

What could be worse than a blatant bondage story? How about it's sequel? Like a nice set of bookends you hide in the closet whenever company comes to visit. The charming knick nack that exists buried in the sock drawer. Disclaimers are pretty much as before. #1, I don't own Xena, Gabrielle or Argo. MCA/Universal does, but we all know that. #2 Xena's point of view this time- and I don't think it's any closer to 'in character'. #3 The Gabster gets smacked around a bit, same as last time. #4 Same-sex bonanza- be brave. #5 Bondage from the point of view of the bondager- if that's a word. For the last time I swear I DID NOT do any research for this stuff. #6 Obviously there isn't one. #7 The plot that does not exist is exactly the same plot that did not exist last time. I never said this was original- just a slight variation on a rather aimless theme.

The Binds That Tie II: The Tacky Sequel

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"Kaltor, the answer is *no*," I said firmly and clearly, not trying to disguise the annoyance I was feeling at the king's pitiful pleading.

"Xena, please!" he begged for the umpteenth time. I took a breath and exhaled slowly, remembering that I owed Kaltor for the decency he'd shown me in the old days. It wouldn't do to detach his whining head from the rest of his annoying body at the moment. I needed to calm down and regroup, so I sat back on the bench and took a deep sip of wine. In the periphery of my vision I saw Gabrielle roll her eyes. Inwardly it made me smile. Gabrielle had been uncharacteristically quiet as King Kaltor and I argued. No doubt she was straining from the self discipline needed to keep out of the fray. A quick glance at her plate told me it had even put a dent in her normally voracious appetite.

"Then I should just hand over the keys to my main gate to Lothar," Kaltor pined, melodramatically.

Perhaps lopping off his head wouldn't be so bad after all. For the life of me, I couldn't imagine why I'd never killed this particular king when I was a warlord. Was my army in that bad a shape back then? With a sad sigh I remembered that had indeed been the case. My men were so exhausted, weak and injured that even Kaltor's pitiful forces could have kept them at bay. But he had opened his doors to us, providing the safety of his keep in return for mercy at the hands of the Warrior Princess. It seemed like such

a small thing then. Now, however...

"Even if I went to see Lothar," I explained patiently, "I find it hard to believe he'd still think I'm a warlord. I had trouble pulling that off with another warlord two years ago." It was true that Lothar was dumber than Myzantius, but I didn't see any reason to remind Kaltor of that fact.

"But you know how isolated we are, Xena," he countered. "And Lothar never looks past his walls, unless it's in the direction of my kingdom. I have to work hard at staying in touch with the outside world; he has his amusements and looks no farther than that." He shook his head sadly, once again overacting. "Xena, you know what goes on within those walls. I've opened my doors to many escaped slaves. Surely, you can't just sit there while..."

"All right!" I snapped, finally fed up. Even a trip to Lothar's kingdom would be preferable to listening to Kaltor's incessant whining. "I'll go talk to him, see what I can do, but I'm not making any promises."

"No promises," Kaltor agreed, looking relieved. "I'll send some of my best soldiers to act as your--"

I shook my head, cutting him off. "No, I'll go alone, at first light." The last thing I needed

Kaltor doing was making this sound dangerous. If he did that, I knew Gabrielle would insist on getting involved, and I wasn't about to have that happen. As if the fates had conspired against me, she chose that moment to enter the conversation.

"Now, wait a minute," she began.

"No, Gabrielle," I replied in the tone that usually ended our unpleasant discussions. "You're *not* going." I took another drink of my wine, forcing any thoughts of Gabrielle in that sick bastard's kingdom as far away as possible. I don't know what Kaltor could have been thinking. He just sat there looking confused, then piped up with the worst ideas in the history of bad ideas.

"Perhaps I can get one of my servants to accompany you, Xena. You won't be believable if you're unaccompanied."

At his words, memories started working their way to the surface, memories of the visits I'd paid to the Kingdom of Lothar in the old days: the heady power, the indulgences. I'd been empty then; it had been so simple to feed the lust that surfaced in a variety of ways. But that wasn't who I was now. Granted, occasionally I'd relive memories from the old days in a rare moment of physical privacy, but those moments and memories were few and very far between. The Xena I had become could ill afford a prolonged stay in Lothar's hedonistic den. I needed to get in, talk to Lothar, and get out. Preferably before Gabrielle even realized I was gone.

"No, I'm going alone," I replied firmly.

"Lothar will never buy it," Kaltor objected.

While he had a point, I was not ready to concede. "I didn't have slaves in the old days," I countered.

"But surely you made use of his?" Kaltor replied. "Do you want to do that again, or take someone who can act the part?"

With great effort I did not groan out loud, but I sure felt defeated. He was right; we both knew it. To get an audience with the twisted king, I'd either have to play his little games with his little playthings or act like I was playing games with my own. Obviously the only choice now was to get someone in Kaltor's household to accompany me and play the part. The hard part of that plan would be convincing Gabrielle to stay behind.

As if on cue, Gabrielle slammed down her wine goblet. "What's going on here?" she demanded. "You won't let me go, but you'll think about taking someone you don't even *know*!" Her brilliant green eyes bored into mine with a cold fury. I could see she was genuinely hurt. Clearly in her mind she'd made more of this than it was, more than I could explain to her. No, what Gabrielle saw was me treating her like a child, *again*. How on earth could I tell her that her fears couldn't have been farther from the truth?

"Listen to me, Gabrielle," I tried to explain. "Lothar's kingdom is no place for you. It wasn't even a place for me when I was a warlord."

"Sounds colorful," she snapped.

I took a deep breath. She was really upset about this. As gently as I could, I spelled it out to her. "It's twisted, Gabrielle. Lothar is a sick man, and his ideas of proper conduct are deplorable. If I'm going to make him believe I'm still a warlord allied to Kaltor, I'm going to have to... do things I'd

"But Xena," she insisted, "I'll *know* it's all an act. If this place is as rough as it sounds, you might need me at your back."

