours."

Did I just say relationship? Gods, that's not what I meant...or was it?

"If you are to serve me on a personal level then I will desire more than simply physical pleasure. I have a need for...a need for companionship." I said, looking down to see what effect my words were having on the young slave.

Gabrielle walked along beside me, her face as expressionless as ever. I took a deep breath and wondered whether this whole thing was going to be worth it. Training a slave to be my companion? It seemed as redundant as paying someone to be your friend. This girl was timid and fearful, and spent most of her life developing the submissive skills that would keep her alive as a slave. I couldn't expect her to forget a lifetime of training in one day. I took in another deep breath and could only guess whether or not Gabrielle would even care to be placed in this situation. In the past, what a slave wanted was never my concern. Now, I felt that it was important, but I couldn't say why, only that it *felt* that way. My patience, or rather the lack of, is legendary. Did I possess the forbearance for such a task as this?

Again, I stopped walking, and when I stopped, Gabrielle halted. We came to another creek, a little larger than the first tiny one we crossed. I could see that Gabrielle would have certainly followed me, walking right through the freezing water, but she wore decorative women's boots and mine were made of thick leather, and meant for the outdoors. I easily lifted her up and placed her back on the ground on the other side of the brook. The amazement on her face was becoming pretty commonplace, but I felt I had to comment this time.

"Sylla would never let me hear the end of it if I let you ride the rest of the day with sopping wet boots." I said, continuing to walk on out of the woods.

We strolled through the grassy field toward the road and I resumed my conversation. "Like I said before, I understand that you may have been punished for your thoughts or your opinions, but if we're to spend time together I don't want to feel like I'm talking to a brick wall. I want to hear from you, Gabrielle. I want you to know that when I ask you a question, if you speak the truth, you will never be punished for the answer. Do you understand what I'm saying...what I'm asking of you?" I asked, pausing to lift her chin up in my direction.

"Yes, My Lord." She answered, and I figured now was as good a time as any for a little test.

"Gabrielle, do you want to walk for a bit, or are you ready to ride again?"

She immediately looked up at Tenorio, walking beside us. The animal's back was past the top of her head and the look on her face told me that mounting the animal again was equated with scaling a tall mountain. I wanted to see if she would answer truly, and as it would always be, the young woman surprised me.

"I would much rather walk, My Lord." She answered tentatively.

"Then walk we shall." I answered and I turned to her so she could see the smile on my face.

She didn't return the smile, but her eyes brightened a bit and I thought that was a start. I didn't use my smile much, at least not this genuine grin. I didn't count the feral sneer I used in battle or pronouncing sentence on a captured enemy. This is the one I reserved for moments when something really pleased me, and those times were few. It usually felt out of place on my face, a brooding scowl felt so much more natural. However, I smiled for Gabrielle, in part to express my happiness that she understood what I was asking of her, and also because it felt rather right.

We walked for another candlemark and I noticed Atrius sent some members of the palace guard back to watch my back. After all these seasons, I still forgot that because I was the ruler of Greece there would be people who would want to kill me, despite the fact that the country enjoyed a state of economic prosperity because of me. Perhaps I was growing complacent as I grew older, but I was still a fearsome warrior and it rarely occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to handle any foe I should come up against.

If the others were any closer I would never have said the things I did to my young slave. We walked along and I found myself telling things to her that I barely knew I felt. I even got her to answer me on occasion, but getting an opinion from her was nearly impossible. I did learn a little of her past, but even gleaning that information proved not to be without its challenges.

"Gabrielle, how old are you?" I asked.

"Twenty summers, My Lord." She answered.

"How long have you been a slave?"

"Since the season I turned ten, My Lord."

"And, how long since you've been a body slave?" I continued.

"That same season, My Lord." She answered, and I thought I heard a catch in her voice.

Gods, I winced inwardly. She has been serving in a master's bed since she was a young child. Surely even the Fates could not be that cruel.

"The world is not always what we would like it to be." I stated quietly, and I knew the young woman agreed, even though she held her tongue.

"Gabrielle, what is your greatest desire?" I asked, thinking I was phrasing this badly.

"My Lord?"

“A wish. If you could have anything you wanted, what would it be?”

I expected her answer to be her freedom. Could there be anything a slave would desire more? Again, my small slave gave me the answer I never expected.

“To be able to write my stories. I mean, to be able to have the time and the supplies to put down all the stories I have in my head, on scrolls, for others to read.”

“Very interesting. Can you read and write?”

“Oh, yes, My Lord.” She answered and I thought I heard a bit of accomplishment in her voice.

“Rather impressive.” I added, knowing that few slaves were ever given the opportunity to learn to read and write.

“Do you think a master is going to let a slave spend her days in this fashion?” I questioned. I wanted to see how strong her desire for this was.

“Perhaps...” she began in a small voice, “perhaps if I was very good...and very obedient.” She let the sentence trail off; realizing, I am sure, that the dream was completely out of reach for her.

That’s when it struck me. Perhaps this is why the small blonde’s demeanor was as submissive as any slave I ever saw, why she accepted anything that befell her, and why she performed any task that was commanded of her, without question. Perhaps she was hoping that if she were subservient enough, some master would take pity on her and allow her to write her stories. What an odd desire for a slave to have.

“So, this is what you would choose above all else, eh?”

Gabrielle nodded her head and I don’t even know how or why the thought entered my head, but it seemed terribly important for me to be the one to make this young slave’s wish become reality.

“I don’t think that should be too difficult a task for us to fulfill once we return home.”

I said the word *home* as if it meant something more to me than simply a palace that I ruled from. Certainly, it seemed to feel like more now. Perhaps it was being away for so long, but possibly, it had something to do with the young woman who walked beside me.

Gabrielle bowed her head, but suddenly, her gait seemed lighter, and if it wasn’t really a smile on her face, it came awfully close.

“My Lord?” she asked.

“Yes, Gabrielle?” I continued on, without looking down.

“May I have permission to ask a question of you?”

I smiled inside. “You may.”

She hesitated for a moment, and then looked as if she decided to throw caution to the wind.

“What do you wish for?”

The question she asked surprised me every bit as much as her reply to my own query. Of course, I could have answered in a multitude of ways, but standing here, with this young woman by my side, I could think of only one thing I truly wished for.

I stopped and looked down on the slave, tilting her chin up to look directly in my eyes. She always seemed unable to do this, but she came very close this time, her eyes shifting nervously under my direct gaze.

“I wish that someday, you will touch me because you want to, Gabrielle, and not because you are commanded to do so.”

Turnabout is fair play, and as I released her chin and turned to continue walking, I knew that my answer surprised *her* for a change.

## Chapter 4: A Conqueror's First Kiss

It would be another two candlemarks before the sun set, but when we came upon the site for our camp, the tents were already erected and the cooking fires properly stoked. The wagons and workers always scouted ahead and I commended Atrius on his choice for the campsite.

I strode into the tent and immediately felt at home, much more so than in Telamon's castle. As was my habit, I set up the same style of tent and requested the same interior arrangements for well over 20 seasons. Everything was as it should be and I yawned and stretched. I knew that if I felt tired after a day in the saddle, my young slave was probably ready to drop. Gabrielle impressed me, however, when she removed her own cloak and began to assist me in removing my clothes.

Once in my favorite silk robe, I sat back in one of my more comfortable chairs and enjoyed the goblet of wine Gabrielle set before me. I thought it strange that she should be so strangely intuitive of my needs considering that she only started serving me yesterday.

"My Lord...um, may I..." she asked, pointing out of the tent.

"Of course." I said, rising as she wrapped her cloak around her shoulders once again. I took my signet brooch from the neck of my own cloak and clasped it in place at Gabrielle's throat. "This will assure that none of my soldiers get too carried away. If you have any trouble, you come directly to me."

The thought of Gabrielle with another, by either force or her own will, left me feeling angry all of a sudden. A vision of Gabrielle with another filled my brain, and the visualization caused my jealousy to flare. This was the monster that I have tried for so many seasons to keep at bay. I'm afraid Gabrielle was about to get her first taste of my possessiveness.

I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger and looked her in the eye. "Let me make this clear, Gabrielle. You belong to me. No one is to make free with either your body or your affection. If I ever find this to be the case, you will forfeit your life on the end of my blade. Do you understand me, girl?"

She nodded her head, and I could literally feel the unexpected fear that swiftly spread through her. I hadn't meant to speak so harshly, nor let my jealousy get away from me like that. It was important to me, for a reason that I couldn't yet fathom, not to have Gabrielle fear me, yet here in only one day, my demon jumped up to make itself known.

I softened a touch, smiling down at her, and then touched my hand to her cheek. "I'm sure you will never give me cause for such an act."

As an apology, it was weak, but then again, you have to understand that apologies were not my strong suit. That's an incredible understatement. The truth is, I have never used the words 'I'm sorry' in my life, certainly never since I came of age. I have committed acts against even those people who held faith in me. I have killed men for the thrill it gave me to have their blood on my blade and beaten women who shared my bed, simply for the feeling of domination and power that I equated with sexual pleasure. Some of those unfortunates were even people I had a modicum of interest or trust in. There were times when I would feel badly afterwards and would offer a gift or kind words in apology, and even though I felt at times

like I wanted to say the words, they never came. It was bending, and a Conqueror never bends. I knew of no emotion, nor person, that could possess that kind of power over me, to bring me to my knees in such a manner.

I looked down at the frightened creature in my hold and knew that if I would only say I was sorry for my previous statement, we might share a different relationship than that of merely slave and master. I sadly wondered where my life would be right now, had I used those words more often.

“Go.” I whispered, and she left the tent quickly.

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“Come here, Gabrielle.” I called to her from where she stood, preparing my clothes for tomorrow. If the girl continued to be so efficient, she and Sylla would soon have words. I sat on the edge of the makeshift bed, watching as she gracefully moved toward me.

“How may I serve you, My Lord” she responded, kneeling before me.

I took her hands in my own and placed them on the tops of my thighs, the long silk robe I wore covering most of my body. The heat from her palms seeped through the silk covering, and I spread my legs, drawing her kneeling form in closer. I examined the small hands that felt smooth compared to my own rough and callused palms. Everyone knew that a slave with skin this soft and smooth, carried out their duties on their back. I had an urge to do something and I felt lacking in courage. Me, the nation’s Conqueror, one time Destroyer of Nations, losing my nerve in front of this small slave.

For some unknown reason I wanted to kiss her. Yet, even more, I wanted to be kissed *by* her.

Now, of course, I knew what kissing was, but it wasn’t something I ever did with women. Oh, I’ve attacked a woman’s mouth, driven by lust. Using my teeth and my tongue, I’ve showed them who was in command of their pleasure, but that wasn’t really kissing, was it? It wasn’t the tender caress the poets say we should yearn for. It wasn’t the innocent token that I’d seen exchanged by a pair of young lovers who found that my private gardens made a suitable trysting place. I would watch from high above them, from my bedroom window that looked down into the garden. I knew, even as I witnessed the sight, that what I had in the past was different from this. What I experienced in my life might satisfy a certain primal urge, but it never caused excitement in my heart, or a fire in my loins. I knew that such a thing existed, but for the Lord Conqueror, it had yet to be.

And so, I sat there, the ruler of all Greece, a most talented concubine at my feet, and all my head was filled with were a schoolboy’s visions of a gentle kiss. I swallowed my pride and my fear of humiliation and decided to ask for what I wanted. After all, she was here to serve me, and not the other way around. It would be many seasons down the road before I would realize how arrogant that statement was.

“Gabrielle, do you kiss?” I asked, unable to come up with a more definitive question.

“My Lord?” she looked confused, and with every reason.

“Kissing...have you kissed the masters that owned you before me?”

“Yes, if it pleased them, My Lord.”

Gabrielle was not a stupid woman by any stretch of the imagination. If she were, she would have been killed long before now. I believe she knew what I was asking, and perhaps she even guessed why, I can't be sure. I know one thing, however, and that was that the look in her eye changed suddenly, and it was apparent, to even her, that she now held the power between us.

There were times in the past when that happened to me. Times when I gave in to my feelings of pleasure, so much so, that the woman or the whore thought they held me captive with their wiles. In those days, power came above all else, even my need for pleasure. If I ever saw that gleam in their eye, I would stop whatever they were doing to me and let the beast in me loose. It never mattered to me if it was consensual. By the time I finished taking them and showing them who really held the power, they never wanted to return to my bed. In those days, inflicting pain seemed the only way to show someone that you were stronger than they were, that you were above them.

“Were you...are you good at it?” I asked rather inanely.

I watched as that same faint glimmer entered Gabrielle's eye, but this time I simply didn't care.

“Perhaps My Lord would care to judge that for herself?” Gabrielle responded, stringing together more words than she'd ever spoken before, at one time.

“Yes.” I replied, as every one of the nerve endings along my spine sparked at the same time.

“Kiss me Gabrielle.” I rasped in a rather breathless voice.

She slid her hands up, across my thighs until they rested against my hips. Pulling herself up to her knees, she reached up and kissed me, gently at first. Her lips pressed against my own and I enjoyed the feeling of the smooth, warm skin. This was what I supposed those lovers felt when they embraced. She kissed me again, a slow lingering caress and I was helpless to even respond. I was frozen in place, my emotions running away from me in ten different directions at once.

I kept telling myself I'd been kissed before, but when Gabrielle reached out the tip of her pink tongue and ran it along my bottom lip, enveloping my mouth in an incredibly passionate touch, I felt like a virgin. I placed a hand on each side of her head and pulled her closer to me, allowing her tongue to explore my mouth, relishing in the very taste of her. The small blonde's mouth swallowed up my moans and, as usual, Gabrielle never made a sound.

Reluctantly pulling away for air, my heart pounded, almost painfully, within my chest. I noticed that at least, my young slave's face was flushed with desire. She may have had to please this way thousands of times, but this time, it looked as though she was not completely unaffected.

I shrugged out of my robe and settled myself onto the bed, stretching my nude body along the length of the mattress.

“Come here, Gabrielle, and kiss me.” I commanded, and she let her robe fall to the floor, laying her body along my own.

My hands wanted to feel every bit of her body at once, and I pulled her snugly against me, between my open legs, simply to feel the softness of her skin where it touched mine. The things her tongue was doing inside my mouth, caused a raging river to flow from my aroused sex, and I was soaking wet in record time.

I’ve kissed women during sex before, rough animalistic sex, a coupling for power or position. In the last few seasons, I sought to have sex only out of need or for release. I realized that I couldn’t even remember the last time I had sex with anyone simply for pleasure; that is until Gabrielle. These kisses were not hungry and raw; they were gentle and passionate, filled with an easy sensual quality. When I glanced up sometime later, the candle appeared to have burned halfway down. We’d been doing nothing beyond light touching and kissing for over two candelmarks. It was at that moment that I remembered something Delia said to me once. It made no sense at the time, but clarity in a darkened room is dependent on how close to the candle you are. Her words seemed like those of an oracle at this very moment. She told me that all I needed was to be kissed, thoroughly, and by someone who knew what they were doing. I made a mental note, reminding myself to tell my cook that she finally got her wish.

My legs trembled and my body was desperately ready for a release.

I took Gabrielle’s small hand and placed it between the drenched folds of my own sex, letting her fingers begin to work their magic. Just when I thought the night couldn’t become any more embarrassing for me, I came with a loud groan after perhaps only three strokes against the sensitive flesh. I was much more than ready and now I did indeed feel like that clumsy schoolboy.

“Gods!” I groaned aloud, trying desperately to regain command of my trembling limbs. My climax snuck up on me and overwhelmed my senses before I was prepared for it.

Then Gabrielle did something that I never expected from a slave. As I leaned over the small blonde, my body lying more on her than the bed and my forehead resting on her shoulder, my muscles still quivering over the intensity of my own climax, I felt her hand on my back. She gently stroked the skin, rubbing her palm in small circles along the muscles there.

I had an urge to touch her just then, this young slave who seemed to know all my secrets, but whom I knew would take them to her death. I lifted my head and initiated a kiss, which may have aroused me more than she. As our tongues teased, first in one mouth, then in another, I slipped my hand between her legs. She was nearly as wet as I and although she might try to deny her pleasure in my bed, her body spoke for itself. I made myself go slow, purposefully using light strokes against that silky flesh. Not a sound came from her throat, but as I rubbed my own center along her thigh, her legs spread wider in apparent invitation.

It took everything in me not to drive my hand into her and claim what was mine. That rush of heady power mixed with the adrenaline of impending orgasm, caused my mind to revert back to a time when sex was raw and fierce to me, a time when my release was explosive in its force. I held back the might that wanted to take and forced myself to give. I controlled my touch and restricted my hand to those relentless, easy strokes, never even entering her. I

slowed my own hip's movements to that of a slow, sensual grind, and could begin to feel Gabrielle's heart race a little faster, her breathing grow a little more out of control.

Her submissive silence persisted, however, and I never heard one sound, not a moan nor a cry, uttered from her throat. If not for the moment that her hand clenched down on my shoulder and the tiny convulsive movements of her hips, I would never have known of her release. I left my hand there, the palm covering the dampness of her mound as I thrust myself against her leg, once, twice, and midway through the third stroke I came with quite a verbal cry.

Slowly lifting myself off the small frame below me, I reached down to place a kiss on the damp forehead. Falling to the other side of the bed, I held out my hand and quickly grabbed Gabrielle's wrist to prevent her from leaving my bed. She had a habit of kneeling at the end of my bed after she'd pleased me, to either await my next command or be dismissed. I wanted more from my slave on this night and instead of putting a voice to me need, I did what I've done all my life; I simply made it so.

"Stay here, Gabrielle." I ordered, pulling her body against mine.

I pulled the blanket up over the both of us and enclosed the young woman in my arms. I kissed her once more, just as she kissed me earlier. I'm not sure why, mostly because it felt good, and very right. Gabrielle settled herself against my shoulder with a look on her face that told me she had no idea what was going on. That seemed only fair, since I didn't either. I was by far the strongest woman in all of Greece, the most feared warrior. I knew only that on this night, I became something more than the Lord Conqueror. I couldn't yet put a name to it, or the emotions that continued to rage through me, but it was different. This was all very different.

## Chapter 5: Gabrielle Speaks

By the time we reached Corinth, my young slave and I reached a certain degree of familiarity with one another. Nevertheless, Gabrielle continued to look rather astounded at some of my unorthodox requests. I could tell that she still wasn't comfortable sleeping the night with me after seeing to her duty of my pleasure. I only knew that it felt good to me and so I continued on. Of course, it was acceptable for that to occur while we traveled, since we shared one tent. I knew that once we were settled in the palace, I would have to learn to sleep alone once more. Like a frightened child, I tried not to think of the coming night.

I was the ruler of the entire damned country, though. If I wanted to keep my body slave with me every night, then that should be my right. If I wanted to treat this girl, like a Queen, then who was going to tell me different? I knew how it would look, however, and weakness was not something you want to advertise to those who have dreams of ruling in your place. I would have to be careful not to show outwardly that I cared for Gabrielle too much. To my enemies, it would be a sure sign that I was growing old.

*Ah, Hades, take me!* I do care for this girl and the country can be damned. I will be the way I want to be! I won't go overboard, but if I want to dote on the girl then I pity the first man to call me weak because of it. He'll get a taste of what an old fool's blade can still do.

A small hand on my forearm pulled me from my thoughts. I looked down into green eyes that held an uncharacteristic concern. I realized my body had grown tense while I was silently warring with my conscience. Gabrielle must have felt the change, and she was still doing things to surprise me.

"My Lord?" She softly questioned.

She was riding sidesaddle in front of me as we passed through the gates to the city and I gave her a weak smile.

"It's nothing." I lied.

I tightened the grip I had around her waist and pulled her closer against me. I felt her weight lean against my chest and we continued on. This was the way we came to communicate in the last fortnight. Neither of us volunteered much verbally, but through small touches and looks, we managed to correspond quite effectively. Well, if not effectively, then at least until one or the other of us could learn to speak our heart.

It was chaos around the palace when we arrived. I don't think Gabrielle was quite prepared for the pandemonium of soldiers returning to their families and my advisors circling me before I even dismounted, to make me aware of this or that problem. I pushed Gabrielle toward Sylla and told her to have my maid show her to my chambers, where I would see her when I was through. I watched the girl move away and I thought by the look in her eye, she surely thought I was dismissing her. Her head hung low and it took everything in me not to scoop the small thing into my arms, never letting her out of my sight. Once I turned to my headman, Demetri, all thoughts of a personal life had to be placed on hold.

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It was rather late in the day by the time I was able to make my way to my private rooms. “Sylla? What in Hades name are you doing here?” I asked my maid, who appeared to be waiting for me.

“It’s about your slave, Lord Conqueror, the girl, Gabrielle?”

“Yes, where is she?” I asked looking around my study, thinking perhaps Sylla already told Gabrielle to wait in my bedchamber.

“Your man, Demetri, he would not allow me to bring her here, Lord Conqueror. He said she belonged with the other slaves.”

If I was a kettle on the fire, you could have watched the transformation from slow boil to steam in only a matter of heartbeats. I refastened my sword to my hip and crossed the room in three strides. I paused before the open door and took a long, deep breath.

“Thank you, Sylla. You may go.” I said between clenched teeth.

I quickly covered the distance to the first floor of the palace, where my advisors had their rooms. When I shoved the door open, Demetri was speaking to some officers, Atrius among them. My captain had only to see the look in my eyes, to back away from my intended target.

“Where is she you fool?” I hissed.

“She? Lord Con--”

I grabbed the front of his tunic and pulled him close to me. He wasn’t a tall man, but I was a tall woman, and I looked down into his narrow eyes until I could feel him shaking.

“My slave. Since when do you disregard my orders? Who the fuck do you think you are? Didn’t my maid tell you who Gabrielle was?” I fumed.

“Well, she...I mean, she’s only a maid--”

“From now on, when one of my hired people tell you that I have given them an order, you better damn well pretend it’s coming straight from me.” I shoved him away from me and he hit the edge of his desk.

“She’s in the slave’s quarters, Lord Conqueror, I will send for her right away.” Demetri scrambled to a young soldier and once he returned to the room, I simply stood there and glared at him for the next half a candlemark until the soldier returned.

“They say there is no such slave there, Lord Conqueror. She was seen in the castle, but...they cannot find her now.” The soldier finished, seeming to wait for his head to be severed by my blade.

I was too caught up in the ways I would torture Demetri to care about killing the messenger. Then I wondered where Gabrielle would have gone. Then my brain went into overload as I envisioned the trouble Gabrielle could get into in such a large palace. Finally, my mind’s eye conjured up an image of Gabrielle and someone else...anyone else, and my blood ran cold.

“Atrius?” I growled.

“Lord Conqueror?”

“I want her found. If she is in the company of another, I want his head. If she is a runaway, I want hers!” I finished, not even listening to what I was saying.

I was angry to be sure as I stood in that room, men scurrying away all around me to scour the palace. If Gabrielle ran, I didn’t want to even think about it. What a complete fool I have been! Showing such kindness to a slave, I must be losing my mind!

I couldn’t stand just waiting there so I decided to look myself, making my way to the soldier’s barracks first. I crossed paths with Atrius on my way to the kitchens and when my Captain said there was no word yet, I began to feel something other than anger. Knowing that Gabrielle was in a strange place, a slave with a fearful and submissive nature, the oddest sensation filled me. My heart went out to this young woman and once I stopped to reason with myself, I felt it would be highly improbable that Gabrielle would leave the castle intentionally. That’s when I felt it. The unexplainable feeling was fear, and I quickened my steps as strange emotions coursed through me, many for the first time.

The kitchens were quiet this time of the evening, so when I heard voices in one of the alcoves off the main kitchen, I gravitated that way. It was Delia’s voice and I could feel myself smile as relief flooded through my entire body. The other small voice belonged to my young slave, Gabrielle. I moved closer, using my particular skill in stealth to get close enough to hear every word. I was curious as to what this girl would say to Delia that she felt she could not say to me. At first, Delia did all the talking, and I just assumed that Gabrielle was as silent around others as she was around me. Then, the oddest thing happened. Gabrielle began to talk, but it was more than simply speaking. Her voice carried an assortment of emotions as if she were a bard, telling a story to a tavern full of enrapt patrons. She certainly had my attention as I leaned back and listened to my slave. The funniest thing about this situation was that Delia, an uneducated woman with an attitude to rival my own, started Gabrielle talking in the last possible way I would have thought to try. She asked her.

“So, girl, have you been a good body servant for our Conqueror?” Delia asked and I suspected that Gabrielle had no idea the older woman was teasing her.

“Well, I see...you don’t kiss and tell.” Delia commented on Gabrielle’s silence. “What is your name, child?”

“Gabrielle.”

“Well...tell me all about it, and don’t skip over anything good. It will be another candlemark before this stew is finished and I’ve nothing better to do with my time. Tell me a story, Gabrielle. Tell me how you came to be with the Lord Conqueror.”

I watched as Gabrielle lifted her head at that request. She had the same light in her eyes as when I told her I would make her dream come true, and again, she came very close to smiling. When she opened her mouth to speak, I was dumbfounded by most of what I overheard. Oh, Hades, I’ll admit it. I was dumbfounded by *everything* I heard!

*“I tried to make myself very small, to hide within myself until I was so tiny that perhaps she would not see me. If I could just make myself small enough, the soldiers would make use of me through the night and I would be put on the auction block in the morning. I would have gladly accepted that fate rather than be chosen on this night...by her. I knew of her, of her reputation, and her appetites. I no longer feared pain, but drew closer everyday to my dream, so that now I didn't want to die. I had hope and that is something few slaves ever have. If they are lucky enough to find it, they usually don't keep it long. Hope shows in your eyes. It can get you killed. So, I closed my eyes and bowed my head. It almost worked, too.*

*I knew that my life was forfeit as soon as her tall shadow engulfed my small frame. I could only pray to any Gods that bothered to listen to the entreaties of a slave, that she would pass me by, see me as unworthy for her bed. When the soldiers laughed, I thought surely she would select another. When she forced me to look into the cobalt fire that flashed from her own eyes, I did something I haven't done in seasons, I cried. I don't know why the soldier's words affected me the way they did, but the thought that I wouldn't even be worthy for this woman's lustful cravings, it saddened me. The Fates caused me to cry, and ironically enough, it was those tears that that brought me to this place. To be owned by the Lord Conqueror.*

*I knew something was different from the start. Her maid was a hired woman, not too much older than myself. She spoke to me as if I was not a slave and that unnerved me. Usually the masters who owned me in the past kept very few hired people. The ones who did work for wages, never wanted to speak to me. Slaves are not the kind of people you become friends with. We could be sold or killed on a whim, so most of the hired helpers ignore you. It wasn't even worth the trouble it took to learn your name. This was especially true of a body slave. Most of the people in my master's home looked at me, and blamed me much of the time for the master's moods. If he was in a foul mood, it was because I wasn't doing my job well enough. If the master was happy, they stayed away from me, hoping that their good fortune would last throughout the day.*

*The maid helped me bathe, eat a hot meal, and then she gave me a rather large silk robe to wear. It smelled like...like...baked goods.” Gabrielle paused as Delia laughed.*

“Cinnamon. You must have been wearing one of *her* robes. She scrubs her hair with a liquid concoction that has cinnamon in it.” Delia continued to chuckle.

Gabrielle closed her eyes for a moment before she spoke again. “It was a very nice smell.” She mused.

“So? What happened when the Conqueror arrived?”

“When I was told to await my new master in her chambers, I had no idea the night would turn out as it did. How was I to know that this woman would bear no resemblance to the bloodthirsty killer I read about in so many different scrolls? She was drunk, to be sure, but she had all her wits about her. She seemed almost embarrassed in my presence and she didn't seem at all like the stories they tell.”

Well, out with it girl. You've been with her for over a fortnight then...is she as good as they say?” Delia questioned Gabrielle, who simply hung her head.

I could have sworn the girl was blushing, but what reason did a concubine have to blush over what went on in a bedchamber?

“She has been...very nice to me.” Gabrielle stated softly, almost in wonder.

So, my actions were getting through to her after all.

“She talks to me, asks me things. She sees to it that I have enough to eat and that I’m comfortable. When she touches me...” she looked up at Delia and I could see the wonder in her green eyes as the flames from the fire danced across her irises, bringing a coppery glow to them. “...it seems almost...gentle. She doesn’t hurt me, or beat me. It’s very different. She’s very different.” Gabrielle finished.

“So it would seem.” Delia answered knowingly.

I was disturbed by a noise from the outside the kitchens and the sound of boots alerted me to the fact that someone finally decided to look down here. I stepped into Delia’s view and she wore a subtle little half smile as she looked back at me.

“I believe someone is here to claim you, child.” She said to the girl.

“Gabrielle.” I said evenly.

“My Lord,” Gabrielle jumped from her stool and rushed to me, dropping to her knees by my side.

I touched the top of her head and stroked the golden hair. So, my slave knows how to speak after all. Just then, Atrius, Demetri, and two of my palace guard entered the kitchen. An audible sigh of relief swept through the men behind me when they saw the slave kneeling at my feet.

“Where have you been, Gabrielle? Did I not give you specific orders when I left you today?” I asked the bowed head.

“Forgive me, My Lord.” Gabrielle said no more and it was understood as to why. Because she was a smart slave...a smart woman. She knew that if it came to her word against Demetri’s, she would lose. She was in a situation she couldn’t possibly win and it was probably smarter to be punished, than to make an enemy of Demetri. Lucky for Gabrielle, Delia was around.

“If this poor excuse for a headman of yours listened as well as he spouted off, the girl wouldn’t have been brought to the slave quarters in the first place. Sylla told him what your orders were. As usual, he ignored her.” Delia’s eyes flashed dangerously in Demetri’s direction and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing at his discomfort. This cook of mine was certainly one to contend with.

“Is it a slave you have, Lord Conqueror, or a pet?” Delia asked me.

Gabrielle still knelt at my side and my hand rested on her head. I smirked back at my obstinate cook and looked down at the cowering young woman at my feet.

“Gabrielle, why didn’t you tell Demetri yourself that you were my personal slave and that you already had orders from me?”

My anger had long since dissipated, but I honestly wanted to hear Gabrielle’s reply.

“I...because, My Lord...I am a slave.” She said as succinctly as possible.

She had no need to say more, that simple statement encompassed it all.

“Stand up, Gabrielle.” I commanded. She stood and took her place to my right, just slightly behind me, her head slightly bowed, as usual.

“Gabrielle, this obstinate woman is Delia, our cook. Delia, this is Gabrielle.” I introduced them as though they’d never met, but Delia looked at me, she knew better. She grinned at me because she knew I’d been there listening, and I grinned right back to tell her that I knew she knew.

“And, Gabrielle, look at this man here.” I said as I reached around and grabbed a handful of Demetri’s hair, jerking his head up hard. “Take a good look at this man’s head, Gabrielle, because if he ever dares do anything remotely similar to this again, you will be seeing this same head as it rolls off the chopping block in the palace courtyard.”

I shoved Demetri away from me and he backed up as fast as possible.

“I believe I’ve had all the excitement I care to for one evening. Gentlemen, you are dismissed. Delia, is my dinner ready yet?”

“Soon, Lord Conqueror. I will send it up directly.”

“Double portions, Delia, I’m famished.” I replied, leaving the way I came, this time with my small blonde slave in tow.

Delia raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She knew I never ate much. I wasn’t really that hungry, but I wanted to start making sure that this little slave had plenty to eat. For some reason it seemed important to her, and as I was discovering, if something was important to Gabrielle, it soon became important to me.

## Chapter 6: A Long Night's Journey Into Day

We walked through the halls and for the first time, I noticed that it wasn't really that quiet in the parts of the castle that I frequented, rather people seemed to make themselves scarce when I came through. Funny, but I never noticed that before.

I gave Gabrielle instructions on where she could and could not go. I didn't want her anywhere near the soldier's barracks; nor the training fields unless I was there to accompany her. I tried not to make it sound like she was a prisoner; instead, I explained that I had her own welfare in mind.

She followed me up a winding stone staircase to the farthest rooms at one end of the castle. I held the door open to my study as she entered, closing the heavy door behind her. I explained to her that this is where I could be found most mornings and evenings, even occasionally during the day. We passed by the ceiling high shelves that housed my library of personal scrolls. Many contained maps and war strategies from long ago, others were plays or histories that I found entertaining. I forgot about my slave's penchant for stories until she stopped and stared at the hundreds of scrolls lying on their sides in their leather cases.

"You said you could read, Gabrielle?" I asked with an amused grin. The girl's mouth hung open as she craned her neck to see to the topmost shelf.

"Yes, My Lord," Gabrielle replied softly.

"Then you may feel free to read my scrolls during your leisure time. My only rule is that you do not remove them from this room without my permission. Is that understood?"

"Yes, My Lord...thank you so much." She looked up at me and I had the feeling that for an adoring glance such as the one she graced me with just now, I would make a number of concessions to the way I lived.

"These are my private chambers, Gabrielle," I said, leading her through another doorway off my study. "When I meet with my advisors or am in a meeting in my study, and you need to speak with me, you will wait in my outer room or the bedchamber. Under no circumstances, do I want you entering my study while I'm in a meeting."

I tried to make it as clear as possible, without actually voicing my true concern. I knew how I could be, although I was usually oblivious to some of my temperamental ways until someone pointed them out. I *was* trying, a little harder every day, but when I dealt with the men and women who ran my armies or advised me about running the Empire, I could still be a little...how does Delia subtly put it? Yes, a little *trying* is the understatement that she chooses to use.

"I will remember, My Lord." Gabrielle added, finally, bowing her head under the weight of my stare. Perhaps I gazed too long, but I believe it was the first time that she ever initiated any words, without me asking her a question first.

"Very Good." I replied and walked through my rooms to the door that led to the back hall. Directly across from the door to my bedchamber was the entrance to Gabrielle's rooms. The housekeeping staff told me earlier that they were finished and only awaited my approval. I

had no idea what they did in my absence and I didn't want Gabrielle to be disappointed. That's an odd thought, isn't it, wondering if my slave would like her rooms? Gods, the girl's probably slept in the stables at times. I shook my head and decided to preface entering the room with a few words anyway.

"Gabrielle, these are to be your rooms. If...well, if you don't like something, just tell me...and I...well, we'll fix it, okay?"

"Of course, My Lord."

I have to say I was a little impressed myself. The message I sent ahead, when we were in Thessaly, was to Delia. I asked her to fix the rooms for a woman to reside in. She took me at my word and the area was indeed lovely. This door opened into a small sitting room, slightly smaller than my study. Another door led into the bedchamber.

I couldn't help but smile as Gabrielle's mouth was hanging open again, not much, but her lips were parted just enough to make her look rather irresistible. She turned around and around and finally stopped to look at me. Gods, I wish I could get her eyes to focus on mine for longer than a heartbeat. She bows her head the moment she catches me watching her.

"Are you sure, My Lord?" she asked.

"Am I sure about what, Gabrielle?"

"This is where you would have me stay?"

"You don't like it?" I misunderstood her reaction and of course, the first thing I always did was react defensively.

"Oh, it's beautiful, My Lord, but...too beautiful for me," she added this last very softly.

"Not to me." I said, almost as if to myself.

I couldn't even be sure why I said this aloud. She was a beautiful girl, but to tell the truth, the words I just said to Gabrielle were as close as I'd ever come to telling any woman she was beautiful. Compliments weren't exactly my style, as most people already knew. Try as I might, words of endearment simply didn't come flowing from my lips. There have been times during my life, when I have wanted to say these kinds of things to a woman, but my tongue grew heavy and I was at a loss. Now, standing in front of this young slave, who has already made me feel more human than I ever have, I wanted to tell her, praise her, and commend her. I had to admit that I didn't know how. How can you imitate something that's never been shown you in the first place?

"Come, Gabrielle," I said, thickly. "Our dinner should be arriving soon."

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I sent for Gabrielle some time ago, and I was sure she was waiting patiently in my bedchamber by now. There seemed to be an enormous amount of work to catch up on and as soon as I would say, only one more scroll, another would jump to my attention.

I already bathed and sat at my writing table in my long robe, jotting down notes and setting up a schedule to hear petitions, day after tomorrow. My mind kept returning to the small blonde that I was certain waited in the next room. It was an unusual habit I was getting into. I hadn't had sex in nearly a whole season, and only sporadically for the season or two before that, but since I'd taken Gabrielle as my slave, I enjoyed her talents every night. It was a strange need that drove me, but the pleasure this woman brought to my body, was something I truly never experienced before. I could see the addiction beginning, yet I was helpless to stop it.

I gave up on concentrating on the words before me, rising and snuffing the candles out. I quietly opened the door between my study and bedchamber. The silence caused me to wonder whether Gabrielle fell asleep waiting for me, but knowing my young slave, I found that unlikely.

I found her standing at the window, the moonlight brightening her features, spreading an ethereal glow around her. She was breathtaking, and I thought I'd never seen such a magnificent sight. I don't know how long I paused in the doorway, but she didn't hear me step in. Her face had that relaxed set to it, just as it did when she slept. When she knew I was there, when anyone was there for that matter, she became nervous, a slight tension added to her facial appearance.

She turned slightly and caught me out of the corner of her eye. Just as she was about to kneel in front of me, I stopped her.

"No. Stay there, just as you are."

I put out the one lamp that was lit, leaving the two candles burning at the bedside.

"Turn around, Gabrielle, and face the window." I commanded and she returned to her former position.

Walking up behind her, I stopped when I was still a handbreadth away. I reached around and undid the knot at her waist that held the robe closed, and then slid the soft silk from her shoulders, revealing the even softer skin of her body. The candles flickered in the half dark and the flames appeared to be licking along the planes of her back. The analogy brought to mind a desire to run my own tongue along the course of those copper flames, and of course, since that's what I desired, that is exactly what I did.

The taste of her skin was something I was acquiring a definite craving for. I started at her shoulders and fed my need for her with my lips and my tongue, allowing only my fingertips to graze across the satiny skin, burnished a dark bronze color from the flame of the candles. All the way down I worked myself, finally slipping out of my own robe, and letting my bare skin glide against hers on the way back up. I moved the hands that were splayed across the backs of her thighs around to the front, pulling on her hips to press our bodies together more firmly.

I could feel my own breasts sliding against the skin of her back, the hard points of flesh becoming increasingly sensitive as my arousal intensified. I brought my hands up the front of her body, stopping to cover both breasts with the palms of my hands. This small woman wasn't immune to physical pleasure, as I felt by the way her flesh pebbled and grew harder, her nipples tightening and elongating even more as I rubbed my palms in lazy circles. No

sound came from her, and I was becoming accustomed to this too, even though it continued to trouble me in no small way. I had no fear that we would someday get beyond it. I grasped her nipples between two fingers and squeezed, pulling gently at the same time. No languid moan met my ears, but Gabrielle's head tilted back until it was resting on my shoulder.

I guessed that it wasn't so much the fact that my lovely slave felt no pleasure after the many years her body was used, and most probably, abused. I supposed that it might be because no one ever *gave* her pleasure. Master's who own body slaves are only concerned with meeting their own needs, their own desires. If they were interested in pleasing someone else, they would take a lover, not buy a slave. Who would care about bringing a slave to her climax, to show a slave the tender affection necessary to produce feelings of satisfaction and contentment?

I smiled against the skin of her neck as I leaned down and kissed the warm flesh, pulling into my mouth and sucking until I could feel the blood pulse against that spot quicker. Yes, who would think it exciting to be able to bring pleasure to a slave, besides an old, worn out warrior?

I pressed my lips to those of the slave who had her head swept back, in seeming invitation. I let the fire of my arousal carry me away, until I could feel Gabrielle returning my kisses. I grasped the hand she kept at her side and brought it to the back of my neck, encouraging her to massage the flesh there. When I released her hand and left it to seek the curves of her flesh, I felt her nails, rake through my hair, up along my scalp, then down again to teasingly run her index finger along my ear.

Gods, how could the woman possibly know how that little move would affect me? I groaned aloud as I felt goose bumps rise up along my arms. It was almost otherworldly, the way she knew what would bring me pleasure, and when.

I used both my hands to explore the front of her body, lingering longer on the spots that caused my young slave to take in a sharp breath or that encouraged her to press against me to prolong the feeling. I broke away from her mouth reluctantly, wanting to taste more of the skin beneath my hands. While my fingers moved lower, drawing imaginary patterns down her belly, my tongue reached out to glide across her shoulders, and then up along the corded line of her neck. My tongue reached an earlobe to tease, just as my fingers reached past the golden patch of curls and along moist inner folds. I felt Gabrielle take in a deep breath, but it was a few long heartbeats later before she released it.

"Gods, you're so wet," I breathed into her ear, swirling the fingers of both hands into her wetness. Again, she allowed no sound to escape her lips, but I could feel the little jerking motion she made, trying, unsuccessfully, to control the shiver that ran the length of her body.

That's when I felt the words come to me. I was no bard, far from a poet, but never in my life was I even aware of the things I was about to confess let alone speak them aloud.

"Do you know how beautiful you are to me, Gabrielle?" I asked; placing small kisses along the outside edge of her ear. "Do you know how good your body feels against mine?" I punctuated this last question by grinding my own wet center against the smooth flesh of her backside.

Once again, I reached out my tongue to taste the saltiness of her skin. “Gods, you taste so good. I need to know if you taste this good everywhere.”

As I continued to circle her swollen clit with the fingers of one hand, I brought the other hand up to my lips and licked the girl’s essence off the fingers that were teasing her only moments before. I closed my eyes at the taste of the ambrosia-like substance, but I was still able to hear the tiny gasp she couldn’t hold back. I pulled her chin back and kissed the tilted head again and again, sure that it was one of the few times she’d ever been kissed by someone who had her taste coating their lips. She was responding quite nicely to this turn of events, but when she grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled my mouth against her harder, sucking on my tongue, while it explored the sweetness of her own mouth, the powerful motion gave me cause to wonder who was attempting to seduce who, here.

I was hesitant to enter her. Although I wanted nothing more than to feel her contract against my fingers as she climaxed, I wondered if she would receive as much pleasure from an act that her body had been used for repeatedly. I know people would find it an insane thing to do, ruminating over how best to pleasure your slave, but I could no more explain it, than stop it. I decided to see if I could get my young slave to decide.

I resumed the tactic of massaging those drenched folds with both my hands. Once my fingers moved to concentrate on that very sensitive area of flesh, I felt her hips thrust forward against my hands. I rewarded the girl’s motion by teasing her entrance and pressing down harder with my thumb against her clit. Since her forward behavior was being permitted, Gabrielle reached behind me and slid her hands up the backs of my thighs, squeezing the flesh of my buttocks. An utterly carnal groan escaped my throat and I ground myself against her harder.

“Show me, Gabrielle. Show me where you want to feel me.” I whispered in her ear.

Her nails ran along my backside and I groaned again. Gods, the woman had me dripping wet with just a few touches. I repeated my verbal request and flicked my thumb across her clit, just as I used the same motion with my tongue against her ear. She moved her hands around and slid them along my forearms and down over my wrists.

“Oh yes, that’s it...come on, Gabrielle...show me what it takes to make you feel good.” I murmured, unsure whether I could put my own excitement off until the girl could be coaxed into revealing her desires.

Just as that thought entered my head, Gabrielle slid one hand down until her fingers mingled with my own in that abundant wetness. She wrapped her fingers around those of mine that rested just outside her entrance and pressed them into her deeper. I made up for Gabrielle’s silence by moaning my pleasure and entering her the rest of the way.

I pressed two fingers deep inside her, sliding them out and replacing them with three fingers. That’s when I kept repeating the motion, feeling her hips slowly begin to move in the steady rhythm my hand set.

“Oh, that’s it. Is this what you wanted, Gabrielle? Hhmm, me fucking you, like this?”

In the past, part of my power game was always to give a woman exactly what I knew she wanted, and then have her admit it aloud. It used to excite me to hear them begging for what I

knew I already wanted to give them. Somehow, I didn't have the heart to do that with the woman who had such little pleasure bestowed on her in her life.

When Gabrielle nodded her response, I felt like she just screamed her answer out to the heavens.

It didn't take long, but I was in no hurry. I penetrated her again and again with my right hand, while I let the fingers of my left slide across that very swollen clit. A usual, Gabrielle's body told me more than her vocal efforts. She clamped her hand strongly around my wrist and I felt her body stiffen, her inner muscles clenching then releasing my fingers, thrust deep inside her. I felt a rush of warm liquid cover my hand, just as her knees felt like they were giving way. I locked one arm around her waist and gently eased my fingers from inside of her.

"It's all right, I've got you," I whispered, lightly kissing her ear.

I stood holding her like that until I felt my own desire rising insistently and demanding more attention. I pulled her back to the bed and I sat on the edge. When I turned my slave around, I could see that her face was still flushed and I was getting to enjoy the look of blissful confusion my attentions caused her. She dropped to her knees, sitting back on her heels, knowing I would allow her hands on me. She ran them up the tops of my thighs, massaging the muscles under her fingertips. It was when she ran her nails along the inside of my legs, down toward my knees, that I lost my composure.

"Oh yes. Touch me, Gabrielle." It wasn't a command, more like a whispered plea and I think we both knew it.

"Where would you like to be touched, My Lord?" she asked in response, and I saw that gleam of bedroom power creep into her eyes, but I was absolutely incapable of doing anything about it.

"Anywhere," I leaned back on both hands as she rose up on her knees. As she moved her lips in to capture mine, I could hear the rapid beat of my heart. "Everywhere." I managed to say, as her lips covered my own.

I leaned back further, onto my elbows, and simply enjoyed the feel of her slight body as she lay across mine, her kisses turning hungry as she knowingly matched my desires. Her lips ran along my jaw and when her tongue found its way to my ear, I let my head roll back and gave everything in me over to the young woman between my legs.

She ran her tongue in a random design along my shoulders and down my chest. She took small little nips of my skin with her teeth, and I grunted in pleasure and surprise with each tiny bite. By the time those lips wrapped around a very aroused, dark nipple, every pull of the skin into that warm inviting mouth of hers, was felt directly between my legs.

I was pretty much moaning nonstop as she slid her tongue down my belly, her hands squeezing my thighs rhythmically. She lay numerous kisses on the dark triangle of hair and without any more preamble than that, she buried her face in my cunt.

“Gods!” I cried out, already thrusting my hips up hard to meet the tongue that lapped at my center. “Oh, Gabrielle,” I groaned, placing one hand behind her head to position her exactly where I wanted her.

The sounds she was making as she ate me did nothing to quench the roaring fire in my belly. She felt my increased wetness and the quick shudders my muscles were making. She raised her fingers to enter me and I pushed the hand away.

“No...just your tongue. Yesss...oh, Gods...just like that.” I relaxed into the exquisite touch, simply letting her carry me to my destination.

When I at last arched my back and cried out, one orgasm blended into another when she slid that tongue into me as deep as she could. I shook and moaned for a long time, slowly coming back to reality by the gentle touches of her tongue as she lapped up the juices my excitement created.

It seemed long moments went by while I calmed myself, lying there with my eyes closed, trying to begin to breath normally again, before I realized Gabrielle was no longer touching me. I opened my eyes to see that she was on her knees, waiting for either another command or a dismissal. Even she knew what it would look like were she to spend the night in my bed here in the castle. She was not the Queen, even though she occupied the Queen’s chambers. She was a slave, and although I would be likely to forget that fact, she would not.

“May I do something more to please you, My Lord?” she asked.

I dropped my head to the bed and raised my arms up to cover my eyes.

“No, Gabrielle...thank you. You are dismissed.”

She left without saying another word and I lay there awake until the candles burned out of their own accord, leaving me in a blackness that matched my mood. It was sometime before I realized that my body would not give in to Morpheus and I rose to work in my study.

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I should have been able to escape to the realm of Morpheus, blissfully sated after an evening’s passion with my talented body slave, but even now, sleep eluded me. For reasons that I could neither understand, nor care to admit to, slumber was not to befriend me easily. I read a few scrolls by the light of the candle, it being some time since I read for no other reason than it pleased me. I dressed and walked the darkened corridors of the palace, even strolling outside across the dampened fields of grass.

I cannot explain what possessed me to do what I did next, only that somewhere, a few candlemarks before dawn, I grudgingly realized, or admitted, what the cause of my insomnia was. I knew what it was all along, didn’t I? I was just too stubborn to admit it. It was rather like having a toothache or receiving a slight injury on the training field. If you ignore it, the symptoms might possibly go away. If you admit it, even if only to yourself, then you’re forced to go to the healer and do something about it. If only there were a healer to free me from the pain, I was in now. If only there were some herb or elixir, I could mix up, to relieve me of this new ache, which sat like a heavy weight upon my chest.