Gods, her eyes shown brightly with intentions so honest. I would have given anything at that moment to change the decision we'd made to come to Kaltor's kingdom in the first place. But it was a decision we'd made together. She saw it as help to an old friend; she had no idea that helping Kaltor would push me to the brink of darkness once again. How I envied her innocence. I couldn't think back to a time when sex and power weren't inextricably linked.

"She's right," Kaltor agreed.

My eyes snapped over to his pasty white face. I know my expression and body language were clear: if he wanted to see the sun rise, he'd shut up immediately. Like a dog that doesn't know when to stop barking, he prattled on.

"The visits you paid him in the old days have kept him off my borders these past six years. I hope a reminder will keep him out of my way for good. But if you're discredited, not only will his army descend on my lands, but you might find yourself wearing a collar at the end of a leash as well. I've seen Gabrielle fight. I was there for that incident in the market place, remember? If she can act as well as she can fight, you'll have no trouble convincing Lothar you're serious, and then you'll be out of there. She's already entertained us with stories of your adventures; she was convincing as the Marquessa at that beauty pageant; surely you could..."

As I'd feared, the king had read more into Gabrielle's presence at my side than he should have. While he wasn't the first to make the false assumption that we were lovers, at this point he was the most dense. And with his kingdom as close to Lothar's as it was, he probably had the most vivid ideas about exactly what Gabrielle and I were to each other.

"You don't understand, Kaltor," I growled. "I've no intention of using Gabrielle to prove anything to Lothar. You're *mistaken*." I arched an eyebrow as I said the last word, hoping to convey, without being crass, that the bard and I were not as intimately acquainted as he suspected. I suppose I could have come right out and said it--certainly I'd had to say those words to myself often enough--still, I just couldn't. It was painful enough to utter them in the privacy of my own thoughts. For what seemed like an eternity I'd been grappling with the desire I felt for Gabrielle. I'm not sure how she'd done it, but somehow she'd taken me from a place where I couldn't feel anything to igniting a love in my heart that burned brighter with each passing day. It was the love I felt that gave me the strength to endure each hour of sweet torture. Being so close to the most wonderful creature in the world, knowing that she would never be mine, was sometimes difficult. But Gabrielle deserved so much more than a reformed warlord on the rocky road toward redemption. Had her friendship not changed me as much as it did, or had I loved her any less, I doubt I would have been able to restrain the lust that thrummed in my veins, wanting her constantly.

Like an idiot, Kaltor opened his mouth and closed it several times, conspicuously looking from me to Gabrielle, then back again. "But I thought..." he stammered.

"Drop it," I barked, forcefully enough to make him jump. Thankfully, for his sake, he did.

"King Kaltor," Gabrielle said in a deceptively pleasant voice. "You said that several former slaves work in your household." He nodded as my eyes narrowed. Ignoring me, she continued, "Surely one of them can tell me what I need to know about functioning in Lothar's kingdom without raising suspicion."

"Forget it, Gabrielle," I warned. She had no idea what she was suggesting.

"No, Xena," she snapped. "If you think for one second that I'm going to let my best friend go into a sick and twisted kingdom without proper back up, you're greatly mistaken. And if you're convinced that I'm too young or inexperienced to handle whatever it is this warlord expects, then I'm afraid you don't know me as well as you think you do. And I'm really sad to hear it."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Looking at it from her point of view, I could certainly see why she was angry. She had no way of knowing it wasn't her I was worried about, but me. I knew she was inexperienced maybe, but not too young. In fact, her maturity--physical and otherwise--was something I'd been wrestling with for months. I had choices, but all of them involved risks I didn't want to take. I could say no and have her think I thought little of her or her abilities; I could explain exactly why I did not want to take her and risk losing her all together; or I could take her into the twisted kingdom of Lothar, destroy her sense of innocence, and possibly take advantage of her in the process. Slowly though, another possibility came to mind. If someone else--someone who had endured the trials of Lothar's kingdom--were to explain to my young friend *exactly* what she'd be in for... well,

certainly she'd not be interested and I could leave her behind at her request.

"All right, Gabrielle," I agreed. "Kaltor, have one of your servants tell Gabrielle what she knows of Lothar's kingdom." I turned to Gabrielle and lost myself in pools of green. "If you still want to accompany me after you hear what Kaltor's servant has to say, I'll take you. But I sincerely hope you'll reconsider." Turning back to Kaltor, I decided to go for broke. Lothar would need to see a warlord; it appeared I'd have to become one once again. "I'll select seven of your guard to ride with us. No more than that." Glancing down at my armor, something else came to mind. "Did you ever repair that old suit of armor I left here?"

The king nodded. "I'll have it brought to your room."

I headed out of the palace to inspect Kaltor's Royal Guard. Gabrielle had told me she was going to her room to meet with his servant, so I busied myself with selecting seven guards, grateful for something to think about other than the education Gabrielle was surely going to get. When I'd finished, I headed back to my room, which was across the hall from my friend's. Pausing at the door to Gabrielle's room, I could hear gasps and hushed laughter, the sounds of women talking and having a good time. I smiled and wondered what Gabrielle thought about it all.

Walking across the hall, I pushed open the sturdy door to my room and immediately noticed my old armor set out neatly on the bed. A bowl of grapes and a flagon of wine were laid out on the dresser. I poured myself a goblet of wine and sipped it thoughtfully as I studied the armor, the skin of my former self. As Kaltor had promised, it had been repaired beautifully. Leather sliced by a grazing short sword had been completely replaced, and the dented metal had been expertly rehammered. There it sat, staring at me, good as new.

Refusing to be taunted by a suit of armor, I picked up the pieces and stacked them neatly on the dresser. I took off my bracers and breast plate and briefly considered wandering back across the hall to check on Gabrielle. "Gods, Xena, you can't go a couple of hours without seeing her," I chided myself. I hated to admit it, but it was true. While Gabrielle, I'm sure, enjoyed someone new to talk to, I felt very alone without her. It was a contradiction I'd grown accustomed to. I hated the thought of Gabrielle being in danger, which proximity to me guaranteed, still there were so many things about her that I adored that separation caused an ache in me the likes of which I'd never experienced before.

I sat down on the bed and thought about it, trying to remember if I could pinpoint exactly when I began to feel with such clarity. My success as a warlord had come in no small part from being able to think and act without feeling. I was certainly feeling now, and even more surprising, it didn't bother me. The sound of her voice, the kindness of her soul, filled me with such warmth. Just then I heard a loud laugh, Gabrielle's laugh, from across the hall, and my heart jumped, throbbing painfully in my chest. Here I was, the feared Destroyer of Nations, acting like a love-sick adolescent. I'd had any number of experiences with men and women in the bedroom and beyond, yet here I was fantasizing about Gabrielle: holding her close, loving her.

I wondered what she might like, what kinds of touches would set her on fire, make her tremble with need. A part of me felt guilty thinking about Gabrielle as I did, but the fact of the matter was I was a very physical person in love with my best friend. At the same time I didn't see my idle fantasies as potentially harmful. They certainly weren't something I'd act on, and they didn't interfere with the closeness she and I shared. I strolled back to the door and slid the bolt into place. As long as my friend was going to be occupied for the evening, there was no reason not to indulge in some private pleasures for myself.

I felt relaxed, having already taken a tour of the castle; the guards were well appointed and alert. Besides, Gabrielle had her staff, and if anything was amiss I had no doubt I'd hear tell-tale signs from across the hall. After finishing off my wine, I eased out of my leathers, unhurried as I let my fingers trail across my skin. In my mind's eye I could clearly envision Gabrielle as she'd helped me dress and

undress so many times before. Envisioning her fingers on my skin, my pulse rate increased as I released an audible sigh. How would she touch me? Would her hands be shy and tentative? Or would she surprise me with a commanding touch, making me beg under the mastery of her fingers and mouth? Idly, I wondered if that could ever happen. I doubted it. Power, the need and rush of it, had become such a force in my life, so much of me, I doubted I'd ever be able to surrender to anyone, even my beloved Gabrielle. Would she want my surrender? Would she want to be loved slowly, every touch gentle until the tender teasing made her shudder with need? Maybe she'd like to be taken, ravaged by the wild passion that she ignited. I sighed, my eyes closing. I'd love to have Gabrielle both ways.

My thoughts shifted as memories of Lothar's kingdom blended with the self-exploration of my hands. I laid down on the bed, easing my thighs apart as I thought about Gabrielle. Shutting my eyes tightly, I pictured the hands roaming over my body as hers--at first shy and tentative, then bold and exploring. A smile eased across my face as I imagined tresses of red-gold hair spilling across my abdomen as her mouth sought out my breast. I eased a finger into my mouth, wetting it, then lightly traced my left nipple, pretending my finger was her tongue. A groan escaped my throat as I felt a familiar surge of energy between my legs. Simply thinking about Gabrielle--picturing her nude body pressed against mine--made me melt inside, the evidence pooling at my center.

"Yesssss," I groaned as one hand slid down my abdomen. As my fingers teased at my wet entrance, the image flashed in my mind, unbidden from so long ago. The image of a slave, shackled to my bed--her only duty, to pleasure me. The teasing fingers left my nipple as my hand traveled down my body to join the other. My body jumped reflexively at the first touch to my aching need. I could clearly imagine Gabrielle's face as her lips withdrew from mine and she eased her way down my body, the manacles at her wrists giving her only enough room to maneuver. Kneeling before me, she reached out with skilled fingers as she teased my folds apart. At my command she brought her mouth to my center, taking her time in servicing me. I imagined looking down the length of my body to see a crown of red-gold hair bobbing in a steady rhythm between my legs. A moan or grunt from me would get her attention, and she'd look up at me, watching me surrender. Regardless of who wore the chains in my fantasy, Gabrielle was the one who commanded my heart, and even now I could not pretend otherwise. With a groan I slipped a finger through the wetness of my folds and shuddered at the pleasurable sensation. I continued to stroke myself, all the while envisioning Gabrielle mastering me, loving me.

With one hand I held my folds apart as I touched myself with the other. My idle thoughts had rendered me more than ready. It seemed that I had just begun when the vibrations of climax surged through me, making me moan into the pillow to keep from screaming out Gabrielle's name. With a powerful thrust I forced three fingers inside my opening, ready to climb that peak all over again. This time I imagined my body moving against hers, driving her wild with need. I could almost feel strong fingers dig into my shoulders and biceps as I surged into Gabrielle's body. Picturing warm breath against my neck as she panted wildly, I pushed harder, taking her higher. I felt my muscles clamp down on my fingers as I imagined them to be hers. My hips lifted off the bed as a second shuddering climax crashed through me. It took long moments for my labored breathing to subside. A lazy smile eased across my lips as I envisioned holding Gabrielle in my arms, delighting in the softness of her skin and hair. In no time I drifted to sleep, my hand still nestled between my legs.

I think I slept for several hours. When I awoke, the castle was quiet, silent in fact. I got out of bed and unbolted the door. Looking both ways down the long hall, my suspicions were confirmed: it was late. Guards could only be heard in the far distance; the faint rustling of hide armor reaching my ears as they made their appointed rounds. I silently stole across the hallway to listen at Gabrielle's door. In moments I noted the steady cadence of her breathing. She was fast asleep. I considered opening the door to her room to check, then with a guilty smile glanced back at my own room. I would not want her to have seen me as I was mere moments ago. Leaving her to her privacy, I returned to my own

quarters, got under the covers and went to sleep.

The next morning I'd all but finished dressing when I heard the soft knock at my door. Frustrated at an uncooperative bracer, I called for Gabrielle to enter. "Come in," I said as I tried once again to fasten the strap.

"Hi," Gabrielle replied, her voice soft and lyrical. "Can I help?"

I offered her my arm as she deposited a small sack on the bed, then stepped behind me. Skillful fingers made quick work of the errant strap. Once in place, I felt her hands move over my body, checking the rest of the straps and buckles, making adjustments where needed.

"I hope you've decided not to go," I commented, feeling a little guilty at how much I enjoyed her adjusting my armor.

"After my talk with Miriam, I'm more determined to go now than before," she replied as she moved in front of me, continuing her inspection.

"Miriam?" I asked.

Gabrielle found a twisted strap near my shoulder and worked on it intently as she answered, careful not to look at me.