She was the cause of my inability to sleep, but there was no sense in lying to myself. I grew so used to sleeping with Gabrielle, that it was apparent I merely missed the girl in my bed. I knew I was growing accustomed to her, but I never thought her loss would affect me in this way.

So, I find myself in a position that instills feelings of comfort and embarrassment in equal measure. From the darkened corner of her room I stand and watch her. I've been standing here, motionless, and watching her for over a candlemark now. She must have been exhausted when she returned to her own bed. She wore no shift, as though she simply fell onto the mattress, pulling the sheet over her. I stared at the slight figure, lying there so silently, a look of peace gracing her features. Her chest rose and fell in a soft, steady rhythm and I felt a strange sensation of contentment wash over me.

Gabrielle, as the fates would have it, felt another's presence in her room and she awoke with a startled expression on her face. As she looked around, I saw her lean over and light the candle at her bedside. I stepped back further into the shadows, silently watching. When her expression went from one of sleepy disorientation to fear, I didn't have the heart to conceal myself any longer. I took a step forward, letting the light from the flickering flame announce my presence.

"My Lord." She exclaimed, starting to rise, "how may I serve you?"

"Relax, Gabrielle," I said, moving closer to the bed. "I have no need of you in that way." I pacified her.

The strained silence persisted as I stood awkwardly, wondering if I should explain my reason for being there, although somewhere in the back of my brain that tiny voice told me that I was, after all, the Lord Conqueror, and why in Tartarus should I have to explain myself to anyone? As always, Gabrielle was one step ahead of me.

"Are you troubled, My Lord?" Gabrielle's soft voice inquired.

Gods, I wasn't sure how to answer that question. I was troubled in a big way, but could I admit that? Would I be opening the gates and giving this small slave some power over me, if she knew my weakness, especially if that weakness turned out to be her? Would Gabrielle think I was being foolish, even worse, losing my mind? I wanted to talk to her. I wanted it so badly. How arrogant of me to think it a weakness to care for someone. My shaking knees were proof of just the opposite, and I began to wonder if even I held enough strength to voice my needs and fears.

I moved forward and sat at the end of the bed, just opposite, but facing away from her. "I...I..." I cleared my throat and tried to begin again. "Sometimes I...being alone at night. I mean, with you in here and me over there...sometimes I wish it were different." I said heavily.

I wasn't sure if she understood what I was attempting to say, Hades, I didn't even know if I knew what I was trying to say. I just didn't have enough practice at this and I cursed my inability to feel anything for anyone for so many seasons. My abilities as a ruthless warrior may have led me to conquer a good portion of the Known World, but they left me ineffectual

at building something worth holding on to. Gabrielle's soft voice stirred me out of my self-recriminations and her words contained a quiet strength that I found odd, coming from her.

"There are times, My Lord, when the only thing necessary to bring comfort to a person's soul, is the sound of another's heart, beating along with your own."

The deeply profound statement from my young slave should not have taken me aback. I ought to know by now, that Gabrielle is nothing, if not unpredictable, but the depth of her understanding for my plight caused me to look at her in a new light. When I didn't move or make any attempt to speak, she continued.

"I may be very unworthy company, My Lord, but perhaps...perhaps if you were to lie here, Morpheus would beckon you."

When she looked over at me and I turned to see her face, I saw those eyes that could never quite meet my own, and I think that we both knew, that in her company is where I wanted to be anyway. Without removing my clothes, I made a move to lie back on the large bed, but realized that I still wore my boots, wet and muddy from my walk outside. This was *my* slave and *my* bed, it should not matter to me where I place my dirty boots, but acting that way to make a point just didn't seem worth it with Gabrielle. To the outside world, we were slave and master, but in the privacy of our rooms, the lines were blurring more and more everyday.

I pulled off my wet boots and lay down atop the covers. Gabrielle pushed the sheet from her body, knowing it was the proper behavior for a slave, not to cover herself in my presence. It seemed like I was doing a lot of things lately and not understanding my behavior, but when I grasped the end of the sheet and pulled it back up to cover Gabrielle, I knew exactly why I did it. If I wanted this girl with the submissive nature to start respecting herself, then I needed to treat her that way in kind. In this instance I felt she was reaching out to offer me comfort and friendship, me, her master, someone she really only had to tolerate with a closed mouth. If she could offer up this olive branch, then I would try to graciously accept it the way it was intended.

"Roll over, Gabrielle, facing away from me." I said, knowing it was neither a command nor a request, but something in between.

She rolled over onto her side and I pulled the sheet up further, tucking it around her. Then I draped an arm around her waist and felt her settle her back against my chest. The warmth against me felt so relaxing.

"Goodnight, Gabrielle."

"Goodnight, My Lord."

It took only moments for me to drift off and when I didn't wake the next morning until the sun's rays shot into my eyes, I knew that tonight, things would be different. Hades could take propriety, convention, and any other long-standing bit of protocol I was damaging. I no longer cared what this looked like to others. I didn't care what people would think or say about such an arrangement. This girl *will* share my bed tonight and every night thereafter until I deem it no longer so.

I silently dared for anyone who had doubts about my sanity, to give voice to their concerns...to my face.

## Chapter 7: To See A World In A Grain Of Sand

“Good Morning, Gabrielle.” I addressed my young slave as she entered my bedchamber.

“Good Morning, My Lord,” she replied in that soft voice of hers.

I just finished dressing, pulling my boots on when Gabrielle entered the room. She and I sat down to the wooden table where I took my meals. Sylla already set the table with a variety of fruits and baked breads, along with some thinly sliced, smoked fish. As usual, Gabrielle sat at the table across from me with her head bowed and her hands in her lap.

Taking our meals together was always an adventure. It was obvious my young slave was denied food, somewhere along the way, as a form of punishment. She seemed very accustomed to not eating for long periods of time, then consuming all she could get her hands on later, to carry her through. I occasionally watched her out of the corner of my eye and I always seemed to catch her placing something in the pocket of her skirt for later. I sighed to myself on this morning, as I watched her slip an apple into that pocket. I could only bite my tongue and continually reiterate the fact that her food hording was unnecessary.

When I rose from the table, I crossed the room to where my sword lay, atop a chest at the foot of my bed. I strapped it to my hip and felt an oddness to the gesture. Funny, but for all these years that I have ruled and lived in this palace, I have worn one sword, but it still feels strange not to have two swords at my waist, as I do when in battle. I spent so many seasons as a warrior, two blades in my hand, that it truly became a part of me.

I shook off the memory and returned to the table. Gabrielle watched as I stopped and dropped to one knee before her. My height was intimidating and I had no desire to press my superiority over my slave. I took her hands in my own and enjoyed the smoothness against my own skin.

“Gabrielle?” I paused and she looked up, never completely looking me in the eye. I wasn’t sure where to start since I didn’t want to frighten her. “Gabrielle, remember what I told you about food in my home?”

“Yes, My Lord...forgive me, I--”

“Ssh, it’s all right, I’m not angry.” I reached into her skirt pocket and produced the apple she tucked there. She guiltily lowered her eyes.

“I want you to try to remember something...look at me, Gabrielle,” I added gently. She raised her head again and I realized I was growing accustomed to the way her eyes avoided looking directly into mine.

“As long as I have food on my table, little one, you will not go hungry.” The term of endearment just seemed to spill easily off my tongue and I made no attempt to get it back as it seemed fitting for my small, lovely slave. “Gabrielle, have I lied to you yet, since you have been in my service?”

“No, My Lord.”

“And, I will not, especially about this. Now,” I returned the apple back to its hiding spot in her skirt. “If you want this because you may grow hungry for a snack, or even if you want to pay the stable a visit and treat Tenorio, that is fine. Only, never fear that I will deny you food as punishment. Do you believe me?” I asked at last, knowing it would be difficult for her to answer that.

“I--” She didn’t know how to answer truthfully. “I will try, My Lord.”

“Then that is all we can ask, is it not?” I smiled at her and although it was not something I usually did, it seemed to ease her discomfort a small bit. I found that smiling in Gabrielle’s presence was becoming easier and wondered if it would ever feel so natural that I wouldn’t be aware I was doing it.

“I have business on the docks today and wish to walk, Gabrielle. Do you wish to join me? It will give you an opportunity to visit the city.” I asked, rising from the floor.

“Yes, very much, My Lord.”

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We walked from the palace, my slave and I, and I should have held no fear that Gabrielle would find anyone here to trade affections with. The gossip spread like wildfire and everyone in the palace already knew, not only who this small blonde was, but also what she meant to me. No one even raised an eye to the girl, at least while I was beside her, and certainly no one spoke to her. Hades, the people of Corinth barely acknowledged me, with the exception of lowering their heads and bowing in respectful submission.

It made me feel rather sorry for Gabrielle, though, to think this was what her life had long consisted of. As I overheard her tell Delia, a body slave lived a lonely life in her master’s household. She was cursed for the master’s bad temper and even in good times, no one took a chance at being caught speaking with her. Even in friendship, a casual glance could ignite the jealousy of an angry and possessive master, such as myself. I do not say, *used to be*, for when it comes to Gabrielle, I fear I could fall back into those same fits of fierce suspicion and controlling behavior that consumed me in my younger days.

I felt compelled to reassure Gabrielle in some small way, to assure her that I would not be lopping her head off if I saw her speaking to someone on the street. Did I really mean that, however? I had not miraculously grown the heart of a mystic because of my developing feelings toward my small slave. I was still at a loss as to what to say to the woman, but there was a *need* in me, that was as accurately as I could describe it. It was a need to express certain emotions I was having concerning Gabrielle. I grew quickly frustrated as we walked out of the palace gates. I wanted to say so much to her, but I was completely unaware of how to say it. I wondered if Delia would laugh at my predicament if I were to go to her for help. I wasn’t completely inarticulate, however, so I decided to wade right in.

“You...uh, you look very nice today, Gabrielle...very lovely.” I commented and caught the surprise in her eyes.

“Thank you, My Lord. I’m only happy that I please you.” She answered predictably.

It certainly wasn't a lie, nor an exaggeration. Gabrielle, with golden hair falling across her slight shoulders, and the early morning sun filtering through the strands of hair blowing around her face. She looked absolutely beautiful. I didn't even realize I stopped moving until Gabrielle's eyes lifted and briefly caught mine.

"Very lovely, indeed." I gently tapped two fingers under her chin and was rewarded with something that was damn close to being a smile. "Wait," I tilted my head to see into her eyes, grinning myself. "Is that a smile I see...from my Gabrielle?" Which made her sort-of smile grow. I couldn't help chuckling as I turned and we continued on.

The palace guard followed in our wake and Gods only know what they thought of our exchange. I remembered a time when the guard walked out ahead of me, terrorizing anyone foolish enough to stray into my oncoming path. Now I felt, rather than saw, their understated presence.

Gabrielle seemed quite unaccustomed to the people and bustle of a city like Corinth. I noticed that she began to follow rather closely on my heels as we strolled along the city streets, toward the docks. I had business today with the Captain of my fleet. According to two of my closest advisors, the man was running slaves as one of his little extracurricular activities. I wanted more than hearsay and gossip, and the truth was, if this man was kidnapping young girls here in Corinth to sell them in the North as slaves, I wanted to personally show him how I felt about that.

As we walked by the prisoners on their way to trial or judgment, many called out to me for mercy. I can barely remember the time when I would stride past them, truly unable to hear their cries for leniency. In the last few seasons, it grew especially hard to ignore their pleas. Now, when I look into their faces, I am able to see something that touches a part of me that has laid dormant for much of my life.

We passed by and I looked at them, chained, or bound, waiting for my wagons to take them to the large palace dungeons. A small boy, no more than eight or nine summers, stood watching me rather impassively as I walked by. He looked also at Gabrielle and I saw the light of compassion burn brightly in her intelligent emerald gaze. The boy had his hands in front of him, his wrists fastened together with manacles that were ludicrously large on his small hands. Yet, he stood there, calmly accepting the fate he could easily have escaped from. I'd known assassins that young, so it didn't completely surprise me, a boy that age, headed for the prison.

We passed by and I easily caught the movement of Gabrielle's hand as she slipped the apple from her pocket and pressed it into the surprised boy's small grasp. At first, I was going to shrug it off and ignore my slave's actions, but what Gabrielle just did was so unlike her. For her to risk punishment, her reason for slipping the boy food, an offense any way you looked at it, must mean a great deal to her. I wanted, no I needed, to learn more about this world in which my slave existed. Because of that, I stopped, and when I halted, Gabrielle did the same.

"Gabrielle?" I asked, not turning to look at her, simply knowing she would be there.

"Yes, My Lord?" she replied softly. I think she knew the moment I stopped that she was caught.

“What was that you just did, Gabrielle?” I asked evenly.

“Please forgive me, My Lord, I--” she began and I turned and placed two fingers over her lips to silence her.

“Gabrielle, I haven’t yet placed blame or even accused you of anything. I only inquired about your actions.”

She lowered her head. “I gave the boy the apple I had in my pocket.” She answered dutifully.

“I see. Why did you do that, Gabrielle?”

“He...he looked as if he was hungry, My Lord.”

“Do you realize, little one, that it is a crime to give prisoners anything, even food?”

“Yes, My Lord.” She again answered and I barely heard her response this time.

“So, knowing that you would be punished, you gave the food to the boy anyway?” I asked.

When Gabrielle nodded and answered with a soft affirmative reply, I questioned her as to why she would perform such a sacrifice. Her answer made me feel completely oblivious to all that went on around me, in my palace, in my city, in the whole of my country. It was as if there was a grain of sand at my feet, and on it existed another world, such as our own. Subsisting, right there at my feet, all this time.

“He is only a child, My Lord. No child deserves to be hungry.” She answered.

Anyone who ever thought Gabrielle a stupid woman, evidently never spent any time with her at all. I found her insights into the world to be profound, thought provoking, and tempered with a compassion, I had to admit, I didn’t fully understand. This last statement was no exception.

I turned and walked back to where the prisoners stood huddled together. I towered over the boy and when I asked him his name, he looked up at me in terror. I was now about to learn my second lesson of the day, when it came to how others perceived me. I felt a hand on my forearm and turned to see my small slave waiting for permission to speak. I arched an eyebrow at her and she understood my unspoken communication. She leaned up on her tiptoes and I leaned down, closer to her. She spoke softly into my ear.

“My Lord, I think...I think maybe you are a great deal like your stallion, Tenorio.” She hurried on when I looked at her in complete confusion. “To people of a much smaller stature, you can be somewhat...imposing, thereby...well, intimidating.”

Always amazed at the young woman, she was quickly becoming one of my best, and most trusted, advisors. I took the hint and turned back to the boy, easing myself down to one knee until my head was even with his.

“Do you have a name, boy?” I asked again.

“P--Petra, Lord Conqueror.” The boy answered my question.

“Why do you wear the chains of a prisoner, Petra?”

“I was caught stealing food, Lord Conqueror.”

“Food does seem to be the topic today,” I looked back at Gabrielle in amusement and she bowed her head. “So, Petra...why does a boy your age need to steal food? Don’t your mother and father feed you well enough?”

“It wasn’t for me, Lord Conqueror, it was for my mother and two sisters. My father was a soldier in the Lord Conqueror’s army, but he was killed in the battle of Chaeronea. My mother is sick and can’t work, and my baby sisters need food to eat. I’m sorry, Lord Conqueror,” the boy said, valiantly holding back his tears. “I didn’t know what else to do. I tried to join the Lord Conqueror’s army, to earn money for food, but the soldiers laughed at me.”

I tried to show no emotion as the boy told his tale. It seemed so melodramatic I wasn’t sure if I was being set up or not. “Where do you live, boy?”

When the small boy pointed back into the palace gates, I was taken back.

“You live within the walls of the palace? Who is your mother a hired woman for?” I asked, and then proceeded to look even more confused.

“Why...she works for you, Lord Conqueror.” He replied, looking at me as if I just told him sheep could fly.

Now I was not only confused, but angry too. With my country enjoying such prosperity, were there really children within the very walls of my own palace, going hungry?

“Jailer!” I shouted and the man was at my side in an instant. “Remove this boy’s chains.” I ordered.

Once free, I motioned to the boy with my hand. “Show me where you live, boy.” I said and suddenly we were all following Petra back through the palace gates.

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I knew the small village style houses that existed in cramped rows at the south end of the palace gates, were small and overcrowded. I was in no way, however, prepared for the intolerable conditions when I entered the boy’s home. It was obvious that someone made the attempt to create a living space within the confines of the small room. What few furnishings were there, had been scrubbed clean, but the rats that ran within the walls, went from house to house, carrying their filth and disease wherever they went.

I felt precariously out of my element, standing in the middle of the small room. My height was a definite hazard as my head nearly grazed the ceiling. Petra led me to a small pallet where a slender woman lay, in obvious pain and fever. I kneeled down to look at the woman,

and although she probably only had a touch of the chills, it could be fatal without proper care and nutrition. I fancied myself rather knowledgeable when it came to healing, but that was a great many seasons ago. I became more adept at treating battle wounds than illness, so I did the only I could think to do, when feeling this helpless. I called on Gabrielle.

“Gabrielle?” I turned, and it seemed that the helpless tone of my voice and the look in my eye, conveyed all that my young slave needed to know.

Spurred into action, Gabrielle gave Petra instructions to fetch a pail of fresh drinking water, not from the well the other houses used, but from the one nearer the gates. By the time the boy rushed back, I merely stood in the corner and watched as Gabrielle requested items she would need. She took a quill and parchment from one of my messengers and made a list in a careful and precise handwriting. The messenger looked on in awe at my young slave. I doubt he’d ever seen one that could write before.

Gabrielle looked up at me. “My Lord, we will need dinars for some herbs and fresh food.”

I nodded and walked out of the house, noticing the small crowd of attention we were drawing. I’m sure the inhabitants of the neighboring houses thought something miraculous was happening, given that I was there. I grabbed one of my guards and dragged him into the house, pushing him in front of Gabrielle.

I must say it was amazing to watch, and had I been less redeemed, I would have taken the girl’s head off for her forward behavior and presumptuous manner. Gabrielle was ordering people about like...well, like she was me! She looked up at the guard before her.

“Can you read?” she asked.

If any other slave had asked that question, she would have been scoffed at, or beaten to the ground. My palace guards were a snobby bunch given their station in the palace, so they would be just the men to do it, too. On this day, however, we were all too astounded at the small slave’s behavior to question her. The tone of authority in Gabrielle’s voice as she took charge of the scenario simply confounded them all, myself included.

The guard nodded dumbly, then added, “Yes, Miss.”

“Take this list to the market and the apothecary and return straightaway with the supplies.” She ordered.

The guard took the list and was about to hurry out the door to do her bidding when he realized, with horror, who he was taking orders from. He quickly turned to me and I saw the blood had nearly drained from the young man’s face.

“Yes, go, go!” I waved him off with my hand, trying to make it appear like I agreed with everything Gabrielle was doing. In truth, I hadn’t an inkling.

Gabrielle put two large kettles on the fire to heat water and I now realized it was my turn. I was feeling a little useless, so why not heap a little humiliation on top of it, right?

“Um...Gabrielle...what...” I lowered my voice so no one outside could hear me. “What do you want me to do?” I could only pray to Athena that I didn’t sound as pathetic to her as I did to my own ears.

“Would you...” she paused as if she were reconsidering the request. “Would you take the children outside?” she asked timidly, waiting for my roar, I’m sure.

I arched one eyebrow just about as high as it would go. I looked at my feet and two young girls stood there, appearing as if they were looking up a mountain. Neither of them came past my knees and one smiled broadly up at me. She wrapped her arms around my leg and laid her cheek against the trouser clad limb. I froze.

“Me?” I said weakly. If I didn’t know better, I would have sworn that Gabrielle smiled just before she turned back to the fire.

When she turned back my way, she came closer and whispered under her breath. “I need to bathe her and remove the soiled linen and clothes, My Lord. The children shouldn’t see that.”

She calmly waited for my decision and I even thought about grabbing one of the palace guards, and forcing them to play babysitter. Two things stopped me. One, I have never, in my entire life, asked a soldier to do something that I myself was unwilling or unable to do. Secondly, there was the tiny girl with her arms still wrapped tightly around my leg. I was amazed that something so small could frighten me so completely. She looked at me in a way I have never been gazed upon before. She had no idea, no preconceived notions of who I was or what I was capable of, no knowledge of what horrible things made up my past. I was looking upon that grain of sand again and seeing a completely new world.

I sighed and gave my best smirk to Gabrielle. I bent down and scooped the larger girl up into my arms. I didn’t have to reach down for the other one. She wrapped herself around my leg and when I tried to walk, it was as if my leg was immobilized. I limped toward the door with my charges.

“Come on, Boy,” I called to Petra, as I limped through the doorway.

I could only hope that one of my officers didn’t pass by. If anyone like Atrius saw me in this position, I would have to run him through. I hate to lose good soldiers that way.

## Chapter 8: Conqueror...Warrior...Babysitter?

I knew that I was coming extremely close to senility, when the ramblings of a girl, not yet five summers old, was entertaining me. I sat on a bench as the two girls jumped in and out of my lap, finally wrestling with one another over who would sit in the cherished position. I lifted them both at once and placed each one on the top of my thighs. They seemed satisfied with the decision and the older girl began to talk.

That's when I began looking around, impatiently I admit, for Gabrielle. The younger girl, maybe three summers of age, took that moment to lean herself against my chest. I felt something akin to panic coming on as she snuggled against me, yawned, and promptly fell asleep. Now I was stuck. The older girl went on about the blue of the sky, the small rag doll she held in her grasp, and my long dark hair. As I said, I knew I was losing my mind because at some point, I leaned back against the outside wall of the house and listened in rapt fascination to her ramblings.

"I-I can take them, Lord Conqueror." Petra stammered nervously, seeing the way his sisters sprawled across me.

I knew what the boy felt. It was fear, of me and who I was. His sisters were too young to know, and I received an unconditional adoration from them. This boy, however, knew me and the very thought made some part of me want to hang my head in shame. I think he was mostly afraid that I would lose my temper with the small girls. No telling, if he lived around the palace, when he saw me lose my temper. How could I tell him that I was more terrified of these small, gentle bundles, than they ever could be of me?

"Leave them be, Petra." I responded and motioned for him to sit beside my on the bench. "I want you to tell me a few things about living here, boy."

I intended to learn what really happened around here and why there were such intolerable living conditions within my palace walls. I knew I would get no better answers than from one who lived here, and also from someone who appeared to be rather honest. True, he stole the food, but I believe the end justified the means. He attempted to work to provide wages for his family, but was scoffed at by the soldiers. I knew that a young boy like Petra would know a great deal about the area he lived in. The young tend to have big ears, yet some pay them little attention. I wanted names and I had a feeling Petra knew them all.

I watched the boy as he spoke and repeatedly throughout the conversation, his eyes made their way back to the hilt of my sword. The silver lion's head with its two sapphire eyes, cast rays of light around as the sun caught the metal. I'd had the hilt fashioned when I made a pledge to change my ways. That was five seasons ago, okay, I was progressing slowly, but the lion's head on the hilt of my sword was my silent reminder.

It was a remembrance of a time when I thought I could be both warrior and purveyor of justice. It started when Cortese attacked my village, when I ran from my home with the guilt that I'd been responsible for my beloved brother's death. I became a warrior with one ideal, to defend my country from anyone who sought to steal it. Persians, Romans, the Gaul's, they all regretted the attempt. I made them sorry they ever landed on Greek soil. It was then, that I earned the title from the people...Lion of Amphipolis.

I'm not sure why they chose that title. My fierce pride, the courage I displayed, the relentless drive as a warrior? Those were days before I took to the seas, before Caesar, before Chin, before I became a woman filled with a lust for power and revenge. Caesar, I laughed inwardly. He was dead and gone, killed by his own senate some ten seasons ago. So, I took the icon of the lion, to remind me of what I had been...and what I aspired to be again.

It was sometime later when I felt I'd heard enough from the young boy. I had my suspicions already about who was at the root of stealing money that belonged here within this poor workers community. When Petra innocently confirmed those thoughts I felt a bit of the old Xena creep back into my blood.

"Guard!" I shouted at one of the palace guard who remained with earshot. "Go to the palace and bring me my healer, Kuros, Captain Atrius, and the chief builder. Bring them immediately." I hissed to the guard.

I took a couple deep breaths to try and still the beast that I kept locked inside nowadays. It worried, and even frightened me a small bit, that the monster could rise so easily, after all the effort I put into keeping the demon at bay. I squeezed my eyes closed and felt the heat of my own blood beginning to rise. It wasn't battle lust, but righteous indignation that spurred the beast on this time. I sat there, my eyes shut, knowing that stealing money in my house could get a man killed. Stealing *my* money...could get him crucified.

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"My Lord?"

Gabrielle's soft voice caused my head to turn and my eyes to snap open. When I focused my attention upon her, I watched as my small slave flinched in fear. I knew exactly what my expression looked like, when the beast tread so close to the surface, as I now allowed. I knew because I saw it thousands of times, mirrored in the faces of men, just before I took their lives from them. In that instant, that small tick of a heartbeat, before my gaze softened, and my irises changed from icy cold to warm blue, Gabrielle was able to see the beast that lurked below the surface.

"It's all right." I said as I held out my hand to her.

I never meant for Gabrielle to see the monster. It was enough that she knew what I did in those days past. I *never* wanted her to see it in me now. That seemed very important to me and I still wasn't certain why. I believe that in some ways, Gabrielle was rather innocent. That sounds foolish, doesn't it? A woman who has spent half her life as a slave, who provides pleasure to her master alone; an innocent. She may have been knowledgeable in the area of her expertise, but there existed an unspecified vulnerability about the girl and I didn't want to be the one to shatter that.

Gabrielle laid her hand in mine and I enjoyed the feeling of it for a few heartbeats. The commotion coming down the side street alerted me that the men I sent for were arriving.

"Gabrielle, take the children inside." I said, rising and placing the smallest child in my slave's arms. The older girl woke with a start and Gabrielle took her hand to lead her away.

“Petra,” Gabrielle called.

“No. Leave the boy.” I said; my attention focused on the men coming toward us.

“My Lord?”

I heard the frightened tone in Gabrielle’s questioning voice and I turned and gave her a very quick smile. “It’s all right, little one, go on now.” I said, touching the backs of my fingers to her cheek.

She disappeared into the small shack and I stood there for a few moments watching the door she’d walked through. I needed to do something for this lovely slave of mine, something to show her how much she was beginning to mean to me.

“Lord Conqueror.” Atrius said, pulling from my musing.

“Captain...we have a problem here I want resolved.” I needed to say it no other way. Atrius has been with me long enough to know the inflection of my voice that went along with this order.

“Kuros, there is a woman inside,” I pointed into the small shack. “She needs medical attention. Gab-- my slave, has been attending to her, but she needs to be moved somewhere within the palace where she can receive proper care.”

“Of course, Lord Conqueror,” the small man said and rushed into the house. Kuros was dedicated to his healing arts and I knew the woman would thrive under his care.

“Sagoris,” I motioned my chief builder forward, “I want you to walk along this entire row of houses, if you can call them that, and then return. In that time I want you to have an idea in your head how we’re going to repair or rebuild this mess.” I ordered.

“Y-Yes, Lord Conqueror.” The older man stammered, pulling a quill and small parchment from the pouch, at his side. He walked along, peering into doorways and marking on his parchment.

Atrius looked amused, but I never felt compelled to challenge my battlefield companion regarding those looks. He didn’t look at me that way to appear smug; rather I felt the looks were meant to applaud the way in which I changed over the seasons. Atrius was a terror as a warrior and I felt comfort having him at my side in a battle, but he had a gentle demeanor that was a complete turnaround once he walked from the field of battle. I often wondered how he did it, but it always explained the amused looks he cast my way.

“The boy needs a job.” I stated simply. “Could we use one more in the message house?”

“Aye, Lord Conqueror. I will personally see to it.” Atrius looked down at the boy with one of those amused grins.

The message house was really just a small room within the confines of the palace where pages and messengers spent their day. Their only task was to deliver messages back and forth between anyone from the cook to myself. We used young boys for the task because they were

speedy and small, running between peoples legs, if need be, to get to their destination quickly. It left soldiers and guards free for what they were trained for, which was not to be errand boys.

“Will you work hard in the service of the Conqueror, boy?” Atrius asked Petra.

“Aye, Captain.” Petra answered and I could barely contain myself at the expression on Atrius’ face. The boy heard the manner in which Atrius addressed me and was emulating the soldier.

I asked Petra who his father was and given the name, I looked over at Atrius. My Captain shrugged ever so slightly at the name and I had to admit to myself that I rarely took the time to learn the names of any of the soldiers that went to battle with or for me. I came up behind the young boy, who seemed hopeful that we would recognize his father’s name.

“Petra’s father fell at Chaeronea.” I stated.

Atrius’ eyes clouded over and he nodded. That one had been a hard fought battle, much more so than many I fought in over the years. I heard just recently they were putting up a marble statue of a lion on the site, overlooking the burial mound of the Macedonian dead.

“Then your father was indeed a brave soldier.” Atrius acknowledged to the boy. “You stay with me, boy, I’ll show you were you’re to go.”

I then cast an amused glance at my Captain, the same type of expression that he graced me with for the last few seasons. The look that said, ‘we must be mellowing’. A boy needs a father, to be sure, and I could think of no better mentor for Petra than Atrius.

“Petra, I’m going to have your mother and sisters moved into the palace. Atrius will show you where they are after he has shown you to your duties. Do you understand?”

“Aye, Lord Conqueror,” the boy answered and I bit my cheek to keep from smiling.

“Make it so then, Atrius.” I commanded. My Captain bowed slightly and turned, Petra imitating his actions, following close on the Captain’s heels.

They were some distance away when Petra came racing back to me. “Did you forget something, boy?”

“This, Lord Conqueror.” Petra replied. He handed me the apple Gabrielle gave him, placing it in my open palm.

“Please, Lord Conqueror. Tell your Queen thank you.”

The boy ran off just as quickly and left me staring at the piece of fruit lying in my hand. My thoughts were really on his words, however. *My Queen*, he said of Gabrielle. I wondered if it would destroy his illusions if he were to know she was merely my slave. Just my slave! It was not to be long at all until I discovered how completely ludicrous that thought was.

Sagoris finally walked back to me, shaking his head. I had the funny feeling this wasn’t going to be good news.

“Lord Conqueror, these structures are not only unsafe, but, by the Gods, I can’t believe humans are living in them! The conditions are appalling. There is only one way to handle this, but I fear you will not like my answer.” The old man told me.

“We need to tear them down and start over.” I answered, hands on my hips, looking around me.

Sagoris stared at me, I could see the surprise in his face from the corner of my eye, and then I heard the disbelief in his voice.

“Y-Yes, Lord Conqueror, that is correct.”

“Who was responsible for the monies out of the treasury when these buildings were first erected?” I asked, fairly certain of the answer.

“It’s been almost ten seasons ago, Lord Conqueror...I believe, yes, it would be your man, Demetri.”

*Another nail in your coffin, Demetri.*

“Sagoris, what do you foresee as a problem in rebuilding here?” I asked the builder.

“Well, the people would have to be housed elsewhere. I suppose for the five or six moons it would take to accomplish the task, they could live in tents on the practice fields. There are plenty of young men willing to earn some dinars by working at construction, so I do not believe the task will be insurmountable in any way.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Sagoris. We need to tear this abomination down and rebuild. I don’t want it rebuilt with the same shoddy materials and I want each home to have two rooms. I will reward you with one hundred talantons of silver upon its completion.” I said to the surprised man.

“Thank you, Lord Conqueror,” the man answered enthusiastically.

“One other thing, Sagoris.” I called out to the gray haired man. “Have Captain Atrius house the soldiers in the tents. The barracks can be cleaned and used by the villagers. I don’t want women and children living in tents. Besides, my soldiers get paid to rough it.” I said with a smirk and the old man and I shared a small chuckle. I surprised him today. I was beginning to get a wry feeling of satisfaction from being able to do that to people.

Just then, both Kuros and Gabrielle walked from the small house and Kuros quickly explained that, while the woman was not deathly ill, the conditions here would only prevent her from growing stronger. I told him I wished her to be moved to the palace and left my healer in charge of arranging some rooms. I asked him to have Delia assist with anything else.

The small man moved off to make the necessary arrangements and Gabrielle stood silently at my side. “I was told to give this to you.” I placed the apple within her small hand.

“Gabrielle,” I began hesitantly, “I want you to know that I am very pleased with you. The way

you acted today tells me there is more to you, my little one, than meets the eye. I like that.” I praised the young woman.

Gabrielle lowered her head, but not before I saw a hint of that quirky smile again. Suddenly, I remembered what I was going to do when the day began; only now, I suspected that my Fleet Commander might not be in his little scheme alone. To find that out, I would have to become the old Conqueror. I would need to act as if I was still a woman whose sexual appetites were filled with violence and lustful perversions. I had no desire for Gabrielle to see me that way. I could tell her it was a ruse and I’m sure she would understand, but something deep inside me, a small tiny voice, begged me not to have the girl see that in me. Acting that way, with my Gabrielle so near; so available, let’s just say I wasn’t that redeemed just yet, and that’s what frightened me the most.

“Gabrielle, I’m going to continue on to the docks alone. I don’t think it would be safe for you to be with me. I have to deal with someone and, well, there might be trouble.”

At the word trouble, Gabrielle’s head snapped up and her brow furrowed in concern. “Will you be safe, My Lord?”

That small question shocked me into silence. Gabrielle has certainly shown me any number of kindnesses since she entered my service. They were the small things that were rare for a slave to be thoughtful about, but this display of worry and concern seemed spontaneous and absolutely genuine.

“Worried, about me, little one?” I teased the young woman.

“I--I just...My Lord, It’s...” Gabrielle lowered her head and stammered.

This was uncharacteristic of my slave’s customary responses. Gabrielle usually had an answer for everything, a patient, thoughtful, and, sometimes, profound response. Now she blushed, not like the seasoned body slave she was, but rather a virginal schoolgirl. I couldn’t stop the laughter that bubbled up.

When she looked up again, her expression was one of relief, I assume brought on by my laughter. I leaned close to her, towering over her slight frame.

“Gabrielle, do you honestly believe that I might not be able to take care of myself?” I whispered to her.

“No. Of course not, My Lord.” She answered immediately.

I chuckled again and thought I was doing a lot of that lately. “Where would you like to go, Gabrielle?” I motioned to one of the guards, the one who fetched the supplies Gabrielle needed earlier. “You may go anywhere you desire, but the guard stays with you. Understand?”

“Yes, My Lord. I think...I think I would like to go to the stables and give Tenorio a treat.” She said, holding the apple up to me, that lopsided, semi-smile returning.

I grinned right back at her and I'm sure my guard thought I looked like an idiot. Of course, wishing all of his limbs to remain firmly fastened to his body, he said nothing.

I quickly plucked the ripe apple from the surprised girl's hand and tossed it in the air a couple of times. Gabrielle then did something that halted my actions, if not my very thought process. She laughed. It wasn't very long or very loud, but it was like music to my ears and a balm laid across my soul. It was the most refreshing thing I ever heard and we both stopped and looked at one another. Well, I looked at Gabrielle and she responded with that nervous behavior where she tries, but she can't exactly look me square in the eye. We both knew, in some small way, we crossed lines drawn in the sand today. Actually, it felt more like we rubbed them out and drew new ones.

Gabrielle bowed her head again and by the strange look in her eye, I think that perhaps she was wondering why she was feeling this way herself. I gave instructions to the guard who would go with Gabrielle and he turned and stepped a few paces away. Smart boy, I thought, because it looked as though he was purposefully giving us our privacy. I placed the apple back into my slave's hands and leaned closer to her, lowering my voice for only her to hear.

"Tenorio will enjoy the treat. He has the same affinities as his master." I said.

Gabrielle answered in what could only be described as a coquettish manner. Gods, if I didn't know better, I would say that my young slave was flirting with me!

"And, those would be, My Lord?"

She tilted her head to one side and I took care to whisper my response into her ear. "Ripe apples...and small blondes."

She lowered her head even further, but not before I saw the smile, she was trying to hide.

"Another smile for me, Gabrielle?" I asked as I began to walk away from her. "I am indeed a fortunate Conqueror."

## Chapter 9: They That Take the Bribe, Shall Perish by the Bribe

“Where is the captain of my fleet?” I asked the young sailor at the watch.

“He is billeted on the *Hybris*, Lord Conqueror. Shall I send for him?”

“No, I’ll make my way there.” I answered.

Before I made my way to the far end of the wharf where the largest ship in the fleet, *The Hybris*, was tied, I called one of the palace guards to my side. It was Nicos, and I was glad. Not only was he an intelligent man, but loyal to me as well. With what I was about to do, that fact became imperative.

Nicos had only one arm, but he used a short sword in that one remaining hand better than most. It took quite a long period for him to recover, not from losing the arm, but when we returned from war, for him to realize he was going to live. A soldier with only one arm, well, he drank himself into a stupor to forget for a full season before I had him dragged into the palace before me. I hate the waste of talent and life that drink brings to so many lives, and especially so to this man, who fought with cunning and valor on the field of battle. He has been with the palace guard ever since.

“Find Atrius or his lieutenant and tell them to quietly bring two squads of men to the docks. Understand?”

“Aye, Lord Conqueror.” Nicos was off in a flash and that made me smile. He wasn’t a young man any more, but I’m sure my words told him we might see a little action today. Being the soldier he was, I’m certain he didn’t want to miss a thing.

I made my way aboard the *Hybris* and stood on the deck briefly, feeling the breeze and practically tasting the salt in the air. I miss sailing, but I realize, as I grow older, there are many things I have begun saying that about. I have taken for granted so much over the years; it’s been easy to forget the things that brought me real pleasure. I took one last deep breath and as the air escaped my lungs, I allowed myself to become a woman I abhor. I became the arrogant, smug Xena who was used to beating men at their own game, for the simple fact that I believed that I was better...smarter. I tossed the dark hair away from my face and moved toward the Captain’s cabin.

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“Who in Hades is pounding on my door like that?” I heard the man’s bellowing rage from the other side of the heavy wooden door. I continued the pounding with the handle of my dagger.

“By the God’s! Who’s trying to get themselves killed, making that kind of racket on my ship!” He was shouting as he opened the door and froze in place at the sight of me, filling the doorway.

“Don’t you mean *my* ship, Callius?” I drawled.

There was a certain satisfaction flowing through me as I looked at the surprised expression on the Captain’s face. I strode into the large quarters and settled myself into a large wooden chair, leaning back and casually draping one leg over the chair’s arm. It was obviously the Captain’s chair, which is why it gave me a great deal of pleasure taking possession of it. It wasn’t until I scanned the room that I saw the girl. When I looked up again and saw the untidy state the Captain’s trousers were in, I guessed at what I interrupted.

The girl was young, maybe fourteen or fifteen summers. She had no scars on her, but she did sport a blackened eye, the bruises seeming rather fresh. Her hands were tied behind her back with a thin strip of worn leather and her naked body kneeled on the wooden flooring.

“Did I interrupt?” I leered.

I listened as he blustered for a moment, but the young woman on her knees, her wrists bound together in a completely submissive pose, held my attention. For a fleeting moment, I pictured Gabrielle serving me that way and I had to breathe deeply to dispel the sudden desire that overwhelmed me. Gods, I knew it would be hard to play this part, but I had no idea how easy it could be to slip back, to want to combine those feelings of control and power with sex.

“She’s worth it, Lord Conqueror. Perhaps...” he paused, as if judging if he should continue or not. “Perhaps, you would care to try her out.”

“She’s that good?” I let my legs part a little further and I wondered if I slipped into this role any deeper, if I would be able to stop.

“She can do things with that tongue that can make a grown man cry.” He answered.

He was drawing nearer to where I sat and I could smell the combination of alcohol and stale sweat that clung to him. I could tell that he wanted a good view should I decide to let her pleasure me. In seasons past, public displays of sex never bothered me; in fact, it aroused me all the more to have an audience. I glared up at him and he backed away a few steps without me saying a word.

I lowered my foot to the floor. “Come here, girl.” I commanded, realizing this performance was coming dangerously close to becoming reality.

She crawled as best she could toward me and I grabbed her by the back of the neck and pulled her in closer until she knelt between my parted legs. Almost...I was so close to ripping open my trousers and pulling her to me that it frightened me. In an instant, one small heartbeat, I saw Gabrielle’s face in this girl. Only, this time I envisioned, not my young slave about to be seduced by me, but Gabrielle, beaten and abused, about to be raped by someone like I used to be. *Used to be...* my hands went cold and I could feel my lips pulling back into a thin line. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Callius watching. He would think it odd if I didn’t go through with it now. I reached out and grabbed the girl’s hair, jerking her head back until I could see her face. I made the rough treatment look worse than it felt for the girl.

I leaned down closer to her. “Did you suck him before I got here?” I demanded to know.

The girl's face turned scarlet all the way down to the roots of her hair. She could only nod her head and anger ran through me in waves as I felt the young girl's humiliation. I pushed her away.

"Then the last place I want your tongue is in me." I responded gruffly. "Turn around." I ordered.

She turned with some difficulty until her back was facing me. I pulled my dagger once again from my belt. "Bend over." I drawled.

I bit the inside of my lip until I tasted blood in my mouth to still the call of the beast inside me. It was roaming loose, just underneath the surface, and I barely had enough will of my own left to contain it. Callius licked his lips and watched, preparing, I was sure, to see a good show. I caught his leering gaze and I swore that if he touched himself, I would hurl the dagger into his chest right now.

I leaned down until my lips were practically pressed to the young woman's ear. "If you want to live through today and get away from this scum you had best do exactly as I say, *when* I say. If you run, I swear I'll kill you myself. Nod your head if you understand." I whispered.

The terrified girl nodded her head up and down and I swiftly brought my dagger down, slicing smoothly through the leather bindings.

I pulled her up roughly and tossed her into a chair. She huddled there, wrapping her arms around herself. I rose and grabbed a blanket, tossing it her way. Turning back toward Callius, I winked.

"Much too distracting when she's naked." I grinned.

Callius grinned back, a tad nervously.

"Yes, I think she'll do nicely, Callius."

"Lord Conqueror?" he answered in complete confusion.

"Do for me. I was in the market for a young girl and I heard you were the man to see. I want one that hasn't been a slave before, but I do hate when they have too much fight left in them." I said, looking the girl up and down.

"But...I--" Callius stammered, unable to think of a reason to deny me, which wouldn't get him killed. "But...she's already broken in." he whined at last.

"Perfect, although I wanted a virgin, and one a bit younger. I must have heard wrong, I was told by Demetri that you could provide me with such a thing. You know...not a slave...perhaps...a nobleman's daughter." I hemmed, pretending to be inquiring about something highly illegal, even in my land.

"So, I guess I'll just take her," I made a move to rise from my seat.

“Wait!” He was thinking hard and this is just the spot I wanted him in. It was only good fortune that this girl was here, just waiting to be part of my plan. Callius was weighing the option of giving up a valuable, broken in body slave, against admitting his illegal slavery antics. He went with the odds and put his money on my libido.

“How young?” he asked.

I smiled as carnal a smile as I could muster up. “Young enough to get me arrested...if I didn’t own the whole country.” I added.

“In the plank house, on the dock. I’ve got just what you desire, Lord Conqueror.”

His smile and his overconfident manner sickened me and I was torn between gutting him right now or throwing up all over his clean floor. I rose quickly, desperately needing some fresh air.

“This way, Lord Conqueror.” He moved out of the way to let me walk in front of him, but I motioned him ahead. Callius was the last person I wanted at my unprotected back. I made sure my dagger was within easy grasp, tucked into my belt, and when I turned to close the door, I held a finger up to my lips in the girl’s direction and she nodded her head.

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Most of the girls displayed the after effects of being beaten, but some still had enough strength to cry. When one golden haired girl looked up at me, in a combination of innocence and fear, Gabrielle’s face was again before me.

“This lot is all virgins, Lord Conqueror, untouched by a man...or a woman.” He quickly added. “Although it takes quite a few extra dinars to the guards, to see they stay that way till I sell ‘em.”

He went up close to the girl with the long golden hair. She trembled and silent tears ran down her face. I guessed her to be all of ten summers. This was Gabrielle once, ten summers old and sold on the block to serve in someone’s bedchamber. I could feel my morning’s meal rising insistently from my belly.

“Now, this one here,” he laid a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “She’s the age you’re looking for and she’s all virgin.”

“And she’s going to stay that way for quite a while yet.” I growled.

When I pulled my blade from it’s scabbard, it made a metallic hissing noise, and I saw the six guards hesitate. They too seemed to be weighing their options of surrender or battle. Too slowly did they choose, as I plunged my sword into the closest man’s belly, kicking out and crushing another’s kneecap. I saw two more guards rush into the old wooden building, but my own palace guards had no clue yet that I was in danger, even with the wailing being done by the group of girls. I dispatched another, and then one more soldier, but I wanted Callius. He couldn’t run; he knew he had to kill me now.

Three more soldiers fell under my blade as I saw some of my own guards rush into the building and into the fray. Finally, it was Callius and I, circling one another. I spit out the

blood that collected in my mouth from a backhanded blow that he slipped in and I cursed myself for leaving him an easy head shot like that. We parried back and forth and the long building was filled with the sound of metal against metal. I tried to slip my blade in, but he saw it coming and I received a painful gash across my left bicep for my carelessness.

“You’re getting old, Conqueror,” Callius spat.

I could see that he thought victory was within his grasp. I may have grown slower after a fortnight without visiting the practice field, but I was far from done with this man. I took a deep breath and loosened what little remaining hold I had on the beast, leaving it free to control me. When I saw myself, reflected in his eyes, my normally blue irises were as colorless as the ice that covered the northern mountains. What Callius saw, was the inevitability of his own death.

Three more parries and I left an opening as big as the Aegean for him to see. He fell into the trap and lunged at the opening that closed so quickly, he never saw the sword that slipped into his belly and drove into him up to the hilt. I grasped his shoulder, gave a half turn to the blade, and watched as blood gurgled noisily from between his lips. I whispered to him then and with his dying breath, he told me all I wanted to know. I held on to the man, not allowing him to fall until I watched the last of his life’s blood drain slowly away. I was conscious only of the dead weight that hung on the end of my blade, a warm, sticky wetness that covered my hands, and the pounding rush of adrenaline at my temple, but somewhere, I heard the crying of young girls and it seemed another voice that I recognized.

“Don’t touch her!” I thought I heard someone say, finally realizing it was Atrius, and that he stood there repeating my name.

“Lord Conqueror...Lord Conqueror...”

It was a steady mantra and with what seemed like a great deal of effort I pulled my gaze from the dead man in my arms, and focused on the tall soldier at my side. I could see it in his face, even though we had known one another for twenty seasons, even Atrius feared the beast. Nevertheless, he was the bravest man I knew and a soldier, after all. He squared his shoulders, looked me full in the eye, calling my name until I could see relief slide across his features. In that weary, battle-hardened face, I thought I saw support and admiration, both emotions directed at me.

When at last I turned away from him, to see what I held in my grasp, I felt it. Like smoke crawling along the fringes of a wood fire, I felt the awful darkness dissipate somewhat and with a significant amount of effort; I was able to push the monster into a safe place again.

Atrius kicked Callius’ body off my blade and tossed a dry rag at me. The first thing I did was wipe my blade clean and replace it within its scabbard. My hands were covered in red and the white silk of my shirt drenched in the stuff. It usually didn’t take this long to put the beast back in its place, except for the times when I was involved in all out war. I could only assume that righteous indignation helped to increase the intensity of this dark episode. Atrius began examining my arm as I slowly became aware of everything happening around me.

“You do realize what an incredibly foolish thing that was to do,” he admonished.

“Guess you had to be here to realize that it seemed like the thing to do at the time.” I shot back.

We grinned at one another briefly; each realizing the other would never change. Some warrior ways were simply too ingrained over the passage of time, to alter.

It took a few more candlemarks to straighten everything else out, including returning the girls and helping the unfortunate young woman on the boat. With Delia’s help, the girls were taken into the palace, under her watchful and caring eyes. I told Atrius about Demetri’s part in the mess, but I also ordered him to hold back. I wanted to give my head man just a little more rope to hang himself with. If I could have known, at the time, what that decision almost cost me, I would have decided against it.