"She was a slave of Lothar's; you won her for the night in a dice game," she said, her voice neutral. She finished with the strap and glanced at me. Before I could look away, her eyes caught mine and held them. Miriam. The image flashed to mind of a muscular brunette, her body slick with sweat as she straddled my lap, facing me, her firm breasts shaking in front of my eyes as my hand pumped furiously inside her; her sobs of rapture echoed in my mind as my teeth sank into the flesh of her shoulder, drawing blood. I remembered the spoils of the dice game, although I didn't know at the time her name was Miriam.

"Then I'm surprised you're speaking to me, much less going with me," I managed to say, my voice dry and tight.

Gabrielle smiled at me, a gentle smile as she touched my back. It was a familiar gesture. While making an important point, Gabrielle frequently touched my arm or rested her hand on my scabbard--to make sure I was paying attention, I supposed. Only now I did not wear a scabbard on my back and my skin sang at the contact, separated from her fingers only by leather.

"Xena, you need someone in there who you can trust, who trusts you," she began seriously. "How many times have I told you that who you were doesn't matter to me. Look, I know you don't want to help Kaltor, but you have to. You gave him your word years ago, and that still means something to you. I can't argue with that. While this might not be the most pleasant adventure we've ever shared, I'm not turning my back on you just because things get a little dicey."

Her point driven home, those gentle green eyes returned their attention to my other bracer. When she finished her inspection, she stepped back to look at me. The expression on her face told me all I needed to know--there was no leaving her behind. No matter what I became, what I might do to her, she'd heard the stories, knew the risks and wanted to stand by me anyway. If there was no way I could assure her of safety, I felt the need to offer her something.

"Gabrielle," I said, feeling woefully inadequate at expressing myself. "I don't deserve a friend like you; I never have. I want to apologize now for anything..."

She shook her head as her fingers came to rest on my lips, silencing me. Gods, I wanted nothing more in that instant than to take those fingers into my mouth, to touch her--any part of her--with my lips and tongue. I forced myself not to respond and simply endured the gentleness of her touch.

"Xena, I understand that whatever happens, it isn't you. There's no need to apologize for anything. Let's just get it over with, okay?" she said with a seriousness that made me ache. She turned from me and picked up the small sack from the bed. "Miriam gave me these, but I'm not sure how

they're worn," she said as she dumped the contents out on the bedspread.

I picked up a metal cuff, then looked back at Gabrielle. "You're sure you want to go through with this? I can guarantee it will be pretty degrading," I said, without a trace of humor in my voice.

Gabrielle smiled nervously, then tried to shrug it off. "I'm a *bard*, remember? Embarrassment and degradation come with the territory. While I've never had rotten fruit thrown at me personally, it's something we all have to be prepared for."

"You've never had fruit thrown at you because you're such a good bard," I countered with a smile.

"That," she agreed, "and my best friend is a little on the intimidating side."

I couldn't help but grin at that. "Okay," I said. "Have a seat. Let's get you dressed."

Gabrielle moved to the edge of the tall bed and sat down. With the first bracer still in my hand, I knelt down and fastened it around her ankle. From my vantage point it was impossible not to notice muscular legs that filled my field of view. Gabrielle had little trouble keeping up with Argo these days; her legs clearly showed it. Once the bindings were locked around each ankle, I stood and reached for her wrists. I avoided looking at her as I worked, afraid she might read the desire I fought to keep from my face. My pulse began to race furiously as I locked a metal binding around one wrist then the other. Her fingertips brushed across the inside of my forearm, cool and soft. My knees went weak, but I kept my composure.

"Xena," she asked, "are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I replied as I reached for the collar. "Here, you'll need to move your hair." I moved behind her as she gathered her lovely hair, holding it away from her neck. Her back was stunning--beautifully sculpted with strong, well-defined muscles that bunched and relaxed as she moved. I moistened my lips reflexively. Gabrielle was breathtaking. I stood as close as I dared and attached the collar around her exquisite throat. Her body trembled as I snapped the lock in place, the slight twitch of her muscles capturing my complete attention. I saw her arm move as she reached for the nipple rings on the bed. "That won't be necessary," I said as I put the key to her bindings away.

"But I think we should be as realistic as possible," she countered.

"But I'm not going to loan you to anyone, Gabrielle," I replied. Still seeing confusion in her features, I spelled it out. "Unless you want to have your nipples pierced?"

A blush crept to the bard's cheeks as she stared once again at the small rings. "You're kidding."

"Not at all, Gabrielle," I explained. "When you loan a slave to someone, they tend to be more combative. The rings are a quick way to get their attention."

"I'll say," she agreed. "I think we can let it pass."

I had to smile at that. My friend was doing her best to take this all in stride. It occurred to me that the nipple rings might come in handy after all, so I pried the ends apart as I teased, "I take that to mean you'll be on your best behavior?"

"I'll try," Gabrielle said with a soft laugh. "Just how bossy are you going to be?"

"Pretty bossy," I replied as I handed her the rings. "But I promise not to enjoy it." I knew that was a promise I'd most likely not be able to keep. In a way, the novelty of Gabrielle doing what I asked her, when I asked her, was hard to resist. "Keep these with you. If you find yourself in a situation where your clothes are off--like the baths--slip these on. I've pried them apart, so they shouldn't hurt but will look okay."

"Just remember, Warrior Princess," she growled with mock ferocity. "Paybacks are hell. I understand bossiness for appearances sake, but you start enjoying it and you're going to pay."

I smiled at her as I watched her tuck the rings into her cleavage. Not wanting to be caught staring, I forced my eyes away. "I can hardly wait."

We set out for Lothar's kingdom after a light breakfast. Well, light for me. My companion

consumed her usual quantity of meat, eggs, porridge, bread, potatoes, and milk. Occasionally she stole glances at me. This outfit was taking some getting used to. I was surprised at how well my old armor fit. It'd been two years since I'd last donned it, and it still fit like a glove. After walking around a bit, I refamiliarized myself with two swords at my hips, as opposed to one at my back. It felt a little strange to be dressed this way again, but not unpleasant. Gabrielle noticed the difference as well. She rode behind me on Argo. Without my sword between us, her body felt much closer as it pressed against the length of my back. Her arms were wrapped snugly around my waist, and I could feel the breeze blowing her long hair against my arms. I was hard pressed to remember when I'd enjoyed a leisurely ride on Argo more. Argo jumped a small ditch, waking my sleeping companion with a start. I held her arms in place to keep her on the mare, as well as to keep her hands right where they were.