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“Ow!” I cried out, as Kuros pulled the thin length of twine through my skin.

I glared at the small man, yet he paid little attention to me. Funny thing about my healer, he’d always been quite unimpressed with who I was. Even when my temper was a thing I lost on a routine basis, he generally told me exactly what he thought of me. I leaned against the edge of the heavy wooden table as the man worked over the injury I received from Callius’ sword. The front of my leather trousers were caked in dried blood and I already tossed my white silk shirt to the floor. The shirt was soaked through with Callius’ blood and even now, the skin of my chest was stained a light red. I was naked from the waist up, but Kuros didn’t seem to mind and modesty had never been much of a priority with me.

“I said, Ow!” I complained again as the healer tugged again on the stitches he was creating along the long gash on my upper arm. I tried to pull away and see what he was doing, but I stopped at his exasperated sigh.

“It would help if the Lord Conqueror could manage to keep still for a few moments.” Kuros said evenly.

“Well, it hurts, I tell you.” I answered, realizing I was coming close to sounding like a petulant child. “You’re doing something differently because it never used to hurt like this.”

“Well, the Lord Conqueror is at a certain age...” My healer trailed off.

“Certain age?” My voice was getting louder and I think it may even have raised an octave.

“Shit!” The pain drew my attention back down to the neat row of tiny stitches Kuros was sewing. One thing I had to admit...his handiwork was good. The stitches were more painful with this method, but being so tiny, it would heal with barely a thin line left as a scar. The only reason my naked body still looked half as good as it did, was because of the skill in this foreign man’s hands.

“Perhaps I could do what I do for the youngsters, Lord Conqueror. Generally, I tell them that if they behave until I am done, they will receive a piece of sweet candy.” Kuros commented without cracking a smile.

I glared down at the smaller man. “Gods know you must have to bribe them with something if this is the best you can do.”

It was then that I saw a trace of a smile cross his face.

The loud gasp caused both of us to look up and I saw Gabrielle’s faced, frozen in fear, as she stared down at the blood soaked shirt I removed when I came into my chambers. The young women then looked at my skin, tinged red from the blood and she rushed toward me.

“My Lord!” she cried out and I stood there, rooted in place at the emotion my young slave was displaying. Her green eyes filled with tears as she rushed over to me.

“The blood is not mine.” I stammered, feeling Gabrielle’s arms wrap around my waist. I looked helplessly into Kuros' amused face.

She pressed her cheek against my chest and I could feel the slight body trembling all over. I held her tightly with my one good arm and kissed the top of her head.

“I’m all right, Gabrielle. I cut my arm, that’s all, see?” I tried to pull my arm forward to show her, but the twine Kuros still held in his hand kept the limb prisoner. “Ow, shit!” I exclaimed.

“Just one more, Lord Conqueror.” The healer pleaded.

Although Gabrielle stopped shivering she didn’t say another word, nor did she loose her grasp from around my waist. I felt a warm wetness on my chest and realized they were Gabrielle’s tears. *Crying...for me, little one?* I asked myself. I held her tightly around the shoulders, pressing her against me gently.

“Sssh, it’s all right, little one.” I murmured, kissing the top of her head.

Gabrielle felt so good pressed up against me and I felt my body begin to respond. Her head was turned, her cheek flattened against my skin, and I could feel her breath as she exhaled. The small puffs of air were falling across my breast and I could feel the skin there tightening in response to that innocent stimulation.

I saw Kuros grin out of the corner of my eye and I glared again at the skilled healer. “Are you done yet?” I prodded.

He sliced through the twine easily with a very tiny, very sharp miniature dagger.

“Keep it dry, I would suggest you see me later and I will wrap a bandage around it to keep it clean, Lord Conqueror.”

“Gabrielle can do that...can’t you?” I murmured against the golden crown of hair. I felt her nod, but there was no verbal answer.

“As you wish, Lord Conqueror.” Kuros said with a slight bow. “My lady.” He motioned his head to Gabrielle and he was gone before I could even comment on that last statement. How odd that he would show Gabrielle, a slave, the respect of that title. I’m not even sure if the young woman heard him.

“Gabrielle, I need to take a bath and clean this filth off of me. Will you help me?” I asked the woman.

Before I could say another word, she ran off through the door that opened into my private bathing room. I shook my head and simply followed the girl, stripping off my boots on the way. The staff sent up hot water earlier and the steam rose and weaved its way throughout the room. Gabrielle poured room temperature water into the tub to cool it down. She attempted to help me with the laces that tied my trousers, but they were encrusted with dried blood.

“Gabrielle, go to my chest and bring me my dagger.” I requested.

She looked up at me in dismay at the request. No slave was ever allowed to touch a weapon, and surely not the Conqueror’s own slave. Yet, here I was, requesting that she do this very thing. I turned from her and picked up a comb, trying to remove some bits of dried blood from my hair. I knew Gabrielle still stood there, I could hear her steady breathing. I was hoping that through this act, Gabrielle would come to know the amount of trust I placed in her.

Eventually she left and when she returned, the weapon lay across both her open palms. She raised her hands to me as if she were turning over some sort of sacrificial tool. Indeed, it could be construed as such, the act of me asking, and her retrieving meant much more than either of us realized. I took hold of the offered knife and began slicing through the leather laces, practically peeling the trousers from my body.

“Let’s just burn these, they’re beyond repair.” I said to Gabrielle as I stepped into the tub and let my body slide under the surface of the water. I kept my arms draped along the rim of the large wooden tub, careful not to get my newly repaired arm wet.

Gabrielle bent down to retrieve the discarded clothing, but I held out a hand to stop her.

“Sylla can get that, Gabrielle. Right now I need you here with me.” I said softly.

*Need?* Did I actually use that word? Gods, it’s true though, isn’t it? At this very moment, I wanted nothing more than to hold Gabrielle against me. To feel her. Not out of sex or lust, or I don’t know what, but to simply feel her and know that there was one soul in this world who seemed to worry for me.

“Gabri--elle?” I had to clear my throat to cover the break in my voice. “Would you join me?” I asked, extending my hand in invitation.

I wondered if she thought I sounded weak when I spoke like that. I know it made me feel weak, but then again, I never told anyone how I felt before, never let anyone see so close into who I was. I watched as Gabrielle began to disrobe and in this circumstance, I suddenly felt as though it would be rude to continue watching her. I lowered my head and pretended to rub soap into a wet sponge, but not before, I took in the look of surprise and the small hint of a smile on Gabrielle’s face.

I expected her to lean her back against me, but without any shame or preamble, Gabrielle kneeled in front of me in the steamy water and gently took the sponge from my grasp. Rubbing more soap into the sponge, she started at my neck and shoulders, setting about the

task of bathing the dried blood from my body. She was careful as she scrubbed my injured arm, moving down and taking my much larger hands in her own, each one in turn, and working the soapy lather into the lines of my skin, and under the nails. When she continued on, below the surface of the water, I could have leaned back and simply accepted the pleasure, but that wasn't what this was about this time. I halted her hand's progress, trapping it under my palm, against the flat of my belly.

"You'd better let me do that," I said with a smirk, "otherwise I won't get my back scrubbed."

Gabrielle smiled and I think she enjoyed the small feeling of power she was beginning to understand that she had over me, and I...well, I simply enjoyed seeing that smile.

"Turn." She requested with a word and I did as she bid.

I handed her the sponge once again and turned around. After Gabrielle scrubbed my back, I felt her powerful, yet sensitive hands begin to attend to the muscles in my neck and back. My head fell forward and I was in a state of bliss, soft moans coming from the back of my throat at the pleasurable sensations.

"Let me wash your hair." I heard her say softly near my ear. Who was I to put an end to all these extremely satisfying feelings? I let her command me as I let her command the situation earlier that day.

Gabrielle washed my hair, rinsed it with a small pitcher, and then she repeated the action, this time scrubbing the bits of dried dirt and blood from the dark strands. I leaned back, tilting my head, one more time as she rinsed the soap away.

"Mmmm," I hummed, "I feel much better."

Gabrielle looked rather pleased with herself, but when she turned away, thinking we were leaving the tub, I caught her arm and pulled her back.

"Now it's your turn." I stated.

Her eyes went a little wide when she realized I was serious. I knew I was breaking every convention ever laid down between master and slave today, but that word kept repeating itself over and over again in my head...*need*. I needed to be close to Gabrielle in this way. I couldn't answer as to why, but something compelled me.

I treated Gabrielle's body to the same luxuries she bestowed upon mine and when I at last rinsed the soap away from the long golden hair, she looked as relaxed as I. It was then that I leaned back in the still warm water and pulled Gabrielle backward, to lean her back upon my chest. A sound of absolute contentment rumbled through my chest. My arm remained wrapped around the young woman's waist and Gabrielle's hand rested on my forearm. I closed my eyes and smiled, feeling a relaxed pleasure wash over me as Gabrielle began to lightly brush her fingers along the muscles in my arm and wrist. When I peeked open one eye I could see that Gabrielle's eyes were closed also, her head turned to the side, resting on my chest. Her fingers seemed to be stroking my skin absently, as if she were not aware of it. I didn't want to be the one to give her a reason to stop.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” I asked, closing my eyes again.

“Yes, My Lord, very good.” Gabrielle sighed in reply.

My hidden smile grew larger at the sound of complete wonder in Gabrielle’s voice.

## Chapter 10: Devouring Time, Blunt Thou the Lion's Paws

We both sat on my bed, Gabrielle behind me, combing the snarls out of my hair. A strange thing for her to enjoy, but she apparently did. She took her time and I endured the tender attentions, careful not to let my natural impatience come through.

“Gabrielle?”

“Yes, My Lord?”

“These stories you want to write down on parchment, do you also tell them aloud? I mean...are you a bard, Gabrielle?” I asked the young woman. Her hands stopped moving and I felt as if I offended her or caused her to stop and think.

“I have never been trained in the ways of the bard, My Lord.” She answered, resuming her previous activity.

“But...do you tell stories?” I prodded.

“Yes, My Lord, I do.”

I smiled. “Good.” I answered, folding my legs up and leaning my elbows on my knees. “Tell, me a story, Gabrielle.” There was a moment's silence. “Please?” I added softly.

I couldn't see it, but if Gabrielle was acting true to form, she was now looking at me with a confused smile. When she began to speak, it was as if the voice belonged to someone else. There was a power and a charisma in that voice, and I've spent most of my life inciting soldiers on the battlefield with rousing speeches, so I know good oratory skills when I hear them. I closed my eyes and I could have been in a tavern, listening to a traveling bard, or even at a banquet listening to Sappho or Euripides.

*There once lived a great and strong Lion who ruled a certain forest, protecting his forest from all that would do it harm. One day, the mighty beast was hunting for his dinner and a small brown rabbit jumped up and raced across the Lion's path. Once the tiny creature saw the massive beast, he could go no further. His fear froze him in place. Even the small bunny had heard of the Great Lion. He was known as the king of the beasts and he ruled over everything in this forest.*

*The Lion wondered why the small creature did not continue running. It was the first time the Lion ever thought of himself as being frightening to others. You see; the Lion wore a fierce scowl on his face most of the time, due to the constant pain he was in. The pain was from a large thorn embedded very deeply into his hind paw. It rested there for many seasons, but no matter what he tried, the beast could not remove the thorn. Therefore, he settled for a life, filled with a constant reminder of a foolish act committed when he was a much younger Lion.*

*So, the beast approached the rabbit, who was still shaking and shivering, unwilling to run. The Lion shook his great mane back and forth, pawed at the ground, and even released a roar that was heard throughout the woods. Undaunted, the rabbit remained.*

*“You will be my dinner if you don’t run.” The Lion said, limping over to sit in front of the rabbit.*

*“But, you would catch me anyway, your Highness, so what will it benefit me to run?” the rabbit answered.*

*“So, you prefer to be eaten, without even defending yourself?”*

*“I could offer you a trade, your Highness.” The rabbit quickly answered.*

*The rabbit was not a stupid animal, but he was indeed one of the smallest creatures in the forest. His size and his position, in the animal world, put him at a constant disadvantage. He learned, however, to use his wit to survive.*

*“What could you offer me, little rabbit, that I could not merely take from you?” the Lion questioned.*

*“Friendship,” the small creature answered at once. “If you would but promise never to eat me, then I would offer you my friendship in return.”*

*“And what good can this friendship of yours be to me?” the Lion asked, a warm puff of breath blowing across the small creature.*

*“If I was your friend, I could end your pain by removing the thorn in your paw. You see; my teeth are made for tasks such as that, while yours are not.”*

*The Lion thought about that for a moment. He was rather hungry, but this tiny thing wasn’t going to make much of a meal for him. He lived with the bothersome thorn for so long, however, that he nearly forgot what it would be like, to walk around without the constant pain. So, the great King nodded his large head and rolled to his side, allowing the small creature to crawl up next to him. The great Lion watched as the small rabbit did as he promised and removed the imbedded thorn, grasping it in his strong teeth and pulling with all his might. The large beast sat rather silent afterward, amazed at the trust that the smaller creature displayed.*

I sat very still, my eyes still closed, lost in the story that my slave told. I knew that Gabrielle wasn’t old enough to be acquainted with the period in my life when I was known as the Lion of Amphipolis, yet I felt the story was an analogy of the lives that she and I led together. Perhaps I was giving my small slave too much credit. Gabrielle knew how to read and it was always possible she came upon the reference in a scroll at one time or another. I suddenly realized that Gabrielle was no longer brushing my hair, but I felt the story wasn’t over yet. Maybe she thought I fell asleep.

“Then what happened? The Lion ate him, didn’t he?” I asked, always the cynic.

“Oh no, My Lord,” Gabrielle answered quickly.

*The Lion kept to the agreement and released the small rabbit, never really understanding how the small creature wove its way past the Lion’s hard exterior. Many seasons later, when the*

*Lion was old and frail, near starvation because he hadn't the strength to hunt anymore, he again met the rabbit.*

*The rabbit was larger and fatter, but still much smaller than the large Lion. The large beast caught up with the slow, small animal and knew that this meal would keep him alive until he could find a proper meal. Just as the Lion was about to devour the smaller creature, the rabbit looked up and pleaded.*

*"But, you promised you would never eat me," the rabbit begged.*

*The Lion searched his memory, which had always been very good, and he remembered the tiny creature that offered up friendship that summer day so long ago. The Lion kept his word and placed the rabbit back on the ground, not out of obligation, but out of friendship.*

*"You are right, old friend. I must say goodbye, however, for without a meal, I will surely perish on this night."*

*The rabbit looked at the Lion, lying down on his side. The large beast's ribs were visible under his skin and the rabbit felt a sharp stab of empathy for his old friend.*

*"I have changed my mind. I think that you should eat me." The rabbit stated emphatically.*

*"Why have you changed your mind?" The Lion questioned weakly.*

*"Because without food, you will die, and I have lived a long and happy life thanks to the day you released me." The rabbit answered.*

*"Ahhh, but so have I. Once the thorn was removed from my paw, I felt ten seasons younger. I feel as if I have lived two lifetimes." The Lion responded.*

*The rabbit saw that they were at an impasse and hopped away as quickly as it's old bones could manage. The once fearsome Lion laid his head down and sighed. He surprised himself, for it hadn't been difficult to release the rabbit before it became a meal. He truly began to think of the selfless little rabbit as a friend.*

*Moments later the small creature returned, hopping around in excitement.*

*"I have found your meal, my friend. Just past that copse of trees is a small antelope. The poor thing is deformed so that he cannot walk and will surely suffer before he eventually dies. He has said that if you would but end his agony quickly, he would gladly give his all to nourish you."*

*The Lion did indeed find the strength to make his way to the pitifully crippled creature, and the antelope bravely gave up his life for the King. Later, as the rabbit and the satiated Lion sat side by side, the Lion asked his small friend why he was willing to give up his life, when it had been so many seasons since either of them had any contact with the other. The rabbit looked up at his large companion and answered most simply.*

*"Because you are my friend." The rabbit said.*

I heard the last sentence, yet I didn't have the strength, me, Xena the Conqueror, to respond verbally to the story. I was in a pathetic state, my eyes filling with tears. I couldn't remember the last time I cried, when anything moved me to such a degree. At first, I wasn't sure if Gabrielle was relating an analogy to parallel my life, or not. Now, I feel in what is left of my dark heart, that she told me this story for exactly those reasons.

I lowered my head and felt the tears that were on the edge of my eyes, spill out, and slide down across my cheeks. It's been such a long time. Why haven't I cried like this until now? What is it about this small slave that reaches in and makes a mockery of all the barriers that I have so carefully constructed around my heart?

I couldn't bear to display this ultimate weakness to Gabrielle. Instead of turning to look at her, I moved toward the hand she had resting on the bed. I lifted it upward and placed a gentle kiss in the palm, continuing to then hold it within my own, in my lap. A long, yet not completely uncomfortable silence hung in the air, and suddenly, I felt her hand against my back, rubbing gently as if to soothe me. So much existed unsaid between the two of us. I unable, and Gabrielle not allowed. I wondered if it would always be this way and knew that if I wanted it to be different, it would be I who had to work the hardest. It was I alone who held the freedom to either give my heart away to this girl, or to simply keep her as my slave. I feared both prospects and felt that perhaps I was up to the challenge of neither. I brushed the tears from my face and turned to my young slave.

"I'm hungry, Gabrielle. Are you hungry?"

Gabrielle's face flooded with relief and it dawned on me that she might have thought my silence indicated my anger. She quickly nodded her head.

"Yes, My Lord. Shall I visit the cook and bring you something?" Gabrielle started to rise.

"No," I chuckled, looking at her attired only in one of my white silk shirts. I rose and tossed off my robe, putting on a fresh pair of trousers and a shirt. "I will go downstairs, you go to your room and get a robe. If I have to look across the dining table at you wearing only that, I'll never finish my dinner. Don't daydream in the halls, I don't want my soldiers seeing you in only that." I nodded, indicating her garment.

As I pulled on my boots, she looked down at the shirt she wore and I could see a pink color rise to her cheeks that caused her to look absolutely enchanting.

"Yes, My Lord." I heard her answer with a small smile just as I left the room.

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"Good evening, Lord Conqueror."

"Delia, what in Hades are you doing in the kitchens now?" I answered the older woman. She was stirring a pot that was emitting a heavenly smell.

"What else have I to do with my time?" she answered matter of factly.

I leaned over her shoulder and dipped a finger into the pot she was mixing. It tasted like a venison stew with thick wine based gravy. When I went back for more she reached out with a hand, and before I knew it, rapped the top of a spoon across my knuckles.

“Ow!” I cried out, rubbing the top of my hand.

She shushed me and pushed me back out of her way, until I was sitting on a high stool. She continued to glare at me and now that her head was above mine, I felt like a child being sent to the corner.

“I do own all this you know.” I added weakly, feeling I had the beginnings of a pout going.

She folded her arms and arched an eyebrow at me, my own move I might add. “When I try to stick my fingers in your pot...then you can slap me back.”

She finally grinned and I couldn’t keep from smiling myself. “You’re worse than me.” I sat there, shaking my head at the double entendre of her words.

“Dinner for you and your Gabrielle, then?” she asked, knowing why I was there.

“Yes, if you would be so kind.” I teased.

Her phrase, *my Gabrielle*, sounded pleasant to my ears. I wondered how many others already knew how I felt about my young slave.

As Delia set about placing our dinner on a tray, I milled about the kitchen. This small alcove was Delia’s domain. The other cooks knew better than to disturb anything in this private area of hers. I noticed she had a small desk and writing utensils tucked in one corner of the room. Suddenly I had a plan.

“Delia...I need your help.”

“Yes, Lord Conqueror?” She turned to me, a quizzical expression pulling her brows together.

“I’ll need you to arrange something, if you can, this evening. I want a desk like this one placed in Gabrielle’s rooms, plus parchment and writing supplies. You know,” I said in answer to her puzzled look, “ink and quills and such.”

She stared at me for a long moment, and then she turned back to the tray she was filling. I saw her eyes before she turned her back to me, however, and I could see I finally made a move that even Delia hadn’t anticipated. Suddenly, I had the need to explain.

“She can read and write and is quite a good storyteller. I think she would enjoy writing them down.”

“You take very good care of this young woman, Xena.” Delia stated.

It sounded so odd, hearing my name. No one ever used it, yet every once in a while, Delia’s voice softened, and she looked at me as a mother might, using the familiarity with kindness.

“She deserves someone to care.” I answered, thanking the older woman, and extracting a promise that she would see that some men installed the necessary furniture tonight. When I walked out the kitchen’s main door, I could have sworn that I heard the old woman chuckling to herself.

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Sometimes it only takes a heartbeat in time to undo so much good. I silently walked up the last set of stone steps to my chambers and when I rounded the corner, I saw them on the landing above. Gabrielle changed into a robe of her own, but holding her in a firm grasp was a young lieutenant from my army. He was pawing at her and had his hand squeezing her backside. This was certainly enough to cause my blood to begin a slow simmer. What set it boiling was the fact that Gabrielle stood there and let him. She squirmed a little as his iron grip, but she wasn’t even fighting him off.

Their backs were facing the stairs by the time I reached the landing and I quietly laid the tray on the top step. The terror in his eyes when I grabbed him by the throat wasn’t near enough to assuage me. I cocked my fist back and broke his nose with the first strike. The table he backed into tilted, and it and the vase atop it crashed down the stairs noisily. The sound brought, not only guards running, but Atrius as well. I would wonder later what he was doing on this floor, but would only discover the truth much later.

By the time I saw Atrius at the bottom of the stairs, I was pulling back for a final blow. When my fist came forward and made contact with the young man’s jaw, I released the neck of his tunic. I felt his jaw break under the impact and I heard his scream heart beats later. I tossed him down the stairs as Atrius and two of the palace guard caught him. His face was a bloody mess, my hand cut, and bleeding as well.

“Get him out of my site before I have his legs broken!” I hissed from the top of the stairs.

I was breathing rapidly, the rush of adrenaline still surging through me. I turned and stood in front of Gabrielle, all my anger now focused on her. My muscles fairly quivered from the restraint, as I held myself back from striking out at her, but couldn’t stop the words that might as well have been dealt as blows.

“Don’t you know how to fight back!?” I shouted angrily. I turned, without waiting for an answer, and walked into my rooms, slamming the door shut behind me. Just before the door closed, my uncanny hearing picked up Gabrielle’s small reply.

“No.” she said softly.

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*Tears coursed down the young slave’s eyes as she leaned against the wall, sliding down it to sit on the top stair. She hugged her legs to her chest, looking like a small, frightened child.*

*Atrius knew the Conqueror, knew her tempers and tantrums, when to stay out of her way, and when to intercede. He left the foolish lieutenant with the guards to bring the boy to the infirmary, and then slowly climbed the stairs to bend down and speak to the girl. He wondered at this one. Mostly he wondered what there was about her that had so bewitched*

*the Conqueror. For over twenty seasons he watched the worst behavior, that one human could lower herself to. Now, lately, he thought he was seeing the best. The Conqueror began to change, but recently, since the girl came to be with her, she was damn near benevolent.*

*“She loses her temper, but she’s always sorry afterwards.” Atrius said to the small slave.*

*The girl wiped her face of her tears, but didn’t look up at the Captain.*

*“You have to develop a thicker skin to be with her, girl. Besides, she’s probably in there right now, trying to figure how to get you back in there without looking like a fool. I’ll bet you anything she already feels worse about shouting at you, than you feel.”*

*Gabrielle smiled at that. From what she’d come to know so far about her new master, she knew that hurting Gabrielle never seemed to be her intention.*

*“Here...take the tray of food in and I guarantee you, she will be the first to speak.”*

*Atrius lifted the tray as the girl rose and placed it in her arms. He walked over and held the door open that the Conqueror so recently slammed shut. When Gabrielle walked into the room, the tall Captain gently closed the door behind her. He shook his head in wonder and returned to his own quarters.*

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I heard the door in the outer room open and saw out of the corner of my eye as Gabrielle set the tray down on the table. I sat in my chair, a high backed wooden chair that was made for my fit and was the one piece of furniture I cherished. It faced the open window that was now covered by a heavy tapestry for the evening. The chair was situated so that I could watch the sunrise, which I developed a fondness for of late. Gabrielle continued to stand there silently.

I didn’t know how to express why I was so upset with the girl back there. Was I just supposed to tell her that she had permission to fight off attackers, no matter who they were? Was I supposed to apologize...could I even apologize? How does one go about it?

I flexed my hand painfully and for the first time saw the bleeding and bruised knuckles. Gods, my body was taking a beating today. I heard Gabrielle moving around, and suddenly she was standing before me, with a bowl of water and a rag in her hands. She kneeled to the floor, and without saying a word, wet the cloth and took my injured hand in hers. She wiped at the cuts and cleaned them thoroughly, neither of us saying a word. I noticed, for the first time in a long time, the tiny white lines that crisscrossed my knuckles on that hand. They were small, thin scars, from years of holding a sword in that hand, that, and punching men like I had tonight.

“You don’t have to do that, Gabrielle.” I finally addressed her.

“I wanted to apologize, My Lord. I’m sorry for angering you.” She said, never raising her eyes to me.

“I’m not angry with you, Gabrielle.” I reached out with my free hand and stroked her cheek, running my fingers through the golden hair. I rose to my feet. “Stand up, Gabrielle.”

I crossed the room to the window and drew the tapestry back. “Gabrielle, look out there, do you see that?” I commanded and questioned at the same time. Night had fallen, but something of dusk remained, you could see across the palace walls, and the villages, situated far out onto the rolling hills.

“Gabrielle, all that, as far as your eye can see, for leagues and leagues, beyond even that, belongs to me.” I motioned with my hand.

I then dropped the curtain and walked to the center of the room. “All around you, the palace and its inhabitants...all of it belongs to me. And, because it belongs to me, it means something to me. It has a place inside of me and I’ll let no one take what is mine. What of you, Gabrielle? Do you know what place you have among all of this?” I gestured with both of my hands.

Gabrielle watched me and with that last question, I could see the light of understanding flicker hopefully in her eyes.

“I belong to you?” she asked rather than answered.

“That’s right, Gabrielle,” I smiled at last. I pulled her to me and kissed the top of that blonde head. “You belong to me.”

I saw the change in her eyes immediately and I could tell that she understood my choice of words. I didn’t say that I owned her, which would have instantly relegated our relationship to that of master and slave. I told her that she belonged to me. I didn’t mean as simply a prized possession, and I think she understood that. I was telling her that her heart was mine, just as I felt mine had become hers.

“But, am I not still a slave, My Lord?”

Well, she had me with that one. How could I ever tell Gabrielle that I desired for nothing better than to free her. How could I explain the terror I felt, knowing that the first thing she would do, would be to leave? Therefore, I kept my silence about that, trying to build a relationship when even I knew I had an unfair advantage. I couldn’t release that last bit of control.

“Gabrielle, you have a station and a rank in this palace, whether you are aware of it or not. You are a slave, yes, but being my personal slave, you rank above all others in this palace. For when it comes to trust, I place more in you, than I would in all my advisors combined.”

Her eyes showed their surprise as I continued. “Because of this, Gabrielle, you have the right to protect yourself from any who would try to touch what is mine. You need to know that no man will ever punish you for obeying me, little one. The next time someone...anyone makes advances...touches you in any way, I want you to scream, kick, fight, anything you need to do to get my attention. Then I’ll deal with the situation. Do you understand, Gabrielle?”

Her head was lowered and I tilted her chin to look into her face. Her green eyes did that usual trick of looking anywhere but within my own.

“Do you understand, little one?” I asked again, more gently this time.

“I--I believe so, My Lord, but I--” Gabrielle stammered.

“But what, Gabrielle?”

“I--I don’t know how, My Lord.” She answered in a voice so low, it was barely a whisper.

I saw her eyes filling with tears and as usual, they tore at my heart. I could feel each one that fell from her eyes as a dagger piercing into my chest. I pulled her into an embrace and brushed the tears away, holding her in my arms for a few heartbeats before speaking again.

“Gabrielle, I know there are things that are difficult for you because of the life that you’ve been forced to lead, but there are things that you must learn if you are to be my--if you are to be with me.”

I quickly changed direction with that last bit. I didn’t want to say slave, yet I couldn’t really say consort now, could I? I held her against me for a few moments more and released her.

“Would you like me to teach you what I expect from you, should an episode like tonight’s happen again?”

She nodded her head quickly. “Yes, My Lord.”

“Let’s begin, then.” I said with a smile, our dinner forgotten.

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“Okay, are you ready to test all this out for real?” I asked Gabrielle.

Three candlemarks sped by as I taught my young slave what aggression was. I came to realize that it wasn’t simply the fact that Gabrielle lived as a submissive slave for so long, that caused her to be so unwilling to shove back when pushed. I found that passivity seemed to be in the girl’s very nature. She always wanted to see the good side of the people who would do her wrong. I finally had to tell her, to let Hades do his job and evaluate people’s lives at the end of their mortal journey, her job was to think about herself.

We walked outside and I purposely went out by the practice field where rows of tents had already been erected for the soldiers to live in, while their barracks were commandeered for the villagers. I explained to Gabrielle that I would be in the shadows and that if I felt it was going badly, I would intervene. She smiled bravely, but I could see her lower lip quivering slightly.

“You can do this, Gabrielle.”

She gave me a weak smile and walked onto the path. It wasn’t long before a soldier walked by and whistled at her as he passed. When she showed no interest and bowed her head, he thought he had an easy mark. Why must all men be so full of themselves? I asked myself. He turned and came back to her and the next thing I knew Gabrielle was in his hold, but it seemed she just forgot everything I taught her. It took two heartbeats for me to get to her side and have my fist connect with the soldier’s temple. He laid on the ground unmoving and I

checked to make sure he was still breathing...I hadn't meant to hit him that hard, but seeing him lay a hand on Gabrielle, Gods, I lost my composure completely.

"Gabrielle." It was all I could say, but when I looked up at the girl, she looked terrified. I was just beginning to think I should simply scrap all of this and let the girl be whatever way she felt most comfortable. I felt no better than the soldier, lying on the grass, for making her do this. That's when she spoke.

"I--I'm so afraid, My Lord."

"Gabrielle," I said again, pulling her into my arms. She was trembling and I squeezed her tightly against me, stroking her hair until she calmed somewhat.

"Little one, don't you know that everyone feels fear?" I questioned.

"Not you, My Lord." She replied and I couldn't keep from smiling slightly.

"Everyone, Gabrielle, even me. Only fools and children feel no fear. They have the Gods to watch out for them, but us ordinary mortals need fear, it protects us from ourselves. It tells you when not to enter an impossible situation. There are times, however, when you have to push yourself beyond that fear, when you need to test its limits to see what really is possible." I explained.

"And you, My Lord?" Gabrielle asked.

"Do you think that when I rush into battle, I feel no fear? Like I said before, *everyone* feels it, especially me. Perhaps that's what makes me a better warrior than most, because I feel it enough for ten men. It's that fear that causes me to try harder, to be stronger, and smarter. It's my fear of losing what I have that spurs me on to do the things I do."

"But you never look afraid." Gabrielle commented, pondering what I was telling her.

"That is the key, the very secret of my life, Gabrielle, and I share it with you alone." I replied, watching as a small smile fell upon her lips. She understood what it meant to learn of an adversary's vulnerability, she also knew the amount of trust required to reveal such vulnerabilities willingly.

"Fear is a good thing, always remember that, little one, yet the secret behind it, is to embrace the fear, and to never let your opponent see that it exists within you. If you can do that, you've already won. I can guarantee that if you give a look as cold as ice to a man, then use the little move I taught you, while screaming your pretty head off...he'll likely drop in his tracks. Or at least be stunned until I can reach you." I smiled.

"Now, want to try this again?" I asked.

"Yes, My Lord," Gabrielle nodded her head and I saw her teeth clench together as she steeled herself against the fear. Gods, the girl was going to be something someday.

Once again, we walked along the path that led to the stables, me in the shadows and Gabrielle in the light from the waning moon, waiting for what seemed like eternity, and once more, a

young soldier met up with the beautiful young slave. Only problem was this one was polite. Gods, what's wrong with the man? I asked myself as he politely left Gabrielle with an admonishment not to be out without an escort.

I stepped from the darkness and surprised the young man and Gabrielle both. I grabbed him by the neck and drug him back in front of Gabrielle.

“Kiss her.” I ordered.

The soldier looked at me as if I'd lost my mind and then he thought about who I was. I was sure he was remembering some soldier's story about my odd public displays of sex, so he decided to be brave and gently reached over to kiss my young slave.

I batted him away and grabbed him by the neck again. “Not like that man, who do you think she is, my sister? She's a wench, so get over there and take it from her like you've got a pair!” I bellowed.

That seemed to get him going. I prepared myself to yank him away from Gabrielle, but to my pleasure and great surprise, the small blonde took every lesson I taught her to heart. Once the man laid a hand on her arm, Gabrielle shouted at the top of her lungs.

“NO! She cried out.

The soldier wasn't prepared for that and loosened his hold enough for Gabrielle to bring her knee up hard between the man's legs. I groaned in sympathy for the poor boy, as Gabrielle pushed him away and he sunk easily to the ground, clutching what was left of his manhood.

I was already on my way into the fray as the soldier fell to the ground. I pulled Gabrielle away and held her against me, feeling the rapid beat of her heart and watching as her chest rose and fell, as she took deep breaths of air. When she looked up at me, I kissed her.

“Brilliant!” I smiled. That's when I saw it.

Her eyes were lit with a fire that had never been there before, at least not in my presence. They looked like two glowing emeralds and I felt a rush of arousal at the thought that this young woman might someday bring that look into our bed. I kissed her again and bent down to attend to the young man who was just beginning to feel the ground underneath him again. I helped him to his feet and slapped him on the back.

“Good man, dismissed. Can you walk okay?” I asked.

“Yes, Lord Conqueror.” He groaned in reply, limping away, but not before I saw the look on his face that told me, he indeed thought the Conqueror had finally lost her mind.

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“You had best eat something.” I said, looking down at the now cold stew. “Here, at least have a little of the bread and cheese.”

“I think...I feel more tired, than hungry, My Lord.” Gabrielle answered softly.

“Me too,” I grinned. “We’ve had an exciting day.” I add, opening my arms to allow the young woman to step into my embrace. “But I think right now I would like nothing more than a good night’s sleep.”

“Do you wish me to leave you for the night, My Lord?” Gabrielle murmured against my chest. I was encouraged because it didn’t sound like she relished the idea any more than I did.

“No, little one. We talked of this already, do you remember? Your rooms are your own for your personal time and possessions, but I wish for you to spend your nights here. Why, do you find it hard to sleep in my bed?” I added quickly, a touch of my own insecurity showing through.

“No, My Lord. I sleep very well in your bed. I--I’m only fearful that...I sleep so sound when you are near to me. I fear that I will not--I will not awaken easily when you have a need for me.

I smiled slightly at Gabrielle’s unfounded fear. “Have no fear, Gabrielle. If I have need of you in the middle of the night, trust me, I won’t let you sleep through it.” I let a crooked smile indicate that I was teasing and that her fear was unnecessary.

“I think it is security.” I said after a few moments, when I really wanted to say that it was about trust. I felt just as safe and slept soundly only after I knew Gabrielle was lying by my side at night.

We settled ourselves for sleep and I encouraged my young slave to lie by me so I might wrap my arms around her. Another habit I was developing. Whether it was a bad habit or not, I knew only time would tell. I could tell Gabrielle was tired, her breathing growing deep and steady in a matter of moments, her face tucked snugly under my chin, her soft cheek resting against my chest.

“Gabrielle?” I questioned softly.

“Yes, My Lord?” A tired voice answered back.

“Do you feel...safe when you are here with me?” I asked.

“Yes, My Lord, very much so.”

I reached down slightly to place a light kiss on the top of the soft blonde hair. “I hope that will always be so, little one.” I answered, unsure if Gabrielle heard me, or if she already succumbed to Morpheus’ call.

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I rose before the sun, as was my custom, and I left Gabrielle sleeping soundly in our bed. When I extricated myself from her arms, I moved a pillow into the warm spot my body vacated. The young woman wrapped her arms around the softness and I thought I heard a contented sigh escape her lips.

I crossed the hall to Gabrielle's rooms, to see if Delia was able to complete the requested task. I should have known the older woman would not have failed me. The small sitting couch was gone, but in its place, next to the window, was a small ornate desk, the kind that one might find in a lady's sitting room. Beside the desk was a large shelf filled with scrolls and atop the shelf were some wooden, hinged boxes. Taking a peek, I found out they held quills and ink.

I left the room with a smile on my face, wondering how my slave would feel about her dream becoming a reality.

"Good morning, Gabrielle," Sylla called to the small blonde.

I could see through the partially open door of my bathing area, that Gabrielle's eyes immediately searched for me. She rose from the bed, slipping into her robe, and bid my maid a good morning. I cleared my throat and walked from my bath to the small room that contained my clothing. Finally taking in my presence, the young slave assisted Sylla in setting up breakfast on the table.

We ate our meal in relative quiet and I related my plans for the morning to Gabrielle.

"I have to meet with my advisors this morning, Gabrielle." I said, rising from the table to begin dressing. "I will be in my study most of the morning, but if you need me, you are to wait here, you are not to interrupt me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Perhaps you should go get dressed yourself, eh?" I touched her cheek as she rose from her chair; she smiled at me, and slipped away quietly.

I smiled to myself at the surprise that awaited Gabrielle. Suddenly I was worried. What if she didn't like it? I was almost finished dressing, when I heard the gentle tapping at the entrance that Gabrielle used to my room. I tried to wipe the grin off my face and look innocent.

"Enter."

Gabrielle rushed into the room and stopped. I had my back to her as I tucked my shirt into my trousers and when I turned, I was greeted by the largest smile Gabrielle ever displayed.

"Gabrielle, you're not even dressed yet." I chided as more of a tease than anything else.

"My Lord, I--I mean, It's--I've never--"

"Gabrielle, if you want to be a bard, you're going to have to be able to finish a complete sentence, you do know that, don't you?"

My young slave rushed over to me and dropped to her knees at my feet, taking my hand and pressing her lips to my fingers. I don't even know if I can describe how I felt at that action

"Gabrielle, don't do that." I admonished the young woman quietly, pulling her prostrate form up to her feet.

Gabrielle looked up at me and for the first time, she looked up into my eyes, directly into my eyes. It was a powerful moment, this small woman gazing up at me, so forceful in fact, that I backed up half a step at the intensity and the fire that flew at me from her stare. When she stepped forward and reached up on her toes to close the distance between us, that's when I should have known what was coming. The blonde moved closer, then she kissed me.

At first, my eyes closed at the pleasurable sensation, then I felt the pressure of her mouth against mine change, and my eyes flew open at the lightning bolt of desire that struck, deep in my groin. Still, Gabrielle did not release my lips, and now her tongue was demanding, and receiving, entrance to my mouth. There was no war for dominance, Gabrielle had all the power, and she was certainly using it. Realizing what the pressure on my upper arms was, I was immediately caught up in a sweeping wave of arousal. Gabrielle had my arms pinned to my sides. Pressing the full length of her body against me, I was pushed backwards, until my backside rested against the edge of the table.

A hundred different emotions attacked my brain and my body at once. The passion and the desire were evident from my moans, as Gabrielle swallowed them up with her own mouth. I was beyond excited at her control over me, yet terrified at the same prospect. *She was taking me!*

I finally freed my arms enough to pull away for a much needed breath. That didn't stop Gabrielle as her lips and tongue found my neck, pulling at the laces of my silk shirt.

"Gabrielle... *Oh, Gods...* Gabrielle," I got her attention, holding her at arms length.

I took some deep breaths and was almost undone when I looked into her face. "You don't have to do this." I said. "That's not why I gave--"

The explanation was frozen in my throat as Gabrielle began to softly suck on the skin at my throat, her hand sliding up my body and capturing a very erect nipple within her finger's grasp.

"Oh, Gods..." I groaned.

My knees instantly turned to liquid at that touch and I had to either sink down, and sit on the table, or slide to the floor. Now that I was sitting, my legs parted and Gabrielle stood between them, her head level with my own. She moved both her hands into my hair and pulled me into another breath stealing kiss.

"Gabrielle," I gasped, breaking away for air. "I don't expect you to repay me for the gift, not this way."

Gabrielle slowed the intensity of her assault, but continued to flick her tongue across my lips, trailing kisses along my neck, and teasing my nipples thru the smooth fabric of my shirt. When she spoke, I could scarcely believe this was the woman that I'd been living with for the last cycle of the moon. Were the Gods using some sort of trickery against me?

"But, My Lord... don't you enjoy my kiss?" she reached up and captured my lower lip, sucking the flesh gently, placing a small nip to the skin as she pulled away.

“Oh...” I moaned.

“The way my body feels, pressed against you?” Gabrielle ground herself into my mound, and I could feel how wet I was getting, merely from the sound of her voice.

“My...” I groaned a second time.

“My touch?” her final maneuver in this game of seduction was to bring her fingers up to run the fingertips across the smooth silk of my shirt, brushing back and forth across very sensitive nipples.

“Gods!” I finally let this last word out with a long release of breath that told me I had been holding it in too long.

“Gabrielle...*oh, yes...I--I...oh yea, right there...*I have men in my study, Gabrielle, waiting...*ungh...*for me.” I slipped and stammered, but Gabrielle was relentless and I guess I could have pretended that this wasn’t exactly what I wanted, that Gabrielle’s aggressive behavior wasn’t exactly what I dreamed of, but I would have been lying and my physical body was betraying the truth of the situation.

“You’ve given me my dream, My Lord...I want to give you yours.” Gabrielle whispered, seriously.

With the last measure of self-control I was capable of, I pushed the small woman away slightly, confusion apparent in my gaze. I felt myself moan out of need when I saw those emerald eyes staring back up at me, full of heat and unwavering. A wave of acute arousal broke over me and I could feel the heat, along with the incredible wetness, trapped between my legs.

“Dream?” I asked in confusion.”

“That day, My Lord, you asked me what my dream was.” Gabrielle tenderly pulled my shirt open and kissed my collarbone. “Then, you told me your dream. You made my dream come true, My Lord, today...in my heart I feel I can make your dream come true.”

I continued to look at her in confusion, replaying that afternoon, when we both barely knew one another.

“You told me your greatest wish was that someday, I would touch you because I wanted to, and not because you commanded me to do so.”

Gabrielle answered and then stood there, her hands unconsciously stroking my hips, my back, and my shoulders, apparently willing to wait forever for my reaction.

“And, do you?” I asked, hesitantly, holding my own out-of-control breath, while waiting for the answer.

“Yes, My Lord...oh yes.” Gabrielle answered quickly and I was struck nearly dumb by the passionate glaze covering her eyes.

She pressed her mouth against my chest and began to tease and tongue a dark nipple through the smoothness of the shirt. She wrapped her lips around the hardened nub, sucked, and pulled, at last tugging the sensitive flesh with her teeth.

“Gods, woman!”

I arched my back, unable to hold back any longer, not really sure why I wanted to in the first place. I wove my fingers into the thick golden hair, pulling her firmly against my chest. I rocked my hips in keeping with the rhythm she was using, suckling at my breast. When she at last pulled back to see the effects of her handiwork, the wet shirt clung to my breast, causing me to shiver, the nipple extending even further in its excitement.

I watched as the smaller woman licked her lips, all the while staring at my chest.

“Off, please.” Gabrielle pleaded in a husky voice, tugging my shirt from my pants.

I saw this as my opportunity and decided that fighting this was a very stupid thing and I did not consider myself an idiotic woman. I briefly wondered at what the men in my study were doing or thinking, when it was quite clear that there was some very serious pleasuring going on in the next room.

I lifted my arms and Gabrielle helped me pull the lightweight shirt over my head. “Come here.” I commanded and pulled her into a fierce kiss, one that she equaled in intensity. I pushed her robe from her shoulders, letting it fall to the ground, and ran my hands down the smooth back, grabbing her backside and pulling her into me.

I felt her small hands at the laces to my trousers and when they were halfway untied, she slipped her hand inside, and those incredible fingers slid through drenched folds.

“Gods, you’re so...so wet.” Gabrielle rasped, not waiting for a response, but leaning in to envelope a nipple within very warm, soft lips.

I’m not sure if it was the physical pleasure, the words, or the fact that the very arousing words were coming from Gabrielle. I only know that I was trying to peel my trousers down my legs so I could spread them wider, all the while, she teased me until I was on the verge of an orgasm, only to slow her movements. Once I caught my breath, she resumed the mercilessly, exquisite torture.

Gabrielle slid down my body, pulling my trousers further down my legs. I could feel her breasts, pressing against my overheated skin, feel the tightness of her own excitement as the tips elongated and hardened at the contact. For the third time, Gabrielle backed off and I could sense my climax building within me, even though I was being repeatedly denied my release. Wet didn’t begin to describe the state my sex was in; drenched...sopping, those were the only terms I could equate with my condition at this moment. I have never in my life begged for sex, not even in a romantic fashion, but Gods, my senses were telling me that if I didn’t come soon, I would simply die. The next thing they were telling me is that Gabrielle was the only one who could bring about that release. It didn’t matter if the thought were true or not, it’s what I believed.

“Gabrielle.” I panted.

The blonde was now kneeling between my legs, the flat of her tongue licking along the inside of my thighs, capturing the wetness that flowed from me. She placed a gently kiss on the dark patch of hair, allowing only the tip of her tongue to graze the outer lips of my sex, no matter how strongly I thrust my hips toward her.

“Gabrielle...please, Gods, please.” I moaned, finally begging, as I thought I would. I knew what that tongue would feel like, I knew what skill she possessed in using it, and all I could do was half-stand, half-sit there and whimper and plead.

“Tell me. Tell me what you would like. Anything at all and I’ll do it, Xena.” Gabrielle murmured against my skin.

I felt my eyes go wide and my stomach muscles clenched down hard as an orgasm ripped through me, caused by mere words. It was the sound of Gabrielle’s voice, seductively asking my pleasure, then finally the catalyst that sent me careening over passion’s precipice. The sound of my own name. It both shocked and pleased me, seeing those green eyes, dark with passion, looking up at me and whispering my name. For a brief moment, I saw fear in Gabrielle’s eyes, but as I still trembled from the effects of my climax, I grinned down at her and her forward behavior. Barely having my breathing yet under control, I felt my need rising insistently once more.

“Gods, woman...don’t stop.” I struggled to say.

Relief flooded her face. There was no tender seduction, Gabrielle knew what I needed and went about giving it to me. Oh and she did give it to me. Even in my wildest days, I don’t ever remember a tongue lashing the likes of the one I now received. It didn’t take long and once again, I threw back my head and howled out my release.

I needed to feel her and so I pulled Gabrielle to her feet and kissed her, tasting myself on her lips and in her mouth. The kisses were passionate, but no longer tender. It was rough and raw, and what excited me the most was that Gabrielle was the instigator in it all.

“Sweet Athena!” I cried out, feeling Gabrielle’s hand press into me. I let go of the blonde and grabbed onto the edge of the table as the young slave eased her fingers, then eventually her whole hand inside me, repeatedly pulling back to lubricate the small hand with my own juices, then easing in some more. I crossed that invisible line between pleasure and pain, now feeling only the gratification of the physical act. I tilted my hips and Gabrielle pressed her hand in the rest of the way. She stayed like that for a moment until I became accustomed to the incredible fullness inside of me. She leaned into my body, pressing my back flat against the table, my legs still dangling over the edges. Her hand shifted within me and I released a groan of delight. Then, leaning over my prone figure, she feasted on my breasts and my brain was close to its shutdown point. Her lips, teeth, tongue caused a renewed wetness that coated the small hand inside me, and my hips began to rock against it.

“Xena...” the small slave whispered.

Gabrielle moved away from my chest and I could hear distinct whimpers coming from my throat. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the loss of her mouth, sucking me, or the way she whispered my name.

“Please...please, Gabrielle,” I implored her hand to pick up the pace, pressing my hips up repeatedly.

“Xena...” she tormented me again by flicking my clit with her tongue. Without any notice, she began sucking on the engorged nub, swirling her tongue out to run along its length.

“Oh Gods, yes...that’s it...unghh.” I encouraged.