"Thanks," she said into my back, sending wonderful shivers down my spine.

"I thought you got a good night's sleep?" I asked, determined to keep my voice casual.

"I did," she replied. "This is just too comfortable."

Truer words had never been spoken. I laughed and stroked her hand gently, hoping my words would distract her from the language of my actions. "I hope you keep that in mind should Argo jump a big ditch and send you flying."

"Nah," she disagreed, "you'll keep anything bad from happening to me."

I smiled sadly. I could keep her safe on Argo, but here we were riding into a den that was anything but safe. Would she still trust me when it became clear that being thrown from a horse was the least of her worries?

Lothar's kingdom loomed into view just as the sun reached its highest point in the sky. At my command the seven guards accompanying us tightened their formation. They had discarded their armor emblazoned with Kaltor's emblem and were instead dressed in the mismatched pieces of armor worn by marauders. While they lacked uniforms, their movements and bearing made it clear that they were indeed an elite fighting force and as such were escorting the Warrior Princess. Falling into old patterns was so easy. Lothar's guards snapped to attention as we entered the keep. There was no need to keep the lazy smirk off my face. I was the Warrior Princess, in need of some relaxation. Everywhere my eyes landed, people knew to get out of my way. Hedge was easy to spot. I'd told Gabrielle about Lothar's personal servant on the way over. He was every inch the pathetic wretch I'd remembered.

I dismounted Argo and walked over. No need for pleasantries with this whelp. "I'm here to see the king."

Hedge bowed, his thick black hair almost touching the ground. He knew better than to look directly at me, so he spoke with his face down, eyes averted, respectful "King Lothar sends his greetings, Warrior Princess, and hopes you will join him for the evening meal. The facilities are at your disposal; please make yourself at home. His Majesty has several guests at present who will be equally pleased at your arrival. If there is any... assistance I can provide?"

This wasn't the first time he'd tried to assist me, but I wasn't any more interested than I had been during my last visit here. "Down," I said, my voice quiet but commanding. I was hoping against hope that my best friend was paying attention. I was relieved to hear the sounds of her graceful dismount, then her quiet approach. She stopped behind me and off to the side. We weren't touching, but I could feel her nearness. "Not necessary, Hedge," I said. "I've all the assistance I need. See to it that my men and my horse are tended to."

Deciding that a warlordly outburst was required, I grabbed the man's face and drew it to my own, forcing his eyes to look at me. His fear was real, and I found myself delighted by his discomfort. "I trust the king is as honorable a man as ever? Because the rest of my army is patiently waiting nearby. They've got explicit instructions should these men not report back at precise intervals with the proper

messages." I released him, and he quickly cast his eyes down, nodding.

My work with him done, I headed off toward the bath building. "Don't bother showing me to the baths," I called over my shoulder as Gabrielle followed obediently behind. "I know where they are."

Not much had changed in Lothar's kingdom. The flagstones of the courtyard were as I remembered, the trees, the slaves--all familiar sights. Dressed as I was it could have easily been five years ago, except that I was different. It took effort, but my former facade was firmly in place. In a way I suppose I was surprised and perhaps even a little disappointed at how easy it was to return to old habits. Still, inwardly I clung to the belief that I was no longer the woman who once felt at home here. If I were, there was no way Gabrielle would be at my side.

I took note of the occupants of the bath house as soon as we entered. I recognized Arleia instantly. She was tended by a female slave; apparently my tutelage of five years ago hadn't been in vain. I sat down on a bench and looked at Gabrielle. It only took a second for her to read my expression. Immediately she began to remove my armor. I was mildly surprised at just how well she read my body language. Briefly I wondered if this was a new skill or one she'd been using for some time. My musings were interrupted by Arleia's greeting.

"Xena? Why it is you! My, but it's been a long time."

"Arleia," I replied in acknowledgement.

"I see you've developed quite the eye for slaves," she commented. "Her fingers look quite nimble."

Oh, so now she was the expert on women. I didn't mind her bravado; I could play this game better than she. I smiled as I shifted position, noting Arleia's gaze fixed on my breasts. Casually I crossed one leg over the other, changing the position of my torso as I moved. "You could say that," I agreed, as Gabrielle went to work on my boot laces. "Nimble, agile, coordinated. All fitting descriptions." Arleia's eyes went wide and I saw the breath catch in her throat. All this time and she still wanted me, or rather, wanted who I was. Arleia was addicted to power; she found it a tremendous turn on. I suppose I did to--but the wielding of it, not the submission to it.

"Wherever did you get her?" the woman I recognized as Frena asked.

"Poteidaia," I replied, "as payment for not sacking the town. Which I naturally sacked anyway." It seemed plausible enough. Gabrielle was obviously listening because she chose that moment to jerk the boot from my foot. Inwardly I smiled. Even now I adored her spirit. Luckily none of the others noticed her subtle act of defiance. Still, there was no way I'd reprimand my friend, so I decided distracting her would be the smartest course of action. I knew Gabrielle well enough to know that she found my body fascinating. She often liked to watch me work out, practice with a sword or staff. I didn't mind; I'd watched her often enough. I shifted my legs, tensing my thigh as I offered her the other boot. As I'd hoped, her momentary anger seemed all but forgotten.

"She seems to have gotten over it," Arleia commented.

"She has her moments," I agreed, standing. Gabrielle moved behind me to work on unlacing my leathers as I drew a slow finger up the outside of her thigh. "We've come to an understanding." Once again I was impressed at how well Gabrielle was handling her role. She made no move to withdraw from my touch. This might be easier to pull off than I'd hoped. I only prayed that Gabrielle would remember this was an act when we were well away from this kingdom. This was, after all, just an act, I reminded myself sternly.

"What brings you to Lothar's court?" Arleia asked.

I stepped out of my leathers and stretched my neck before answering. "I've been visiting King Kaltor, and I'm concerned about what I've heard. I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding, but I thought I'd drop by for a visit to check. Besides, I've always found a stay within King Lothar's walls..." I strolled to the pool, smiling as the warm waters enveloped my feet. The water felt delicious.

"Take your clothes off, get the soap and come here," I commanded. If Gabrielle was paying as much attention as I'd hoped, she'd recognize it as an invitation to bathe. I watched with an odd sense of pride as my friend undressed. Arleia, Frena and the other woman stared at Gabrielle appreciatively as her muscled form appeared from beneath her clothes. She turned toward her bag, and I noted that as she got the soap she discreetly donned the fake nipple rings. Leave it to Gabrielle to pay attention to detail. She turned back and walked toward me, pausing at the pool.

I didn't try to hide my smile; Gabrielle was nailing all of the details. "No objections?" I asked, glancing at the water.

As I figured, there were none. "Go right ahead," Arleia said. "She looks healthy enough. A nice piece of work."

I nodded as Gabrielle came toward me, her gaze leveled at my collar bone. She was able to see my facial commands, but was not presuming to make eye contact. Mirium must have been quite detailed in her narrative. Gabrielle moved behind me, and in moments I felt her hands--slick with soap--moving across my back. Now the challenge was not to appear to enjoy this too much. I feigned a bored expression as I moved to shallower water, giving Gabrielle the room she needed to wash my hair. Her hands were strong and sure as she massaged my scalp and neck. I made a mental note to return the favor to her sometime.

"Very well behaved," Frena commented. "Much less feisty than yours, Arleia."

"I like mine feisty, Frena. They're better in bed that way," Arleia retorted, annoyance hovering at the edge of her voice.

"It doesn't look like Xena has any complaints, and hers is quiet as a lamb," Frena pressed, happy to get a rise out of her friend.

"There is a time and place for feistiness," I said as I rinsed my hair. "It took awhile to break Gabrielle in, but I've had her for some time now. I've no complaints."

"Gabrielle, what a pretty name," Frena cooed.

"Thank you, I like the way it sounds," I replied with a smile, happy to finally say something truthful.

"Funny," quipped the third woman, who I finally remembered was Ione. "You never had slaves before. But visits here tend to rub off on people. Perhaps you'd loan her to Arleia to see just how good she is."

"Perhaps," I agreed, gazing at Ione. As I remembered, she was another one who desired me from the old days, but in her case she wouldn't even admit it to herself. Perhaps she'd discovered her heart's desire in these past five years. "Are you sure you don't want to try her out yourself, Ione?" I asked playfully.

Arleia and Frena shared a laugh at that.

"No, Xena," Ione replied, with a chuckle. "Arleia is the only one of us who adopted your appetite for female slaves. You see, we don't have the opportunity to order men around all day, so for us it's quite a novelty."

"Besides," Frena added, "there are just some things men can do that women can't."

"That's not been my experience," I countered. While I knew Frena had never been remotely interested in sex with women, I'd had hopes Ione might join Arleia in some daring discovery. "Unless, of course, you're trying to get pregnant," I added with a grin. I moved to the steps to join the trio and unconsciously cast a glance backward to my friend. "Get cleaned up, Gabrielle," I added, making my glance appear intentional.

I sat on one of the steps and watched with the others as Gabrielle bathed. This was a rare opportunity indeed to feast my eyes without causing awkward suspicion. It was beginning to dawn on me just how many little fantasies I'd be able to indulge here, supposedly for the sake of appearances. Regardless of Frena's preference for men, the sight of Gabrielle's nude form was having some effect.

She murmured something to her slave, who sank beneath the waters to service her. Arleia, Ione and I continued to talk, about inconsequential things mostly, as Frena enjoyed her slave's attentions. Little had changed in Lothar's kingdom. They did not seem willing to talk about Kaltor, which told me the twisted king had grown bold where his neighbor's lands were concerned.

Several minutes later Frena reached her peak, much to my bard's embarrassment, I'm sure. Deciding that distraction would be the best policy, I nodded for Gabrielle to sit at the edge of the pool. I leaned back and gestured with my shoulders, requesting a massage.

"Shoulders, Princess?" she asked in a tone too charming for her own good.

I nodded as I casually looked at my companions. "For now," I replied.

Arleia looked at Gabrielle--as did her slave--almost aware, it seemed, to the sarcasm in the bard's voice; Ione was oblivious; and Frena was thankfully still glowing from her orgasm. It seemed my bard had lucked out once again--I'd not be required to discipline her in front of these women.

My annoyance at Gabrielle didn't last long. In moments my body was singing, responding powerfully to her touch. It had been a long time since she'd given me a massage. The last time I'd returned the favor, I'd come close to turning it into much more. It was all I could do to restrain my questing fingers from acquainting themselves too well with Gabrielle's body. I knew she missed the contact, but I no longer trusted my hands on longer indulged in attention from her either.

Ione's voice broke into my thoughts, and I silently cursed myself for not paying more attention to the goings on around me. "Arleia, you got your slave from King Lothar, didn't you?" Ione asked.

"Yes, as a gift. Why?" Arleia replied.

"Well, she seems rather put out by Xena's slave. Perhaps she was hoping to be loaned to the Warrior Princess for the night?" Ione said, as she and Frena shared a laugh. Arleia's eyes narrowed as Ione continued. "I'm sure she's heard stories from the other slaves," she continued. "I've even caught mine discussing the topic more than once."

Images of Mirium flashed into my mind again--our bodies slick with sweat, the groaning in release, the begging for more. I wasn't surprised they'd talked about me. I had mastered them, after all. There had been many slaves--men, women--all loaned or won for some reason or another, and every one somehow changed by our meeting. I vaguely remembered one weekend working off battle lust. I'd worn out four men together, then required the services of three women to finally still the raging in my blood.

"I hardly think that's the case, Ione," Arleia countered. "She's high strung, I'll admit, but that's the breeding. She's from a hearty village. They resent weakness; it makes them angry."