Finally, the hand moved and I cried out as the tongue disappeared, but I was soon delirious, lost to the ecstasy of Gabrielle’s hand pumping in and out of me.

“Yes...Gods, oh, yes, fuck me harder...deeper...” I cried out.

I was in a place where there was no thought, only feeling. I didn’t have to be the Conqueror, didn’t have to be in control, all I had to do was exist in this pleasure. The sensory delight was making its way to *me* and all I had to do was lie here and let this beautiful woman make a gift of it to me. My hips worked in a furious fashion and when I opened my eyes, I could see the sweat that plastered Gabrielle’s hair to her face. When our eyes met, Gabrielle leaned down and put her lips close to my ear.

“Come for me, Xena.” Then she bit down on my earlobe as she sucked the tender flesh in, I felt it all the way to the hand pounding into me.

I did as she bid me. I came for her...over and over again.

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I tied off the leather laces on the flaps along my trousers. Gabrielle sat watching me, suspiciously quiet, and now I cursed myself for giving in. I should have remained stronger, because now the girl felt used.

“Gabrielle--”

My Lord--”

We both said in unison, then we both smiled hesitantly.

“Gabrielle, are you all right?” I asked.

“Forgive me My Lord, I don’t know what...I’ve never...”

I realized the problem and a welcome relief spread through me. Gods, at least it wasn't me.

“Gabrielle,” I said gently, pulling her up from the chair she sat upon. “It was wonderful.” I said, murmuring the words into the soft blonde hair. I shivered slightly as her body came into contact with mine. Perhaps it was remembering the exceptionally gratifying experience of a few moments ago. “I’ve never felt anything quite as wonderful in my entire life.”

“But, I--”

“You acted with a passion that was very welcome and that I hope to see more of. Only not too soon.” My smile turned into a grimace as I took a step away. I had a feeling I was going to walk funny for a couple of days after this morning’s pleasure.

“I’ve never felt this way before, My Lord.” Gabrielle responded, as if pondering her own thoughts.

“It’s probably my own fault anyway,” I pulled my young slave back into my arms, loath to give up this feeling just yet. “Probably all that adrenaline still in you after last night.”

A dark cloud of what I interpreted as fear suddenly crossed Gabrielle’s features. I knew instantly, what she feared, and I reassured her, as I expected to do many times, until she was comfortable with the fact.

“Gabrielle, you have no reason to fear reprisal for these actions. I will never punish you for bringing this ardor to our bed, or for doing what you must to physically protect yourself. Do you understand?”

“Yes, My Lord.” This time, she answered with a smile.

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I walked into my study and every man that I counseled with, was seated there. Gods, does it actually get any more embarrassing than this? Ten men sat before me and as I walked, somewhat delicately, I might add, to the large desk that was my own, I could see the amusement in their eyes. One or two of them even had the beginnings of a smile.

I couldn’t very well hide it, now could I? All ten of them just finished listening to my verbal cries of lustful delight, as my small slave brought me to Elysium and back. They heard, quite well, I am sure; me begging like my life was on the line. There was nothing to do, but to suck it up, glare like Hades, and intimidate the Tartarus out of them.

I opened the scrolls and pieces of parchment I would need for this meeting. Never raising my eyes from the papers before me, I slipped my ever-present dagger from my belt and laid it on the desk, in full view of everyone.

“The first man to laugh leaves here, one member short of a threesome.” I commented in a menacing, low voice.

Every man in the room suddenly lost his need to smile, yet had an incredible urge to cross his legs. I smiled in triumph; I cleared my throat and started the meeting.

## Chapter 11: Little Lamb, Who Made Thee?

“What did you spend your afternoon doing, little one?” I asked Gabrielle as we took our evening meal together.

It was a fortnight ago that my young slave turned a corner in her life. It was evident in the way Gabrielle talked, walked, and even held herself. I’m sure she didn’t even notice the changes that were taking place, but my eyes took it all in. She smiled a lot more and sometimes, I think, she even forgot it was me she was chatting to. She told me of her day and I sat there, an elbow leaning on the table, my chin resting within the palm of my hand. Somehow fascinated, by every damn word the girl uttered.

Gabrielle’s newfound confidence put many of my own fears at ease. I no longer worried quite as much when she was away from me, knowing that she now possessed enough attitude, to keep her slightly out of harm’s way. Her days, it seems, were spent filling the scrolls I purchased for her, I know she spent time everyday with Delia, and once I even saw her laughing with my maid, Sylla, on their way to the market.

As ruler, my own time was not my own very often, but when I did take time away from the business of running the lands in my care, I spent that time with this young woman. Occasionally, I gave permission for Gabrielle to come down to the practice fields, to watch as I worked out. For some reason, unknown to me, she enjoyed sitting atop one of the low, stone walls that surrounded the sparring area, watching as I exchanged blows with a variety of weapons, against my soldiers. I rarely allowed the young woman to be there, yet she never pleaded to come. She simply smiled and nodded enthusiastically when I asked her if she would like to join me. I admit there were two reasons for my hesitation in bringing my slave down there. The obvious was my concern with a pretty girl being in sight of my men, especially *my* pretty girl. I’ve lived with or around soldiers nearly all my life and on the whole, they’re a pretty loutish bunch. I didn’t see the need to put Gabrielle through any undue humiliation, nor did I desire to put myself in the position where I would be compelled to kill a man for a leer or a whistle. I knew how jealous I could become and how unreasonable my temper could be. Why play with fire?

The second reason was more of a personal problem on my part. It was, very simply speaking, disconcerting to see Gabrielle, watching with rapt fascination, as I practiced and demonstrated my fighting skills against young men barely half my age. In the heart of this very large woman, this Conqueror, there resided a mass of insecurities, especially when it came to Gabrielle. The truth is, I was never quite certain as to whether the young woman wished to watch me, or the young men I pummeled.

“Wait...back up. Who is Anya?” I asked.

I had the unnerving ability, to some, to let my mind wander, but still hear everything going on around me. Gabrielle moved to the bed in the middle of our conversation, and when I looked up again she had her legs drawn up into a casual position against her chest, her back leaning against the carved wooden headboard. She was telling me of a woman she was becoming friends with, yet I knew no one in the castle by that name.

“She is Petra’s mother, My Lord. Remember the boy you--”

“Oh, yes, yes. She’s well then?” I asked, remembering how frail and ill she looked when Kuros led me to the rooms within the palace, that he appointed for the woman and her children.

“Very well, My Lord. She’s teaching me how to sew and create the most amazing things with cloth. Do you know she was apprenticed to a famous seamstress in Athens before she married?”

“Indeed?” I answered seriously, indulging my slave. “And, who was this famous seamstress?”

“Messalina.” Gabrielle said with some excitement.

I sat up in my chair a little straighter. “She studied this craft under Messalina?” I asked.

“Yes, My Lord. Do you know of this famous woman?”

“Yes.” I answered distractedly, remembering a time when the woman known only as Messalina, designed all the silk robes I wore.

I looked up and Gabrielle was watching me patiently, perhaps waiting for me to explain. Since I already answered in the affirmative, how could I not explain myself?

“When I was a much younger woman, before you were even born, I first became known as the Xena the Conqueror. I conquered all of Greece, the Roman Empire, the Far East, Gaul, and set up my Palace here, in Corinth. Messalina was perhaps the age you are now, but even then,” I shook my head and smiled, “she was truly gifted.”

I paused and took a sip of water, remembering the young woman and the heavy brocades she created for me to wear in public, reminiscent of the flowing robes I became accustomed to wearing from my time in Chin. Back then; that land influenced everything in my life, too bad I didn’t study their principles more. I had only to describe my preferences to her once, and soon after the girl literally created the style of clothing, I would wear for the next twenty seasons.

“She designed all the clothing I wore then. There wasn’t much kindness in me then, but I remember being kind to her. I think I admired her talent. She was like Delia, though not quite as forward about it. She never thought twice about telling me when my clothing designs were outlandishly tasteless or downright ugly. The way she looked at me sometimes...it’s the same way you look at me.” I let a small bittersweet smile cross my lips at the memory.

“Did you love her?” Gabrielle’s soft, questioning voice cut through my reminiscing.

I looked up at her and I saw something in her eye that wasn’t there yesterday. It looked a bit like jealousy, but when I blinked, it was replaced with that same expression of compassion Gabrielle always held, when she gazed at me. Gabrielle was young; too young to know more about me than what legend told, but it was time she knew what I was. I rose from my chair and crossed the room to sit beside the young woman, seated on the large bed.

Taking one of her small hands in my own much larger one, I began to speak. “There was no love *in* me or *for* me, back then, Gabrielle. I killed and I raped, and I took, all for one reason,

and that's because I could, because I was strong and others were weak. My life was about power and control, because I thought that whoever had that, had everything."

I lowered my head as I continued speaking and my dark hair surrounded me like the hood of a cloak, making it easier to share the awful truth of my existence, to the young woman before me.

"The things that I've done, Gabrielle...what I have been...it sickens me and I know now that there really is no amount of good that I can do, that can possibly atone for my acts. It's true what they say about me, you know. Perhaps you shouldn't be nice to me, Gabrielle...I am evil."

I wasn't looking for pity or even compassion, although I believe I received both from my young slave. I simply told her, in the fewest words possible, who I was. I wondered at my actions. In those long heartbeats between the time my voice ended and Gabrielle's next movement, a quick bit of introspection caused me to ask myself...why, just when I've drawn her closer, am I trying to push her away? Why am I trying to frighten her out of caring for me?

I could only hope that someday I would find the answers to those questions. I felt the smoothness of Gabrielle's fingertips under my chin, and as I've done with her a hundred times, I felt my face tilted up until I was looking into an expression that could surely melt, even the hardest of hearts.

"I have read many things, My Lord, about this woman, Xena the Conqueror. The scrolls are filled with her history, her stories of war, as well as her proclivities. I know I'm young, but I understand more than you think. I know *of* Xena the Conqueror, but I do not *know* her. That Xena is not the woman before me, and she is certainly not the Xena to whom I belong."

I'm not sure why I did it; only that it seemed natural to do. I lay my head down in her lap, stretching the length of my body out on the mattress, one arm wrapped tightly around her waist. Gabrielle rubbed my back, in small soothing circles, while caressing my temple with the fingertips of her free hand. It was that insecurity-ridden woman that spoke next.

"Do you belong to me, Gabrielle?"

My eyes were closed tight against the respectful silence I was sure I would hear. Why couldn't I leave well enough alone, why did I have to push the issue? I felt silky tresses surround me as Gabrielle placed a feather light kiss upon my ear. I tried to hold back, without success, the hot tears that leaked from the corners of my closed eyes.

"Yes, My Lord...only you." Gabrielle's warm breath responded in my ear.

I wrapped both arms around her waist and squeezed. My heart couldn't decide whether it should be grateful or terrified. It decided to choose both. It felt so right to be lying here with Gabrielle this way, not worrying about whether I should be in control of my emotions, not caring how it might look to anyone else. It also felt very natural allowing someone...no, not just someone. It felt very natural allowing *Gabrielle*, to care for me. As ruler and warrior, I was never allowed to look weak or foolish, but in Gabrielle's presence, I'm positive I looked both, but sure, to her anyway, that I appeared neither.

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I felt a heavy comforter being pulled over me, and the soft warm presence of another, wrapping their arms tightly around my shoulders. I moaned and pushed into the embrace further. A loud rapping on the outer door to my chambers interrupted my pleasant state. I growled, knowing I would have to leave this comfortable sanctuary.

“Shall I, My Lord?” Gabrielle asked.

“Mmmm,” I murmured. “Get rid of whoever it is, please, Gabrielle, I don’t want to see anyone till morning.”

I rolled on to my back, immediately missing the soft body that silently rose from the bed. If I had been more awake, I might not have thought it merely a pleasant dream, when smooth lips were pressed delicately against my forehead, before moving away.

A male voice in my outer room instantly brought me awake. Gods, I slept so soundly when I was beside Gabrielle, it frightened me. I suddenly remembered that only moments ago I asked Gabrielle to answer the door. I rolled to the end of the bed, standing and grumbling under my breath once I discovered the male voice belonged to the scum, Demetri. The exchange between Gabrielle and my headman was muffled, but suddenly their voices became clear as they moved directly in front of the door to my bedchamber. I sat back down on the mattress, listening to the more than surprising exchange.

“Move aside slave, or I’ll move you myself.” Demetri growled.

I silently swore to myself that if the man laid a single hand on her, a slow crucifixion would be too good an end for him.

“I cannot, Lord Demetri.” Gabrielle’s voice suddenly came closer and I realized she must have stepped in front of the door, to block the man’s way.

“You little bitch. You know if I have to move you out of the way, you won’t be happy about it.” Demetri hissed.

I practically applauded Gabrielle’s next words, even though every muscle in my body was poised to intervene should things get out of hand.

“Lord Demetri, the Lord Conqueror has given me orders that she not be disturbed. If her wishes are not obeyed, then I will be punished for certain, but I expect worse will befall the person who actually does the disturbing.”

I almost laughed aloud. I could just imagine what Gabrielle looked like, delivering those words filled with caution and innuendo. Her brazenness surprised me more every day, and my mind’s eye conjured up a vision of the tiniest smirk on her lips, along with the ever so slight arch to her eyebrow. Gods, this woman was no idiot!

I walked to the door and heard only silence as Demetri was obviously contemplating the words, *Conqueror* and *disturbing*, and weighing his chances. I grinned to myself, and then

fixed a fierce scowl onto my face. I grabbed the door and pulled it open so swiftly that Gabrielle, who was leaning with her back upon the heavy wood, flew into my arms.

The small blonde was surprised and momentarily lost until she realized it was I behind her. The look on my face caused Demetri to take a full two steps, backward. I held Gabrielle's back against me snugly with one arm wrapped around her waist. Demetri looked rather relieved and opened his mouth to speak.

"Lord Conqueror, I--"

"Good night, Demetri!" I slammed the door in his face, leaving him still standing there, stammering, for a few heartbeats. Eventually his footsteps walked away and the outer door to my rooms slammed shut.

"Oh, that was worth the price of admission!" I laughed, falling back against the door and wrapping Gabrielle in my arms, kissing the top of her blonde head.

"Was that...was it all right to do that?" Gabrielle asked, her cheek pressed against my chest.

"That was very all right, little one, I'm very pleased." I replied and I could feel the tension leave the young woman's body.

I moved to open the door and peered out into the room before deeming it safe to enter. I crossed the room and grabbed up a flask of wine, pouring a large cup. I stopped and lifted the container in Gabrielle's direction.

"Gabrielle, have you ever tasted wine?"

"No, My Lord."

She answered as I expected, for few masters would ever give good drink to a slave, it would be considered a waste.

"Would you like to...hmmm, try some?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, My Lord. If it would please you." She answered.

"The point is; would it please you?" I responded, and we seemed to be at an impasse. We both stood there, seemingly unable to release one another from the tender gaze.

I pulled away first and poured a small bit of the red liquid into a heavy metal cup, then added a good deal of water. I figured that never having tasted the brew before, along with her slight build, watering the drink down would be the best way to initiate my young slave to the grape.

I handed Gabrielle the cup and waited until she took a sip first. Her nose crinkled up and she smiled slightly. "Sweet." She commented. "It's like juice...in a way."

I lifted my own cup to my lips, but stopped short. I paused momentarily and raised the cup a bit further in salute. "I drink a toast to you, Gabrielle. You have pleased me greatly today."

Her blonde head lowered slightly. “Is it because of what I did with Lord, Demetri? Is that why you’re pleased, My Lord?”

I took a large swallow of my wine, then another before answering. Setting my cup on the side bar, I leaned against, I pushed off and walked toward the open window, the stars shimmering and suspended in the black sky. I wanted to say so much, yet as always in my life, words deserted me when I needed them the most. I made an attempt to say what was in my heart, but I was still so far from being able to put a voice to all that I felt there.

“I guess I just like knowing that you can take care of yourself.” I said with my back still facing her, realizing how very weak that sounded.

“I am a slave My Lord, I’m not sure everyone will accept aggression coming from me.”

I turned to look at her and I noted her furrowed brow. “Gabrielle, there is a enormous difference between being aggressive and being assertive. I don’t see you as becoming an aggressive woman, it just doesn’t seem to be in you.” I looked across the room and paused, but Gabrielle looked just as confused as before.

“Gabrielle, if I taught you to use a weapon, if you were able to become skilled with it, would you use it to kill?”

“I--I don’t know if I could ever do that, My Lord.” Gabrielle answered, disappointment evident in her voice.

“And, I wouldn’t expect you to be able to. Like I said, it’s not in you. But you might defend yourself with this weapon, mightn’t you?”

“Yes, perhaps,” she responded hesitantly. “Yes, I think I could protect myself, or someone I cared for.”

“Then you have just learned the difference between aggression and assertion. If the first were true about you, you would be able to attack someone. If it is the latter...well, being assertive means defending one’s self, little one. That’s what I want you to learn to do. It will help me not to worry so much when you are away from me.” I answered, but as the words slipped off my tongue, I realized what I’d said, and how easily I said it.

Did I actually just admit that I worried about her? Me...Xena the Conqueror? I could feel my ears growing hotter, and that’s never a good thing for a warrior. I watched as the crease in my slave’s brow eased and suddenly I saw something that could only be described as mirth; enter Gabrielle’s forest green eyes. I folded my arms across my chest, shifting my weight to one foot, as I tried to appear casual. When Gabrielle took a few steps forward, her facial muscles quite obviously straining to hold back a smile, I turned slightly and began examining the hanging tapestry on the wall. Mind you, that tapestry has hung against this wall for nearly 12 seasons, but suddenly, it became the most fascinating object in the room.

“My Lord...you...worry? About me?” Gabrielle said, I must admit way too merrily for me. Gods, I think it may have been a colossal mistake, giving this woman power!

“Well...” I paused, still fingering the tapestry, knowing that if I made eye contact with the small blonde I was done for.

I knew that if I allowed myself to be caught in that gaze, filled with a combination of compassion and seduction, I would fall on my knees and promise her anything. I would end up flat on my back in some sort of submissive posture, allowing my young slave to take me as if our stations in life were reversed. I would do the one thing I swore to myself I would never do again...I would beg. Gabrielle would use her talented body and my own weakness to take control, and I would end up begging for her divine touch like a pup begs for dinner scraps, whining and whimpering my need until my master would take pity and satisfy me.

“Is it true? Do you worry for me...” Gabrielle paused momentarily.

All right, I won't look at her. I will not give in; I continued to think to myself, unconsciously pulling threads from the priceless piece of heavy fabric. I can be strong. I can be articulate. I'm the Conqueror of practically the whole Gods be damned world!

“...Xena?” Gabrielle finished.

Then I looked. Hades!

I fell into the eyes, which displayed a temperament and an attitude that I helped put there. My heart stopped as my libido soared, and I realized that I created this. Somewhere along the line, I took a small, frightened lamb, and turned her into a ravenous wolf.

“Do you, Xena?” Gabrielle repeated the question, tilting her head slightly in the most charming manner. She stopped in front of me, her body so close, we were almost pressed against one another.

“Um...I...sometimes.” Gods, how pathetic!

I froze as I watched her capture my attention with no more than a commanding look. Gabrielle smiled at me. Not the feral grin I expected from such a capable huntress, but an innocent smile, laced with sweetness, the kind that can capture an old warrior's heart, and within a candlemark, have her begging for mercy.

My young slave raised herself up on her toes, sliding her body along my own. She reached up, and almost shyly, placed the most gentle of all kisses on my cheek. It was so light and delicate, it felt like the beat of a butterfly's wings against my flushed skin. I felt those ears that grew warm earlier, burning like flames now. I could do no more than look down on her, a sheepish expression on my face.

Gabrielle slipped one small hand within my own and began to walk toward the bedchamber. As she drew me through the door, I suddenly remembered a phrase I'd read. It said something to the effect of...

*be careful what you wish for...*

## Chapter 12: Mistress, Mine

I lowered myself in to the steaming bath water, wincing at the stinging sensation the hot water caused on the tender flesh between my legs. I squirmed a bit, trying to find a comfortable position, since the scratches raked across my backside were smarting from the heated water, too.

“Gods, this girl is simply going to be the death of me.”

It was indeed a pleasurable pain as the indelible grin on my face indicated. I lay there in the warm water replaying the previous evening’s events in my mind and a small shiver took my body. There was no mistaking that tremble; it was caused by the mere memory of our lovemaking last night. The grin became wider.

I cracked open one eye at the sound of movement from the other room. Sylla entered the bathing chamber, bending down repeatedly to pick up the path of discarded clothes from the tiled floor.

I see that your Gabrielle is still asleep.” Sylla commented.

I raised an eyebrow, yet my eyes remained shut. “And, how do you know that?”

“Because that girl is neat as a pin. I always suspected she was trailing after you. Leave you to your own devices and it looks like a barracks full of soldiers live here.” My maid grumbled good-naturedly.

I opened my eyes and couldn’t stop the deep laughter that issued forth. “Sylla, if I wasn’t such a slob, what ever would you do for a living?”

“Very true, Lord Conqueror, very true.” She admitted, continuing to collect my laundry, placing it into a basket.

I settled back into the water, closing my eyes once more. I could sense that my maid stopped and stood, waiting at the entrance to the room. I cracked that one eye open again in question, only to see Sylla silently chuckling at me.

“What?” I asked as innocently as I could muster.

“Forgive me, Lord Conqueror, but might I suggest that people would know less about what you do in the privacy of your bedchambers, if you tried taming that smile down a bit?” Sylla said, a mischievous grin falling across her own features.

I grabbed a sponge and feigned throwing it at the younger woman. “Out!” I bellowed; chuckling as she slipped through the double doors, pulling them closed behind her.

She was right, though and I realized that I must look like that clumsy schoolboy again, grinning like an idiot. I tried, but all I could force it down to was a maddening smirk. My eyes drifted closed once more and it was a few moments before I heard the doors open again.

“Gods, woman! Did you come back to hear it from my own lips? Yes, I got laid last night!” I said in exasperation to my maid.

“Actually, I do somewhat already know that...My Lord” Gabrielle’s soft, teasing voice came at me.

I jerked forward to a sitting position and turned my head to see Gabrielle standing at the head of the tub. She wore only her robe, but her hair was already brushed and pulled back from her face. I have never blushed in embarrassment, shame, or modesty, but at this very moment, I could feel my skin turning absolutely scarlet.

“I...um...I--I thought you were Sylla.” I responded weakly.

“I see. I came in to see if you would care for me to scrub your back...perhaps wash your hair?”

“Yes, please,” I answered, thankful that she wasn’t rubbing salt in the wound of my humiliation. “I’d like that.”

My beautiful young slave proceeded to wash my hair, and then she carefully lathered a sponge, preparing to scrub my back. When Gabrielle tenderly brushed my hair over one shoulder, I heard a small gasp.

“I’m sorry, forgive me, My Lord.” She said with some concern.

I turned my head and followed her eyes to my shoulders and the light scratches there. Then I looked up to witness the expression of fear; no, it looked literally like terror, in Gabrielle’s eyes.

“Gabrielle...little one, it’s all right.” I turned around and took the sponge from her grasp, grabbing her hand, and stroking the top of it with my thumb.

It took a few heartbeats for her to look into my eyes with her own hesitant gaze.

“I wear my battle scars with pride...especially these.” I winked, returning the sponge to her hands, and turning my back to her once more. I knew my jest put her at ease, once I felt her hands on my skin.

We chatted about nothing in particular for a spell until I was finally able to entice Gabrielle into the bath. By the time I gave her the same treatment, she just graced me with, she turned and began to massage my neck and shoulders, carefully avoiding the scratches. It felt incredible and muscles that I hadn’t used in seasons, screamed out in relief.

“My Lord?”

“Hmmm?”

“Remember when I spoke to you about Petra’s mother...Anya? I was wondering, My Lord...”

My senses were now on alert, but I willed the rest of my body not to betray me. I had the oddest feeling that I was being set up for something. Now, being the target of feminine wiles was not necessarily a new thing to me, but being on the receiving end, with Gabrielle as the conniver, well, that was certainly different. I smiled to myself and silently cheered the girl on. Come on, little one...let's see what you've got.

“Yes...what were you wondering Gabrielle?”

“Well...she still isn't completely healed from her recent illness and she has three small children. Petra would help more, but he is a palace messenger, and--”

“How is the boy doing, by the way?” I interrupted. I could see where this was going now. Gabrielle became friends with the boy's mother and was making a petition to keep them in the castle. Rather transparent, but Gabrielle probably didn't have much experience in strategy and subterfuge.

“Oh, Petra, he is fine and healthy, My Lord. He is a good worker and has become a favorite messenger of all in the castle. Captain Atrius says Petra has the makings of a fine soldier, perhaps even an officer.”

Gabrielle continued my massage as she spoke, but one of her tidbits caught my attention, more so than the others.

“When did Atrius say this?” I questioned innocently. When in Hades had Gabrielle been speaking with the Captain of my army?

“Yesterday, My Lord, I spoke with him when he came to Anya's roo--” Gabrielle's voice froze in mid syllable.

I felt her entire body freeze, and when I turned to look at the girl's face, her hand went up to the mouth that still hung open in surprise. She immediately lowered her eyes from my gaze, a heavy silence hanging in the air between us.

“Gabrielle...” I paused, but my slave refused to raise her head. “Gabrielle, are you hiding something from me?”

“Yes, My Lord,” she answered in defeat. “I've done nothing wrong, I swear, My Lord, but I promised that I--”

Again, she clamped her mouth shut, but by this time, I figured it out. One of the reasons why slaves, especially the master's body slave, had few if any friends was for this simple reason. Slaves are not allowed to keep secrets. Any person, indentured or not, knew that if they confided in the master's slave, their secret would soon be made known.

As whenever I thought back on the life my young slave has endured, my heart opened up and I felt an agonizing pain envelope my chest. I reached over and tilted the chin, watching the muscles in her jaw clench as she willed herself not to shed the tears that brimmed her eyes.

“Little one, have you made a promise to someone, to keep a confidence?” I asked knowingly.

She uncharacteristically nodded her head, seemingly unable to answer. I couldn't help but smile gently.

“Then we can't have you breaking your promises, can we? After all, how would that look...the woman that belongs to me, breaking her word? I think it might reflect poorly on me. Don't you agree?” I responded tenderly, always prudent enough not to say, *my slave*.

When Gabrielle finally raised her eyes to meet my own, I saw her brighten as she noticed what I'd hope she'd see there. Gods, I wonder if she knows it yet, that I would refuse her nothing.

“Thank you, My Lord,” Gabrielle threw her arms around my neck, pressing our bodies together.

My own arms found their way easily around her. Eyes closing in soft delight at the way she felt against me. My eyes snapped open when I felt her lips on my neck, tongue and teeth suddenly nibbling on a sensitive earlobe.

“Oh, no you don't,” I laughed, pushing her an arm's length from my body. That intensity of an inferno was once again blazing in those emerald eyes and I realized the small blonde was in a mode to thank me, as only she could do. She looked at me with a coy expression and I laughed even harder. Pulling her against me once more, I whispered into her ear.

“If I let you take me like you did last night, I won't be able to sit a saddle for a week.” Then I kissed the edge of the small ear, only to feel a strong embrace from the slight woman.

When I reached in to tease the ear with another delicate kiss, Gabrielle's lilting laughter rang out, completely filling my senses. I'm not yet sure why, but her laughter acted as more of an aphrodisiac on my body, then her teasing kisses. For a brief moment, I almost said, to Hades with riding. Nothing seemed more important to me than being with Gabrielle. It was at an extremely great sacrifice, and with some incredible effort, that I pushed the girl away, all the while screaming in my head, *by the Gods, take me woman!*

“Out, now,” I laughed again at what looked like a pout, situated on Gabrielle's face.

It was definitely true...this girl *was* going to be the death of me.

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I finished dressing, at last pulling on my boots, while Gabrielle sat in her robe at our dining table, pouring a hot mug of tea for the both of us. We conversed a little over our morning meal. I told Gabrielle what my day held, and she explained that Anya would be giving her another sewing lesson. I completely forgot about the beginnings of our earlier conversation.

I was gulping down the rest of my tea, preparing to strap my sword into place on my hip, when Gabrielle's words filtered through.

“This will probably be the last time Anya will be able to instruct me, for a while at least. The work she does is hard, and with her still recovering from her illness...I don't want to take up her time.”

“What work does she do here?” I asked, falling right into the trap without even realizing it was set for me.

“She works in the Palace laundry, My Lord.” Gabrielle answered. Her face never even hinted at the fact that I was being manipulated.

“What?” I turned around to face Gabrielle. “Do you mean to tell me that the woman who apprenticed under Messalina, is working in my laundry? That’s insane!” I shouted.

“Perhaps you know of something she would be better suited to, My Lord?” Gabrielle innocently asked.

“I should say so. She’d be a lot better use as my seamstress, than my laundress.” I replied.

“Excellent suggestion, My Lord.” Gabrielle smiled up at me.

I froze. What else could I do once I realized that I’d just been played like Terpsichore’s lyre? Hera’s tits, this girl is good.

I turned my back on her and walked across the room, stopping in front of a heavy marble table that I used to play King’s Men on. It only came up to my knees and wasn’t very large, it was square with a geometric pattern inlaid on the top. It took three men to carry the thing in here, but I rarely had anyone to play against anymore.

“Gabrielle, come here.” I ordered, and the young girl was instantly at my side. Without even looking at her I gave a little defeated sigh and continued.

“Gabrielle, have you ever played King’s Men before?” I asked, picking up one of the playing pieces. They were all carved from pieces of Jade, in a variety of shapes. Warriors, centaurs, and horses, they were divided into two equal sets, one in green jade, and another in lavender.

I casually examined the piece in my hand, at last looking down into my slave’s confused face.

“No, My Lord.” She answered.

“Tonight I will begin teaching you the moves, then we will advance to the nuances of the game. I have the oddest feeling, little one, that you will excel at it.” I returned the piece to the table and stared down at the young woman, a smirk situated on my face.

“Why do you have that feeling, My Lord?”

“Because,” I lowered my voice, leaning down until our noses were nearly touching, “it involves cunning and strategy, both skills I believe you possess in abundance.” Saying that, I covered the remaining distance and kissed the tip of the girl’s nose. I grinned down and her and Gabrielle lowered her head to hide her smile.

I tilted her head back up with the assistance of two fingers under her chin. We gazed into one another’s eyes, and I wanted Gabrielle to know that she may have beaten me this time, but I

knew I'd been played. Even as I searched those lush, green eyes, I believe Gabrielle understood that I knew also.

I reached over and kissed the top of that blonde head. "Gabrielle...you have indeed become a worthy adversary."

Thank the Gods; the girl at least had the decency to look up at me with an expression of chagrin.

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I leaned upon the stone wall of the corridor, listening to the sounds of their laughter behind the wooden door across from me. I could have let it go, but I easily figured out the secret Gabrielle was keeping, and even though it involved a trusted friend, I didn't want anyone in my palace thinking they could be entirely free of my eyes. So, I waited patiently outside of Anya's rooms, waiting for the right moment.

Anya's daughters were becoming the darlings of the palace, to be sure. I think children have always been my weakness...well that and small blondes, I thought with a smile. Over the years, I have allowed children a liberty around me that few others have ever been granted. I chuckled softly under my breath as I remembered what happened earlier this morning.

After having left Gabrielle in my rooms, I made my way to the great public chamber within the palace. I have come to detest this place and vow that I will make more of an effort this season to change the way things look. It is the large hall, where the public gathers to see me preside over matters of the realm. The only real reason I detest the place is that it was fashioned at a time when I was rather full of myself. Everything was set up to give me the air of a mighty ruler. After twenty some seasons as Conqueror, I have learned that looks are the last thing to make a ruler powerful. Ah, why does it take age to learn these lessons?

The hall was created with a raised platform, upon which an ornately carved throne sat. In previous seasons, I enjoyed the image this created. However, on my fortieth birthday, I had the monstrosity of a chair hauled out and burned. I ordered one of the more comfortable chairs from my private chambers to be installed, nowhere near the dais, I might add, and I held court from there. It was more informal and less intimidating to the uneducated villagers who often traveled great distances to bring a petition to my attention. Nowadays, it wasn't unusual to see children racing about or hiding behind their mother's skirts. Perhaps that's why Anya's two girls slipped past the guards so easily.

Demetri, my headman, who I was watching carefully these days, was droning on and on in regards to some petition regarding a group of slaves who mutinied, aboard a vessel bound from Amphipolis to Corinth. There was an outcry from some, that the slaves were free citizens captured illegally. Knowing of Demetri's involvement here in Corinth with the unlawful traders, it didn't surprise me, when he was the one to speak for the ship owners from my home city.

My headman's eyes suddenly went wide and I was pulled from my current musing as to why I made it illegal to kill idiots like this in the first place. It seemed like it would solve so many problems. I looked down in surprise to see both of Anya's girls at my knee, smiling broadly, each tugging on a pants leg.

Silence reigned for long moments throughout the great hall and I could see that some waited in fear over what I would do next. My temper still preceded me and in all fairness, most of the public had no chance to see how I have changed in the last few seasons. Looking down at these beautiful children, however, it never even entered my head to scold them. Their trusting smiles were as much a balm to this old warrior's soul as the ones I received from Gabrielle.

"We know you." The oldest girl said, beaming up at me.

I motioned the guard away, who ran up to intervene, and scooped both girls into my lap. Poor Demetri. The look on his face, when I told him to continue, was priceless. He became so distracted by the girls who squirmed, giggled, and pointed at him, that he started to babble. As for myself, I must admit that I was surprised at my own reaction. I remember distinctly, how absolutely terrified I was at the prospect of being near these small bundles of delight the first time. Now, there was not only no fear, but I actually paid little attention as one girl tugged gently on strands of my hair, the other playing with the laces of my shirt, all the while, I was listening attentively to Demetri's monotonous diatribe regarding slavery and Greek law.

One of the girls began poking me in the ribs and hit a particularly ticklish spot, causing a burst of laughter from me, which I covered by pretending to clear my throat. I grabbed the offending hands, but now it became a game to the youngster. Quickly realizing that I was beginning to look less than regal in my current state, I brought the morning's session to a close.

"Free the slaves and send the vessel back to its owners," I interrupted.

"Lord Conqueror, surely you--"

"What part of my command aren't you clear with?" I asked Demetri, rising from my chair and silently motioning to the two girls to stay put. They both quieted instantly and sat obediently in the chair I just vacated.

"But, they're slaves, Lord Conqueror...and the ship's owners--"

"The question of their slavery appears to be in some dispute." I said abruptly, walking to stand in front of the man. I admit; I always enjoy doing this. I stood nearly a head taller than any man in my court and occasionally, physical intimidation was the only thing men like this understood. "Free each and every slave and give them ten talantons of silver from the palace coffers. Return the ship to its owners and be done with it."

"But, Lord Conqueror, surely the ship's owners deserve some recompense also." Demetri whined.

I'd already turned to go, but I moved back in front of him, to tower over the man and hissed in a low tone. "Their compensation is the fact that I am giving them their ship back and not impounding it. Plus, the fact that am not dispatching a unit of men to arrest them all as illegal slave traders."

"We are finished. I will hear more petitions this afternoon." I said, turning my back.

I walked back to the girls and quickly scooped them into my arms, carrying them from the great hall. Their giggles could be heard throughout the halls and I thoroughly enjoyed the looks of amazement that greeted me.

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“Hello, Atrius,” I smiled at my Captain’s expression of complete surprise as he closed the door to Anya’s rooms.

“Lord Conqueror,” he bowed his head, a worried smile crossing his features. “So, your Gabrielle told you after all?”

“Gabrielle?” I asked in surprise, to cover for my young slave. “No, actually. You see, I always wondered why you were the first one there that night I beat that young lieutenant to a pulp. A few things began to add up and I realized that you would have had to be here for a purpose. It’s not like you to wander the halls of the palace for no reason. Then it dawned on me that you certainly may have had a purpose...here in the rooms below my own.”

“I certainly didn’t mean to bring dishonor, to the lady Anya, or you, Lord Conqueror.” Atrius said stiffly. I could see that he was wondering if he were actually in trouble or not.

I pushed myself from the wall I’d been leaning against. Slapping the soldier on the back, I laughed. “Come on, my friend. Let’s have a drink, shall we?” I said, leading Atrius up the stairs, to my own study.

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“So, when did all this start?” I asked Atrius, pouring the both of us a strong cup of port.

Atrius shook his head and I could sympathize completely with the look. His expression told me that he was wondering that same thing.

“I went to take Petra there after I showed him around the messenger’s area that first day. I saw her there, all small and weak and...well, I don’t even know how to explain what I felt.”

I crossed the room and handed the Captain one of the heavy silver goblets, continuing to stand there as I thought about his answer. Yes, I understood his feelings completely. It seems the same affliction struck me down while in a castle in Ambracia, when I stood there, looking down at a small slave in her bare feet. I physically shook my head to bring myself into the present.

“So, dear Captain,” I began. “Seeing as how Anya is living here under my protection, I rather consider it my duty to see that her reputation is not sullied. What are your intentions toward the woman?” I asked, but when I saw Atrius begin to bristle, I realized he didn’t recognize the jest for what it was.

“I have done nothing to dishonor the woman, Lord Conqueror.” He said through clenched teeth, rising out of his chair.

“Relax, my friend,” I laid a hand on one shoulder and pushed him back to his seat. “I was only joking, Atrius.” I grinned down at the man.

The Captain smiled at that, shaking his head back and forth. Finally, a silence hung between us and when I looked over at him, he was concentrating his gaze on me.

“You have changed much, Lord Conqueror.”

“For good or ill?” I chuckled in response.

“It is good...it is very good. When I first came to know you, it was your skill as a warrior that drew me to fight by your side. After nearly twenty seasons, I have witnessed your very best, and your very worst, yet I have always been willing to die with a sword in my hand for your ideals. I was there in the days when the people called you, Lion, and I always believed in you and the reasons that you fought to keep Greece ours. I’m not a man that’s above asking for a little help and I prayed to Athena, on more than one occasion, that you would one day return to the ideals of the Lion. It’s good to know the Gods still listen to an old soldier’s prayers.” He finished and I turned toward the window to blink away sudden tears.

“I am not proud of most of my life, Atrius.” I answered.

“I won’t try to tell you that standing before Hades will be easy for you, when that time comes. I would like you to know that through it all, you have earned my respect as a warrior. In the last few seasons, I have seen a self awareness come over you, that is welcomed by all. I have always been proud to call you, Lord Conqueror, but it has been only recently, that I am pleased to also call you friend.”

“Thank you, Atrius. That title honors me more than any other.” I answered, my back still facing him.

“Tell me then, friend,” I asked, changing the subject. “How do you feel about this young woman, Anya?”

“I...well, I suppose I love her.” Atrius responded with some embarrassment. I understood, but who else was I to ask such a thing of?

“And, does she feel the same as you?”

“I believe so, Lord Conqueror. We’ve never actually said the words, but...well, you know how it is...you sort of get a feeling.”

I wanted to tell Atrius that I *didn't* know how it was, that’s why I was standing here, surely looking like an idiot, asking a soldier about love. The last thing I needed or wanted was to look a fool. I wondered if it was worth it, trying to ascertain what my feelings were for my young slave. There was no way a beautiful young girl was going to fall in love with the Conqueror of the Known World, was there? Besides, what I was feeling for Gabrielle wasn’t love, was it? There would be only one way of finding out. I had to decide whether a relationship with Gabrielle, as ludicrous as that sounds, was worth a little humiliation.

I turned around and pulled a small chair in front of the seated man. I turned it around and straddled the seat, resting my arms on the chair's back, in front of me. I opened my mouth to speak, before I could turn tail and run.

“Atrius, how do you know?”

“Know, Lord Conqueror?”

“If what you're feeling...if what she's feeling...I mean, if it's really love?” It was too late to back down now, the question was out there already, and so, I looked at him with grim determination, hoping he was smart enough not to make me explain.

Finally, the light of understanding burned in his brown eyes and he nodded his head, a small smile of realization crossing his lips. “I see.” He said at last. The import of the players involved, eventually getting through to him.

“It's not very easy to explain, it's the way I feel when I'm around her, but more than that, the way I feel when she's not by my side. If she's away from me, I worry for her and when she's with me, I worry I'll do something stupid in front of her. It's feeling something like pain waiting all day to see her, and then the minute I'm with her, the pain continues because I know shortly, I'll have to leave her. It's knowing, that everything she says or does, simply fascinates me. It's in the way I have to remind myself to keep breathing when she smiles at me. Most of all,” Atrius finally took a breath and I noticed how his eyes took on a gentle expression as he spoke of Anya. “It's knowing that I'll probably make a complete jackass out of myself, in front of her, but that she won't notice, and if she does notice, you can rest assured she'll overlook it. I know none of this is very concrete, but the only way I know to say it, is that she *completes* me.”

Just as he finished speaking the words that were highly uncharacteristic for the battle-hardened soldier, I heard screams followed by peals of laughter coming from outside. Rising and walking to the balcony that overlooked my gardens, I watched as Gabrielle tucked a small lap quilt around Anya's legs, the slightly older woman sitting on one of the stone benches. The young slave then turned and pounced on one of the small girls, lifting her up and twirling her own body around to giggles of delight from the tiny child.

This was the one, the smallest, that always seemed to find me, as she did yet again. Pointing a chubby finger upward to the open balcony, Gabrielle raised her eyes to meet mine. She smiled and I found myself, just as Atrius predicted, reminding myself to keep breathing. The little girl waved happily up at me and I couldn't help waving a few fingers back, freezing in mid motion to look around, self-consciously, to see who might be watching. I cleared my throat and tried to appear stern once more, but I think the females below understood that it was all bluster.

Gabrielle kissed a chubby cheek and the girl squirmed from her grasp, running off through the maze of stone paths that wound through the beautiful garden. I'm not sure if those flowers ever heard laughter before this, let alone a child's laughter. No one was ever allowed in my private gardens, but since Gabrielle had run of the area, the guards knew better than to deny her, and her new friends.

Once the small blonde released the laughing girl, Gabrielle lifted her head to look up at me again. With that one glance, everything Atrius just said made complete sense.

*Is that what this feeling is, little one? Is that why I worry when you're not with me and sit, captivated, by your innocent and unintentional charm? Is it true? Am I feeling something that Xena the Conqueror thought was never meant for her?*

The moment of our eye contact lasted no more than a dozen heartbeats, but it felt like an eternity to me. As I looked down into those eyes, that always seemed to hold something more than what the rest of the world saw, I realized the truth of it. *Gabrielle, you complete me.*

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By late afternoon, my schedule of petitions for the day was exhausted, as was I. I searched for Gabrielle and when I couldn't find a trace of her, I asked one of the guards, who was stationed on this floor of the palace.

"She's helping in the school, Lord Conqueror." He answered.

"I didn't even know we had a school." I responded with some confusion.

"Well, the lady Delia started it up, Lord Conqueror, and she asked your Gabrielle to assist her."

I chuckled aloud at that bit. Gods, that's all I need, for Gabrielle to spend more time around Delia. Figures the two of them would come up with a plan like this.

Unsure as to when my young slave would find her way to me, I decided to leave her a note, and take Tenorio out for a relaxing run. I look back at my actions now and wonder. What if I decided not to leave Gabrielle a note? What would have transpired between us, if I hadn't made my way to her rooms, discovering the scroll, lying outside its case on her writing table? I ask myself that same thing over and over some days, for on this day, it became official. On this day, I lost my heart.

*My name is Gabrielle. I am a slave and I belong to Xena the Conqueror...*

So, the scroll started out, but I was long past that portion now. I was more than halfway through. It was a horrible thing I was doing, destroying my young slave's privacy by reading the scroll. It was rolled up tight, but was lying outside its case, as if waiting to be finished. I wanted to stop; I chided and berated myself, yet still, I could not stop reading. It was as if, Gabrielle were finally speaking to me. She was telling me her most private and intimate thoughts, and I, like the criminal I am, gave in to temptation's call.

*What is it about her that causes my many fears to melt away, as the winter's ice under the heat of the midday sun? Why do I feel so much more than a mere slave when in her presence? A more apt question might be; why does she insist on me being more than a slave?*

*Even when I can't see her, I feel her powerful blue gaze upon me, trying to extract my secrets from their hidden recesses within my heart. She does not know what it means to be a slave, but I will not say she does not know what fear is. I, myself, thought of her as the most fearless*

woman I have ever known of, but on the evening she taught me to stand up for myself, I learned that not only does she know fear, but it is often her closest companion.

I could not, nor can I still, explain what it did to me that night. She gave me permission to defend myself. Has she saved me or cursed me? She has only called me her slave but once, while I was in her presence. Now she uses the words, you belong to me. I could take this admission as simply my master asserting her ownership, but I feel there is more to it. She asks me if I belong to her and I feel that she is asking me so much more than that. Often, when she asks that question, it is with a certain degree of sadness, even trepidation in her voice.

She has caused me to do something that I vowed would never happen. I promised myself, every heartbeat of every day, for nearly eleven summers, that I would not do this, yet it has happened. The unthinkable has occurred and I don't know how to undo the damage, worst of all, I do not know if I want to. She is called Xena the Conqueror, and the name is appropriate, isn't it? She's conquered me, hasn't she? She has breached the barriers I spent half my life creating, and of all the things I swore would never happen, she alone has been able to bring forth. She has caused me to feel.

My problem is, that I don't know what I feel. Is it friendship, compassion... Gods, Love? How does one recognize the difference, without ever having experienced the emotions before? Pain and humiliation have been my constant companions since I was first placed on the auction block. What does this woman know of these things, she who has never suffered the degradation of being owned like chattel? How is it then that she knows just the right thing to say to ease my constant fears? How does she know how to touch me, so that I do not simply feel her caress on my skin, rather deep in my soul?

I cannot say why or how she knows me so well at times. We are so very different, are we not? There are so many questions and so few answers. I am better educated than over half the population of this castle, yet there are so many things that I have yet to experience. I have been instructed well and my own knowledge is vast, yet I have been kept sheltered from so much. Why do I feel entirely safe in her arms? Do I fool myself when I think there may be a bond...dare I use the word affection, growing between us?

Does she know the turmoil this causes me? She who seems all knowing to me, does this woman know that I wake up in the night, to hear her whispering my name in her dreams? Does she realize when she's not looking; I gaze at her and am amazed at her beauty? Does she understand that hers is the first pleasurable touch I've ever encountered?

Last night I pleased her for the second time, in no way that any man or woman has ever taught me. It was all instinct and something rather primal I felt locked up deep inside. It was forceful and commanding, and although I know my master's arousal was great, mine was as well. That surprised and frightened me. I touched her this way, not only because it pleased her, but also because it thrilled me. In almost eleven seasons, I have never experienced any form of release from the acts that I performed or that were committed on me. This woman, however, can whisper in my ear and I feel warmth, swirling in my belly. When she touches me, I am instantly wet and awaiting the contact that always promises that she will not stop, until I experience that release.

Last night, I was caught up in that pleasure, not only hers, but my own pleasure as well. I straddled her body, my wet center pressed against her muscled abdomen and suddenly; I felt

*the rocking of my own hips as they ground into her belly. I was mortified, knowing punishment would be swift, but it never came. Her large hands took hold of my hips and she actually encouraged my movements. She pulled me down, pressing my need harder against her skin, my own increasing wetness making it easier to slide myself across the hard muscles, covered with silky skin. In my head, I knew that my actions were not those of a slave, and when she began to moan and persuade me with her words, I knew those were not the actions of a master.*

*I leaned forward, bracing my hands on the bed and continued my body's movements, only focused on my own mounting need. Her sounds sent jolts of pleasure through me, then I felt her hands slide up my body to each enclose a breast. She pinched and pulled on the sensitive tips, causing me to begin to pound myself against her. I had absolutely no control over these actions and the feelings terrified and gratified at the same time. When I, at last, leaned back, silently screaming in release, I felt those long fingers slip inside me. Before my body could recover, she was producing the sensations again and again. Her voice... Gods, that voice. She sat up and wrapped one arm around me, the other continuing to fill me, repeatedly. She spoke to me, in that low, seductive tone, telling me all she would do to me, all she wanted of me. They were sweet, sensual, sometimes vulgar words, but the sound, combined with the idea that she might make them a reality, propelled me over a cliff that I thought I would surely, never come back from. All I could think of, as we lay together much later, was that these were not the actions of a master and her slave, rather, two lovers.*

*One night I woke up, terrified and screaming, from a nightmare that I hadn't suffered from for many seasons. The large woman took me in her arms and looked genuinely distressed; thinking something she'd done, triggered the unsettling vision. She held me close and whispered tender words until I felt my heart resume its normal cadence. It was at that moment I knew. Again, it is not something I can explain logically, only a feeling that I have. I knew on that evening, that she would do anything for me. She would go hungry, to see that I was fed, suffer any cold, to keep me warm. It struck me also, that she would feel the sting of a blade, before she would ever let harm come to me. The other feeling that I endure is that she doesn't know why she feels the same things. I wonder however, does she feel it too? Does she know?*

*Yet still, knowing is not understanding. What will come of me if I am wrong?*

When I realized I was having trouble reading because of the lack of light, I looked up in alarm at the setting sun. Quickly replacing the scroll on the desk, in exactly the same order as I found it, I quietly made my way to my own chambers. All the while, my hands nearly shaking at the discoveries I made.

If I hadn't been quite so preoccupied with my own thoughts, I might not have missed the small blonde who sat tucked into an alcove on the stone staircase. Nor would I have missed, what I was only to discover much later in our relationship. Had I been a small fly on the wall, I could have watched as Gabrielle silently entered her own rooms, lit a candle, and then walked directly to her writing table. A gentle smile graced her features as she lifted the scroll up to the candlelight. Returning the parchment to her desk, she plucked a long golden hair from her own head. Carefully the young woman wrapped it around the scroll once more. Right before she blew out the candle, a look that seemed a combination of fear, tinged with excited expectation, crossed her face. Taking a determined sigh, the young woman left the room, to gently tap on the door across the hall.

### Chapter 13: Love Bade Me Welcome; Yet, My Soul Drew Back

Our evening meal was a quiet affair; both of us lost in our own private thoughts. My young slave seemed as pensive as I, on this evening. I told her I had a little work to do and the next couple of candlemarks were her own. I kissed the top of her head and sent her off to her scrolls. When she looked back at me, I thought I saw disappointment written on her face.

Sometime later, I sat at my writing table, within the silent confines of my study, surrounded by the ceiling high shelves packed with scrolls and parchments. I pulled the silk robe tighter around my body, as if to ward off the chill and damp that always settled in the castle, once the sun was drawn from the sky. I meant to get some work done writing letters, a seemingly never-ending task. All I could do, however, was to ponder all that I learned from Gabrielle's scrolls.

So many thoughts and emotions seemed to be racing around in my head; I can scarcely remember my own name. Does Gabrielle feel anything akin to what I feel for her? She feels something, her scroll made that much apparent, but what if it was nothing more than friendship? Yes, she feels pleasure from my touch, but I am basically giving her no choice, am I? Gods, am I *forcing* her into feeling these things? Is it similar to training a falcon to sit on my hand in order to receive its reward, when it's not what the bird would do naturally? All these doubts and self-recriminations came at me until my head began to pound.

I saw a movement to my right and saw a tentative blonde head peek into the room. Gabrielle was never to interrupt me in my study, in case I was in a meeting. I purposefully left the door open to this room, hoping she would eventually find me.

"My Lord?" she asked, standing in the doorway.

"Come in, little one, I'm alone."

Gabrielle smiled and walked up to my desk, standing beside the large chair that held my long frame. I slipped an arm around her hips and just as easily she ran her fingers through my hair, brushing back the dark locks, that fell forward into my eyes. It seemed such a natural movement, and I squeezed her in response.

"What is it Gabrielle?"

"You said that you wanted to teach me, My Lord. The game...King's Men?" she reminded me.

"Ahh, so I did. Are you still interested? It's a complicated game."

"I'll do my best, My Lord." She answered.

When I walked into the outer room, I was pleasantly surprised. A warm fire burned brightly in the fireplace, a number of large candles and a lamp were lit, and moved close to the playing table. Finally, a goblet of sweet wine rested by my favorite chair, which was positioned in front of the marble table.

Gabrielle looked up at me expectantly and I couldn't resist reaching over to place a light kiss on her forehead. "This is lovely, thank you, Gabrielle."

Nearly a candlemark later, we were hunched over the table, beginning the first real game. Gabrielle memorized the moves that each distinct piece was allowed to make, and it became apparent to me why she was as intelligent as she was. The young woman possessed a remarkable memory, easily remembering the sometimes, complicated pattern of steps each piece took, to effect a turn.

I made my first move and Gabrielle quickly moved a piece after me. I looked up at her and she never took her eyes off the board, hovering there as if she couldn't wait for me to take my turn. After a few moments of deliberation, I again moved one of my front warriors forward a step. My hand was barely off the piece, when Gabrielle's hand shot out and moved one of her warriors on the far left. An arch to my eyebrow was the only clue that I was becoming perturbed. Still the young woman focused only at the playing field. On my third move, I pushed a different warrior into the fray, before I raised the goblet of wine to my lips, Gabrielle moved her Centaur in to take the Warrior, and I frowned. I didn't like losing the first piece.

"Gabrielle, why would you make a move like that? You took my Warrior it's true, but now you've put your Centaur in harm's way. See?" I pointed out, plucking the centaur from the table and putting my Castle down in its place. "You should only sacrifice a piece to get an opponent's piece that is of greater value."

"Yes, My Lord, I remember that you said that, but that was my intention." She said, as she deftly picked up her lavender Mystic from the corner of the board and moved it through the spaces vacated by two of my Warriors and one of hers. She knocked my castle to one side and placed her own piece in its square. She quietly picked up my fallen piece and set it off to her side of the table.

"How did you--" I leaned forward in my chair and scanned the table.

"Is that wrong?" Gabrielle looked at me earnestly.

How could I let my temper flare when she looked at me that way? Okay, it's just been a while since I've played the game, that's all.

"No, Gabrielle, that's not wrong. Actually, you did very well." I answered, even if it was somewhat grudgingly.

I eased myself back into the chair and we began again. I would study the table and the game pieces, and then with deliberate care, I would make my move. Gabrielle seemed not to even care, but the girl got the best of me for three moves in a row.

"Gabrielle," I began, trying not to let my scowl become any deeper, "We're not in any hurry here. I mean, you can take your time and think about your moves before you make them."

"Have I done it wrong?" Gabrielle looked startled and stared at the board again in confusion.

"No, no. I simply meant that this type of a game is a contest of wits, not speed. I've known great battlefield strategists who have taken days to make one move."

“Days?” Gabrielle finally looked up at me.

Suddenly I felt like a complete fool, mostly because my young slave was looking at me as if I’d just said the most idiotic thing she ever heard.

“Well, maybe not *days* exactly, but a long time.” I quickly recovered.

“Yes, My Lord.” She answered.

I went through two more cups of wine before I realized that must be what was throwing my concentration off. In reality it was that and the fact that Gabrielle never slowed her style of play, she was kicking my ass, and I was getting as grumpy as a child whose favorite toy was just torn apart by the family hounds.

Gabrielle began do notice my darkening mood, which must have been why she suggested we quit for the evening. It took me a while, being caught up in my own petulance, but I finally realized that Gabrielle was slowly losing pieces to me via moves that she hadn’t been foolish enough to make in the beginning of the game. Gabrielle reached over to move her King into a spot even a beginner wouldn’t choose. The light of understanding finally made it’s way to my thick head. Gods, why do people bother with me! I’m as bad as any ill-tempered child.

I calmly sighed and reached out my hand, covering Gabrielle’s under my own, before she had a chance to lay the jade playing piece down.

“Gabrielle? You see I hate to lose, don’t you?” I asked.

“Yes, My Lord.” She answered softly.

“Do you know what I dislike, even more than losing at anything?”

Gabrielle shook her head and brought a solemn gaze up to meet mine.

“When someone lets me win a contest because I’ve intimidated or bullied them. I hate that about myself and now I feel I may have committed that act with you, and that was never my intention. Now, you realize that once your hand leaves this piece, this move will be final?”

“Yes, My Lord, I remember.” Gabrielle nodded her head.

“Then I’ll ask you...do you still want to place your King there?” I looked across at the girl and grinned, telling her I knew of her ruse.

“No, My Lord?” she phrased it as a question just to be sure.

I laughed aloud. “All right then, please continue.”

My mood cheered considerably after that, although it was short lived. I thought I had a plan, but four moves later, Gabrielle moved her King again and looked up at me. I’m sure the tentative smile on her face was from my open mouthed expression as opposed to any real joy she felt. I could be wrong, however.

“I believe, My Lord, that you are cornered.”

“No, Gabrielle, that’s called dead.” I looked up from the table with a wry smile. “By the Gods, girl, how did you do that?” I was still scanning the table trying to figure out where I went wrong.

I sat there and listened as Gabrielle explained the method behind her moves. I had always been taught to think a few moves ahead, but this young woman amazed me. Gabrielle was at least six moves ahead of me, during the whole game. I knew that some possessed a skill such as this, but for it to be my young slave, that astounded me.

“Come here, you.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her into my lap, squeezing her tightly and covering her neck in a shower of teasing kisses, that to my delight, made her laugh in my arms.

“Remind me to do something, Gabrielle.” I told her.

“What, My Lord?” she responded.

I pulled back and put as intent a look on my face as I could muster. “The next time I go into battle, to take you with me. You’re the greatest strategist I’ve ever been acquainted with.”

The young woman giggled, as I hoped she would, but somewhere, deep inside my brain, that tiny voice was back, telling me I finally met my match. Boadicea, Caesar, Alexander, Antipater, they all challenged me and, eventually, they all lost. Could even the Gods have known, that a small and loving little slave would be the one to cut me down to size?

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This time was different and I don’t know why. Gabrielle lay against me in our bed, actually, more on top of me, her breasts pressed firmly against mine, our legs entwined, both of us pushing our bodies into the other, just a little bit further each time. The kisses weren’t nearly as raw as the ones we shared last night, tonight, it seemed as if it was all about softness, slow touches, and gentle arousal. Tonight the fire wasn’t roaring out of control, rather it was building slowly, with a need to see it burn throughout the night. Gabrielle touched me, then I touched her, and soon we were simply trading caresses, each igniting burning trails along the other’s skin.

I felt Gabrielle’s body slide along my own, positioning herself more fully on me. When she leaned over my face, reaching down to kiss me, I kept my eyes open to watch as she teased, first with the tip of her tongue. I watched as she ran her small pink tongue along my lower lip, tugging gently with her teeth. She continued by running the tip along my upper lip, continuing to stroke the cleft there in a subtle motion that hinted at regions of my body much lower, that would soon feel that same stroking tongue. I could stand the arousing torment no longer and wrapped my arms around her waist, crushing her against my body. I sucked that tongue into my mouth and we both began a rocking motion with our hips, in response to the oral exploration.

Everywhere...I simply wanted to touch her everywhere at once, and Gods know, I tried. The silky smoothness of her skin, the way she urged her hips into mine, the scent of her, all combined to fill my senses to the point of overload. I kissed her shoulder and ran my tongue along the corded muscle of her neck. I breathed in her aroma and sighed. Gabrielle smelled of the delicate soap from her bath, the light rose oil that reminded me of the deep red flowers in my garden, both mixed with the bouquet of our mingled desire, that rose up and threatened to overwhelm me.

I slid my hands between our bodies, wanting to touch that wetness, aching to feel the young woman tremble against me with every stroke of that sensitive flesh. Gabrielle intercepted my hands and grasped the wrists firmly, drawing my hands over my head. I could have stopped her with sheer strength, but I was curious to see where my slave was going with this. She wrapped my fingers under the wooden headboard, her eyes, never leaving my own.

“If you let go...I’ll stop.” She whispered into my ear, before sliding her tongue along the outer edge, letting her teeth tug at the flesh of my earlobe, all the while I could hear a low whimper coming from the back of my throat.

“Gabrielle...” I drawled out in warning. Gabrielle’s past episodes of domination came at a time when I couldn’t think, but this was slow and calculating, and I wasn’t sure if I was prepared for this conscious decision.

I still had my hands wrapped around the lower post of the carved wood, when Gabrielle pulled back and looked into my eyes. She stroked my cheek with fingers that seemed to burn my skin with their fiery caress.

“Please, Xena...let me?”

Gods, was there a man or a woman alive who could have ignored that passionate plea? I certainly wasn’t one of them, as I white knuckled it around that wood and concentrated on keeping my grip.

All I could say later was that Gabrielle’s tongue certainly made a meal of me. I knew I was in sincere trouble when I was literally shaking, my muscles jumping in tiny convulsions, before Gabrielle’s lips ever enclosed a rock hard nipple. When she licked her lips and covered the aching bit of flesh a loud groan flew unbidden past my lips, my back arching into the pleasurable sensation.

Fighting to take in normal breaths of air, I felt that tongue as it slid down my abdomen, gliding repeatedly over the muscles of my belly that rippled and fluttered as small tremors of desire shot through me.

“Gabrie--Oh, Gods!”

I cried out in the middle of pleading with the young woman. Gabrielle moved her body against mine as she positioned herself between my thighs. Moments ago her tongue was creating teasing patterns along my skin, but when she reached the thick patch of dark curls, I felt the coolness of her skin skim along my heated center. By the time I called out her name, I felt her run a hard nipple along the length of my sex, grinding the stiff nub against my sensitive core.

“Yes, Xena?” she responded brazenly.

“You are such a wicked woman.” I panted, my hips pressing forward in an attempt to feel that delicious sensation once more. “Please, baby...ohhhh...” I wasn’t disappointed, as Gabrielle slid the hard point of flesh back and forth against my swollen clit.

It seemed to take an eternity for Gabrielle to use her lips, teeth, and tongue to blaze a trail along my inner thighs. She teased and then she pleased, holding me on the brink for longer than I thought my control could hold out. I was so very ready, that I swore the next time she even blew a breath of air across my hypersensitive sex; I would explode in ecstasy.

Her tongue finally made gentle flicks against my nether lips and I could feel my legs spreading further apart, the muscles in my thighs taut and trembling with anticipation. That first lingering touch, as her tongue gently separated the engorged folds, and I felt that warm wetness slide inside of me, caused the back of my head to press into the pillow and a long, drawn out groan to be released from my throat.

“Oh, yes!” I responded to the touch.

Gabrielle seemed to take great delight in this slow torture. I seriously began to wonder how long she could keep me, hovering along the edges of orgasm, without actually effecting my release. It seemed like time was passing so slowly. Every one of my senses was screaming out with need, while Gabrielle slowly and relentlessly used her tongue to explore, taste, relish all that I was.

“Baby...please...I need...” I groaned again.

Gabrielle paused to speak, but not before taking a long stroke against my heated flesh with her tongue.

“What, Xena...what is it you need?” she asked, before quickly returning to the slow strokes of her tongue.

“Oh, Gods...I need...I need...” I felt as if I were being turned inside out. “I need...you!” I was finally able to blurt out.

It was as though Gabrielle knew that this was my breaking point, so to speak. Perhaps in some way, it was what she was waiting to hear or maybe she realized that I wasn’t going to say what she wanted to hear. Whatever it was, it spurred her to action, and after what seemed like candlemarks of being so lovingly ravished, I was about to find my release.

She wrapped deceptively strong arms around my thighs, holding them open and to the bed at once, and I could do no more than give in. Suddenly, it was happening, her tongue, those teeth, and her lips...everywhere at once, first sliding through the swollen folds of my sex, reaching up to flick against an enlarged clit, then entering me with deep penetrating thrusts. I couldn’t concentrate on one area of pleasure, it was simply everywhere at once, licking, sucking, and prodding. I felt as though my orgasm started the moment she buried her face against me and it was simply taking all this time to well up from some hidden depths to swallow me whole. I felt my body jerk and twitch as I lay there waiting for my climax to

devour me. When at last I felt the penetrating warmth and the spasms begin in my groin, I realized it was too much, too much emotion, too much feeling, all at once. I tried to pull my legs closed, but Gabrielle's embrace was deceptively powerful and she kept me spread open, the pleasure flowing over me in waves, threatening to pull me under and drown me.

The roaring in my ears was surely the pounding waves, trying to drive me under. It was only as the next release took me higher; that I understood the roaring sound was coming from my own throat. There wasn't enough left in me to fight and I eventually let the waves pound me to the bottom. I let the blackness settle over me and felt a contented satisfaction that was new and strange to me, as I floated along, more than confident that Gabrielle would pull me back to the surface.

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"It's all right...I've got you."

I felt the words whispered close to my ear and as I felt myself slip back into my own skin again, I told myself that I already knew that. I already knew that Gabrielle would not let me drown. Here she was, whispering words of comfort and brushing her fingers through my hair.

"By the Gods, woman...what you do to me."

It was the first thing out of my mouth and it made Gabrielle smile.

"You frightened me. Are you all right, Xena?"

"I didn't mean to scare you, but you...Hades, I can't even explain what it felt like. Come here," I beckoned her into my own embrace and suddenly our positions were reversed.

I felt an odd sort of strength when I held Gabrielle in my arms. What she wrote in her scroll was not only insightful, but also true. I would do anything for this small woman. I would go to any lengths to keep her warm and fed, and safe. I wanted her to know this and I looked into her face, but my tongue instantly froze in fear. What does one say when revealing your heart...how do I go about it? There was only one recourse for a warrior like me, and that was action, not words.

I reached out a hand to touch her face, running it lightly across her cheek, letting my fingertips glide across full, smooth lips. I bent my head and when I'd bridged the small distance between us, I pulled back ever so slightly, merely brushing my lips against hers. I wanted to do what my words could not, let my body tell Gabrielle what I felt in my heart.

I pleased her body as tenderly as I could, gently stoking a fire in the small woman until she could no longer hold back the moan that rose up in her throat. My hand cupped a breast, the thumb lightly rubbing the taut nipple, again, that delightful sound from Gabrielle. That became my goal now, to elicit more of those sounds from the young woman's body.

That's when I froze.

I literally stopped all movement and nearly stopped breathing. What sounds? Gabrielle never makes noises, of any kind, when I touch her. Even in orgasm, if I weren't so completely attuned to her body, I would never know when she achieved her release.

I pulled back a small way, enough to look down into Gabrielle's face. It was there; the girl might be able to hide many things from me, but not this. I searched her eyes; hoping that it was my imagination, and that she would smile and it would be fine. Gabrielle's eyes filled with tears and she pulled her gaze away.

"I'm so sorry, Gabrielle...I suppose you must think me an old fool." I said sadly, easing my pain with a bittersweet smile.

"No, never My Lord" she answered softly, her tears escaping from the corners of her eyes. "It...it seemed to mean so much to you. My silence bothered you and I only wanted to please you."

I reached up and pressed my fingertips to her lips, realizing now that she must have felt nothing as I was just kissing her. What a fool I've been, thinking a young woman, especially a slave could ever come to care for me. Of course, she feels something for me, I'm the first master she's ever had that's been decent to her. She's grateful and confused, and very young. She is my slave, and I foolishly misled myself into thinking there was more...feelings...emotions...love.

I suppose if I knew how to cry anymore, I would. Gabrielle was a slave and she had no feelings for me, beyond serving me well. Why didn't I see that before? I am her master...Xena the Conqueror...I am the Conqueror, and it's all I'll ever be.

I pulled away from Gabrielle and moved to the edge of the bed. The small blonde wrapped a hand around my forearm.

"Please, forgive me, My Lord." Gabrielle pleaded.

I hadn't the heart to be angry with the girl. She only did what she knew best, to intuitively serve her master. It wasn't her fault if her master happened to be a lovesick old fool.

"It's all right, Gabrielle." I answered, gently pulling her hand from my arm. "You've done nothing wrong."

I rose and pulled on my robe, crossing the room and stepping into the outer room. I walked to the window and pulled back the tapestry, tying it in place. I turned and eased my frame into the chair that always faced the window. I watched the stars shimmer in the blackness, even now wishing I could cry. I had to smile at that. I spent my whole life learning how to ignore my emotions. I remember crying on the day I gave my son away, but not once, since then, have I allowed myself what I perceived as a woman's weakness. Oh, an occasional drop or two when overcome by emotion, but it was rare, and you could count the seasons on both hands between the occurrences.

Until Gabrielle.

I've cried real tears on more than one occasion since she's been with me. Funny, but now, when I think a good cry might be a welcome relief, I am unable.

I felt Gabrielle's presence and turned to see her with her robe pulled around her, fear or sorrow in her eyes, I couldn't tell which. She moved to me and dropped to her knees in that familiar pose of subservience.

"Forgive me, My Lord. I didn't mean to anger you."

I touched her cheek with the back of my hand, smiling as tenderly as I could muster. She gently grasped my fingers and kissed the scarred knuckles. I extricated my hand, slowly pulling away. It felt too good and Goddess knows, I felt enough of a fool already.

"I'm not angry with you, Gabrielle. I told you, you've done nothing wrong. Go on, go get some sleep." I turned away to look back out the window. "You may as well sleep in your own rooms tonight, little one. Leave me now." I added.

I turned one last time, before she left the room, and I thought I saw an incredible sadness in Gabrielle's face. I knew that is was my own imagination, and so I rested my chin in the palm of my hand, preparing for a sleepless night.

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The sky was beginning to turn that soft gray color, just before Apollo's light breaks through. I sat in much the same position as I had the whole night. Thinking of my life and what an awful mess I've made of the whole thing. Wondering what I was to do with my little slave now. Do we keep on, she giving, and I taking? Do I continue with our nights of mutual gratification, or do I merely let her pleasure me and keep a respectful distance?

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and when I turned, Gabrielle was standing in the doorway, between the two rooms. She wore a small silk shift that I gave her as a present, but no robe.

"Gabrielle, are you ill?" I asked, taking notice of her swollen, red-rimmed eyes. It was quite obvious she'd been crying all night, and the sight stabbed at my heart.

She rushed to fall to the floor before me, her sobs shaking her body.

"Gabrielle," I picked the girl up, pulling her into my lap. "You're freezing...you're going to catch your death.

I rose, with the young girl in my arms, and settled onto the large lounge, pulling a heavy blanket from the back and wrapping it around the young girl's body. She looked up at me and her cries grew in intensity.

"Gabrielle, has someone hurt you?" I asked, only to have her shake her head. "Have I hurt you?" I asked again, thinking that must be it.

"N-No, I hurt y-you." She stammered.

“Gabrielle, you haven’t hurt me.” I reached down and wiped the tears from her eyes, holding her closer until her shivering and tears both eased up a bit. I thought it odd that she would be so overwrought at the mere thought of causing me pain.

My young slave wrapped her arms around my neck, and burrowed her face against the warmth of the skin there. I held her tightly, knowing that she deserved some explanation from me, no matter how big an idiot it made me look. She served me well and I was traumatizing her with my inability to put a voice to my stupidity where she was concerned.

“It’s me, Gabrielle...you’ve done nothing to displease me. I...I thought...Gods this is so stupid.”

Gabrielle pulled away from me, tears still glistening in her green eyes, but she had a look so full of compassion, that it gave me the strength to continue.

“I thought...that perhaps you...felt...*more*...” I stumbled.

“More, My Lord?”

“*Felt more*...for me, I mean. I...oh, it was a foolish notion I had...I never meant to cause you pain with my own weakness.” I turned away from her; I could feel my cheeks getting hot. It’s been quite some time, since I felt this kind of embarrassment.

I felt soft fingertips guiding my chin back to face her.

“Do you...feel something...something more...*for me*?”

Should I lie? Should I laugh it off? Should I remind myself that masters don’t fall in love with their slaves? I knew that none of those options would be fair.

“Yes, Gabrielle.” I answered, truthfully.

“What?” she asked. “What do you feel?”

“I don’t know...just...*more*.” I answered vaguely, still wondering if I could have fallen in love with the girl.

“I thought you would know.” She began and I looked down into her serious face. “I thought you could tell me what it was, since I feel it, too.”

“You?” I was confused. “*For me*?”

Gabrielle nodded, and the look in her eye told me it was true and she was as confused as I.

“What do you *think* you feel?” I asked her, not even daring to hope that I would hear her answer one way or another.

“I’m not...I’m not sure...just...*more*.”

I leaned over to kiss her forehead and she smiled in surprise.

“Does this...does this bother you, My Lord, my feeling this?”

I wrapped her in my arms once more, resting my chin upon the top of her blonde head. “I have to admit, Gabrielle, it does scare me a bit, but it certainly doesn’t bother me. How about you...doesn’t this scare you at all?”

I felt those small arms tighten their hold about my waist as I felt Gabrielle shake her head back and forth. For the first time in candlemarks, I felt like laughing at the absurdity of the situation. I chuckled aloud and gave the small blonde in my arms a squeeze right back.

“It would if you had any sense, trust me.”

I felt much better feeling Gabrielle’s lips turn up into a smile against my skin. Neither of us said another word until the sun rose, then we slipped back into bed and fell asleep holding tightly to one another, uncertain as to exactly how to describe what we felt for one another, only knowing it was *more*.

## Chapter 14: Lovers And Madmen Have Such Seething Brains

For the first time in ten seasons, Sylla did not rouse me in the morning, and for the first time in as many seasons; I did not awaken before dawn. When I finally shook away the slumber that held me in its tenuous grasp, I lay, staring up at the high ceiling above. Even though the tapestries still covered the windows, I could see by the light peering in through the edges of the heavy drapery, that it was late in the morning. The next thing I felt was the heartbeat, which I could feel pulsing against my chest. It wasn't my own heartbeat, rather the small blonde, whose body was draped across my own. What a downright pleasurable way to wake up, I thought to myself.

I smiled, a broad, lazy kind of grin as I listened to the gentle snores coming from Gabrielle as she slept. Gods, whoever thought that I might possibly find something like that endearing? My young slave slept heavily, something she didn't normally do, but I'm sure the circumstances of last evening, and morning, were the cause. I gently extricated myself and rolled Gabrielle to her side, a soft murmur of protest escaping her as she slept. I rose and pushed the still warm pillow my head so recently rested on, into her arms. Again, a soft moan, but this time the words were audible and they stole my breath away.

"Mmmm, Xena," she whispered faintly.

I kissed her forehead and quickly pulled the same clothes on from yesterday. Running long fingers through my hair, I assumed I was at least presentable enough to wander down to the kitchens. I was actually hungry for once, but I was more concerned over why Sylla hadn't been there this morning to wake me.

I dodged a few scullery maids, their arms overloaded with dishes, and when I held the door open for the smallest of the three, she looked up at me as though I were an apparition. Hades, a look like that could really take the wind out of one's sails.

"It's all right, girl, go on." I forced myself to say gently.

"Many thanks, Lord Conqueror," she returned, rushing backwards through the door. Her eyes never left mine. I couldn't tell if she was in such a hurry because of the load in her arms or if she just wanted to be away from me.

I realized that although I hadn't assaulted a woman in almost five seasons, my reputation still went before me. It probably didn't help that I became such a monarch, that I not only never visited certain portions of the castle, but that I rarely recognized whether someone worked for me or not. I barely knew a soul in my own home. The thought made me determined to change that. I wasn't sure how, but I would try. I would ask Gabrielle. Now that's a thought that simply slipped out. Asking my slave for advice on how to rule? No, I answered my own question; ask her how to learn about people. Gabrielle seemed to know a lot about people, seemed to understand them, and the feelings that drove them.

Walking into the small, private kitchen that was Delia's domain, I was happy to see the older woman, hard at work kneading dough on a large stone slab.

"Well, well, good morning, Lord Conqueror, how are you today." She said to me, brushing a stray lock of hair away from her face with her forearm, her hands covered in flour.

“Is Sylla ill?” I asked quickly.

She looked at me with a tired smile and shook her head back and forth.

“Good morning, Delia, I’m right as rain, and yourself?” The woman said, talking to the air.

I couldn’t keep from grinning, like a child who’d been caught stealing an extra sweet cake from the tray. “Sorry. Good morning, Delia. I’m fine, thanks.”

“Wonderful to hear.” She continued on with her kneading, slapping the mixture with more flour. “I take it you’ve finally come down because you’re hungry?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Why didn’t Sylla wake me? Is she all right?”

“Sylla’s fine, no need to worry.” She answered.

“Gods, I didn’t forget her birthday or something, did I?” I suddenly searched my brain and though Sylla celebrated something closer to the summer solstice.

“No, she is not ill, nor did you forget her birthday. I told her not to wake you this morning.”

“You?” I replied in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Sylla came down as usual for your breakfast and said you were still asleep. She also said something about the cute picture you made--”

“Tell me my maid didn’t call me cute.” I simply glared.

“No,” Delia laughed, “I threw that part in.”

“That much is believable...go on, *after* the cute part.” I admonished.

“Well, she thought it odd that you were still sound asleep after the sun was up, then one of the guards told her the candles were blazing in your rooms till the sun rose. I was the one that told her to leave you be. Figure you and your Gabrielle must have had a long night.” She turned and winked at me.

The look on my face must have told her something, for she furrowed her brow in concern.

“Sit down, Xena, you look more than tired.” She said, pushing me onto the high stool that always sat next to the fire. “Are you ill yourself? Is Gabrielle all right?”

“I’m not sure we are. I know for certain I’m not all right.” I answered.

Delia rinsed her hands and poured me a cup of tea, wrapping my fingers around the mug, seating herself in front of me. “Drink this, it will make you feel better.” Something about that gesture was very mother-like and I could feel myself responding to the affection.

I enjoyed the mint taste to the beverage and soon found myself relating everything that happened the previous evening. It all came tumbling out in such a jumbled mess, what actually happened, interspersed with the feelings I had for my young slave, that by the time I was finished, I was sure Delia wouldn't have a clue, as to what was going on.

When I looked up from my mug, I saw her smiling.

"Xena", she said softly, "there's no need to make so much of it. You're in love, that's all."

I just stared at her.

Was that the confirmation I was waiting for or the fact I was desperately trying to deny? I ran my fingers through my hair, rising and pacing in an agitated state.

"Delia, masters don't fall in love with their slaves." I said flatly.

"Well, you do have a point there. That is easily fixed however." She reasoned.

I refused to answer, even though I could literally feel the weight of her stare, waiting expectantly for an answer. I continued my pacing until I heard her sigh.

"You do plan on fixing that, don't you, Xena?"

To hear Delia use my given name, well it always seemed to level the sparring field a little bit more between us. Actually, it more than leveled it. The older woman only used it on occasion, but she seemed older than the ten summers she had over me. I suppose it was always her motherly manner that caused me to feel this way. Now, more than ever, I saw the elder in her come out. She was asking me if I planned to give Gabrielle her freedom. I could no more hide the truth from Delia than I could from myself.

"If I free her...she'll leave." I said hesitantly.

"Why would you think that?" She responded.

"Why?" I repeated, resuming my pacing again, a burning sensation building in the pit of my stomach. "Even you wouldn't stay with someone like me if you had a choice, no woman would." I shouted.

"I would if I was in love with you." She replied softly. "Gabrielle is just as in love with you, as you are with her."

I stopped all movement and kept asking myself the same thing. With my back to the older woman, I'm sure I sounded like a small, frightened child; Gods know I certainly felt like one.

"Do you really believe that, Delia?" I asked.

"Xena, sit down here." She motioned me back onto the stool. "Now look me in the eye and tell me you don't feel it. Blessed Athena, you sleep with the woman. When she touches you, doesn't it feel different than any other's touch that you've ever experienced?"

“For *me*, but how do I know Gabrielle feels the same?”

“I thought you said that you told her and she told you?” Delia threw back at me. I could see that I was confusing the woman.

“Well...we kind of did...in a way...”

Xena, did you or did you not, tell the girl you loved her?”

“I...well...not in those exact words...”

“In what words...exactly?” Delia asked, now crossing her arms across her chest.

“Well...I told her that I felt...more.” I replied. I was beginning to feel like that idiotic schoolboy again.

“More of what?”

“Just...more.” I finished without meeting her eyes.

“And what did she say to that?” Delia asked. I’m sure at this point; she was amazed that I’d been taking care of myself for forty-four seasons so far without incident.

“She said she felt more, too.”

Delia put her head in her hands and I couldn’t tell if she was laughing or crying. I jumped up from the stool to resume my agitated motion. I was embarrassed and aggravated at trying to make the woman understand.

“I can’t do any better than that!” I nearly shouted. “I--” Stopping in mid-sentence, I honestly thought I might start crying out of frustration. Oh sure, *now* the tears come! I lowered my head, my hands on my hips, and in a broken voice, tried to continue. “I can’t...I don’t know...”

“You don’t know how...what to say to her?” Delia asked in an understanding voice.

I returned to my seat and sunk down heavily. All I could do was nod my head in response. “I should know.” I eventually answered.

Delia did something I never expected from the older woman. She took my hands in her own small, plump ones and squeezed them gently until I lifted my face to meet her eyes.

“Xena, how could you be expected to know? You’ve never felt this way before, never had anyone to teach you, or tell you. You’re too hard on yourself. It’s understandable that when you have no one around to teach you how to love, you’re not going to get the example and the education that most do.” She finished.

“That’s my own doing too. I spent my whole life--”

“Do not even go there, my friend.” Delia chastised. “Do you really want to play the pity game? Okay, you spent your whole life what? Let’s see, murdering, raping, beating, stealing...right?”

I looked up at her with a wry grin. I swear, that only Delia and Gabrielle have the ability to make me feel this way.

“Yes, thank you, I feel so much better.” I answered.

Delia chuckled and squeezed my hands lightly. “Xena, telling Gabrielle that you love her can be the easiest thing in the world. All you have to do is quit analyzing everything so much and look inside your heart. Look there and tell her what you feel, what you see between the two of you.”

“When I try to do that my brain freezes up and my tongue feels the size of a small boulder.” I admitted. “I’ll sound like an idiot.”

“True, it may sound a little strange to your ears, and you may stammer a bit, but I assure you, when you pledge your love, it may sound like Xena the Conqueror speaking *to you*, but Gabrielle will hear only the lyric love poetry of Ibycus.” Delia reassured me.

“And if she doesn’t feel the same way as I?” I asked at last.

“Therein lies the question that has driven more lovers mad than all else. All I can tell you there, Xena, is that the truth of love can be a powerful weapon. You above all others should know the value in a good weapon. It has the power to save or destroy; it all depends upon how you wield it. Occasionally, a rare few of us get to a place in our lives where we find something worth risking everything for. You alone decide; whether loving Gabrielle will be the object, you roll the dice for.

“And if she asks that I free her?” I asked, already knowing, in my heart, Delia’s answer.

“That, Lord Conqueror, will be a decision that you will have to make alone. I’ll only add that you can’t really start an equal relationship, based on an inequality. Can you?”

I smiled sadly, now thinking of all Gabrielle and I had to talk of. My thoughts of Gabrielle pulled me in another direction.

“Hades!” I stood up quickly. “I was supposed to bring breakfast back up for Gabrielle.”

“Good Gods, with the way that girl eats and you haven’t fed her yet? Better make it lunch.” Delia replied, suddenly bustling around the small room, loading a tray with food.

As I was leaving the kitchen, my arms laden with a silver tray, stacked with food and drink, I paused and turned back.

“Thank you, my friend. I wonder if Galen ever knew how lucky of a man he was, to have found you.” I said to Delia.

“You are quite welcome, Lord Conqueror.” She said, turning her back on me to face the fire. “I miss that old soldier.” She added softly as I left through the door.

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I tried to get through the door to my outer chamber quietly, with little success, one of the silver plates crashing loudly to the floor.

Gabrielle jumped up from the cushions she sat upon by the open balcony door.

“Hi, I thought you might be as hungry as me, so I brought back lunch.” I explained, grinning awkwardly at my own clumsiness.

“I thought...” Gabrielle trailed the thought off and I heard the note of apprehension in her voice, taking in the strained expression on her face.

“Oh, Gabrielle, no...I just went to get us some food.” I clarified, setting the tray on the table.

I pulled her into an embrace and held her, resting my chin on the top of her head. I tilted her face until I could see the sparkling, emerald eyes, and reached down to kiss her. I tried to ease her fears and convince her I was sincere with that kiss.

“Believe me?” I asked, pulling away to look down on her.

Her flushed cheeks caused me to smile and she nodded her head.

“Hungry?”

She nodded her head even more enthusiastically and we pulled apart to sit at the table.

We ate in odd periods of silence. One of us would say something mindless, such as commenting on the weather, and then we would make a few remarks about said topic, eventually graduating to a awkward silence once again. I could only guess that we both had the same things on our minds. We finally finished our meal, and I could make no other excuses, could no longer put off the inevitable. It was time for me to do something that I avoided like swamp fever, for nearly forty-five seasons. I was about to open my heart and speak.

“Gabrielle...”

“My Lord...”

We each said in unison.

“Gabrielle, I would think, given our circumstances, that you might want to call me Xena, all of the time. I mean, at least while we’re alone. It probably wouldn’t look good outside...” I quickly added the last, not quite ready to be called that in front of my men.

“I didn’t know if you...are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m sure.” I answered with a nervous smile. “Did you have something you wanted to say?”

“Please, you go first.” She replied.

“Huh?” I was caught a little off guard, thinking I might formulate my thoughts while Gabrielle spoke. Now, the lamplight was shining brightly on me.

“You said you had something to say?” Gabrielle gently prodded.

“Yes...yes I did.” My palms began to sweat and I wondered why someone, somewhere, never came up with a plan to create an army of young women like this. They take your breath, your thoughts, and all physical movement, and make it nearly impossible for you to perform any of the aforementioned activities. They would be unstoppable, and I was making a mental note to ask someone about this plan, when Gabrielle brought me out of my nonsensical thoughts.

“Xena?”

“Oh, yes...well I...Gabrielle I--” I was reprieved by a knock on the outer door. “I’ll just see who that is,” I said, rising quickly and crossing the room.

It turned out to be Sylla, come for the dirty dishes. The girl was faster than I thought she would be and moments later I was pacing the room, determined to at least give Gabrielle an inkling of what I felt for her.

“Gabrielle...” I started again, for perhaps the fifth time, slowly backing myself up until I felt the wall against my back.

Gabrielle sat, very patiently, I might add, a perplexed sort of expression on her face. I began nervously fingering that same tapestry, hanging on the wall. Gods, the thing was going to be threadbare before winter if I kept on like this. I nearly slapped my own hand to stop the fidgety gesture of pulling on the loose threads.

“Gabrielle...I have something to tell you. It’s...well, it about the way I--” A louder pounding at the door this time.

“Hera’s tits!” I exclaimed and Gabrielle released a small giggle.

“I’ll get it this time.” She said.

When Gabrielle returned, my guard, Nicos, was with her.

“Forgive the intrusion, Lord Conqueror, but you said that I should report to you immediately upon my return. I have the information you requested.” Nicos said, standing at attention the entire time.

“Did you bring them with you?” I asked cryptically.

“Aye, Lord Conqueror.” Nicos replied with a sly smile. “Captain Atrius is with them at this moment. He awaits your orders.”

“Outstanding, Nicos, good man. Tell the Captain I’ll be down directly, then go get yourself some food and rest.” I clapped the soldier’s one arm within my own warrior’s embrace, and could feel the man stand a little taller, pride having been in short commodity for him the last few seasons.

After Nicos left, I entered my bedchamber. I flipped open the chest and drew my weapons from their customary place, fixing them in the appropriate places. Looking up, I suddenly saw Gabrielle, studying me in quiet contemplation. *Hades, I forgot something, didn’t I?*

“Gabrielle, I do have something important to talk with you about, but this is something that must be handled immediately. Do you understand?”

She smiled and I felt instantaneous relief.

“Yes, Xena, I understand perfectly.”

“I have no earthly idea when I’ll be through. You don’t have to stay here and wait, though.” I put my arm about her shoulders, as she slipped her own around my waist, and we walked to the door. The gesture was completely involuntary and seemed so effortless.

“Perhaps I’ll go to see Anya, then.” She said.

I kissed her lips, and felt her smile against my skin, finding myself smiling the same way. When I, at last, left the room and walked down the lamp lit corridor, I found my fingers reaching up to brush across my lips. I knew I was grinning like an idiot, but it was such an odd physical feeling. My lips literally tingled after having kissed Gabrielle. I knew that no matter how long this next bit of nastiness lasted; I would find Gabrielle and tell her that I was truly in love with her.

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“Well, well...Kassandros, I should have known.” I said immediately upon entering the small room Atrius held the prisoners in.

Held in chains, the six men looked ragged and unkempt. If one didn’t know better, they might think them peasants or simple travelers. I, however, knew much better. Callius, the Captain of my fleet gave me their names, each and every one of them, as his own blood drained from him, to spill across my hands. He gave them up with a dying whisper, not even bothering to take their names to Hades with him.

When I first learned of the treachery, I ordered Atrius not to arrest my headman, Demetri. I knew if he thought he wasn’t implicated in the illegal slave trade fiasco, once I killed Callius, he would eventually take over the Captain’s role of masterminding the scheme. I dispatched Nicos and two squads of men to quietly arrest the other players. I let Demetri continue to think that I was unaware of his activities, until I had all of his associates firmly within my grasp.

It never even surprised me when Kassandros’ name was the first to escape the dying Captain’s lips. He was one of my elected Governor’s, set up in one of the provinces of upper Macedon. I

think it was a nostalgic moment that caused me to select him in the first place, either that, or guilt. I killed the man's father, Antipater, a regent of Macedon also. Once I killed Alexander, his regent, Antipater was no problem. After that campaign, I seized control of Macedon, and began outwardly expanding the areas I conquered, until most of the foreign Empires surrounding the Aegean were under my control.

It seems that Kassandros had teams of mercenaries, kidnapping young girls and selling them to Amphipolis, Abdera, and Potidaea. The girls were daughters of free men, but that didn't matter to any of the slave traders. Much to my recent abhorrence, the majority of the slaves eventually made their way to Corinth, and the many auction blocks in the great city.

It took a great deal of patience, understanding, and time, for the story to be garnered; from the young girls I rescued that day on the docks. I asked Delia to help out, and the girls soon overcame their trauma enough to confide in the caring older woman. Now, the men responsible before me, I wanted nothing more than to see them beheaded or even crucified out in my palace courtyard. There weren't too many punishments my dark mind could dream up that would sufficiently make the men pay, however. What they have done over Gods know how many seasons as I ruled, could never be repaired, even with their deaths. For the girls, the women, and their families, at least it would be a start.

I walked around to face the condemned men. "Now, who would care to share their secrets with me?"

I smiled, an altogether unpleasant smile, the kind that I haven't used in quite some time. Three of the four men, seated and chained before me, began talking so fast; the beast within me was a bit disappointed that it would not be allowed its freedom. The fourth man, sitting there, silent and sneering, was Kassandros.

I finally heard all that I needed. Frankly, I was a bit surprised. I never took Demetri for having the jewels for this sort of scheme, but I could only assume that was why he surrounded himself with an exceedingly rough group of characters. It was evident, from this lot especially, Demetri was the brains, and they were the brawn. Kassandros never said a word, as he and I stared hard at one another. I silenced the others with a baleful glance, positioning myself in front of the former Governor. I suppose he didn't care much for my superior smile, because his lips pulled back in a sneer, and he proceeded to spit upon my boots.

"Oh, yea...that hurt." I responded in a mocking tone.

"Don't think I'll give you the satisfaction of hearing me spill my guts like these fools. Let me free of these chains and I'll show you what a real warrior is made of, you self-righteous bitch!" he shouted.

I simply smiled again. Looking up, I pointed out two guards. "Find Demetri and arrest him. Bring him here...better yet, bring them all to the jail. I think my former headman should start getting to know the rabble he associates with, on a more personal level."

I turned to go when Kassandros' voice met me once again.

"I knew you were getting too soft to take me up on my challenge." He shouted out, but I ignored him, making my way to the door.

“You always were all show with the big sword and all, bet you ain’t much without weapons. It’s all over Greece how the Conqueror bitch’s bedmate is a dirty whore!”

I stopped all movement, feeling as though I was just hit between the shoulder blades with a brick. The feeling wasn’t even one that I could consciously remember dredging up. The words he spoke about Gabrielle caused a faint stirring, somewhere deep inside, and within the depths of my very soul, I felt the beast claw to the surface.

“Lord Conqueror...” Atrius was by my side, but I stood staring at the door, unmoving.

“Get these others down to a cell, leave him here.” I finished.

A few more guards hustled the rest of the prisoners down to the palace dungeons.

“The rest of you...out!” I commanded and men scurried from the room.

I went about removing my sword belt and the chakram that hung on the opposite hip. I carefully wrapped the package of weapons up and turned to hand them to Atrius.

“Remove his chains, then leave.” I said flatly, realizing I was very close to losing control of the darkness that began to settle all through me.

“Lord Conqueror, this is foolishness. The man will die in the morning.” My Captain tried to persuade me from this reckless path, but I was past having either the ability to hear or care.

“Now.” I repeated.

I heard the door click as Atrius reluctantly closed it, then I turned to face the man who stood no taller than I. “Now,” I began, “show me what a real warrior is made of.” I growled.

I felt possessed, once I made the conscious decision to relinquish the last of my remaining control to the beast.

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“Get a couple of men to drag him to a jail cell.” I said to Atrius as I walked past him to a low barrel of water. I rinsed the blood from my hands and winced in pain when I bent my fingers. *Gods, his jaw was hard.* I rinsed my mouth of blood and fingered my jaw tentatively, checking for loose teeth. I gave a lot better than I got, but I didn’t leave the room completely unscathed.

Atrius handed me a dry cloth, the expression on his face displaying his displeasure with my actions. I accepted my weapons and strapped them around my waist.

“Lord Conqueror, I can understand why you felt the desire to beat the Tartarus out of him, what I don’t understand is why you actually put yourself in jeopardy that way, and went through with it.” Atrius was in his mother hen mode and I couldn’t blame him...much.

“I imagined you, of all people, would know why I had to.” I answered, tossing the rag away.

That crooked smile and a grunt, of which I took to be agreement, was all that came from the Captain.

“Lord Conqueror...” A young lieutenant rushed up to the two of us. “Someone must have warned Lord Demetri...he’s gone. I have two squads of men searching the palace, another four combing the city.”

“Ares balls,” I muttered under my breath, “can’t anything ever go easy around here? All right, he’s probably fled the city by now, but keep your men looking just in case.”

“Aye, Lord Conqueror.” He responded, rushing away just as quickly.

“Gods, they’re making them younger every day. I’m starting to feel my age.” I complained to Atrius.

The expression on my Captain’s face fell. “Speaking of age, Lord Conqueror...you are rather promised to a certain group of officers in training.”

“And just how in Hades did that happen?” I growled. Those training classes were always filled with a dozen young soldiers all looking to be the first to best me with a sword.

“Actually, Lord Conqueror, you promised you would meet with them this morning. I was told by your personal maid that you were rather...indisposed, this morning.” Atrius said, that damned amusement sparkling in his eye.

“Since you think it’s so entertaining, you can come along and protect my back.” I grinned.

“Yes, Lord Conqueror.” He muttered.

I paused before continuing on out of the palace. A feeling slid up my spine, that I could neither put my finger on, nor brush off. “You don’t think Demetri’s stupid enough to hide here, do you?”

“If he’s smart, he’ll be headed for Athens by now.” Atrius answered.

“Well, I’d never accuse him of overt intelligence, but it’s what most sane men would do.” I responded with a sigh. “All right...to the training field.”

My Captain and I walked off, headed outside, to show some of the young pups what kind of bite two old warriors still had. My last words about Demetri were meant as something of a jest, but one thing was true, fleeing the palace is what a sane man would do. Unfortunately, at this moment, my headman was currently doing a balancing act between sanity and madness.

As I strode to the training field, I never even thought that my Gabrielle might be somewhere, about to walk into harm’s way.

## Chapter 15: Because I Could Not Stop For Death

“Ayah!” I yelled out, raising my sword up and over my head to block the attack at my back, pushing the metal blade away from my body.

“Hey, you’re supposed to be watching out for me back there!” I shouted to Atrius.

I could see that my Captain was having difficulties of his own and I tried to keep from laughing at our predicament. We were old enough to have sired any one of the young men and women who surrounded us, but we were doing a damn good job at not getting our butts kicked too badly. Atrius was currently battling against two female soldiers, whose swordplay I would have stopped to admire, had I not been otherwise engaged.

“Look, it’s a little hard to build up a lot of sympathy for you right now.” Atrius panted. “Frankly, you’re on your own Conqueror!” he added, taking a wicked right boot to the jaw, then making the future officer pay dearly for it.