I bristled at the remark. Gabrielle was anything but weak, and I'd just about had enough of Arleia's ego.

"Are you calling my slave weak, Arleia?" I asked, dangerously.

Arleia smiled condescendingly. "Well, she is a little on the small side. It says nothing about your training, dear. I'm sure she's well suited for her... duties."

Oh, this was going to be good, I thought. "Get up," I said to Gabrielle, giving her a nudge.

I stood, smirking, as I noticed all eyes on me, slave and owner alike. Even Gabrielle was watching my naked body intently. That meant more than the appreciative stares of all the others combined. She grabbed a towel and began to dry me with it. Gods, I should have felt at least a little guilty at such pleasure, but I didn't. "Perhaps you'd like a demonstration of this *small* slave's abilities?" I asked, arching an eyebrow at Arleia.

"Very well," Arleia agreed. "What did you have in mind?"

I looked around for a minute until my eyes landed on a couple of mops--the closest thing to a staff in here and something I knew Gabrielle could handle without any problem. Arleia was about to get a lesson in humility. "Let's see if yours can knock mine down," I offered, as I tossed a mop to Arleia's slave and another to Gabrielle.

Arleia shrugged. "Not much sport, but very well." She looked at her slave. "Knock her down, but don't do any permanent damage."

"Defend yourself," I commanded my bard, "and dump her in the pool." There was something unreadable in Gabrielle's expression, but I didn't have the time or luxury to deal with it at the moment. I could only hope that Gabrielle would take the fight seriously and avoid any large mistakes.

Happy for a new diversion, Frena and Ione placed bets. Ione was smart and bet on Gabrielle; Frena chose loyalty and bet on a lost cause.

Arleia's slave approached Gabrielle, boldly showing off with the mop as she moved. I smiled. Already she'd shown Gabrielle her level of proficiency with the weapon--which was adequate, but not nearly as good as the bard. She lunged smoothly and without warning, but Gabrielle easily parried the strike. Predictable for my bard, she went for the legs next, but Arleia's slave was agile and with a decent leap almost came down on Gabrielle's mop. A slight frowning of my bard's brow told me she'd learned her lesson and wanted this over. When the slave attacked again, Gabrielle parried smoothly and landed several blows flawlessly. She and the mop moved as one, and I could feel my hunger for her intensifying as her body moved with such poetry. After knocking Arleia's slave to her knees, she was ready for the angry outburst. Edging her toward the pool, it was a simple matter after that to plan her moves and win. Gabrielle's abdomen clenched with the force of the reverse back swing that finally dumped the slave in the water, and I could feel my mouth water at the sight.

After putting the mops away, she came back to my side, not really exerted but panting slightly. Her eyes told me something more: she was angry, at me. "Well done, Gabrielle," I said, my voice husky with want. She cast her eyes down. Unable to stop myself, I reached out and stroked the back of her cheek. I smiled anew as I saw the very slight catch of breath in her lungs. Whether she knew it or not, Gabrielle had just responded to my touch.

"Clearly there's more to your girl than meets the eye," Ione said happily.

I was happy but thought Arleia hadn't quite learned the lesson of humility I desired. "Oh, didn't I mention?" I asked. "She's Amazon stock."

"What!" Arleia exploded.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Gabrielle's angry glare. She wasn't even trying to hide it now. My bard had just decided I'd gone too far.

I lowered my eyes to hers. I enjoyed a battle of will; victory was sweetest after a well fought contest. Perhaps Gabrielle had decided she'd like to engage me. The thought of conquering her was beginning to hold a great deal of appeal. "Not raised as one, of course," I explained, not looking anywhere but into Gabrielle's deep green eyes. I arched an eyebrow, asking silently if she'd like to challenge me, that I would gladly prove myself to her. I saw the fear there; it was a contest she knew she'd lose. As she stooped to pick up my clothes and dress me, I turned my attention back to the others. "Sent to Poteidaia because of a birth defect. Had six toes on one foot, but I took care of that. Still, with a bit of training, those instincts really kick in. After all, the conquest is sweetest after a decent battle."

Gabrielle jerked on the lacing of my leathers. She was still angry. No matter. I decided any contact she had with my body was pleasurable.

"Interesting," Arleia admitted, trying to get past her defeat. "Everyone knows Amazons don't live long in captivity. I'm sure you've had offers to sell her?"

"A few," I agreed. "But she isn't for sale, at the moment anyway." Gabrielle jerked on my lacing again, and I decided enough was enough. I laughed and reached over to touch her nipple. I looked intently into Gabrielle's eyes as I lightly pinched her between my thumb and forefinger. She gasped in surprise, but her body told me more. Her pupils dilated and her flesh instantly became hard in my hand. My best friend was getting turned on by my touch. If I played my hand correctly, this might be a better mission of mercy than I'd hoped. "Get dressed," I commanded, tearing my eyes away from

pools of terrified green.

I decided to check on Argo and Demetris, the captain of Kaltor's guard. As we'd arranged, a guard would be dispatched at regular intervals, supposedly to rendezvous with my army. It was a standard procedure, one that had worked well in the old days. At this juncture there was no reason for Lothar to think I was anything but serious. Unfortunately, on our way to the main hall we had to pass by one of Lothar's nobles disciplining a slave. Gabrielle nearly jumped at the sound of a whip tearing into human flesh. The sight was deplorable. Even as a warlord I'd only used a whip on army deserters, and then it was only a prelude to death.

"Let's go," I said, leading Gabrielle away from the scene. We walked through the main hall--which was now empty--toward our destination, Lothar's inner sanctum. "Are you okay?" I finally asked, unable to endure her silence any longer. Now, away from everyone else, I was beginning to come back to myself--able to look at what I'd just done and how Gabrielle must see me. The only thing that gave me pause was the possibility that there might be more going on with Gabrielle than what I'd suspected.

"All things considered..." she replied after a moment's thought. "You're not acting, are you, Xena?" she asked softly.

I looked down at her, to the gentle eyes that regarded me so kindly even now. I owed her the truth if nothing else. "Not much," I said. "It's who I was. Look, I'm sorry about..."