I laughed and continued on, finally feeling my years as fatigue set into my muscles. Although I knew I would pay dearly for this over-exertion tomorrow, I was actually enjoying myself at this moment. Above all else, I was a warrior, and although I rarely admitted it, nearly nothing pleased me as much as a good fight.

I worked with two swords, thrusting with a short blade, while parrying blow after blow with my long sword. I kicked out to my left side, not seeing yet feeling my booted foot sink into soft flesh. At the same time, I heard a grunt and a whoosh of air being forcibly expelled from a set of lungs. A young soldier fell into my peripheral vision, sinking to his knees.

The recruits finally realized they needed to work together. This was the whole reason for Atrius and I putting our bodies through this agony. Officers in training tended to be an arrogant, often immature lot. This little exercise taught them that you had a better chance at victory if you worked with your men. Suddenly two and three of them started banding together for their attacks, and before I could avoid it, I felt my legs swept out from under me.

When my back hit the ground, the impact caused me to lose my short sword, while at the same time; a kick to my hand knocked the other blade a few feet away. The young man smiled in victory, I would tell him later why that was his undoing. I was on my back, trying to regain my breath when he raised his sword in both hands to bring the blade down to my throat. One can only hope in these types of situations that adrenaline doesn’t get the better of the young recruit, and he does indeed, stop the downward motion of his sword, before it

pierces your skin. I watched his style and form as the blade came at me, instantly assessing where his weakness lay.

I clapped my hand together, trapping the flat of the blade in between my palms. I moved quickly, before the young man even knew what was happening. With all the strength I could muster in my arms and shoulders, I pushed back and upward sharply. The hilt of his sword came speeding back up at him and cracked him under the chin.

I flipped his sword around, grabbing the hilt, and with just enough spring left in my legs, I jumped up from the ground. The man was still staggering backwards and my jaw tightened in empathy. His whole face probably felt like one huge, exposed nerve as blood spilled from the gash across his chin. I would be surprised if he hadn't bitten the tip of his tongue off. Dropping to a bent knee squat, I swept one of my long legs into his feet and he toppled to the ground.

One-two-three times, I twirled the broadsword in my hand, screaming out a blood curdling battle cry. The fallen man's eyes went wide as the blade came down, aiming for his head. At the last heartbeat, I veered right, sinking the blade into the soft turf, barely a hair away from the soldier's ear. My chest heaved with the exertion, adrenaline pumping throughout my system, and then there were the cheers. The other recruits stood back and applauded.

I immediately motioned for a healer to attend to the fallen boy. As they lead his unsteady figure from the field, he paused in front of me. I wiped my mouth of the water I downed from a nearby waterskin and took the boy's arm. He smiled, displaying a missing tooth and a bloody grin.

"It was an honor, Lord Conqueror. Everything they say about you is true; you are a mighty warrior. I thought I had you, though." The young officer shook his head, looking perplexed.

I squeezed his forearm and congratulated him. "You came close, young man. Never let your opponent see the fact that you know you've won. I saw that look in your eyes when you raised your sword. The thought of defeat made me try harder."

"Aye, Lord Conqueror." He smiled a little shakily, and was taken off the practice field.

The remaining officers gathered around Atrius and I, and we gave a critique of their performance. That's when I heard it and it made my blood run cold.

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*Gabrielle spent a few candlemarks writing in her scrolls after the Conqueror left her, to attend business elsewhere. The young slave already knew when she saw Nicos, what the news was about. She knew, as every other slave in the palace did, her Lord's clever plan to catch the headman, Demetri. Most free men and women weren't like her master. They treated slaves like chattel, property to be ignored until it was needed. Because of this, they spoke freely before their slaves, never realizing that intelligent human beings resided within the body of one held in thrall. Slaves knew more about what was going on in this palace than the Conqueror herself. Gabrielle already knew that Demetri fled. The young woman experienced a jumble of feelings regarding this.*

*The truth of that man's actions struck this small slave for very personal reasons, but she never told anyone. Why bother? She was a slave after all, the Lord Conqueror's slave...well cherished, but a slave nonetheless.*

*The small blonde now walked the familiar hall on the way to Anya's rooms. She thought about belonging to Xena and all that she so recently came to know of the Conqueror's feelings for her. Gabrielle dared not tell her master how hopelessly in love she was with her. For a moment, when they were alone in their room, however, she felt certain that Xena was about to declare that very thing.*

*Gods, am I losing my mind? Xena the Conqueror, as beautiful as she is, would never fall for the likes of me...Would she? Besides, aren't you forgetting that you're her slave?*

*Gabrielle's thoughts carried her to last evening. She wept so hard, but when Xena could not profess her feelings, the young slave felt it would be wrong, if not actually dangerous, for her to make the first admission. If the Conqueror were never able to confess to those feelings, then Gabrielle would indeed be committed to a lonely life. Loving and being loved, but never able to speak the words...Gabrielle dreamed, her whole lifetime, of someone saying those words to her. She knew that whatever course Xena chose for their relationship, she would serve and love the Conqueror gladly.*

*Often her dreams turned prophetic, never in exactly the same way, but since she was a young girl, she would gather snippets from her time in Morpheus' realm, that would occur in her waking moments. Sometimes, many seasons passed in between the visions, but since she entered the palace, here in Corinth, she began having the most confusing revelations. Never before had she received a premonition from an object, but that happened too. She dreamed the gentleness of this woman, known as the Conqueror, the attentiveness. Gabrielle recently saw Xena proclaim her love to her as they lay together, but being it hadn't happened, she now*

*questioned the reliability of her dreams. One nightmare, in particular, frightened her beyond imagination. She dismissed it as Morpheus disturbing her sleep, but the disconcerting scenario was repeated on the day she held Xena's dagger in her hands. Carrying the blade to her master, Gabrielle saw her nightmare again, this time played out in lurid detail in her mind's eye. She saw Xena, her back facing the small slave, suddenly turn, and thrust the dagger toward the blonde's throat.*

*Gabrielle shook off the memories of that mental picture. Right now, she was the happiest she could ever remember being. Xena was very good to her, and the tall woman admitted that there was more between them than merely the relationship involving a master and a slave. Xena made the small blonde's hopes and dreams come true by giving her the materials, and allowing her the freedom to write. Perhaps, in time, Gabrielle mused, she could persuade the Conqueror herself, to tell of her own life. Xena's greatest gift hadn't been material, in Gabrielle's estimation. The finest present was to give Gabrielle a sense of herself. Some would call it confidence, even pride, but whatever it was, the young slave enjoyed the feeling that she was worth something, if only to her rather uncommunicative master.*

*The young slave's deliberations occupied her attention so completely, that she never saw the figure that blocked her path, until she nearly ran into him.*

*"Ahhh, the Conqueror's whore."*

*The voice stopped Gabrielle in her tracks. She raised a terrified gaze to the man in her path. Her eyes darted throughout the expanse of the hall, as if to find someone who might help her. **Athena, please don't let me die...not yet...not when I'm so close.***

*"No sense looking for assistance, my pretty whore...you'll find none willing to help you here."*

*Gabrielle observed the look in Demetri's eyes. She'd seen that look before, a combination of madness and mirth, a volatile mix. Again, she looked around, searching her mind for a way out, even a way to appease. She was so close to Xena. The open-air columns on the second floor led out to a parapet that ran the length of the palace wall. She could hear the sounds of the village and the soldiers training on the field, just below.*

*Before she had a chance to make a move, Demetri reached out and grabbed her by the throat, squeezing until Gabrielle began to gasp for air, clawing at his hand. He released his handhold, twirling the girl around, and pulling her against his chest. He pressed his groin into her backside suggestively.*

*“I’m going to make you mine now, little slave.” He leered.*

*Gabrielle squeezed her eyes shut tight. Men like this had taken her before, but it only hurt for a short time and then it was over. If she gave Demetri what he wanted, perhaps that was all he would do. She felt the man pawing at her chest, trying to pull open the blouse she wore. It wasn’t the rough touch; she’d felt worse, or the idea of being taken against her will; that happened before, too. It was the fire that unexpectedly permeated her entire being. The feeling that this was wrong.*

*Suddenly, Gabrielle felt the burning come from within. It was like a warmth that started with a little spark, until it was a roaring blaze. She tried to give in and let this happen, tried to separate her mind from her body until the humiliation passed. She couldn’t. From somewhere far off she heard a voice begin to go along with that fire in her belly. The voice told her that she didn’t have to accept this fate; she didn’t deserve to be treated this way. She was, after all the personal slave to the Lord Conqueror. It was happening so quickly, but soon the tiny voice inside turned into Xena’s voice. The things Xena said...taught her...*

*Let me make this clear, Gabrielle. You belong to me.....The next time someone...anyone makes advances...touches you in any way, I want you to scream, kick, fight, anything you need to do to get my attention. Then I’ll deal with the situation. Do you understand, Gabrielle.....That’s right, Gabrielle, you belong to me.....Don’t you know how to fight back!?*

*The words Xena said to her swirled about her head in a jumble, phrases, and snatches of conversation that were burned into her memory. Finally, the young slave felt the fire explode into indignation. She did belong to Xena...to Xena and no one else. No one else had this right!*

*“No!” Gabrielle sank her elbow into Demetri’s ribs and the man released his hold on her arm.*

*The suddenness of the action, especially coming from this slave, caught the man completely by surprise. He grunted as the elbow caught him sharply a second time.*

*Kicking back with her heel, Gabrielle felt her foot make contact with his shin. Demetri howled in pain, completely losing the girl in his grasp. Gabrielle didn’t wait, she ran directly for the outside wall.*

*She could feel how close Demetri was and she could see that the outside wall was coming to an end. She was running out of territory when at last she looked up across the palace courtyard. There, on the training field, Xena stood with her soldiers. Realizing the penalty for what she had in mind, Gabrielle knew it was either certain punishment, or death at Demetri's hands. Just as Gabrielle made it to the end of the wall, Demetri was behind her, his arm around her waist pulling her back inside. Her hands refused to let go of the stone ledge, as she cried out with everything that was in her.*

*"Xeeennnaaa!" The high-pitched scream echoed off the surrounding walls.*

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The sound chilled my bones, and when I looked toward the source of it, I saw Gabrielle leaning over the parapet, Demetri grabbing her and pulling her inside the palace.

I was moving at a dead run before the last echo faded away. I heard the oath Atrius muttered before catching up to me, followed by our class of recruits. All rational thought left me. I couldn't think or swear; all I could focus on was reaching Gabrielle. I took the stairs three and four at a time on my way up to the second floor.

Demetri was there, cut off by soldiers at the other end of the hall. Suddenly, nearly every soldier in the palace was converging at this point and that worried me. My former headman held Gabrielle to him, a dagger at her throat. If I didn't get some of these soldiers to back off, Demetri might just kill Gabrielle for the fun of it.

With a quick motion of my hand, we all slowed up, Demetri turning this way and that, Gabrielle struggling against his hold. That rather surprised me, but I guessed that I taught her well. Left with no place else to go, Demetri eventually felt his back against the stone wall. He inched along, until he was in front of a large wooden door, trying the latch to find it secured from the other side.

"You can't escape, Demetri." I said evenly. "Might as well as do this as painlessly as possible. Release the girl." I continued in a calm voice.

"Oh no, Lord Conqueror..." he began and I saw the glazed over look of lunacy written in his eyes. "You get to watch her bleed to death, first."

I watched as he pressed the tip of the blade against her slightly, puncturing the skin. A slow, thin line of blood made its way from just under Gabrielle's chin, trickling down her neck, and into the cleavage hidden below her ripped blouse. She winced, and when she looked up at me, I saw the fear in her eyes.

I never had the time to fight the beast back. All of a sudden, it was there, my darkness all around me, consuming and controlling my actions. The blood on Gabrielle's neck and the torn state of her clothing sent me spiraling into that abyss. Only this time a very miniscule part of me remained. I would need to be detached, even frigid, to pull this off. I would need all my wits about me, to outwit a madman.

Again, with my hand, I motioned to Atrius, who immediately began whispering instructions. It could only be I, no one else. If I were to save this woman, the only one to ever capture my heart, I would need to gamble with her life. And so, I pushed the last bit of Xena away, embracing all that I grew to detest about myself.

"You don't honestly believe that I'm simply going to let you walk out of here, do you, Demetri?" I asked as I slowly moved forward.

The man pulled back his hand, exposing Gabrielle's neck further. "I'll slit her throat, I swear it!"

"Forget about her." I replied, casually dismissing her with a wave of my hand. "You're the one I'm talking about. So, you kill the slave, look around you." I paused as he did just that. "How do you think it feels to be skinned alive, Demetri?" I asked, an evil grin pulling at my lips.

"She means that much to you, eh?" He grinned now, thinking I cared so much for the girl; I would make his death slow and painful.

"I don't give a damn about the fucking slave!" I screamed at him. I was now a mere yard away. "You stole from me...ME!"

Suddenly he was confused, I could see it in his eyes. He was wondering if grabbing the girl was a smart move after all. It was as if I was reading his mind. I knew what path his brain would take, before he did. Now, he was thinking that this was a ruse. He would test me.

I stood there, my arms folded against my chest, a malevolent glare burning into him. He raised his hand and I silently prayed to any Gods I hadn't heartily offended in the last twenty summers, to keep Gabrielle from too much pain, and for her to forgive me when all of this was at an end. He slashed the knife quickly across Gabrielle's upper arm, where her blouse had been torn away. The young woman cried out in pain at the four-inch slice, which began to bleed heavily.

I simply stood there, every muscle in my body under my command. I didn't even clench my jaw or change my pattern of breathing...nothing. The beast was as dead to emotion as a corpse and it had full reign now. I blinked emotionless eyes and saw the man's growing terror in his own. Yet, he still wasn't sure.

"I'll kill her!" He stated, with much less passion than before.

"Kill her then." I responded flatly.

"I'll do it!" he was hysterical now and rightly so. He saw it all coming to an end, and wondered how he miscalculated so badly.

"Did you hear me?" I shouted at the top of my voice, turning my back on the madman, raising my hands into the air for effect. "Kill the bitch!"

"What?" Demetri gasped aloud.

There would only be this one chance and as I sit here writing about it, I know it sounds as if it took an eternity to accomplish, but nothing could be further from the truth. It all took but the blink of an eye. I knew...rather the beast knew what Demetri's actions would be. It was an otherworldly sense, whether an accident at my birth or a curse from the Gods, I would likely never know.

Demetri paused for a heartbeat, wondering how his plan had gone so horribly wrong. He lowered the hand slightly, that held the knife to Gabrielle's throat, and it was in that one heartbeat; that one wrinkle in time, that I realized I had to make my move.

My back still facing the madman, I turned. As I made that turn I brought my hand up to my belt, and with one swift motion, I pulled my ever-present dagger from its resting place. My motion was quick, too fast to stop or to be anticipated by the victim. Since I'd had my back

facing him, I couldn't be certain of where he stood, I could only sense it. The entire time, I prayed that Gabrielle was as quick as I gave her credit for.

It all happened in one, seemingly effortless, motion. My weapon hand led the way, and as my body turned, the dagger headed straight for Gabrielle. *Gods, this girl is truly the other half of my soul*, I remember thinking, as she jerked her head to one side, allowing my blade to plunge into Demetri's throat.

His knife clattered to the stone floor and I could remember using all my might to press the dagger into his neck. He coughed and gasped, his eyes rolling back into his head, blood spattering over both Gabrielle and I. I remember my whole body shaking as I continued to press the blade into him, even though it would go no further. I heard sounds all around me, but I was caught in the lingering grasp of power. The only thing circling my mind was that this man tried to take what was mine.

I sensed a hand on my arm, and felt a growl rumbling up through my chest.

"Gabrielle, no!" I heard my Captain's voice, but the hand around my forearm squeezed.

The hand moved to my face and I heard the soft voice. "Xena? Xena?"

Those soft fingers were pulling at my chin and I tensed my jaw, fighting the feeling. I gave up and the hand managed to turn my face. Finally, my eyes pulled into focus, as if seeing this vision for the very first time. Deep green eyes drew me in and held me there, while I felt my fingers being pried away from the hilt of my dagger.

"Gabrielle." I managed to say, receiving a small smile of acknowledgement.

I didn't care what it looked like. I grabbed the woman, wrapping my arms tightly around her. As she pulled me away, I looked back and saw Demetri's body, suspended in death, impaled against the wooden door by my dagger.

I nodded to Atrius, who seemed to have the most incredulous expression on his face. "Send for the healer." I said, remembering Gabrielle's arm, then I pulled her with me, walking back to our rooms.

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I began to feel it the moment I held her in my arms, the twitching sensation in the muscles, the searing warmth that flowed from my belly, settling between my legs. I could feel the pattern of my breathing change and the moment we were in the privacy of our rooms, I pressed myself against her.

Gabrielle leaned back against the door and I kissed her. It wasn't like any kiss we'd shared yet. It was powerful and urgent, rough and intensely raw. I could feel Gabrielle's hand at my back, holding the bunched up cloth of my shirt, tightly in her fist. I had only one desire, one focus, and when I paused for a heartbeat to let my brain catch up with my libido, I knew the sensation for what it was; battle lust.

*Gods, it's been so very long since I felt anything like this!* I realized it was because I hadn't fought with a passion for anything in so long, hadn't struggled in battle, risked my life, for anything I truly wanted or believed it was my manifest destiny to have and own. This was what the darkness always called up in me. No matter how hard I tried, I was never able to fight off the demon when it came to satiating its lust after a battle.

Gabrielle's body tensed against me, and all at once, her head turned from my lips, her arms pushing against me.

"Xena, I love you!" she cried out.

The words were like a blow and I literally staggered back a step from the weight of the assault. Gabrielle dropped to her knees and I could hear fear in her voice, fear, and a great sadness.

"Forgive me, My Lord."

I felt all the surging ardor and passion drain from my body at once. *Dear Gods, who knew?* Who knew that the many seasons I spent suffering, trying to control my dark side, how was I to know that the cure was in this small slave at my feet? The rush of adrenaline quieted and I felt the beast retreat into nothing.

"Forgive you for saying it...or for feeling it?" I asked in a very weak voice.

She lowered her head even further, most certainly expecting a swift punishment, which she seemed sure would be forthcoming.

“For feeling it, My Lord.”

I stood there for a few moments, almost unwilling to believe her answer. I slowly knelt down and pulled her upright, taking more care for her injured arm than I did earlier. I held her in my arms for a moment and lightly kissed her forehead.

“Gabrielle, I thought I told you to call me Xena.” I said gently, smiling down at her.

She made an attempt to smile back at me, but I knew there was only one thing I could say that would ease her fears. It was the one and only thing I knew for certain in this life.

I pulled her closer, brushing my cheek against the soft texture of her hair. “I love you, Gabrielle,” I whispered to her. “With all my heart, I love you.”

If I’d ever hoped to look into the face of an angel, my wish came true when I pulled away slightly. Gabrielle’s face was the vision of joy, her green eyes with a new added sparkle.

I quickly turned from any thoughts of sex, to the simple desire to be close to Gabrielle. I brought her into the bedchamber, carefully using a damp cloth to wipe away the blood that was spattered across her face. I helped her to remove her clothes and change into her robe, and then I set about cleaning the wound on her arm. A pounding on the outer door interrupted my actions.

“Enter.” I shouted loud enough to be heard into the other room.

The young palace guard, Aristes, entered the room. He stopped at the open door to the bedchamber, probably amazed at me kneeling in front of Gabrielle, attending to her wound.

“Captain Atrius wishes to know if you need any assistance here, Lord Conqueror.”

“I do as a matter of fact. Where is Kuros?” I asked about my healer.

“He is attending to Lord Demetri, Lord Conqueror.”

When I stood up, I could see that Aristes was backing up, preparing for what was sure to come.

“Attending to Demetri? Fuck him, he’s beyond help! Tell him to get his butt in here, this is where the live patient is!” My voice grew louder as I advanced on the young man.

Aristes scrambled from the room and I returned to Gabrielle, a scowl on my face as I kneeled before her once again.

“Xena...” Gabrielle’s uninjured arm reached out and she laid a hand against my cheek. “I’m all right.”

I grinned in embarrassment. “I know.” I turned my face to place a kiss in the palm of her hand.

“Lord Conqueror...” I heard Kuros’ voice behind me.

“Her arm,” I motioned the small man into the room. “From a blade.” I explained shortly.

We settled Gabrielle against some cushions on the bed and the healer carefully examined the wound. “Yes, it does look as though stitches are in order.” He looked up at me expectantly.

“Well,” I motioned him on with my hands, “get on with it.”

I knew why he asked that way. People didn’t always bother with giving medical treatment to slaves. It was oftentimes easier and cheaper, in the end, to buy another healthy slave, than to treat a sick or injured one.

I paced the room nervously, while every one of Gabrielle’s murmurs of pain, brought me over to the bed to watch. I hated to admit it, but seeing Gabrielle like this frightened me. It showed me just how quickly it could all disappear. The last time I walked over to stand behind the

healer, I must have inadvertently nudged him with my knee. I heard his exasperated sigh right before he glanced up at me.

I muttered something unintelligible and moved away again, until I heard Gabrielle's small cry. I leaned over Kuros' shoulder to get a look at what he was doing.

"Lord Conqueror!" the small man finally gave up and paused.

"What?" I tried to say innocently.

"Would the Lord Conqueror mind getting out of my light?" He said rather forcefully.

"Touchy touchy..." I said softly, but I think they both heard me.

"Xena, please come over here." Gabrielle asked, indicating the other side of the bed.

She held out her hand and I took it in both of my own, carefully sitting on the other side of the bed. I watched the tiny, precise stitches being placed in her skin and remembered how much it stung. It made me happy, however, to think that Kuros thought enough of Gabrielle to place the type of sutures that would leave the smallest scar.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" I asked gently.

"Actually, I can hardly feel it since Kuros put the ointment on." She replied.

"What ointment?" I looked to the healer for the answer.

"It temporarily deadens the area to the touch. I use it for children, and beautiful young women." The older man graced Gabrielle with a fatherly smile.

"You have an ointment that does this?" I arched an eyebrow about as high up as it would go, glaring over at the man. "Why didn't you ever use that on me?"

“Well, you are a warrior, Lord Conqueror, and frankly, it is extremely difficult to make. If I used it every time you needed stitches, there’d be none left at all.”

“Look, Kuros--”

“Xena?” Gabrielle interrupted.

My demeanor changed instantly. “Yes, Gabrielle...can I do something for you...get you something?”

“Xena, would you do something for me if I asked?”

“Of course, love,” I paused and kissed the hand that I still held in both of mine.

“Promise?”

“Yes,” I chuckled at her questions. “All you have to do is ask.”

“Okay. Would you go wait in the other room until I’m finished?” Gabrielle asked so sincerely, it took me a couple of heartbeats to realize she was serious.

I could feel the muscles in my face falling and suddenly I felt like a scolded child. “Okay. I’ll do it for you,” I carefully reached up and brushed the golden bangs from her forehead, placing a gentle kiss there. “But, I am not doing it for him.” I jerked a thumb in my healer’s direction.

Gabrielle giggled and squeezed my hand and I thought; to be on the receiving end of that, I didn’t care if Kuros thought I was completely whipped. I didn’t even care if he spread that bit of gossip through the whole palace.

I rose to do as Gabrielle asked, pausing in the doorway that separated the bedchamber from the outer room. I turned back one more time.

“You might need something, are you sure you want me to--”

“Yes!” they both said in unison.

I tried to muster as much dignity as I could, straightening myself up and walking into the other room.

“I never get ointment.” I grumbled under my breath.

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“We look like a pair of bookends.” I said in jest, to the young woman sitting in front of me in the large tub.

I indicated our arms; mine, already with a healing scar, Gabrielle’s stitches on the opposite arm. She smiled, but I could see the weariness in her eyes. We decided on lingering in the bath once the cleaning and hair washing was complete. I pulled Gabrielle’s back against my chest

“Be careful not to get your arm too wet.” I cautioned.

“You take good care of me.” Gabrielle replied, leaning against my shoulder.

“I didn’t do such a good job today.” I responded.

Gabrielle turned slightly, until she could see the expression on my face. I think she honestly wanted to know if I was teasing or not. It was no joke to me.

“Xena, you saved my life today.”

“Gabrielle, it was because of *me* that you were put in jeopardy in the first place. I fear that loving me, it won’t be the last time.” I answered, gently stroking her beautiful face.

“It’s a price I’m willing to pay...if you’ll allow me,” she added, capturing my hand within her own, and raising it slowly to her lips.

I reached in and replaced my hand with my lips. Gods, so soft. The tender kiss lingered on, becoming two, then three. Who would have thought that mere gentleness could arouse such passion? I would never have dreamed it possible for me, to ever be so completely sated by such caring and compassionate lovemaking. That is until Gabrielle.

“I do love you, Gabrielle.” I whispered, kissing her once again. “I want to show you how much. Would that be all right with you?” I asked at last.

Gabrielle nodded her head and I easily lifted her as I stood, stepping from the bath. We took turns drying one another off, and then I scooped the small woman into my arms again.

“Xena,” she laughed, “I can walk.”

“Yes, but this feels so much better.” I answered with a lopsided grin.

“Mmmm, yes it does,” she replied, immediately pressing her lips against my neck.

I placed Gabrielle down on the large bed, stretching the length of my body out next to her, running my fingertips along her skin, the entire measure of her beautiful body, stopping to tease and stroke the areas I knew brought her pleasure. Gabrielle arched her body into the touch, closing her eyes, trusting me to pleasure her for a change. When I bent my head down to brush my lips against her own, I let my body press into her, beginning to wonder whose pleasure this was for.

“Gods, you feel so good.” I continued the lazy caress, letting my fingers wander lower.

My lips moved along her jaw, down to her neck, and back up to her ear, where I nipped and sucked on a perfect earlobe. Sliding my hand up along her ribcage, I cupped the underside of her breast and brushed my thumb across the nipple, the flesh hardening quickly under the easy touch.

“Xena...” She said in a heavy breath, and I was thrilled to hear my name, in as close to a moan, as Gabrielle ever uttered.

I positioned my body over Gabrielle's, easing my weight on top of her, but resting the majority of my body weight on my elbows and arms. Gabrielle pressed her body up against me and I moaned aloud for the both of us. Once again, I lowered my head, taking Gabrielle's lips with my own, savoring the taste of the young woman. I slowly slid my tongue across the woman's bottom lip; simply as a promise of what pleasures, I could offer her with that tongue. When I pulled away, Gabrielle's hands reached up, entangling themselves in my damp hair, luring me in to another passionate kiss.

“Ah, ah, ah...” I smiled, disentangling myself from the small woman's embrace. Gabrielle looked confused until I brought her arms over her head, carefully avoiding the injured area, and wrapped her fingers under the wooden headboard. “Remember, love...if you let go, I'll stop.” I smiled down at her.

She smiled and I moved down along her neck, using my lips, tongue, and even teeth to lead me along her throat. I couldn't help but be pleased at the rapidly beating pulse there.

“I want everyone to know you belong to me,” I growled, pulling that tender flesh into my mouth, sucking long and hard.

Gabrielle gasped, “Oh Gods, yes!” She cried out.

The sound of Gabrielle's passion surprised both of us. I grinned up at her. “So, I take it that means you like it?”

She nodded, her face flushed pink in a combination of desire and embarrassment.

I began to gently tease, my fingers brushing across her erect nipples. I kissed her breast, all around the hard point, not yet letting more than my warm breath touch the pebbled flesh.

“Xena...” Gabrielle squirmed under my touch.

“Is this what you want, love?” I asked.

Without waiting for an answer, I slowly enclosed one of the hardened nubs into my mouth and sucked, at first leisurely, working the sensitive flesh over with my tongue, graduating to a firm sucking. Gabrielle whimpered slightly, unused to verbally expressing herself. Gods, I

could come just listening to the wonderful sounds she was making. Before switching to the other breast, I leaned up and reached for her mouth, placing a soft kiss there.

“You can be as loud as you want, love.” I reassured her.

She took me at my word when I used my knee to gently spread her legs apart, moving my thigh in against the warm wetness there.

“Gods, Xena!” she groaned.

“You're so wet.” I answered, “Gods, do you know how good that feels?”

I moved downward, my mouth and tongue sliding across the flat plane of Gabrielle's stomach, the satiny skin tensing and releasing in anticipation. I spread her legs further apart with a touch of my hand on her inner thighs, settling my shoulders comfortably between them. Breathing deeply, I let my mouth water at the intoxicating scent of Gabrielle's passion, turning my head, first to the right, then to the left, I placed a kiss to the inside of Gabrielle's thighs. My own body shivered in delightful expectation, at the thought of finally tasting this gift that I measured worth more than Sumerian treasure.

I slipped my hands under Gabrielle's hips, pulling her to my eager mouth. I ran my tongue along the length of her entire sex, feeling her body shiver, her hands clutching the wooden bar under the headboard tighter.

Gabrielle spread her legs wider in encouragement, and I simply couldn't hold back any longer, I buried my tongue deep into that sweetness. Gabrielle's hips immediately thrust upward against my tongue. I let her grind her hips into my mouth for a few short moments, then gently held them to the bed, spread open for my pleasure, as well as hers.

I allowed my tongue to roam and explore the delicate folds, delighting in the constant moans of pleasure coming from Gabrielle. I reveled in the textures and taste of her, feeling her hips begin to move in a rhythm all their own. I felt my own hips rocking against the mattress, groaning against the smooth wet flesh in my mouth as my clit rubbed against the silk sheet.

I began to easily stroke the hidden nub, now swollen with need. I felt Gabrielle's body begin to tremble uncontrollably, her legs parting wider, and the muscles in her thighs stretched taut. I slid a single finger inside, then two, gliding repeatedly into Gabrielle's soaking depths, relentlessly continuing the actions of my tongue on her center.

“Gods, please...more...” she gasped out.

I held a close rein on my own body’s desires, abdominal muscles cramping, to prevent the explosion I could feel coming. I pressed into Gabrielle with three fingers and her whole body was trying to thrust against me, in order to achieve her release.

I finally felt her back arch, and I wrapped a strong arm around her out of control hips, burying my face deeper, sucking hard, while my tongue moved rapidly across the swollen nub.

Gabrielle cried out my name over and over, as waves of release washed through her, contracting against my fingers inside her, the young woman's body convulsing as a second orgasm quickly exploded within her. It didn’t take much more to release myself after hearing Gabrielle scream in passion for the first time. We both collapsed, the last vestiges of any energy, draining from our fatigued muscles.

As Gabrielle lay spent, I eventually crawled up and kissed her tenderly, pulling her into my embrace. Gabrielle nuzzled my neck, seemingly unable to speak. She tried a couple of times, but finally gave up.

I chuckled, pulling the sheet up over us. “I know, my love...I know.” I answered her unspoken emotion.

Encouraging her into a comfortable position, I smiled and thanked any Gods who were still in my life, when I heard Gabrielle’s sleepy voice whisper against my chest.

“I love you, Xena.”

## Chapter 16: Calm Was The Day...

I lie here awake, as the predawn light attempts to filter in from behind the heavy tapestries that cover the windows. I listen to the regular breathing and feel the tiny twitches of sleep-absorbed muscles, coming from the woman in my arms. I take this moment to thank those Gods still favoring me, amazed at Athena's tolerance of my twenty-season absence from her temple. Perhaps a bit of placating is in order. For I know with certainty, only the power of the Gods could have brought Gabrielle and I together in this fashion.

Waking at my usual time was no more a chore than it always was, however I was loath to leave this spot at present. I now had a reason to stay and linger, the feeling of Gabrielle's small body tucked against me, compelling me to lie here, for just a while longer.

I heard Sylla in the outer room. She was no doubt cleaning up the mess I left, and that Gabrielle was too preoccupied to remember. My maid decided that coming into the bedchamber to wake me was too personal a task to attempt, now that I was no longer alone. I smiled at the times Sylla hustled a sleepy whore from my bed, so I wouldn't have to look at the woman the next day. Gods, the things people put up with from me. I appreciated the fact that Sylla afforded this respect, not only to me, but to Gabrielle also. The reason why took the smile from my face and replaced it with a frown. Sylla provided this courtesy to Gabrielle because she no longer thought of the young woman as a slave. Actually, very few people in the palace did. When people spoke of her to me, they called her, *my Gabrielle*. They could just as easily have said, *my slave*, but none did. It seems that only one person still thought of Gabrielle as a slave, and that was Gabrielle herself.

Of course, I perpetuated that notion with my selfish denial of her freedom. With only a word, I could have a Queen by my side, and yet I settle for a slave. I know...I know in my head the wrongness of it all, but Gods, my heart. I couldn't take it if she were to leave me. That's what it all boils down to, doesn't it. She may say she loves me now, but wait. Just wait until the moment the beast is loosed upon her, instead of an enemy. If she were a free woman, she would be able to run, any sane woman would, wouldn't she?

I have found the love of my life, the woman that no other has or will ever compare to, yet there is still that tiny voice, deep inside. That voice that tells me I don't deserve to be loved, that given time, I will only hurt this beautiful young woman. I wonder when I will have a day when I feel it's okay for someone to love me. I release a heavy sigh and suddenly the woman beside me is awake.

"You're thinking grave thoughts," she whispered humorously, in a sleepy voice.

"How long have you been awake?" I chuckle and ask. I was so involved with my own introspections that I didn't even hear the pattern of Gabrielle's breathing change.

"Long enough to feel your body tighten up with those worries." She answered. "Xena?"

"Hhhmm?"

"Is it still all right...to call you that?" Gabrielle asked, a small hint of concern in her voice.

I rolled partially over, until I was leaning against her, looking down into that beautiful face. “It would take more than a night in Morpheus’ realm to cause me to forget my love for you, Gabrielle.” I punctuated the statement with a deep, lingering kiss.

The doubts vanished from Gabrielle’s face, while my own self-recriminations were tossed into a heap in the corner of my mind. It was still a concern, but Gabrielle had a way of dispelling the darkness from my heart and mind, not to mention the absolutely heart stopping way she was preparing to thank me, for not leaving our bed too early this morning.

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A couple of very pleasurable candlemarks later, I was in the process of receiving a much-needed back massage. I laughed aloud at the memory that passed before my mind’s eye.

“Are you suddenly ticklish?” Gabrielle questioned the small laugh.

“I was remembering the first time you did this for me. You know where that got us, don’t you.”

It was Gabrielle’s turn to release a small bit of laughter, moving her body up until she was lying across my back. Gods, she felt good.

“Would you like a repeat performance, My Lord?” Gabrielle asked in a teasing manner, stressing my title, to make me more aware of that fact.

I rolled over, laughing, at the enthusiasm of her youth, and that I was even entertaining the notion. I pulled her into my arms. “My heart says yes, most definitely, my body, however, says that if I have one more orgasm this morning I’m going to pass out. I will take you up on that offer later, however.” I added with a smile.

Kissing her once more, I reluctantly pulled away to rise, but it was the feel of the small body in my arms that caused me to lie back against the pillows, once more. We lay there for some time, each of us lost in separate thoughts, but something told me we were both replaying yesterdays events in our minds.

“Gabrielle?” I asked hesitantly.

“Yes, Xena?” she answered, rising up on one elbow, to look down on me.

Suddenly my mouth went dry. She was leaning over me, her golden hair falling over her shoulder, the strands reaching down to tickle my arm. She was a vision and her heart belonged to me, just as I gave mine to her for safekeeping.

“Gods, I love you.” I blurted out, feeling instant embarrassment at my juvenile method of expressing the emotion.

Her smile said more than an entire scroll. It lit her from within and she practically shimmered from the ethereal quality of the effect. There I was, looking up into the face of a woman, young enough to be my daughter, an expression on her face that belied her seasons. She

directed so much warmth and compassion toward me, through that one smile, that I momentarily lost my voice.

“So beautiful.” I finally uttered, reaching up to stroke her cheek.

A dark thought occurred to me and I felt myself needing to clear the air. “Gabrielle...those things I said to Demetri...you know I only said what I did to--”

She reached up and pressed her fingertips to my lips, effectively halting my speech.

“I know,” she answered simply.

“I had to let myself go, to get you away from him, I had to become...become something...”

“Dark?” Gabrielle voiced the words I found so difficult.

“Yes, dark. Gabrielle, I don’t know how to explain it, but I lose myself when that happens. I fear that I might forget myself that way around you. I would never purposely hurt you, but I’m afraid that I might someday. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if that happened. It almost did happen, Gods, Gabrielle, if you hadn’t moved out of the way of my blade so quickly, I might have stabbed *you*.”

I watched the play of emotions express themselves in her face. I wondered if she was thinking twice about this whole thing...about me. Gabrielle appeared to be struggling with some unknown choice. She seemed to finally come to a decision and spoke.

“I knew.” She stated quietly.

“Knew what?”

“Knew you would turn with your dagger...I saw it...in a dream.” She slowly finished.

My first impulse was to laugh at the young woman’s jest, but the look on Gabrielle’s face said she was anything but joking. The expression told me she was expecting...well, I don’t know what, but something. She lowered her eyes and silence hung heavy between us, until it dawned on me. She was serious. Gabrielle was taking a huge chance in revealing this to me.

When I was a young woman, oracles were feared, yet respected individuals, whom the Gods blessed, or cursed, depending on the way you viewed their situation. The world was a different place now. The Gods rarely showed themselves, although I still received regular visits from some of the most annoying of them. As this world changed, so did its people. People were no longer open and accepting of what they did not understand, rather they let fear become a ruler in their lives. Because of this behavior, gone were the gifted ones with the sight, even the Oracle at Delphi, either murdered or gone into seclusion, no longer speaking of her visions.

To this day, I look back with wonder at the one true seer I ever met. She called herself Beve, and I met her not long after my army swept through Athens on the final leg of successfully conquering the Greek Empire. I refused to make Athens the capital city of my new empire because of what they’d done to my homeland, during the Peloponnesian War. I ordered

Pericles and most of the statesman to be crucified and many of the Athenian halls torn down and destroyed. I felt my destiny click into place on the day I watched them destroy the marble architecture of my enemies.

Atrius, who heard the woman tell of her visions, brought Beve into my tent that evening. He thought her predictions real enough to bring her to my attention. As I sat across from her, an amused, wine induced smile on my face, she told me things that I thought impossible, some merely impossible for her to know. Strangely enough, every single word the woman told me eventually came true over the passing years.

I was overcome with an uncharacteristic sadness on the day that I heard they stoned her, along with a woman by the name of Hypatia. I think part of the reason for their unnecessary deaths could have been the fact that they were popular women in a male dominated society, but mostly, I believe they were murdered because their visions of the future made them different. Frighteningly enough, being different in today's society, caused fear, then anger, then rage, usually inciting the passions of the mob.

"Are you an oracle, then?" I asked Gabrielle, who was still patiently waiting for my comment.

"Oh, no, I only have...dreams sometimes, and sometimes the things end up happening like they did in my dreams, but not always." Gabrielle answered.

I kissed her forehead. "It would be all right if you were a seer. You know that, right?"

"Thank you, Xena," the young woman breathed a heavy sigh of relief at my answer. "I know how people feel about such things. When I was a small child, I told my mother about a dream I had that came true. She told me never to speak of it again. After I was sold into slavery, when I would have these visions come to me, I always kept them to myself, for fear of being branded as a priestess of Hecate."

"Gabrielle, you don't have to keep these things to yourself any longer. I'll always listen, and no one else ever has to know." I smiled at her.

"I'm so glad to know that, Xena. When I was a teenager, I saw the men of an Ambracian village hang a woman for her visions. I've always been too afraid to tell anyone my secret, until now." She finished, looking into my eyes. I saw love and trust in that gaze, and my heart ached over the seasons of pain this lovely woman had to endure.

"People can have such small minds sometimes. They only want to know what has always gone on before, what has always been. Change frightens them, Gabrielle; anything different frightens them." I commented.

"It is so much more so for slaves, Xena."

I watched the young woman's face, yet Gabrielle didn't say this out of meanness or to chide me. It was obvious that she was more accepting of our slave/master relationship, perhaps more resigned at what she thought of as fate, than I. Here it was then, our first words about the issue that hung silently between us. What could I honestly say that would not be a lie, for that, I would not do to her. Yet, she didn't ask me for her freedom, did she?

“You do know, Gabrielle...I...I don’t think of you that way...as a slave.” I was simply trying to tell her how I felt.

“Yet...I am.” Gabrielle answered softly, not a hint of spite or anger in her reply. She was simply stating a fact.

My young lover, unlike myself, was resigned to the reality that she was in love with, and loved by, a woman who owned her, a woman who, when it came right down to it, was her master. There wasn’t much either one of us could say after that simple phrase. I would spend the rest of my days in this mortal realm, cursing my own selfishness and the outcome it was to bring about.

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Gabrielle and I enjoyed our days, not to mention our nights together. She was still the model of civility to me in public, but in private, she was becoming open and fun loving, even learning that she could tease me. She continued to beat me at King’s Men on a regular basis, my pride refusing to ask how she was able to consistently perform such a task. When at last I grudgingly accepted the idea that Gabrielle’s mind was better suited to the game than mine, I inquired as to how she employed her strategy. The rather amazing thing, was that she beat me every time from a knowledge, not of what she would do in six future moves, but in knowing what I would do. She was reading *me*, not the board. Very simply, she told me my arrogance made my moves predictable, once my King was in trouble. Even more ironic, was the fact that it was this very ability that led me to conquer Greece. I was able to read and predict people, just as Gabrielle seemed to have a feel for them. Only, somewhere along the way, I lost touch with people, and therefore, the ability to know them.

She enjoyed her growing friendships with Anya, Sylla, and Delia. I neither said nor did anything to discourage the relationships she was forming. I knew friendships were important to the young woman, they were a new experience, and I was quickly discovering, my Gabrielle loved a new experience. Her life as a slave left her little time, nor inclination, to make friends. I kept my opinions to myself and hoped she was smart enough to know that she had to take care regarding those who would befriend her. There were always people who would hurt or even use her to get to me.

Gabrielle was a relatively good judge of character, however. Because of this, I never thought to question her as to who exactly she spent how much time with. I was learning to trust, and even surprised myself, simply because that was very new for me. I never cared for her friendships with Carra, however.

Carra was a slave, but that had little to do with my dislike of her. She was captured as a very young woman, part of the spoils of war, from one of the many battles my army and I fought, in lands far to the north. Gods, what country! The land was beautiful for perhaps two or three moons of the year, and then grew cold and icy. The snow, which I previously only saw on mountaintops, covered their entire country during the winter spells. Surely the Goddess of their people suffered a similar fate to Persephone, but the God who kidnapped her must not have been as easy going as Hades, to let her return to the earth for half the season. It was a murderous campaign, and the men and women of their armies were huge, hulking people, whom the bitter cold did not appear to affect. Their weapons were stronger and larger, yet their battle strategies were pitiful. It was only that fact that led to my eventual victories. I left

that country without adding it to my already growing realm. I took slaves, resources, and precious booty, but left the inhospitable land, vowing never to return if I could help it.

Carra had a look in her eye that spoke, not only of pain she suffered, but also of pain she would like to inflict. It was not a new expression to me; I'd spent most of my life with that look, burning from my blue orbs. It was a thirst for revenge. However, Gabrielle saw someone in need of a friend, and I found it, a little harder every day I must admit, to deny my little one anything.

Carra was a tall, strong, dark-haired woman, and I attributed my feelings to jealousy more than anything else. It was the way she looked at Gabrielle that I never cared for, but I held my tongue, not wanting to appear the jealous lover. Perhaps if I'd voiced my concerns, Gabrielle would have been more aware, not quite so trusting. If I'd broken my silence, Gabrielle might not have suffered so much hurt, not only at Carra's hands, but also by my own.

My days began to be completely dominated by the trial of Kassandros and his men. I could have simply declared them guilty, after all, they all confessed, quite eagerly I must say, once Demetri's lifeless body was paraded in front of them. I had it in my mind to put them on trial for their illegal slavery tactics, a fair and unbiased one, not some mock court procedure, and to use the trial as a precedent to banish and outlaw slavery within the Greek Empire.

It would have to be prepared with care. I didn't want an uprising over the issue, so I spent long hours with my advisors, running messages throughout the entire Empire to men and women of position and power, who I knew to be loyal to me. A full moon passed before I received the answers I needed. With the exception of a few dissenters, who would stand behind me nonetheless, the majority of the people who held any kind of power in the land, agreed to my concepts.

It would not be an easy task. There were those who truly believed that fate made certain people slaves because they were not able to take care of themselves, that they weren't as smart, or as capable as the people who owned them. It was because of this that I told no one but my advisors, and the key people around the Empire, of my plan. Even Gabrielle did not hear of the plan from my lips.

I thought it would truly be the ultimate gift to her if I could announce, not only her freedom, but also an end to slavery throughout the realm. I prepared myself as best I could for the eventuality that Gabrielle would want to leave me. She was a young woman and had her whole life ahead of her. I, on the other hand, was nearing my journey's end, finally realizing that my love for Gabrielle, would not allow me to cage her like a pet.

It was because of something Delia said to me that I charted my course of action. The older woman cajoled me on a daily basis regarding Gabrielle's freedom. Once I voiced all my fears to her, she reminded me of the golden eagle that still lived in the hills and forest outside my palace.

An accidental bowshot downed the animal some fifteen seasons ago. We were out hunting and the huge shadow that covered us spooked the horses, and scared the wits out of one young archer. His shot went wide, but caught the bird's wing and it fell from the sky. Thinking to put it out of its misery, I jumped from my horse, but realized, with a little care, the wound might not be life threatening.

That began a journey for both the young bird and myself. I fancied myself quite a falconer and began the conditioning necessary to prepare the bird for training, but this bird was not to be trained so easily. Its wounds healed, but it would only obey half my commands, ignoring me the rest of the time. After a full season, I realized the creature was quite like myself. This is how I would be in captivity, isn't it? I was born free and would never be able to forget the fact, nor completely bow to anyone. Because of this revelation, I took the bird out one day, and with a heavy heart at losing such a magnificent creature, I removed his hood, untied the anklets that held the jesses to his legs, and finally removed his leash. It was the first time in captivity that he was without his leash and he didn't know quite what to make of it. He looked rather like a child about to dive into the deep end of the pond for the first time.

At last, I threw him into the air and he took flight. He circled for a long time, swooping closer to see if I would toss out the lure as I had in training. After some time, he flew off. I stood there for quite some time just in case, but he was free now and able to make his own choice. At that moment in my life, that profound thought made a difference in me. Although it would be a great many seasons, before the thought would be put to good use again.

On the day I spoke with Delia regarding Gabrielle, the older woman reminded me of what happened the next day, on a crisp fall morning. The screeching of the massive bird brought me from the castle, glove fixed firmly on my hand. When I raised my arm, the bird glided gracefully to the perch, the muscles in my arm straining to bear the weight of the creature whose wingspan was easily the length of my body. He sat there regarding me and accepted a few tidbits of meat from my hand; it was quail, his favorite. The bird flew off again, but he circled the castle once as if to say that he knew this was home. Delia said he was letting me know that his heart would always be here, therefore, he would always return.

We built suitable shelter and sanctuary for him outside the palace walls, and he came and went as he pleased. It was the remembrance of this time, which made up my mind about Gabrielle. Late one evening, as we lay together in bed, I decided to let Gabrielle fly free. I knew, however, that unlike the eagle that still came to my gloved hand, my small slave might choose not to return. I also understood that although I was able to deal with the loss of the magnificent creature from my life, I would not fare so well if Gabrielle left. If she were to leave, I realized that my life would never know joy again, and if she stayed, it would never experience greater happiness.

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The trial went on for much longer than I expected. I would end my days, completely exhausted from listening to, and ruling on points, that the two magistrates argued back and forth. Of course, this being the case that I would use as a precedent to put my new law into effect, I had to keep going back to my libraries to reference scrolls. Reaching my limit one day, I sent a messenger to find Gabrielle, telling her to pull two particular scrolls and send them to me. It was with some surprise that she not only found the scrolls, but also did it in half the time it would have taken me. The young woman became invaluable at referencing material and soon, I found that she was scribing the sketchy notes I made during the trial onto scrolls in the evening, so I might read them easier the next day. The ironic part about Gabrielle's involvement was that, although I could have used her abilities down in the Great Hall, where the trial was being conducted, slaves were not allowed to enter the room unless they were directly involved in the trial.

Therefore, it was no surprise that I was somewhat oblivious to the change in Gabrielle's behavior. I noticed for the past few days she was quieter than usual, but she would smile and shrug off my concerns. If my mind hadn't been quite so focused on the damned trial, I might have learned the truth before the palace was thrown into such chaos.

I rose even earlier than usual one morning, spending the time in my study with the scrolls Gabrielle transcribed for me the night before. I smiled when I realized that it was I who fell asleep, for a change, waiting for Gabrielle to come to bed. She sat up late, copying my notes by the light of the candle, leaving them in the middle of my desk, so I would find them first thing this morning.

The sun was not yet up, when shouts could be heard, not only throughout the palace, but outside in the courtyard as well. I armed myself and stepped into the hall, nearly running into a young soldier.

"What in Hades is going on?" I yelled.

"The slaves, Lord Conqueror...some are causing trouble, a few have already escaped beyond the palace walls."

"How many is some?" I asked quickly.

"Twenty-five...maybe fifty." He answered, looking nervous and rattled.

Half a dozen slaves were trouble; fifty...well, fifty was an uprising. Ares balls! Why now, I was so close, this could ruin everything. I grabbed the youth by the shirt and pushed him off in the opposite direction.

"Go find Captain Atrius--"

"Aye, Lord Conqueror..." I heard the familiar voice already behind me.

I turned to find Atrius leading six members of the royal guard and Delia.

"Here, here, and here," the Captain indicated the entrances to our rooms, stationing guards at each point.

"I came to be with Gabrielle," Delia stated simply and I knew there was no point in arguing.

Atrius, Delia, and I entered the outer room and I opened the door to the bedchambers to find Gabrielle already putting on her robe.

"I hear shouting." Gabrielle said with a worried frown.

"It's all right, love. It seems some of the slaves have staged a small revolt--"

"Oh no!" Gabrielle cried out.

I wrapped my arms around her trembling figure. “Shhh, it’s not that bad. I’ve got to get down there, Gabrielle, but Delia is in the other room, she’s come to stay with you, and there are guards at all the doors to our rooms. Don’t worry,” I kissed her forehead. “I’m going to try my best to see that no one gets hurt.”

I hugged her and walked through the door to the outer room, Gabrielle tying her robe and trailing behind me. It was unlike the small woman to forget there were others in the room, but when I opened the door to leave, she cried out.

“Xena.”

I turned, and she held such a look of fright in her face that I moved to sweep her in my arms once again. I kissed her one more time.

“It will be all right, little one.” I said and pushed her toward Delia. I left the room with a backward glance at my young slave, only to watch as tears slid down her face.

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Two candlemarks. As slave revolts go, it was probably the shortest one on record. They weren’t very well organized and had no weapons. A few guards got the stuffing knocked out of them, but with the exception of a few cuts and bruises, there were no casualties on either side. I was adamant about the fact that no slaves were to be harmed. I know how soldiers operate, I made sure every man and woman that made up the six squads, was aware of my order.

I sat heavily in the chair in the Great Hall that served as throne. A serving girl brought me a hot mug of tea and I sat alone and in silence as the sun came up. As Apollo’s chariot pulled the burning orb up into the sky, I watched the shadows on the floor creep away, until the whole room was bathed in brilliant light. Scuffling and cursing broke out behind me and I knew they were bringing her before me for sentencing. Slaves, unlike free men, received no trial. They were either guilty or they weren’t and in this case, part of me was glad, the other part cursing myself for what I was about to do. I finally looked up from my musings, to notice Atrius and four guards holding the prisoner in chains before me. It didn’t surprise me in the least that the leader of the slave revolt was Gabrielle’s friend, Carra.

One of her eyes was swollen shut and she had a number of small cuts on her, but nothing she wouldn’t recover from. She was pushed from behind to kneel to me and she spit at my boots.

“You may think you own me, but you don’t!” she hissed.

I took a deep breath, trying not to let the woman’s words affect me. How can I condemn or punish slaves now that I have Gabrielle? I felt that every decision I made would have an emotional impact on the relationship between the small blonde and myself.

“So, what am I to do with you now, Carra?” I asked seriously.

I think the tone of my voice confused her. She furrowed her brow and continued to glare at me.

“You can no longer be trusted as a slave within this palace, but there are few laborers who will take a woman, especially one who incites the other slaves to riot. You leave me with few choices.”

“Go ahead and crucify me,” she spat, “I know you’re dying to. Bet you won’t be so quick to nail your little plaything to a cross, though.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, assuming she meant Gabrielle.

She laughed then and just stared up at me defiantly. “Are you forgetting, Conqueror? Your precious Gabrielle is a slave, too. If the slaves mutiny, do you really think your personal slave wouldn’t know about it?”

The comment took me absolutely by surprise. I never even considered that Gabrielle would know. Suddenly I was remembering the young woman’s terrified reaction to the news. She didn’t act surprised...only frightened.

“You’re thinking about it now, aren’t you Conqueror? Ever think about what else your slut and I did together?”

I slowly rose from my chair. I towered over the still kneeling woman, remembering the way I ordered the chains removed from Kassandros, so that I could make him pay for his comments about Gabrielle. My mouth opened to speak and I realized that this slave almost beat me. She almost caused me to lose my temper along with my focus. I should have been immune to childish taunts, but for a moment, I let her get the better of me.

I slumped back into my chair, that same confused expression plastered on her face. That’s when I let the thought in my brain, the nagging kernel of half-truth that this slave planted in my brain regarding Gabrielle, possess me. It didn’t take long for the idea to germinate and, like the roots of a tenacious plant, take hold of my conscious mind.

“Get her out of here.” I ordered between clenched teeth.

The guards looked at Atrius. “Her punishment, Lord Conqueror?”

“Did you hear me order a punishment?” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “Throw her in a cell and get her out of my sight!”

When they dragged her from the room, and I was once more left in silence, I looked down to see that my nails left their imprints in the wooden armrests of my chair. I sat there for quite some time, at first thinking of nothing, finally thinking too many different thoughts, all of them centering around Gabrielle. I believe a long time passed before I heard a noise at my elbow and saw that it was Atrius. As always, he intuitively knew when to leave me alone, and how long it would take for my initial anger to pass.

“Lord Conqueror?” He queried respectfully.

“Yes?” I answered in a low tone.

“I feel that I must be the one to speak with you regarding this matter...for two reasons.” Atrius said stiffly.

“And what do you have to say?” I refused to meet his eyes.

“She’s not the only one saying it, Lord Conqueror,” Atrius finally said in a tired voice. “Two others we rounded up said they heard the same thing. The slaves across the palace are talking and by nightfall, with the way gossip travels in here, everyone will have heard.”

I breathed a heavy sigh, trying to force the anger inside me down to a manageable level. It rose up like bile in my throat and my head began to throb with the effort of containing it. I rose and walked over to one of the windows, glancing outside. The day was so beautiful; it was hard to realize that my love and my dreams were shattering inside of me.

“Atrius?”

“Yes, Lord Conqueror.”

“What were they? You said there were two reasons why *you* needed to be the one to tell me.” I asked, seeking explanation.

“Because I knew the temptation would be great to kill the messenger. I hoped that after twenty seasons, I would fare better.” He said with a wry smile. “The other reason is that I genuinely like that girl. I think that if Gabrielle did know, she must have had a good reason for not revealing it,” my Captain answered.

“Do you honestly believe that, Atrius?” I asked him.

“Yes, Lord Conqueror, I do.”

I turned from the window and walked past him, out of the hall. I wasn’t sure I was heard as I passed him by.

“That’s good...I’m not sure if I do.”

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I stood in front of the open balcony in the outer room, looking out onto the landscape, but not really seeing anything. I sent a guard looking for Gabrielle the moment I entered the rooms and found her gone. It wasn’t long before I heard the sound of the door opening. It wasn’t long enough, however, because I was nowhere near ready to do this. I would ask and she would answer, and it would be over. How could I have left myself open for this heartache? My bruised ego and wounded heart left me feeling heart sick and sorry for myself. That feeling was quickly being replaced with anger. Gabrielle made her choice; she would have to live with the consequences. Like a child with no ability to reason whatsoever, I saw the situation in only one light. I knew only that Gabrielle chose her slave friends over me, and when I turned, my arms folded across my chest, directing my angry gaze in her direction, she realized that I knew.

I watched as her expression changed from loving concern, to fear, and then finally, resignation.

“My Lord.” She bowed her head in submission.

Part of me hoped it was in regret, but that small part of me was becoming more miniscule with the passing moments. I could feel that old anger bubbling just under the surface, waiting to rise up and engulf me. The beast was pacing like a panther in an iron cage.

I clenched my jaw tightly, raising my head up to stare at the ceiling, while I took deep even breaths. “Gabrielle, I have been given distressing news and I want you to either confirm or deny it.” I said in an ominous low tone, that I’m sure she hadn’t heard me use before, at least not directed at her.

“Did you know of the slave revolt, before it happened?” I asked, my voice tight and controlled.

“Was anyone hurt?” she asked quickly.

“Did you know?” I demanded again, through clenched teeth.

Gabrielle looked up and I watched as her eyes filled with tears, spilling out to run down her cheeks. Under normal circumstances, the sight would have caused my own heart to break, but now there was only anger. I’m sure it was apparent, even to Gabrielle, that the Xena she loved was being trampled and overcome by the Conqueror.

“Yes.” She answered softly, lowering her head again.

“And you care so much more for Carra than me, that you refused to warn me?”

“No.” Gabrielle’s head popped up. “Xena, I love you...”

I merely arched an eyebrow at the admission as she stumbled on.

“I didn’t know what to do...I couldn’t...I couldn’t tell. She...I needed to prove to her that...that I was her friend.”

I quickly turned my back and pounded my fists loudly into the table. “Gabrielle, do you know what you’ve done? I am working day and night to prepare a trial to put in place laws to banish slavery, and now this!” My voice grew louder with every word and I knew that if I turned around, Gabrielle would be staring at me in surprise.

“Now, how do I tell the people that slaves are no different from them, mean them no harm, after something like this?!” Again, I slammed my fist into the table, until it was numb, feeling my fury inching closer to the surface.

When I turned around, Gabrielle could only stare at someone she could barely recognize. I could see it in her face.

“I didn’t know what to do,” she cried. “I wanted her to have a friend...to show her that she could trust me,” she finished.

“Trust? I trusted you!” I shouted back at her. “You didn’t believe that I changed, did you? You thought the Conqueror would sweep down and nail those slaves to crosses, didn’t you?”

That’s when she gave me a look that was filled with an incredible sadness. She didn’t have to agree; I saw the truth of it acknowledged in her eyes. I narrowed the space between us, feeling my whole body trembling with rage.

“You’re right,” she answered, “but my mistrust of you is no more than what you still feel of me, Xena.”

“I trusted you with my life!” I shouted.

“Only not with my freedom.”

Her answer was spoken so calmly, so softly, that she came across as a woman already condemned, and so she was. I could no longer hold back the demon inside me. The beast clamored for a release to the white-hot fury that was the truth of my actions. I would hold myself accountable for every heartbeat of every day for my next act.

I was no longer in control of my body, and I watched as if outside myself, as my arm lashed out and struck Gabrielle across the cheek. Regret instantly burned through me like hot metal, even as I saw the hand in motion, but I was not in control enough to halt its movement.

It wasn’t a punch, and I suppose I attempted to pull back enough so that it was simply a hard slap, but the deed had been done all the same. Gabrielle stood there, steadfastly refusing to fall to her knees. The look in her eyes seemed to mock me, telling me that she knew one day I would strike her.

Breathing hard, I wheeled away from her, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath, my eyes focused on the hand I held before me. I could only stand there and stare at my right hand, five seasons of control, wasted in a heartbeat. How long I stood there looking down at my hand, I couldn’t remember, but I knew I couldn’t even bring myself to look in her eyes. The weight of what I’d done, falling on me heavily, I continued to stare, transfixed, at that one hand. Finally clenching my fingers into a fist, I hissed.

“Get out!”

Just before I heard the door open, Gabrielle poured salt in the open wound by uttering the cruelest words I ever heard her say.

“Yes, Lord Conqueror.”

## Chapter 17: I Had Been Hungry All The Years

“How many times do I have to tell you? I do not want any food!” I picked up the tray from the floor, flinging it, contents and all, toward the staircase.

I knew they were there, hiding around the corner on the steps, so I picked up the flasco of wine that was previously sitting on the floor outside my door, and tossed it down the hall as well. I stepped back into my room and slammed the door shut, turning the latch to lock it.

I crossed the darkened room to the open balcony. Leaning my back against the wall just inside the room, I let my body glide to the floor, allowing the chilly night air to sweep over me. The tears came again and I could no longer stop them. Just when I thought there were none left to cry, I would think of Gabrielle, remember exactly what her beautiful face looked like when I slapped her, then the weeping would begin again.

The day passed for me, just like this. The moon was high up in the nighttime sky by now, but I lit neither lamp nor candle. I left my rooms in the same darkened state I felt surrounding my heart. I was acting like a spoiled brat throwing the trays Sylla left, but physical violence seemed to be what I always reverted to, when angry or frightened. Hadn't I proved that earlier, when I lashed out at Gabrielle?

I heard the pounding on my door and recognized Delia's voice as she spoke with Sylla.

“I tried to leave the food like you said, but she threw it at the guards.” Sylla's young voice sounded worried, making me sorry I acted like a petulant child.

“Never mind, Sylla. Go get a fresh tray and bring it up to Gabrielle, I'll tend to the Conqueror.” Delia answered my maid.

“Did you hear, Delia, what they're saying about Gabrielle?” Sylla asked.

“If I listened to every bit of gossip that came through my kitchen I'd get precious little done with my day.” Delia responded gruffly, and then seemed to reconsider her harsh answer, because her next words sounded softer, more understanding. “Yes, I heard what they're saying.”

“Do you believe it?” Sylla asked.

“Not for a minute. Gods, Gabrielle is as honest a person as they come. Now go on, bring some hot tea and broth up and make sure she eats at least a bit.”

“Lord Conqueror?” Delia resumed the knocking.

I sat there unmoving, wishing Hades would just take me now and get it over with. I heard a key in the metal lock and it didn't surprise me at all that Delia found a key to my room. I continued to sit there on the floor, watching as Delia moved expertly through the shadows of the room. She lit a large oil lamp in the corner of the room and proceeded to move around the spacious area, lighting one more lamp, and a number of candles. I lifted my head at the scent of the melting wax, it gave off an odd comforting smell that always reminded me of home, even when I didn't have one.

I sat with my chin resting on my arms, which hugged my legs to my chest. Delia came closer and I could tell what I looked like through the expression in her eyes. My hair was in terrible disarray, my eyes red and swollen, they burned from long hours of crying. She came closer and pulled a chair from the table, positioning it in front of me.

When she sat down and ran a gentle hand through my hair, brushing it away from my eyes, I pulled away. I couldn't bear the tenderness, it reminded me of something Gabrielle would do, and the tears fell again.

"Don't be nice to me," I scooted away a few more inches, turning my face toward the open balcony.

"So, the two of you had a row, it's nothing that can't be fixed." Delia replied, understandingly.

"It can never be fixed," I responded flatly.

I believe the ominous tone to my voice actually got through to Delia and she began to wonder.

"Exactly what did happen here this morning?" she asked.

"I hit her," I answered, trying not to break down completely in front of the older woman.

"Oh, Xena," Delia sighed heavily, leaning back in her chair.

I looked up into her eyes at last and I didn't see the rejection I was expecting. I saw a compassion that surprised and overwhelmed me a bit.

"Don't you hate me?" I asked, knowing how much Gabrielle meant to Delia.

She gave me one of those bittersweet smiles of hers. "Could my hating you, make you feel any worse about what you've done?"

I couldn't answer past the tightness of my throat and simply shook my head back and forth.

"Then what would be the point?" she replied firmly.

"I feel betrayed," I commented, feeling rather sorry for myself.

"*You* feel betrayed? How do you think that girl over there feels, Gods, it's a wonder she has any sanity left at all, living with you! One moment, you tell her that you love her, showering her with gifts and affection. Then, you refuse her freedom and keep her as a slave. Don't you think she pictured those actions as a form of betrayal?"

"She knew about the slave revolt and never told me!" I shouted back.

"Is that what this nonsense is all about? Good Gods, woman!" Delia jumped up from the chair and stood before me with her hands on her hips.

“But, Gabrielle admitted it,” I responded weakly, “she said she knew.”

“Xena, *everyone* knew...sweet Athena, even I knew!”

“She should have told me when it was going to happen...I could have done something,” I countered defensively.

“I’m sure Gabrielle had no idea it was actually going to happen.”

“Wha--” I was stunned into silence.

“Xena, Carra plans a slave revolt every day. Gabrielle brought her into the kitchen and I heard them talking, the cooks, scullery maids, Gods, half the guards in the palace have heard her plan this fool’s venture! No one ever took her seriously. I don’t think Gabrielle knew that it would actually take place this morning, any more than I.”

Delia stood in front of me and I felt all the anger within me simply dissipate into nothing. I was left weak and confused. I simply didn’t understand how the morning’s events could have gone so wrong.

“She just admitted it,” I said, almost as if to myself. “Why didn’t she explain?”

“Did you really ask her, Xena, or did you interrogate? Did you assume her innocence or her guilt? When you looked at her, was it with an expression of understanding for the woman you loved, or was it harsh and judgmental?” Delia asked.

I didn’t even have to respond to Delia’s questions, she knew the answers as well as I, it was written on my face.

“Gods, what have I done?” I muttered burying my face in my hands. “What am I going to do?”

“What do you *want* to do, Xena?” she asked me.

“Die.” I answered quickly, no trace of humor in my answer.

“And your second choice?” Delia tossed right back at me.

“How do I make it right with her, Delia?” My voice sounded so small to my own ears.

“You can do two things, that will be a start.”

I looked into her eyes and knew what she was going to say before she uttered a word, two of my greatest fears in one fell swoop.

“I have to apologize and ask her to forgive me.” I answered.

“That’s one.” Delia sat down in the chair once more. “If you love this girl as much as I think you do, then you need to make her a free woman.”

We sat in silence for a few moments as I tried to envision myself doing either. “Do you think she’ll forgive me if I free her?”

“Xena,” Delia shook her head slightly. “You don’t barter with people you love. You give and sometimes it’s returned--”

“--and, sometimes it’s not,” I finished, lowering my forehead to rest against my arms.

“Yes, that is the chance we take when we give our heart away. It’s the same with friendship. When you gave Gabrielle the writing materials and the desk, did you give it to her thinking you could make her like you?”

“No,” I lifted my head indignantly, “of course not!”

“Of course you didn’t. You did it for no other reason than to make her happy. That’s what we do when we care for people, Xena. You have to give this beautiful eagle it’s freedom Xena, this magnificent creature needs to know what freedom is. Only if she flies back to you, will you know if she is truly yours.”

“I’ve never said it before,” I mumbled.

“Said what?”

“Apologized...I’ve never told anyone that I was...sorry.” I answered against my arm, thoroughly embarrassed that a woman my age should have to ask for advice about such things.

“Ever?” Delia sounded surprised, and I shook my head.

“It will be the hardest thing you’ve ever done,” she stated.

“Thanks,” I replied with a great deal of sarcasm, “I feel loads better.” I paused before speaking again. “I don’t know if I can.” I added.

“You can, and you will,” she responded, rising from the chair and moving to my side.

“How do you know?”

“Because I know you,” she answered, tugging on my elbow. “Come on, don’t make this old back lift you up. Gods, you’re a big girl,” she added as I rose.

I was amazed. The course of action seemed so clear to Delia. I was even more astounded that a woman who was only ten, maybe fifteen summers older than myself was calling me a girl. This was Delia, however, and I thanked the Gods for a friend such as her.

“First thing you’re going to do is to soak for a bit in the tub, wash your face and hair. I’ll make up something to lay across your face to get rid of some of that swelling and puffiness...you look like Hades.”

“I’m sure he appreciates that,” I added as she pushed me into the bathing chamber.

“After your bath you’re going to relax yourself with a cup of hot tea and then get something into your stomach.”

“I’ll throw up if I eat anything!” I shouted from the other room.

“Then you go ahead and throw up...we’ll get some more into you after you do.”

I eased my body into the tepid water without adding any more from the buckets that were kept heating by the fire. The cool water felt good on my hot skin and I splashed my face with the soothing liquid. I could hear Delia as she answered the door to Sylla.

“She drank the tea, but I couldn’t get her to eat a bite,” my maid said; I assume in regards to her attempt to get Gabrielle to eat.

“Go down and fix a light tray for the Conqueror and be quick about it.” Delia ordered.

“Delia...Gabrielle, she has a bruise on her face”

“Sylla, I want not one word to pass your lips about that, do you understand? You and I are the only people who know about that. If I hear one bit of gossip, I’ll know it was you and I’ll have you demoted to scrubbing chamber pots for the next twenty seasons! Understand?”

“Yes, Delia.”

I heard the door close and Delia came in a bit later.

“Here, lay this across your eyes for a spell,” she said.

“Delia, would you do me a favor?” I asked. When she nodded, I continued. “Will you check on Gabrielle? Make sure she’s not hurt too badly.”

“You can do that yourself, when you get out of your bath,” she answered.

“I know...I mean, I will. I *am* going over there, but I need to go to the jail first. I need to speak with Carra.”

“Before speaking with Gabrielle?” Delia asked in confusion.

“Yes, it’s important. I need to know why Carra deliberately led me to believe Gabrielle betrayed me. I want to hear it from her,” I explained.

“Very well. I’ll make sure Gabrielle is all right, then. Would you like me to do anything more for you, Xena?” Delia asked.

“No.” I called out after she turned to go. “Delia?” She spun around to face me again. “I...I’m sorry I’m...such an idiot most of the time.”

As apologies go it may have been lacking a little something in the way of finesse, but it was my first attempt, after all.

“There...was that so hard?” she asked.

“Yes,” I offered her the best imitation of a smile I could muster given the circumstances.

Delia smiled back at me. Patting my shoulder, she turned to leave once more.

“Keep it up...it gets easier every time you do it.”

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As prisons go, this certainly wasn't the worst one I ever saw. There were dungeons under the palace, cells that were carved from the hard rock of the castle's foundation. The damp and darkened caves were still used on a rare occasion, but a few seasons ago, I ordered a new building erected to be used as a prison. It was a low, stone structure that existed beyond the soldier's barracks. Although the conditions were far from hospitable, the filth and the rats weren't quite up to the same level the old dungeon cells were.

No one stopped me as I made my way into the building. I'm sure the look on my face didn't encourage much social conversation, plus I had a feeling that even after cleaning myself up, I still looked like Tartarus. Once the outer and heavy inner doors were opened for me, I asked the jailer which cell Carra was in. He looked a little surprised, then a little frightened. He said that because of the never-ending racket she made, screaming obscenities, they placed her in the last cell in the building, at the far end of the darkened, twisting hall. He still had the strange look on his face. As I recalled, it was the same odd expression I was given by the guard who unlocked the inner doors. I could find nothing out of the ordinary to warrant the strange looks, so I picked my way slowly through the gloomy corridor, past empty cells, until I neared the end of the building. I heard voices, but the darkness kept me in the shadows. Peering around the corner, I already knew who I would see under the light of the torch, hung high upon the wall. I could distinguish her voice in my sleep, even hoarse, like it was now, obviously from candlemarks of crying.

Gabrielle sat on a bench, directly across from the cell Carra was being held in. The tall woman leaned against the bars, and at this moment, I liked the way she looked at Gabrielle even less than before. I was not going for a repeat performance, however. Yes, my first instinct was to burst in on the pair, confront Gabrielle with her betrayal, but that wasn't in me now. Gods, that realization surprises *me* more than anyone.

Gabrielle was right about me, it was because I didn't trust her, in her commitment or her love for me, that I never freed her from slavery. Here, I thought I trusted her with my life, but the truth of the matter is that trusting her with my life was simple; I never thought my own life worth much at all. Gabrielle's life was another thing entirely. She was worth everything, and once I realized that she might be the one soul to be able to illuminate the dark recesses of my heart with her special brand of light, I understood all of it; why I treated Gabrielle as I did, most importantly, why I held back from making her a free woman. It amazed and shamed me that while lying in a tub of rapidly cooling water, I would have such an epiphany.

Now, my aching eyes taking in the small figure, her shoulders slumped forward as an unmistakable indication of her own feelings of sadness and loss, I am ashamed that I forced Gabrielle to choose between her lover and her friend. That's what it boiled down to, in its

most unrefined sense. Gabrielle never had any friends before this, nor experienced the gamut of emotions that giving away your heart to another person can create. The truth was that I placed her in a situation, she could never hope to liberate herself from, and gave her none of the resources necessary to combat the problems that would arise. I thought only of myself, how Gabrielle was changing *my* life. It never occurred to me to think how the change in her life was affecting the girl.

I leaned against the wall, completely covered in dark shadows, listening to what was transpiring. Yes, I suppose this was wrong, but my fear was that it would be the only way I would know of my young lover's thoughts and feelings. I was probably the last person she would feel like confiding them to. As I listened, my heart broke all over again. It simply never occurred to me that Gabrielle felt like a friend *and* a lover were betraying her all in the space of one day.

"But, why, Carra?" Gabrielle's strained voice was heard.

"Why?" The prisoner's deeper voice boomed back. "Look around you, Gabrielle. In case you've forgotten, I am a slave...*we* are slaves! The difference is that I don't have a master that dresses me in fine clothes, gives me lots of food to eat, and hands me expensive gifts!"

"Xena's not like that," Gabrielle countered.

"Xena? You do mean the Conqueror, don't you? You act as if she isn't your master...that she *means* something to you," Carra continued.

"She does." Gabrielle's head jerked back up and I watched, tears in my own eyes when I saw those emerald orbs begin to burn with fire. "And why shouldn't she?" Gabrielle was standing now, facing her friend down. "She cares about me...she," Gabrielle paused to choke back a sob, "she loves me." She finished, her jaw set in a defiant pose.

"Oh, really," Carra purred. "What part of *I love you* gave you that bruise then?"

Gabrielle's hand flew up to her cheek, her fingers tracing the discolored mark. I watched as she turned from the light, her face now hidden from my view. I didn't need to see her however, to know that tears filled her eyes. She couldn't deny what happened, nor did she try. I felt my own tears begin again, when I saw her turn back toward Carra, a very small voice attempting to explain.

"She felt betrayed," Gabrielle said softly, staring into the darkness at nothing. I watched and wondered if she was remembering the moment as I replayed it over and over again in my own mind's eye.

"*She* felt betrayed? Gods, Gabrielle after all you do for her, the way you service her, what right does *she* have to feel like the victim?" Carra shouted at the small blonde.

"Every right," Gabrielle's voice whispered. "She had a right...not for striking me, but for the way she felt. I did betray her."

"You didn't betray her, I simply led her to believe you knew more than you did. I let her think I was fucking you," Carra said without emotion.

“What?” Gabrielle’s face held an expression of complete confusion “Carra...why would you do such a thing? I thought you were my friend.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? You are a slave, Gabrielle. She owns you! What do you think she would say if you told her you didn’t want to sleep with her when she wanted you...do you think she would say she loved you, and it would be all right? Not for a heartbeat! She would take you and rape you until she showed you who was the master and who was the slave!”

“That’s not true!” Gabrielle shouted back. “Xena would never treat me that way.”

“She’s done it before, what makes you so special?” Carra responded, snidely.

Gabrielle’s face was contorted in pain. I never told Gabrielle the things I’d done, the ways in which I treated the women who came before her in my bed. I sometimes thought she knew, but she never questioned. The look on her face at this moment, told me that if she suspected any of the rumors were true, she never wanted to believe them. Again, I left her unable to fight against attacks like Carra’s.

“She wouldn’t do it to me,” Gabrielle replied.

“Yea, right! She was more than willing to believe you betrayed her.”

“It’s you who don’t understand,” Gabrielle took a step forward. “I did betray her! I should have told her of your talk, and not because I am her *slave*, but because I am her *lover*! I didn’t tell her a thing because I didn’t believe her. I didn’t believe she’d changed. I didn’t trust her when she told me she was trying to be different. I saw that she could be good, but I also saw the darkness inside her and it frightened me. I was afraid of what she would do to you...to my friends.” Gabrielle brushed her tears away and paced a bit in front of the cell.

“And, this is how you repay me.” She turned sad, lonely eyes toward Carra. “You deliberately made Xena think that I hurt her, that I would be disloyal to her with you. Do you know why I hurt so, over this? Because it turns out that I lied to the woman that I love because I didn’t trust her and it seems that, she is the only one I can really trust. With all her flaws, and yes she has hurt me, yet she has been more of a friend to me than you ever could be, Carra.”

“And yet you remain her slave,” The prisoner answered.

“And if I remain so the rest of my life, I will never know a greater love,” Gabrielle answered.

Gabrielle turned to leave and it took every bit of willpower I had, not to run to her and sweep her in my arms. Gods, I couldn’t believe that a woman such as this loved me. Did she still want me? If it took the rest of my life, I would attempt every day to make it right with her. I would show her that I could change, so she would never be in doubt again. I stepped further back, hiding myself in the shadows, but I felt my anger burn strong at the next exchange.

“As long as you remain her slave,” Carra called after Gabrielle, “you will always be known as the Conqueror’s whore.”

Gabrielle kept walking, but as she passed me by, I heard the softly spoken whisper escape her lips.

“I know,” Gabrielle said.

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I had only one thought as I silently waited for Gabrielle to leave the prison. I took deep breaths to calm myself, feeling the beast tug and pull at me, demanding, then requesting, finally pleading release. I walked to the cell and stood there, Carra watched me with a look of pure hatred stamped across her face. Almost...I almost did it. I closed my eyes, willing Gabrielle’s image in front of my mind’s eye.

I must have made for an odd sight, my eyes closed, eventually the beginnings of a smile pulling at my lips. The beast was begging now, and although I was a heartbeat from opening the cell door and making Carra pay for the hurt and the pain Gabrielle suffered because of her meddling and lying, I stopped myself. I pushed my demon away, how, I don’t know, opening my eyes to look on Carra.

“So, did you come here to do what you didn’t have the balls to do this morning?” She sneered.

“That was my intent,” I began calmly. I think the tone of my voice threw her off. “Carra, I walked up to this cell with every intention of causing you a great deal of pain. I wanted you to hurt the way your betrayal has made Gabrielle hurt. She thought of you as a friend and you thought of no one beyond yourself, and how you could use her to best suit your needs. I wanted to rip your heart out for that, but I realized that I was just as guilty. I have committed the same crimes, but now I seek forgiveness. How can I offer less to someone else?”

I turned and walked down the murky corridor, not expecting to hear her voice once I’d gone.

“Love has made you weak, Conqueror,” she spat after me.

I smiled and I’m sure she thought I’d lost my mind.

“You’re wrong, Carra. For the first time in my life, I’m strong enough to get down on my knees and beg for what I truly desire. Love hasn’t made me weak...it’s made me strong.”

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I stood out in the hallway, facing her door, feeling as if I’d been standing there for quite some time. My mind was taken back to Mycenae and the two full seasons I spent fighting back the Persians until, with the Gulf at their backs, they surrendered and departed from Greek soil. There were times when I visited the city, just southwest of my capital city, here in Corinth, and when I passed through the Lion’s Gate upon entering Mycenae, I remembered the brutality of that campaign.

The monumental gate, built in my honor, was a ten-foot tall limestone slab carved to display two lions, flanking a pillar. The slab is held up by a massive stone lintel, which stretches over

the high gateway into the city. Each time I enter the city, I am reminded of only one thing. That campaign and the many battles involved, were by far the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life.

My mind comes back to the present and I realize that when I walk through Gabrielle's door to speak to her, it will be as if I am walking under those creatures carved in my honor. I know that my perceptions will forever be altered as I raise my hand to knock upon the door. Now, I understand that there are scores of things mightier than war, and countless people who are stronger than warriors. I gently knock upon the wooden door, fortified with the knowledge that this will be by far, the hardest thing I have ever done.

She opened the door and we simply looked at one another. Her eyes were every bit as red and swollen from candlemarks of crying, as my own were.

"May I come in, Gabrielle?" I asked hesitantly.

She appeared startled, as if my civility surprised her. "Of course, My Lord." She pulled the door open wider.

I tried to hide the hurt at her use of my title instead of my name. At least she wasn't calling me Conqueror. We both stood in her outer room, beside the desk neatly absent of the familiar scrolls and quill. I realized that she probably wasn't much in the mood for writing. She didn't offer up a word and I knew it wasn't her place to. This moment was my responsibility to fix, to take the initiative at least. I shuffled my feet nervously, glancing at her, and then looking down at my boots again.

"I have something to say to you, Gabrielle...can we...can we go into your room, where it's...um, more comfortable?" I managed to stammer.

Gabrielle said neither yes or no, she simply turned and led the way into the bedchamber.

"Please," I laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, "sit down."

She immediately sat back on the edge of the bed. I found myself pacing and once I realized what I was doing, I stopped. Gabrielle looked up at me and for once, I couldn't read what was written in her eyes. Standing there, towering over her, I swallowed hard once or twice. I moved to stand in front of her, easing myself down onto my knees. She now looked down on me and it felt more appropriate this way, for I was the one who needed to beg forgiveness of her, and not the other way around.

I looked up to study her face, the slightly discolored bruise standing out against the pink skin of her cheek. I lifted my hand and lightly touched my fingertips to the sore area, so light that my skin was barely grazing her own. After all the tears I cried, I was surprised at my own reaction. The tears fell from my eyes, leaving wet trails along my face. I felt my breathing interrupted, as I choked back a sob. Gods, I didn't want to cry and sound so pathetic, but kneeling here in front of the small woman, no amount of strength seemed able hold the tears back.

“Gabrielle...I...I’m sorry...God’s above, I am so sorry!” I wept and I think it was my reaction that caused the somewhat frightened expression on her face. I babbled out the rest, later realizing I could remember little of what I’d even said.

“I swear, Gabrielle, I will never do that again...ever. I will fall on my own sword before I ever allow you to be hurt by my hand. I know you probably can’t, but I wondered if you could find it in your heart...maybe not now, but someday, when you have time to think about it more. If you could possibly...”

Gabrielle still hadn’t spoken, but she lifted my face with one of her own small hands. Her brow was furrowed in what appeared to be a combination of confusion and concern. She moved both hands until she was holding my face in each, I could feel my eyes close when she brushed her thumbs across my wet cheeks.

“I’m sorry I’m so bad at this...I’ve never said I was sorry to anyone before. Actually,” I opened my eyes and attempted to smile, “I practiced on Delia earlier.”

“You practiced?” Gabrielle spoke for the first time. “You’ve never said this before...ever?”

I shook my head back and forth. “Never wanted to...never thought I needed to. I always thought it should be up to everyone else to bow to me because I was stronger and that if I said I was sorry it would be like saying I was wrong. I could never afford to be wrong. I thought being wrong and admitting it, would show that I was weak.”

“Oh Xena, is that what you think? That saying you’re sorry means you’re weak?” Gabrielle asked sadly.

I was quick to notice that she used my given name, but I didn’t want to let my heart hope just yet. “I did, but not anymore.”

“What happened to make you change your mind?” she asked.

“You happened. I never expected to love you so much, Gabrielle.” I took strength from the way Gabrielle let her thumb lazily stroke my cheek as I spoke. “I never knew one person could have such an influence on my life. I am so sorry I hurt you, Gabrielle, not just by hitting you, but also by mistrusting you in the first place. I’d do anything to go back in time to undo what I’ve done, but I know that’s impossible. I’ll do anything to make it up to you, anything at all.”

I reached up and placed my hands over hers, grasping them, and pulling each one to my lips for a gentle kiss. “Anything that I have, little one, or anything that I have the power to do, any gift that I can give you...all you have to do is ask me and it will be yours. I don’t do this for your forgiveness. I wouldn’t blame you if you never offered it, and you don’t even have to be with me anymore if you don’t want to,” I lowered my eyes, closing them tightly as I thought about what I was offering. “I just want to make it up to you, Gabrielle...make it right again. Just ask and anything in the Greek Empire will be yours,” I finished.

“Anything?” she asked softly.

I nodded my head. I watched as she rose and stood in front of the balcony, the moon shining in and bathing her face in a silver light.

“You don’t have to give me anything at all, Xena.”

“I suppose I don’t, but it’s something I *want* to do, not *have* to do,” I responded.

She turned and my stomach did a small flip at seeing that warm light burn in her eyes once again. “Then you should know that I forgive you, even without the gift.”

I couldn’t help the smile; it took over my whole face. It was such a spontaneous reaction that I found the young woman in front of me, smiling back.

“Then it makes the gift that much more special,” I stated.

“First, I want to know...if you’ll forgive me?” Gabrielle’s eyes darkened instantly, seemingly overcome by sadness.

“Gabrielle, don’t,” I rose to stand beside her. “Please, you have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I don’t believe that’s true. You’re taking all the blame and it’s true, you hit me, but still...it’s also true that I didn’t trust you, Xena. I didn’t think you were that different from the Conqueror I read of in those scrolls, and I feared what you would do, how you would react, if I told you of Carra’s plan.”

Gabrielle looked down and wrung her hands together. “When I called you Lord Conqueror...I did it because I knew it would hurt you, and I wanted you to hurt like I did,” she finished.

“Gabrielle, I think it’s unnecessary, but if it makes you feel better, then of course, I forgive you for that. Please don’t look so sad, it’s only natural to want to lash out and hurt, when you feel that you’ve been wronged,” I explained.

“It shouldn’t be that way, not with someone you love,” she muttered softly.

I walked away from her, hanging my head, while standing in front of the open balcony. The night air was rather chilly, but it felt good when the breeze blew in against my face.

“I’m afraid, Xena,” Gabrielle stated simply.

I turned to look at her in confusion. Did she still not understand what she meant to me?

“Gabrielle, what are you afraid of...is it me?”

“Not of you...I...Xena, what will become of me when you no longer want me?” she blurted out, tears already forming in her eyes.

“What?” I was speechless. Had I given her any indication that was what I intended?

Suddenly Gabrielle was sobbing. “What will become of me when you no longer care, what will happen if you sell me to another master? What have you left me fit for?” she continued to cry and I could only stand there, rooted in place, as the girl’s weeping clutched at my heart.

“You have taught me to stand up for myself, to fight back, to even think that I’m worth something! When I have another master I will disobey an order or look the wrong way, I can’t hide who I am any longer and I will surely be beaten or put to death because of it!”

Gabrielle’s whole body shook and I didn’t know if it was out of fear or anger. Gods, had I left the girl that much in the dark as to my intentions? It’s true; I never spoke of our future together, did I? What seemed so clear a course of action was left unsaid between us.

“Gabrielle, come here,” I pleaded, opening my arms and welcoming the feel of her small body, carefully enfolded in my embrace. I squeezed tighter, trying to somehow will her pain into my own body.

“I am so sorry, my love, for never telling you this before. Gabrielle, I have never had any intention of putting you away from me in any manner. I love you and I want us to always be together. Forgive me for never making that clear to you. I thought so many things, yet I said very few.”

I kissed her forehead, feeling her slight body ease its trembling. I pressed my face into the silkiness of her golden hair, breathing in its beautiful scent. I pulled back slightly to look down into her face, it being my turn to wipe *her* tears away.

“Tell me, Gabrielle, what gift can I give you to try to make amends for all the hurt I’ve caused you?”

“My freedom,” she answered, her green gaze looking clearly up at me.

I knew of course, that would be her answer. If it hadn’t, I planned to give it to her anyway.

“Then so be it. Starting this very moment, you are a free woman, Gabrielle.” I said softly, although my heart was heavy.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, very.” I moved away from her and sat on the edge of the bed, in the spot she occupied previously.

“It’s that easy?” Gabrielle seemed dumfounded.

It was such a serious situation, but I couldn’t help chuckling at her astonishment. “Actually, it takes a few days for it to be official, but for all intents and purposes, you are a free woman, Gabrielle.”

The smile on her face...Gods, I wish I could capture it. The look of wonder and awe. I held it in my memory, for the day when she would leave, and memories would be all I had left.

Gabrielle moved to the open balcony once more. She must have been aware of such feelings of newness and power. I could see her face and it filled me with an indescribable pleasure, knowing I was the one who made it all come true for her.

“I’m free...I’m not a slave.” She repeated to herself, staring out at the night sky. She turned quickly and looked directly into my eyes. “And, if you asked me to share your bed, and I refused, what would happen to me?”

“It would sadden me greatly, I suppose,” I answered, giving her a bittersweet smile, “but you are a free woman, and are free to share your bed with whomever you choose.”

“I could leave...leave the palace, right now and never look back?” she asked, turning to look at the lights of Corinth.

“Yes, Gabrielle.” I answered her, even as my heart was seizing up in my chest. “You could ride away from here...from me, as fast as you could. As a matter of fact,” I continued sadly, “I wouldn’t blame you at all if you did.”

I lowered my head and stared at the floor, waiting to hear the click of the door. To my surprise, I felt the smooth softness of Gabrielle’s hand, caressing my cheek, and reaching down to brush the hair from my eyes.

“Would you tell people?” Gabrielle asked gently.

“Tell them you’re gone?” I asked, looking up in confusion.

“No, silly,” she giggled, “that I’m no longer your slave.”

“Well,” I started, not sure where to begin, “I would have to tell some people, I’m sure Delia would want to know where you were going, and I’d have to make up some identification for you to travel with.”

“Xena, what are you talking about?” Gabrielle’s brows came together in bewilderment.

“I, uh...I...Gabrielle, what are *you* talking about?” I asked her, suddenly having the realization that we were both discussing two different things.

“Would you tell people...you know, that I was free, so I could go through the palace, and go into the library in Corinth without getting arrested. Xena, what did you think I meant?” Gabrielle was looking at me like I was crazy.

“I thought...I mean if you wanted...Gabrielle, are you saying you would stay with me...here?”

“But, you would have to tell people, I wouldn’t want them thinking I was still a slave.” The small blonde stood before me, a mildly defiant look in her green eyes.

“Gabrielle,” I said jumping up and nearly knocking her down, “I would make you my queen!” I exclaimed.

She laughed at that, placing her arms around my waist. “I don’t want to be a queen, Xena, just your wife.”

I was well and truly speechless as I lifted Gabrielle into my arms, kissing her for all I was worth. I don't think I ever knew such happiness before this moment. A few candlemarks ago I wanted to kill out of anger and hate, now I look at that space in time as if outside myself, watching a stranger. All of this was due to Gabrielle. Whether my lover would admit to it or not, there was something in her, something unique and blessed by the Gods. I vowed, to myself and my future wife, that I would forever be there, standing alongside of her.

"Look, Xena...see that star?" Gabrielle pulled me with her toward the balcony.

"Hmmm, it's new. I don't know when I first noticed it, but it's very new, and bright." I said, standing behind her and wrapping my arms around her. I felt the warmth of Gabrielle's body against my chest and kissed the top of her head.

"Do you think it's true, that the Gods toss diamonds in the sky to create the stars?" she innocently asked.

"I suppose it's as good an explanation as any." I replied.

"I first saw it on our way to Corinth. You know the top of your tent, where the side poles meet in the middle, and there's an opening in the tent, so the center pole can stand? One night I saw that new star through the flap in the tent. I was lying close to you, thinking it was so strange that you wanted me this way. I'd never slept with any of my previous masters, not for the whole night. I fell asleep that night and I had a dream."

Gabrielle looked up at me and the expression on her face told me that she thought this could be one of her visions. I smiled and kissed her gently, encouraging her openness.

"Tell me, my love...was it *that* kind of a dream?" I asked.

"I won't know, I suppose, until the moment happens. Do you want to know what I dreamed?"

"Tell me, please." I whispered.

"I was lying in bed in our room and you were standing over me. You kneeled beside the bed and Delia placed a baby in your arms. When I looked at you, you had tears in your eyes, and over your left shoulder, I saw the star through the window. Delia said that your daughter would someday make as wonderful a ruler as her mother."

"Is that it?" I questioned, suddenly full of questions.

"Yes." Gabrielle answered. "What do you think of that, Xena?"

"Is that what you would like someday, Gabrielle...children?"

"Your children," she answered adamantly.

I chuckled and pulled her closer to me. "I would like that too, only I fear I may be lacking the necessary equipment to produce the desired results."

Gabrielle turned in my arms to face me. “Perhaps if I make an offering every single day to Athena, she would bless us,” she said seriously, with hope in her eye.

“We can certainly try, love. I haven’t spoken with her in many seasons, but I’ll see what she has to say.” I replied.

“You’ve talked to the Goddess...and she’s talked to you?” Gabrielle asked, her mouth hung open in astonishment.

“Yes,” I laughed aloud at the look on Gabrielle’s face. “I don’t want to scare you, and it isn’t like I’ve ever been to Olympus or anything, but some of the Gods have been known to visit me on occasion. Except Ares, he and I have a deal. He doesn’t try to bother me any more and I don’t kick his ass in front of mortals,” I finished.

The talk of Gods, especially my old mentor, the God of War, brought back how long it was since the last time I was in Athena’s temple. Right before the capture of Athens, the final battle in my quest to own the Greek Empire, I turned my loyalties from Ares to Athena. Whereas they both ruled the Olympiad when it came to war and warriors, Ares perpetuated chaos and destruction, while Athena was the patron of the disciplined aspect of war. I made a decision on the eve of my greatest campaign; I turned my back on Ares and his brutal ways. I gave up on his ways of madness and waste, bowing my knee and receiving Athena’s blessing as her chosen one. From that day forward, my loyalties fell under Athena’s strategic and glorious methods of war.

A kiss to my lips brought me back to the present and I smiled into the delicious sensation.

“I love you, Xena. I’m sorry I ever hurt you,” Gabrielle said softly.

“I love you, Gabrielle. I promise, I’ll do everything in my power, never to hurt you again.”

We stayed there for a few more moments, staring at our star, as Gabrielle began to call it, and spoke of our future. I was never one for talk, but I told myself that Gabrielle would never again doubt my love for her because of my own silence.

At last, we walked back to our rooms, hand in hand. I’m sure I heard an audible breath of relief from the palace guard. It would be this same way for Gabrielle and I, many seasons from now. On the rare occasions that we would have a disagreement, the whole palace would hold its collective breath, until we made up and life could continue at its usual pace.

I lay in bed that night, Gabrielle in my arms, a look of peace and contentment resting on that beautiful face. I smiled to myself before I joined her in sleep. Tomorrow Kassandros and the others would be found guilty or innocent, and then I would sentence them. The court was in for the surprise of a lifetime. I smiled again as I drifted off to, meet up with my lover in Morpheus’ realm.

## Chapter 18: The Happiest Day... The Happiest Hour

I heard her soft steps before I felt my long hair pulled to one side and her lips tickle the back of my neck. Quicker than she anticipated, I reached around and grabbed her waist, pulling the small figure into my lap.

“No fair!” Gabrielle cried out between her laughter.

“Oh, and it was fair, you stealing a kiss?” I asked with mock sternness.

“It didn’t feel like I had to steal it,” Gabrielle replied, “seems to me you gave it up awfully fast, Conqueror.” She said, reaching in to place a quick kiss on my cheek.

Yesterday’s pain and hurts all but disappeared between us, replaced by an almost giddy feeling of first love. Gabrielle even looked like a changed woman; she most certainly acted differently, and not from when I first met her, but since yesterday. She appeared self-assured and strong and I could feel myself falling in love with her all over again. She teased me with the title, Conqueror, and I felt the bond between us was solidified, for both of us to accept such a thing.

“You realize you’ll have to pay for stealing that kiss.” I said, standing and lifting her easily into my arms. I walked into the outer room, our bedchamber on my mind.

“Oh,” Gabrielle purred seductively, “and what will my punishment be?”

I stopped in the middle of the outer room, the sound of Gabrielle’s voice arousing my smoldering libido into a full-fledged blaze. I arched an eyebrow and gave her a wicked smile.

“You’ll have to give it back,” I whispered.

Our lips met in a kiss unlike any other we ever shared. The only way, in which to describe it, with mere words, is to say that it was powerful. That one kiss soon led to another and another, until my knees began to literally shake from something that had little to do with the weight of the slight figure I held in my arms. Unfortunately, that was exactly when the door opened. I don’t know who was more surprised, Sylla, or the two of us. I’d completely forgotten that my maid...correction, our maid, came in to the rooms like this every morning to wake me. She’d

taken to not walking into our bedroom at all, but I suppose she thought the outer rooms were still safe.

“I...uh...forgive me, Lord Conqueror.” Sylla stammered.

“It’s all right, Sylla” I chuckled, still holding Gabrielle in my arms.

Suddenly my lover must have felt slightly foolish, which I was surprised about, but I attributed it to Gabrielle’s new sense of herself. She was a free woman and I was going to have to start remembering that fact.

“Xena, put me down,” Gabrielle ordered and I immediately complied, much to Sylla’s amazement.

The young maid straightened the room and brought the trays in with our early morning meal. I noticed both young women, their heads close together, speaking in low tones. Sylla looked at me with a distrustful eye a few times as I walked in and out of my study. That, I marked up to the quickly fading bruise left on Gabrielle’s cheek. Finally, I watched as Sylla hugged Gabrielle tight and I was sure my young lover told her friend her important news.

“Xena...are you going to sit and eat something?” Gabrielle asked.

I walked over and popped a small piece of sweetbread into my mouth. “I need to bathe and get ready, the verdict and the sentencing are to be today. Besides,” I placed a small kiss on top of the golden hair, “you need to get ready too.”

“Me?” Gabrielle asked in surprise.

“Yes, don’t you want to be present at such an event?”

“Yes, but I--”

“It will be your first time in the Great Hall as a free woman and I intend to have you by my side.” I responded before waiting for her answer.

Gabrielle smiled and as I entered the bathing chamber, I could hear the two women begin a lively discussion as to what the Conqueror's future bride should be seen wearing to a day in court.

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I'm not sure how to describe how I felt walking into the Hall. I usually just strode in as Antillius, the youngest advisor on my staff, announced me. I liked Antillius. He was an honest young man, like his father before him, who served me well as an advisor for many seasons. I search back over the summers that have passed in this palace and realize, through all my debaucheries, I always seemed to have a soft side. It simply didn't rear its head often. Antillius' father was an advisor on my staff until one winter a fever took more out of him than he could recover from. I could look around the palace now and see that nearly half my staff was comprised of people I rewarded for some reason or another. Either that, or I felt I owed their parents something, although that's how I ended up in this mess with Kassandros, isn't it?

It was customary for all those in the Hall to stand until I seated myself. On this day I led Gabrielle into the room, my hand placed strategically under her elbow. I wanted to make it clear; in the way that Gabrielle walked by my side and not behind me, her status within the palace, as well as my life, had changed. I'd made arrangements with Antillius earlier to scribe the necessary documents regarding Gabrielle's freedom, and also to make plans for a chair to be situated next to mine. I stopped and motioned for Gabrielle to sit before me, another indication of her status change. It sent a very clear message to those within the Hall. It told them that I placed Gabrielle's welfare above my own; thereby signifying that only one here had as much power as I within the Empire.

"Her Royal Highness, the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire," Antillius called out in a clear voice, "and the Lady Gabrielle," he added per my request.

Antillius grinned slightly as we passed and I winked at the young man. As Gabrielle and I took our seats, I heard the murmurs coming from those in the audience. Part of it was due to confusion over hearing the title affixed to Gabrielle's name, the other, anger because she was there in the first place. I plucked a few scrolls off the table beside my chair, I went about the pretence of scanning the information in the parchments, while one of the men appointed to argue this case before me, stood up, clearing his throat.

"You have a question, Terillus?" I asked, without looking up.

“Uh, Lord Conqueror...”

I looked up as he was nervously glancing over at Gabrielle. I knew he didn't want to be the one to say it. Terillus was a decent enough man, but I was breaking the law, having a slave seated in the Hall.

“Oh, yes.” I said as if it just occurred to me. I was rather enjoying this. “Antillius, don't you have some sort of proclamation to read?”

“Yes, Lord Conqueror,” he stepped up and cleared his throat, unrolling the scroll as he did so.

By order of her Royal Highness, the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire,” I rolled my eyes in embarrassment at Gabrielle as Antillius read off my title and she used her hand to cover her smile.

“This morning, her Royal Highness declares that the slave known only as Gabrielle, receive her freedom from servitude. According to law, the Lady Gabrielle will present herself to this court seven days hence, for the official decree. Until that moment, the Lady Gabrielle is presented temporary status as a Greek citizen with all the rights that privilege contains.”

Gabrielle looked at me and the smile on her face warmed my heart. I saw only love, mixed with a tiny bit of surprise. I leaned over to whisper in her ear.

“You asked if I would tell people...is this what you had in mind?” I questioned innocently.

“Not exactly,” she whispered back. “I envisioned something a tad more intimate, but thank you, Xena.”

Those green eyes sparkled in my direction and I knew in my heart, this wouldn't be the first time I would attempt to move a mountain for my lover.

I looked out into the sea of faces looking back at us. Some smiled and nodding their approval, other looked a bit taken back, and some, of course, appeared angry, frightened that the way of life they knew was about to change. Against the far wall, I caught the eyes of a familiar face

and the large smile that graced the older woman's features. Delia's eyes shone with unshed tears and I bowed my head in her direction, in deference to the woman who showed me the most about being a friend, with the possible exception of the young woman seated beside me.

Terillus bowed and backed away. "Lord Conqueror...Lady Gabrielle." He said respectfully.

"Has the council considered a verdict, Terillus?" I asked, getting back to the matter at hand.

"They have, Lord Conqueror." He answered.

"Have the prisoners brought before me to hear their judgment," I commanded to no one in particular.

The six of them were led in, bound in chains. They filed in, at least four guards surrounding them, Kassandros brought up the rear. Finally, they all looked up and a surprised gasp escaped from Gabrielle's throat. Looking quickly over to her, the small blonde's hand reached out and she clutched at my forearm, digging her nails into my skin.

"Gabrielle?" I leaned toward her.

Her face was contorted in pain, her breathing increased by the telltale rapid rise and fall of her chest. Her eyes took on a glazed over cast as she stared down at the men, more particularly, Kassandros.

All I could do was reach out and call her name, which she seemed suddenly oblivious to. Gabrielle stood up, all the while staring daggers at the man. Suddenly, her balance seemed compromised and she clutched at my arm again. I jumped from my seat just in time to keep her from hitting the floor. I scooped her into my arms as Atrius opened the door into a side chamber. I moved through the open doorway, already calling out for my healer.

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"How beautiful." Gabrielle dreamily commented as she moved toward consciousness.

I was worried now; the girl wasn't making any sense as she looked up, past me, and into thin air. I was standing over the low couch I'd laid Gabrielle's limp body on, upon first entering the room. Kuros, my healer kneeled at her side, proclaiming that she simply passed out and he couldn't find anything physically wrong with her beyond that.

"Gabrielle, are you all right?" I asked nervously.

"I see stars," Gabrielle tried to focus, pointing toward me.

"I told you she wasn't all right, Kuros," I chided my healer. Gods, it's amazing that the man still puts up with me, I turn into such a child around him.

He turned to look up at me and opened his mouth to speak. Suddenly he broke out into a smile and pointed above me. "Lord Conqueror...she does see stars."

I looked over my head, since Gabrielle and Kuros were both pointing toward the ceiling. I had to smile, sweet Aphrodite, the girl would be the death of me someday, I just know it. I stood looking at a painting of the night sky over Amphipolis, one that I commissioned an artisan to paint on the ceiling when I was in one of my more melancholy moods a few seasons back.

Atrius walked into the room and closed the door. He stopped when he saw all three of us looking up at the ceiling. His head inclined, then he took stock of the three of us once more.

"Lord Conqueror?" he asked uneasily.

"Oh, It's nothing," I said quickly, realizing we must look like a pack of fools. "Gabrielle?"

I kneeled beside her when Kuros relinquished the spot, brushing the hair that fell into her eyes. I kissed her lips, watching as the color came creeping back into her cheeks. Her face quickly lost the dreamy quality of sleep and she tried to jump up into a sitting position.

"Oh, Xena!" she exclaimed.

Gabrielle clung to me and I could feel her body trembling. It didn't feel like fear, it felt as if anger were coursing through her.

“Easy, easy,” I said, helping her to sit up on the edge of the couch. “Please, Gabrielle, tell me what’s wrong.” I asked.

“I...Xena, that man!” Gabrielle cried out. I looked up rather helplessly and Atrius shrugged his shoulders, not understanding any better than I to whom Gabrielle referred.

“Gabrielle, I don’t understand. What man? Has someone hurt you?” I asked slowly.

“The man...the one that stood before me in chains...he was the one.” Gabrielle stammered.

“Kassandros? The burly man on the end?”

“Yes! It was him, Xena, I’ll never forget his face.” Tears formed in her eyes and I felt myself growing angry over whatever Kassandros had done to Gabrielle to terrify her so.

“What did he do?” I asked in a low voice, my teeth clenched together, trying to control myself.

“He was the one,” Gabrielle seemed as if she were trying to explain, but couldn’t put the thoughts together in an understandable way. “Xena, he was the one who kidnapped the girls from my village outside of Potidaea. He took us and sold us in Amphipolis the next day.”

Gabrielle’s tears overflowed and streamed down her lightly freckled cheeks. I looked up and every man in the room simply stood there with an open mouth. I’d never asked Gabrielle how she came to be a slave. I’d asked her how long she served and where she was from, and a hundred other questions, but I never thought to ask her that one. There were only three legal ways to become a slave in my realm. You could be destined for a life of servitude if you were captured as part of the spoils of war, if you had debts you couldn’t pay, or if you sold yourself into the position. On the very borderline of the law were the people who would sell their own children as slaves, in my opinion, the worst kind of humanity. I’d outlawed illegal slave traders, but old habits were hard to break for some. My prisons were full of men arrested for the same crimes Kassandros and his bunch committed. All these thoughts went through my head, but I found myself unable to speak.

“Then, you’re not a slave?” Antillius commented on the obvious.

“She’s never been a slave,” I said, as if to convince myself as well. I stared straight into those sad green eyes. “Gabrielle, why didn’t you ever tell anyone?”

“I tried, at first,” her tears spilled harder as she related the memory. “I was beaten for trying to tell people, I was so young and the men had ways of making you...” she visibly shuddered and I pulled her against my chest, stroking her hair as she spoke. “...They made it so you didn’t tell anymore.”

I admit to feeling so many emotions at once, I couldn’t rest on just one alone. It came upon me in a swirling rush, the notion that this was my past come to haunt me. All the old nightmares, the sleepless nights, the people who came in and out of my life, for a good many seasons, I tortured myself for my past. When I wanted to try to begin to atone for the slightest bit of my past crimes, I found it hard to know where to start. I had no focus or goal, but that was different now.

Gabrielle sat before me as a living memory of my past. I’d not caused all the ills of the world, but I certainly didn’t do much as ruler of Greece to combat the evil and cruelty that existed here. I had the power to do so much good and I thoughtlessly squandered it all. Now I had a goal and even though it may appear small to some, I knew it was a start. I would work the rest of my life to repair the destruction of Gabrielle’s young life. There would be no amount of love too great to give, no time too much to spend with her. I only prayed to Athena that it would be enough. In my heart, I knew it wouldn’t come close, but I would try all the same.

“Gabrielle...why didn’t you ever try to tell me?” I asked.

The small blonde looked up at me. Wiping her eyes, she then looked at the open mouthed men standing around her. “Because I was a slave,” she said.

My lover used those very words once before and they made just as big of an impact on me as they did now. In a world where one person could own another, where one human being’s life was thought to be worth so much less simply because of the direction the fates spun their life thread, Gabrielle’s words completed the picture. Injustice and inhumanity allowed to flourish, for one simple reason; slavery. It brought about an even greater commitment to the event I would make happen on this day.

“Then we won’t need the proclamation...Gabrielle is a free woman, right?” Antillius said enthusiastically.

Atrius and I looked at one another, knowing it was never that easy.

“Gabrielle,” Atrius acknowledged her for the first time. “Where did this happen?”

“My father had a farm quite a distance from Potidaea. I was very young, but I remember that it used to take a full day to get to the harbor in Potidaea.” Gabrielle answered.

“This farm...would your parents still be living?” Atrius asked again.

I saw where he was headed, but Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve never been able to get back to the Macedon area to find out.” She replied tearfully. “I was bought in Abdera by Persian traders and it was another three seasons before I was sold to a Greek Master.”

It suddenly became clear why Gabrielle was so well educated for a slave. Being sent to Persia as a slave had its advantages and its horrors. The unfortunate aspect for a ten-year-old girl was that of the Persians propensity for children as sex slaves. The odd part was that they neither beat nor berated the slaves, but taught through kindness and gifts, an odd form of abuse. They also believed in educating slave children right alongside the nobleman’s children. Boys and girls all learned to read, write, and play an instrument, usually the lyre. It was good fortune for Gabrielle, that once a girl reaches the age of twelve, she must be Persian born to share a citizen’s bed. Gabrielle was probably sold to a Greek buyer, bringing her back to her homeland, for that very reason.

“Gabrielle, it’s only that...well not that any of us don’t believe you, of course we do, love,” I said, kissing her forehead, “but the court would have to have proof that you were born a free woman, your parents word, or a midwife present at your birth.”

“I understand. I’m sorry I interrupted the proceedings, My Lord,” Gabrielle answered and I grinned at her ever so slightly. All that she suffered through and she was still trying to present the proper amount of decorum in front of the other men present in the room.

“This isn’t over yet,” I stood up and ran my hands through my hair.

Something was nagging at me about all of this. Gabrielle’s story rang true for more reasons than because she was my lover, and I wanted it to be true. My mind sped through the many

conversations Gabrielle and I had over the last few moons. Ten...the number ten stuck in my brain.

“Gabrielle, you were kidnapped when you were ten summers old?” I asked.

“Yes,” she responded slowly. “That was ten, almost eleven, seasons ago.”

I turned to Atrius and Antillius. “When I spoke with my chief builder, Sagoris, that day I told him to tear down the hired servants housing and rebuild, he said something interesting. He explained that Demetri was in charge of building the shacks we’re left with now. At the time, I simply assumed Demetri purchased inferior supplies and pocketed the money. Now I know where that money went. Sagoris said that all this happened about ten seasons ago.”

“So, you think Demetri provided the funds for Kassandros’ illegal slave trade.” Atrius caught on.

“It makes more than perfect sense when you look at it.” I began my customary pacing as I spoke. “Ten seasons ago Demetri stole enough money from the palace coffers to fund such an operation. Ten seasons ago Kassandros was made a Governor of Macedon. Ten seasons ago Gabrielle was abducted in the same manner as the girls we so recently rescued from Callius’ clutches.”

“It does seem more than enough to be presented as a case for dismissal,” Antillius offered.

“But, where is your proof?” I hadn’t even noticed Terillus come into the room. The older man folded his arms across his chest.

“Terillus is right. It’s all conjecture unless we have testimony, someone who knew or saw something.” I agreed sadly.

“He would know.” Gabrielle’s voice came from the couch she still sat upon.

We’d all but forgotten the young woman was still there and all of us turned at once.

“You mean Kassandros?” I asked her and she nodded her head.

“Gabrielle, he a man condemned to die, he would spit in our faces rather than give information that would help your cause.” Atrius responded.

“Not necessarily.” I added. “I might be able to make him a deal. Atrius, can you have a couple of guards bring him in here?”

“Aye, Lord Conqueror.” He replied and left the room.

I pulled Gabrielle to one side and spoke softly. “Gabrielle, you may not want to be in the same room with him.”

“Please, Xena, don’t do what I think you might do...not just for me.” Gabrielle responded. “I can tell by that look in your eye. These men deserve to die for their crimes. Think of all the woman like me, the girls like the ones you saved on the ship that day. Don’t allow this man leniency simply for me. I wouldn’t want that.”

I pressed my fingers to her lips to quiet and reassure her. “There is no fear that I will not see that these men are punished accordingly, Gabrielle. They will wish for death before their punishment is through. Trust me?” I whispered at last.

She looked up at me, nodding and mustering a tiny smile for my benefit, the expression on her face, the look in her eye, spoke of an all-embracing and utter trust. I knew what it would come across resembling, but I simply didn’t care. I reached down and kissed her lips lightly.

“I won’t let you down.” I whispered.

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“Kassandros,” I stood in front of the chained man, “I need information from you.” I said simply.

“I’ll suffer in Tartarus first!” he growled.

“I can arrange that.” I hissed. “Do you remember Antipater? Remember how your father died?”

I moved closer to him until I was practically whispering in his ear. I could see that he blanched a little at the memory. I’d had the General and all his officers disemboweled while they still breathed. Sometimes I still heard those screams in my nightmares.

“What do I get in return?” he asked, knowing that I would offer a reward of sorts.

“Your life.” I answered.

I had to admit, I was proud of Gabrielle. When I asked her to trust me, I was asking for a great deal. I could see her in the corner of the room, her hands formed into small fists.

“You’ll be put into a prison for the rest of your life. Your alternative is death, and I won’t make it a pleasant way to die, trust me.” I raised an eyebrow for effect.

“What do you want to know?” he asked gruffly.

“When you started the kidnappings, where did you begin?”

“Hades, it was seasons ago!”

“Where did you get the money to hire men, then?” I asked.

“Demetri sent silver. He started the whole thing off.”

“Think hard, Kassandros, your life depends on it...literally. Where did you begin?”

“Ah, it’s no big a mystery. We started in Macedon, the Chalcidice region. In those days, I’d hire some men and do the job myself. We started there; the little farm villages usually had plenty of girls to grab. We raided the outskirts where we could get whole villages sometimes. Adult males sold good for heavy labor, women, and brats for domestic stuff. The really pretty girls all went for pleasure.”

“Do you remember where exactly?” I asked between clenched teeth. It was only my promise to Gabrielle that kept me from splitting his skull.

“Course. Potidaea, Amphipolis, but then it got so’s you couldn’t sell them there...once you and your laws came around,” he added snidely. “We started sending them to Abdera, that way they could be shipped straight to Persia.”

I listened to his tale and realized that I’d done precious little over the seasons to combat the illegal trade in slaves. Amphipolis, Potidaea, and Abdera, were all well-known ports of trade for slaves. Abdera got away with the most, I guessed, simply because they had a daily auction block for slaves, legally taken as war captives in neighboring Thracian tribal wars. Their proximity to Persia meant that a good deal of the slaves went there.

“Where else did you send them to be sold?”

“Hades, all over! Most went to the big slave markets in Ephesus and Chios, then on to Corinth and Athens. Some went to Delos, but not usually ours.” He finally finished, as calmly as if he were telling us there would be rain tomorrow.

Delos would be the hardest port to shut down. Only recently, it became the notorious center of the Greek slave trade, legal and otherwise. I remembered the beautiful island well from the last time I was there. Funny thinking this now, but I got a notion in my head, that Gabrielle would probably enjoy the spectacular lake, inhabited by thousands of eye-catching swans. I would love to see the look on her face when she saw the breathtaking *Lion’s Terrace*, built in my honor. The carved marble lions were indeed a remarkable sight.

I finally shook my head to bring me out of my thoughts and into the situation before me.

“Well, gentleman?” I looked at Antillius and Terillus, who nodded their heads.

“I will speak to the other advisors on the Lady Gabrielle’s behalf, Lord Conqueror.” Terillus spoke up.

I motioned with my hand and the guards stepped forward to bring Kassandros back out to the Great Hall.

“Don’t forget what you promised, Conqueror!” The prisoner shouted back at me.

I stood there watching Gabrielle’s eyes follow the man from the room; a haunted look of pain and a life lost burning in those emerald orbs.

“Oh, I won’t forget,” I muttered under my breath.

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I left the room to speak with Antillius and Terillus, along with my four other advisors. I wanted to handle things in the right order to prevent any chaos that might come of the situation. First things first and I had a verdict to pronounce.

Once again, the men were brought before me, Gabrielle too, seated by my side.

“Lord Terillus, will you announce your verdict to the court?” I directed the older man.

“Yes, Lord Conqueror.” Terillus opened a scroll and read the short, but predictable message. “In the court of her Royal Highness, the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire, we six advisors to the palace have conferred and found each of the accused guilty of the crime of illegal slave activity.”

Terillus then turned to me and bowed slightly before returning to his seat.

“So be it,” I said, sealing the fate of the silent men before me. “You will be brought before the court this afternoon for your sentencing. I recommend you say a few words to Hades.” I smirked, as they were lead away.

Once they were gone from the Hall, I nodded to Antillius. The young man cleared his throat and opened the first scroll. I held my breath without realizing it, anxious to see the look on Gabrielle’s face. I don’t know why, but the usual preamble always caused me to want to roll my eyes.

“By order of her Royal Highness, the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire, the proclamation to free the slave known as Gabrielle is immediately rescinded.”

If Gabrielle’s eyes had been brands of fire, I would have been seared through. She looked at me with a combination of anger and incomprehension.

“Antillius!” I called out sharply, interrupting the young man. I crooked a finger when he looked up and he walked close to my chair, so close that I grabbed him by the neck and pulled him down to ear level.

“Antillius, do you see the look on Gabrielle’s face?” I asked. I didn’t have to glance again; I knew what she looked like.

The young man nodded nervously once he saw the death wish written in my lover’s eyes.

“Do you know what happens if Gabrielle gets mad at me?”

Antillius gave a red-faced grin. “May I hazard a guess and say I would get beat up or something like that?”

“You’re such a bright boy, Antillius.” I grinned right back at him. “Why don’t we read those proclamations in a different order? Hhmm?”

“Of course, Lord Conqueror.” He answered.

“Um...by proclamation of the--”

“Antillius, just get on with it!” my patience was sadly at an end.

“Yes, Lord Conqueror. After conference among the Conqueror’s palace advisors and satisfying testimony, the advisors have reached an understanding; the slave known only as Gabrielle will no longer be known as a former slave. Due to kidnapping and illegal slave trade, the lady Gabrielle is not now, nor has she ever been a slave. She is a free woman born and raised until the kidnapping ten seasons ago. According to law, the Lady Gabrielle will present herself to this court seven days hence, for the official decree.”

I looked over to find Gabrielle smiling proudly. We left the Great Hall for a break until the afternoon session, where I would be expected to pronounce sentence. I needed to be somewhere quiet for a bit. I wanted Gabrielle with me, so I asked one of the kitchen maids to prepare a light lunch for us to take into the gardens. I took Gabrielle's hand as we left the Great Hall, she with tears in her eyes that, for the first time in a long time, meant pure joy and happiness, and I with a smile that was so uncharacteristic, I saw a few old women laugh at my lovesick expression.

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The girl amazed me as I watched her eat the last half dozen figs, followed by one more, thick slice of *manoúri*, a sweet cheese.

"You sure you're not eating for two already?" I teased.

"Not yet, but look out when I do." She smiled over at me and we both enjoyed the relaxed laughter that followed.

"It feels so different being with you now, Xena," she commented.

"I'm sure I'm much changed, love, but I think it is mostly because of the changes in you."

"Me?" she answered, the tone sounding as if she believed that to be highly unlikely.

"Yes, you," I reached over and touched my index finger to the tip of her nose. "I've watched you, Gabrielle, occasionally when you think I'm not," I smiled. "I remember the girl who stood before me with a dirty face and bare feet, not even able to look me in the eye. She was so terrified of the thought of spending one night in the Conqueror's bed, that she tried to hide herself from my eyes."

"I looked so pathetic then...I hadn't had a bath in days and days," Gabrielle said self-consciously.

“I think I started to fall in love with you on that very day, at that very minute,” I answered her, and she blushed deeply, bowing her head.

“I’ve never heard you talk like this,” she responded, unable or unwilling to raise her head and meet my eyes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t know how to tell you sooner,” I said, taking her hand in my own, looking down at it and feeling the smoothness against my own much rougher hand. “I’m sorry that I ever led you to doubt how very much I love you, Gabrielle. I’m not always proud of who I am, much less who I’ve been, but having you in my life makes me believe that I can be a much better person; having you in my heart, makes me know that I am.”

I was mightily rewarded with the sweetest kiss in the world for that little speech. Gods, who would have known? If I’d have recognized that the simple truth of revealing my feelings could do this, I might have tried it long ago.

“Xena, you’re an incredible woman,” Gabrielle said, surprising me. “You’re different from every person I’ve ever known in my life, and I love you because of it. I knew there was something different about you after the first evening we were together, but I never knew it could cause me to feel this way; never realized it would instill this feeling of absolute love and trust for you, and I do you know.”

I didn’t want to cry, not again, and not in front of Gabrielle, but I was fighting a losing battle. All I could do was bring the hand in my own up to my lips and kiss it.

“I never thought, Xena...never dared to hope that something this beautiful would ever happen to me. That someone like you would ever want a girl like me,” Gabrielle added.

I looked up, and through my tears, I smiled.

“Did I say something amusing?” Gabrielle asked.

“No, something mystical,” I replied. “You just read my mind. Those were the very thoughts running through my mind. Gabrielle, are you sure, I mean, sure that I’m the one?”

“Would you rather I not be?” she asked in concern.

“No!” I answered quickly, “no, love it’s not that. I only think about the fact that...well, Gabrielle, I’m quite a bit older than you, I’ve earned my share of enemies over the seasons. I worry that you’ll be committing to a lifetime of loneliness or have your heart broken should Celesta come looking for me one day soon.”

I searched her eyes, the green irises turning darker, misting over with tears. Just as suddenly they brightened, then she smiled and shook her head.

“No, Athena would never have fulfilled our destinies this way to set us up for pain. It’s not like her to dangle a golden carrot before someone without at least giving them the chance to jump at it. I will make special offerings to her in hopes that she can persuade her uncle not to call your name for a very long time,” the young woman answered optimistically.

“Gabrielle, do you know what an enigma is?” I asked. My tears forgotten, a smile now graced my features.

“Something that is difficult to understand?” she answered, uncertainly.

“In a way, yes, but it’s more. It’s something or someone that is puzzling, that’s simply inexplicable. You are that for me.” I responded. “You are the most loving, generous woman I have ever known, yet living the life you have, that you are that way, completely baffles me. You can be shy and timid, but in the time it takes an eagle to strike down its prey, you can be forceful and commanding. I can’t explain it. You are a riddle, my love, that I want to spend the rest of my time in this mortal realm solving.”

I reached over to kiss the look of shock from her face. “We need to get back, but I want to ask you something.”

I pulled the small signet ring from my little finger. I kept a large, heavy ring in a box on my desk, which would someday go to my heir. I only wore it at official functions and kept it locked at my desk to use as a seal. For Greek royalty, the ring that bears our crest carries no greater sign of commitment. To give the ring to my heir or the next in line for the throne, displayed an open and willing commitment to the bearer of the ring. It showed great faith, trust, and belief in the recipient of the gift. No ruler ever gave their signet up lightly.

I took hold of Gabrielle's hand once more and pulled it toward me, easily slipping the trinket on her ring finger. Once in place, I kissed the tops of her fingers, then turned her hand and gently kissed her palm.

"This is my promise, Gabrielle. All that I have I share with you, except my heart, and that I give to you completely," I said softly.

"I don't think I deserve to be a Queen, Xena," she replied in a tearful voice.

"You do, my love, and I plan on spending the rest of my life showing you just how much I believe that." I smiled. "Are you ready?" I rose and held out a hand to her.

When I felt her hand slip into my mine, I thought of the eve before I took Athens, the night I pledged my allegiance to Athena. Suddenly I was there, in that old tent I set up as a shrine for her, remembering the Goddess' words to me.

*"With Ares power, Xena, you would have become the mightiest warrior in the Known World. With mine, you'll become the greatest ruler Greece has ever known."*

*She slipped her hand into mine and I felt a tingling sensation travel up my arm and into my chest, followed by a feeling of confidence, that what she was saying would indeed come to pass.*

*"And what will I owe you?" I questioned in a low dulcet tone. My naturally suspicious nature knew the Gods didn't give anything away for free.*

*"Your heart," Athena answered.*

*"I thought you were the Pallas," I drawled, the use of the old title, indicating the Goddess' renowned virginity. I also stared hungrily, greedy for a chance at being the first. It seems conquering was in my blood.*

*Athena smiled seductively. "I've seen the way you go at it, Xena. I think if I were to take a lover, I'd want it a little less rough."*

*“Don’t knock it till ya tried it,” I grinned, turning on the charm.*

*This time she laughed. “Xena, you have a long journey ahead of you, and I fear what Ares has molded you into, may make it difficult, if not impossible, for you to recover.”*

*I didn’t understand one damn word she was babbling on about, but the ample breasts, threatening to spill out from their armored hideaway, weren’t helping me keep track of her words any.*

*I looked into her face and she was shaking her head in amused disapproval. “Xena, I’m going to keep your heart for you until you need it.”*

*“Trust me, that I won’t need,” I responded, still ogling her chest.*

*Quickly she reached out and grabbed my chin, holding it firmly within her fingers. I saw a previously hidden fire in her eyes and I realized her patience had come to an end.*

*“You will need it someday. Trust me, there will come a time when you will want it back,” she said strongly.*

*“Yea, when?” I sneered.*

*Her gaze softened again. “When you want to give it away,” she replied. “Were you even listening to me before?”*

*“Yea, yea...I’m going on a journey,” I answered, rubbing my sore chin.*

*“Of a sort, yes.” She smiled again, only this time the smile seemed sad. She turned to leave and I couldn’t help asking.*

*“Athena....” I called out and she turned back. “When will I want to give my heart away?” I asked quietly.*

*“I thought that would have been apparent,” again, the bittersweet smile, “at your journey’s end, of course.”*

*She was gone in a multicolored flash, but I looked down at the hand that still tingled with warmth.*

“Xena...Xena, are you all right?” Gabrielle asked.

I had to literally shake my head and look around to realize where I was. I remembered the incident with amazing clarity, but up to a few heartbeats ago, it had been lost to my memories. It was as if it never happened, but I knew that it had.

Athena and I both kept our promises after all. She made me the greatest ruler in all of Greece and I gave her my heart. Thank the Gods there was at least one benevolent deity on Olympus. Athena safeguarded my heart all these seasons, her words coming back to me as I felt the warmth of Gabrielle’s hand in mine.

“Until I want to give it away,” I whispered in amazement.

“What?” Gabrielle asked with a worried frown.

I smiled brightly and squeezed her hand. “Nothing, love, just remembering something that happened a long time ago.”

We walked through the garden, and I swore the olive wood statue of Athena Polias, which we passed before entering the palace, winked at me.

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“Are you sure you want to be in there?” I asked Gabrielle before we entered the Great Hall. Gabrielle nodded her head silently and I watched as she twisted my ring on her finger. “Gabrielle?” I asked.

“Xena, I just don’t want you to back off of punishing that man because he gave us the information we needed.” Gabrielle responded, indicating Kassandros’ testimony.

“I’d never interfere with your decisions, it’s only...he needs...” tears formed in her eyes and I took her in my arms and held her.

“To suffer?” I finished for her.

Again, the silent nod.

“And, you think I might let him off the hook, for the testimony that freed you?” I asked.

“I don’t ever want to be the cause for so many feeling that justice wasn’t served in your court.” She responded.

“I understand, love, but sometimes the law and justice are leagues apart from one another. I promise you one thing, though, justice will be served today.” I answered.

Moreover, Kassandros *will* suffer, I thought to myself, as Gabrielle and I entered the Hall.

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I stood and paced before the men brought for sentencing. I was speaking of the inhumanity of the slavers, their ways, detailing in graphic examples, exactly what the kidnapped children could expect as slaves. Ever since I could first remember, I had a knack for speaking in front of people. The rush that I received from my battle speeches was something akin to being pleased, and I used to ride that wave of pleasure, squeezing every last drop of emotion from it. I did the same right now and I could see it in their faces. Some realizing, for the first time, what the life of a slave must be like, so I continued to speak.

I was setting them up for my victory, and the majority of them never even knew it.

“You have all been condemned and convicted of the crime of illegal slave trade,” I directed my comments to the prisoners. “By Greek law I have the right to condemn each of you to death.”

“Wait a minute,” I heard Kassandros growl under his breath.

I held up my hand for silence. “But, is death really appropriate for this crime? I turned to the people once more. “Would their deaths bring those children back? Can it bring the stolen lives back?” I asked, pausing to look up at Gabrielle. “Do the victims even care if these men die? Of course, not, they can only think of one thing...vengeance. Many of the victims will never be known, but for them, this court exacts that vengeance for them.”

I moved back to my chair, touching Gabrielle’s shoulder lightly as I walked past her. That small connection was enough for me to feel energized, committed to my goal.

“In this case, death is actually too good for you.” I said seriously. “Because of that, I sentence you to life imprisonment.”

Murmurs and grumbles arose from the audience before I was even finished. “In the mines at Pella,” I added.

The grumbling stopped immediately and only murmured whispers could be heard.

“You bitch.”

Pella was in upper Macedon, Kassandros’ homeland, so he knew what I had in mind.

The city of Corinth produced silver coins, my face stamped on some, the symbol of a lion on others. Silver was used because it was plentiful in mines all over the Empire. Gold coins were something a bit more rare. They were minted in few cities, but the most profitable was in Pella, due to the supplies of gold ore. The deposits were deep underground, the labor nearly death defying to mine the precious metal, which was why prisoners were used in the mines. In the mines at Pella, even slaves were considered too valuable to send in.

“You said the rest of my life...I’d be sent to a prison for the rest of my life,” Kassandros yelled as they pulled him away.

“I figure that should be in about one season,” I returned calmly.

Once the astonished onlookers were calmed a bit, I motioned to Antillius. The young man opened a scroll and cleared his throat.

“By order of her Royal Highness, the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire, the following proclamation is issued as law. To begin on this day at this very moment, the Lord Conqueror has commanded that slavery be banished from within the boundaries of the Greek Empire. The throne will be willing to provide a modest compensation to slave owners, as recompense, or to be used as wages, if the slaves of a household or within an industry choose to stay in their position, as hired servants. The army of the throne will see to it that said law is met with compliance, however the Lord Conqueror and her advisors shall be available on a daily basis, to see to it that the law is made a reality. Effective immediately, slavery is at an end in the realm.”

Antillius looked over at me for approval and I smiled at the young man. “So be it.” I said, thereby putting the law into effect.

He then brought the scroll to me and handed me a quill, wet with ink. I signed my name to the document, and another, exactly like the first. Terillus insisted we have a duplicate copy. A remarkable thing happened after I signed my name. Almost the entire Hall cheered. I certainly wasn't expecting that, which made Gabrielle brighten and lean towards me to whisper in my ear.

“And now...you are an enigma to me,” my future Queen smiled

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Not a soul bothered us again for the rest of the night. We ate a leisurely dinner that Delia outdid herself creating, followed by an even more relaxing bath, with more touching and caressing going on than actual bathing. We ended up in front of the game table, each of us enjoying a goblet of wine. I think Gabrielle humored me in drinking hers, I know she didn't care for the taste very much.

The game of King's Men went about like all our games; I got my butt kicked.

“How do you do that?” I raised my voice slightly, staring down at the marble playing field.

“Because you do the same thing over and over,” Gabrielle countered.

“I’ll have you know that I won every campaign I ever waged, from Sparta to Troy, with the exception of one.” I shot back.

“Hhmm,” Gabrielle said, rising and turning her back on me, “Funny, but you haven’t won any in Corinth.”

I stared at her retreating back, open-mouthed. Now it was a well-known fact that I hadn’t won the first Campaign I waged to take Corinth, well, actually, I didn’t lose, but I called a retreat. Long story. What amazed me is that Gabrielle managed to cut me down to size in a rather amusing jibe equating that battle and my ability at King’s men.

So quickly, I bet she never heard it; I jumped from my chair. I had her in my arms and up in the air, tossed over one shoulder before she knew what was happening. The combination of Gabrielle’s screams and her laughter as I tickled her, brought a much too enthusiastic Aristes, charging in through our door.

We all just stopped and stared at one another. I repositioned Gabrielle in my arms and the guard was wondering, I’m sure, which it would be, Tartarus or Elysium.

“I...forgive me...I...I heard...well, then I thought maybe...I thought the lady...um, that she could be...in trouble...” the guard desperately tried to stammer out.

Gabrielle and I never said a word.

“I’ll just...um...” Aristes pointed toward the door and he left the way he came, only a lot quieter.

Once the door closed, Gabrielle and I took one look at one another and burst into laughter.

“That poor boy,” Gabrielle said.

“Poor boy, my ass,” I said while crossing the room and pushing the bolt on the door, while holding on to Gabrielle with one arm. “He’s lucky I’m in a good mood.”

“Are you going to put me down now?” she asked.

**“Oh, sure...after that Corinth comment?”**

“So, what *are* you going to do with me?” she asked with a gleam of expectation in her eye.

“What do you think?” I asked, crossing the threshold of our bedroom.

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“Why are you laughing? I think I could,” I said, sure if I pouted a little Gabrielle would give in and agree.

“Oh, Xena, I’m sorry, love but you...as a body slave? I just can’t picture it.” She continued to chuckle.

“Well, I didn’t say I’d be great at it, just that I could, if I had to.” I replied.

“Uh huh.” Gabrielle arched her eyebrow.

“I could! Quit looking at me that way.”

“What way, love?” she asked.

“That way. That condescending way that says, you don’t think I can do it.”

“Xena, dear...we’re talking about forgoing your own pleasure to see to your master’s, not thinking of taking one bit of satisfaction for yourself. Do you remember the first evening we met, when you eventually passed out?” Gabrielle asked.

“I fell asleep, I did not pass out. Besides, I fought in a battle that morning.” I whined rather pathetically.

“All right,” Gabrielle rose from the couch we’d been reclining on. She let her robe slide from her shoulders, her beautiful, naked body standing there before me. She turned on her heel and walked to the bed. Pulling back the comforter and sheets, she sat down and leaned back, reclining on one elbow.

“Well?” she looked at me.

“Now? Right now?”

“It’s now or never, Conqueror.” Gabrielle answered firmly.

She held an amused look in her eyes that told me she thought I was far from capable of pulling off such a feat. I wondered why I was even trying, when I knew damn well that making love to Gabrielle, denying my own release, would damn near kill me.

I can do this, I kept whispering in my head. I stood up and walked to the bed.

“Take off your robe.” She commanded and I felt myself getting wet.

Just like that I was aroused. Hades, this wasn’t going to be much of a seduction if the slave came before her master. Why am I even considering this? Gabrielle doesn’t expect me to prove anything. I let the robe fall from my body, becoming increasingly aroused at the hungry stare Gabrielle used to look me over. She abruptly rolled into the middle of the bed, on her stomach.

“A backrub, Xena. That’s what I need,” she mumbled, practically into her pillow.

Oh Gods, I knew what she was recreating, now. It was the first night we spent together. I realized I might be in a tad over my head here, but never being one to back away from a challenge, I blindly pressed on. I stood there wondering how a submissive person acts, how do they think? I watched as she spread those legs apart and I knew it was up to me to take the silent command to kneel there. I found myself frozen in place, literally unable to move. Something like fear kept me grounded in place, unable to obey the unspoken order. I was

suddenly afraid that I wouldn't be able to please my lover, couldn't be what she needed. Was I too old, too weary, did I have enough in me to be in love? Children...she wanted children, Gods!

My thoughts raced through my brain like a speeding chariot. I pulled my mind to an abrupt halt and realization crept up on me. This is what a slave feels like; insecure, unworthy, always wondering if you are good enough, pleasing enough. For all my bluster about being unable to know what a slave truly feels, I actually did know. Deep down, the only thing different between Gabrielle and I had always been her fear. Now, that she was ridding herself of that cumbersome emotion, she stood on an equal footing with me. That fact terrified me. It also elated me. I had a chance to give Gabrielle something that no man or woman ever gave her; the chance to be in command. To feel with abandon, understanding that any pleasure you desired was within your reach. I was smiling at that prospect when Gabrielle spoke.

“Not up to the challenge, Conqueror?” she smirked into her pillow.

I decided to take the challenge. I kneeled between her open legs, my own pressing up against her. I touched her, kneading the muscles in the small of her back. I slowly began to feel her muscles become warm and pliant under my touch. Her skin felt smooth, but I could feel the strength the porcelain skin disguised.

“Where did you learn how to do this?” Gabrielle asked in a breathy voice. I just knew she was holding back a groan of pleasure.

I decided to play along with her little recreation. “One of my masters had a healer who was from the land of Chin. He was very happy to teach me the ways of his art, Mistress.” I tried to remember the few words Gabrielle spoke to me that evening.

I leaned into her slight body and rubbed small circles into her lower back with the heel of one hand. Strong thighs parted slightly and I pressed against the insides of those gorgeous legs, leaning my weight in, to place more pressure on my hand. She moaned softly as the curls covering my mound pressed into her shapely backside, and my own wetness betrayed me, just as it had when our positions were reversed. Gods! How does she do it? I was about ready to hold her down and ravish her right then. I paused momentarily upon reaching her hips, acting as if I didn't know in which direction to continue. Thank the Gods this whole thing seemed to be exciting her as much as me.

“Lower,” she ordered.

I watched as the muscles in her arms tensed in anticipation. She held the pillow in her arms tighter as I kneaded the flesh of her backside, wondering if she had any idea how insane she was making me with the small whimpers that I'm sure she wasn't even aware she was making. I ran my hands along the silky skin there, first strongly massaging, then softly teasing with only my fingertips. I held my hands close together, letting the thumbs run along the division, moving lower until they just grazed her wetness. I took a deep breath, struggling to stay focused. In time, I moved down each thigh and along the backs of her legs, allowing my hands to caress her calves, working the arch of her foot, before letting my hands make the return journey.

By the time I slowly worked my way up to her backside again; the sounds coming from her throat were torturing me. She could no more hide her desire, than I could stop. It was easy to see her excitement, the folds of her sex, open and exposed to my eyes, glistened with her own brand of ambrosia. I was beginning to wonder if Gabrielle would want me in the exact way I wanted her, but I continued on. I was the slave and she the master. It was up to her to tell me what *she* desired. I don't know what it was about the open way she lay before me, the submissive position that belied who was in control, and who was merely being pleased, but I watched, mesmerized, as she pulled one knee up, spreading herself open, issuing the one command I held my breath for.

"Touch me," she said hoarsely.

I knew exactly what she wanted now and I clenched my abdominal muscles, to contain the surge of pleasure and keep it from taking over my belly. I left one hand to continue rubbing the flesh of that gorgeous backside, allowing my fingers to slip into the wet flesh between her legs. Gods, oh Gods, I kept thinking to myself, as Gabrielle arched her back, leaning up on her elbows a bit more to open herself fully to me.

I was whimpering, but I believe the soft sounds were drowned out by Gabrielle's moans and pleas for me not to stop. She ground her hips into the mattress to try to force my hand harder against her clit. I remembered the frustrating feeling when that contact wasn't enough, and she growled in frustration, just as I had.

"Inside...Gods, get your hand inside me!" she commanded, crying out in ecstasy when I slipped my fingers inside of her.

She pushed back hard, impaling herself further, nearly on her hands and knees by now. I couldn't believe how excited I was by it all. It felt just as incredible as when Gabrielle took me in the same manner.

I kept in perfect sync with her thrusting back against me, matching the exact speed her hips dictated. My free hand was splayed, the fingers across her backside, moving my thumb along the crack toward her center. I continued that way, back and forth, spreading Gabrielle's own juices up until she could feel where I was headed. I paused and began to gently rub the puckered flesh, pressing lightly, but not penetrating. Gabrielle's hips began a swirling motion, pushing back, silently pleading for more.

I kept up the thrusting of my fingers inside her, feeling the trembling of her limbs indicating her approaching release. I continued to run my thumb back down to pick up more lubrication, returning and pressing a little harder each time.

"Mistress?" I asked, requesting permission exactly as she had.

Gabrielle groaned. I knew that feeling. You wanted to say no, but it was as if someone else was controlling your body.

"Gods, yes!" she cried out.

Finally, I paused and pushed against the reluctant opening, my thumb covered in Gabrielle's silky wetness and in one smooth motion, I penetrated that tight opening with my thumb. I could feel my digit slide in, easily penetrating that wet warmth. I proceeded to do what Gabrielle did to me, fucked me until I thought I couldn't possibly hold back my own release any longer. She began pushing back hard against both of my hands moving inside her, and when her own screams ripped through her, she fell into the pillows, breathing hard.

I slowly eased my thumb out, my hand stilled inside her and before the last tremors of her powerful orgasm eased, I was moving my fingers inside her again. I twisted them up high and deep, rubbing the velvety spot inside and she was groaning aloud again. I brought her to another quick release after that, until her body fell forward onto the bed, her lungs needy for air.

"Mercy," she sighed in defeat and I smiled inside, not allowing the emotion to be displayed on my face.

I rose from the bed, cleaned myself, and gulped down half a dozen swallows of *ouzo*. I was hoping the spirits would send me into Morpheus' realm quickly, because now I had to go back to bed and prove that I could be a good slave; that I could abstain from my own pleasure.

Gods, this was not funny. I had an ache between my legs that I just knew wasn't going to allow me to simply roll over and fall asleep.

I moved to the bed and wrapped myself around Gabrielle. "Everything okay?" I asked.

"Mmm hmm," she murmured.

She pressed the length of her body back against me and my skin burned where it made contact with hers. "Gods," I whispered as low as I could.

"Feel good?" she teased.

"Ssh, go to sleep, love," I said hoarsely, trying to remember all the points of battlefield strategy I learned when younger. I was willing to try anything to get my mind off the pain between my legs.

Gabrielle pushed back into me, grinding her backside into my mound, which left a damp trail along her skin.

"Xena...you're so wet," she purred.

I broke out into a cold sweat. That kind of talk was doing nothing to douse my flaming libido. She swirled her hips, backing them into me a little harder this time. I could hear the growl rumbling in my chest before it even voiced itself.

"Gabrielle," I leaned closer, practically lying over her, enjoying the contact of practically lying on top of her back, "are you doing that on purpose?"

"Yes," she whispered back to me.

Then I did growl. "Gabrielle..."

"Yes, love?" Again the grind.

“I’m sorry, I admit it...I suck at being a slave.” I relinquished at last.

“Why do you say that?” she asked as I pressed against her further.

“Because all I want to do right now is feel you moving under me. Gods, woman, I want you to make me come.”

I spread my legs, lying nearly completely on top of her, reaching my hand down between our bodies. I was incredibly wet, and couldn’t resist swirling my fingers against my need. I spread myself open and pressed down hard against the firm ass under me, Gabrielle tilting her hips up to increase the pressure. She grabbed my hand and brought it to her lips, and I could only watch and groan as she licked my juices from each finger.

“Gods, woman!” I cried out.

I pressed down hard again while sliding myself along her backside. Sparks of pure fire were igniting against my clit as I continued to rub against the soft skin, while Gabrielle continued to press up against me at the same time.

“Ohhh,” I moaned, “I’m...Gods I’m sorry, baby...this is...going to be...so fast...Oh Gods!” I screamed.

The convulsions wracked my body and I couldn’t control the way I pressed against Gabrielle’s body, in pain, but unwilling to end the powerful orgasm. When at last the tremors eased, I fell against her, sated and amazed. It was true, I thought to myself, just before sleep claimed me after we whispered our words of love, I was a slave, but to only one thing...my passion for Gabrielle.

## Epilogue

“Xena...are you all right love?”

Gabrielle found me in the outer room, peering out the window, down into the garden.

“Yes, love,” I answered distractedly.

She slipped her arm around my waist and I realized my head was elsewhere. “I’m sorry, my brain is fixed on something else this morning.”

“I can see that by the frown,” Gabrielle answered, reaching up on her toes to place a kiss on my cheek.

I admit, that did make me feel better and my smile told her so.

“Why are you frowning and why so early?”

“It has nothing to do with us, my love.” I kissed her forehead and pulled her against me tighter. “We have a visitor.” I pulled back the tapestry to reveal a young man pacing in the garden below.

He walked back and forth, sat on a bench for a few heartbeats, then bounced up again as if too much energy could not be contained by sitting. He was tall, with a slim waist, and broad shoulders. His long dark hair fell down into his eyes and when he tossed his head back, he revealed sparkling blue eyes. Most would guess him to be nineteen or twenty, but I knew that he was twenty-three summers, in fact, I remembered the day he was born with startling clarity.

Gabrielle looked at the man, then back at me, and I knew she was wondering.

“Xena...do you know that young man?” she finally asked.

I smiled down at her, letting the tapestry fall to cover the window once again.

“Yes,” I answered. “He’s my son.”

**The End...**

*to be continued in Tale Two: “The Petal of the Rose”*