She nodded at me, not needing to hear more. "Already forgotten," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. A quick glance at her breasts told me that her body had not yet forgotten, even if her mind had.

Entering Lothar's dining hall, I quickly took note of the guards, their weapons and their positions. Absently I wondered how the pervert had managed to keep his kingdom. Everything, to the last guard, was exactly as it had been five years ago. The man was a creature of habit. It wouldn't surprise me if he'd arranged for me to sleep in the exact same quarters I'd always used. There was a vacant seat next to his throne; I headed up to take it, whether it was reserved for me or not.

"It's been too long, Xena," Lothar said in greeting as I took my place. Following the lead of the other slaves, Gabrielle kneeled next to me.

"Yes, it has," I agreed. "I'm sorry I have to visit under such troubling circumstances."

I gave him credit. He had the decency to try and look surprised. "What circumstances might those be?" he asked, absently fondling the breast of his half-naked wine server. As always, Hedge sat at his side, head resting on the king's thigh.

"You're making Kaltor nervous, Your Majesty," I said, tasting his wine. "Kaltor is a friend, and I hate it when my friends get nervous."

"Well, I hope you're not here to overthrow me?" he asked jokingly.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes at that. Instead I smiled. "Oh, no," I replied. "If I were, I'd be sitting in that chair," I commented with a pointed nod to his throne. "I thought we might try to talk about it first." Lothar was a fool if he thought he was going to bluff me.

"Am I really to believe your army is prepared to strike?" he asked, trying to sound unconcerned and failing.

I shrugged. "Lord Malcom thought I was bluffing and look where it got him. Which reminds me, he was about your size. Interested in buying his wardrobe? Malcom won't be needing it anymore." That did it, I realized. Beads of sweat started to dot Lothar's brow, and he laughed nervously. He was willing to play games with any life save his own. And as I'd hoped, he was still completely out of touch with the outside world. Lord Malcom died all right--choked to death on a piece of gristle.

"Come, come, Xena," Lothar said as he mopped his sweating brow with his napkin, "we can talk business after dinner." Looking for more comfortable conversation, he swept his hungry eyes over Gabrielle's kneeling form. "I'm impressed, Xena. I see you learned a thing or two in your visits here." I

took another sip of his wine to avoid laughing in his face. My knowledge of women preceded my visits to his kingdom by a number of years. When his wine servant returned, he spoke harshly to her. "You, escort Xena's property back to the kitchen."

Gabrielle looked at me, the uncertainty clear to my eyes alone. "Go," I said, hoping she heard the gentleness in my voice that my expression could ill afford.

"I don't suppose you'd like to wager her in a dice game?" the king offered as Gabrielle left

I joined him in watching her retreating form, strong legs graceful in their movements. "Do you have anything to offer that could compare?" I asked, knowing in my heart that the answer was no.

"Perhaps," he said thoughtfully as he returned to his food.

Moments later Gabrielle returned from the kitchen with a goblet of wine for me. I tasted it experimentally and was impressed with her selection: strong, but with a surprisingly smooth taste. Once I had my wine, she retreated to the kitchen again, and I absently considered that had Gabrielle ever truly been a slave, I would have paid a king's ransom to have her.

I resumed my small talk with Lothar. I commented on battles I'd not fought recently, victories I didn't celebrate, and any number of other lies. He ate it up. The more sordid the tale, the more he liked it. Several other guests listened attentively, also reveling in the deception. As the evening progressed I felt more and more like the warlord I was pretending to be, the warlord I once was. Gabrielle arrived with roasted pheasant, setting the plate before me and kneeling gracefully. Once I prepared to eat, I considered my options. I could feed Gabrielle on a plate, which would appear soft; I could toss her food on the floor, which would be unkind; or I could be completely self-indulgent and feed her by hand. I chose the later. From the first bite she knew what I expected and she didn't disappoint.

My heart beat faster as Gabrielle's lips brushed against my fingers time and again. Searching for something to quench the fire of my lust, I drank steadily. Perhaps, I considered, if I drank enough I'd be able to pass out when the evening was over and thus prevent making a big mistake with my best friend. I shared my wine with Gabrielle, careful not to let her drink too much. She needed her wits about her, while the role I was currently playing was essentially witless. As I held the goblet for her to drink, small amounts of wine ran down her chin and neck, droplets coming to rest between soft breasts. There would never be a more elegant vessel for the blood of grapes, and I longed to taste its sweetness from Gabrielle's body.

Lothar and I continued to talk, although truth be told, I've no idea what he said. My face looked at him, nodded and commented on his words, but my attention and every other awareness were riveted solidly on the woman by my side. I allowed myself many indulgences during that meal. I freely touched her silken hair, delighting in the soft texture against my fingers. I stroked her back, feeling her muscles bunch and relax against my hand. I paid attention to her breathing, noting that the more contact her lips made with my fingers, the shallower her breathing became. That, coupled with frequent caresses, had her almost panting. I was really beginning to wonder about the effect I clearly seemed to be having on her. It was becoming entirely possible that a desire burned within my friend that pulsed in tandem with my own.

As the nobles finished their meals, the next phase of the evening began. One by one slaves were positioned to service their owners in any number of intimate ways. Gabrielle had been warned and her education was about to begin.

"Dessert, Princess?" she asked, her voice taking on a slightly sensuous edge.

I made sure she saw me look around the hall, pointing with my eyes to what was going on. She might think I was kidding as my eyes challenged her. Was she ready to go on to the next step? "Something to eat, for now," I said, letting her know that her intimate reprieve was temporary. I

laughed to myself as she nearly bolted for the kitchen.

She returned with one of my favorites, strawberries bathed in chocolate. When she began to kneel, I stopped her. "Stand behind me," I said gently. "Serve me."

Gabrielle took her position, and I leaned back delighting in her warmth. She reached for a strawberry, providing an elegant length of arm to touch. I drew my finger slowly up the outside of her arm as I bit into the strawberry. When I took my second bite, I made sure my lips brushed her fingertips. I smiled inwardly at the shudder that went through her body. She'd felt that all right, and she couldn't help but respond.

I'd almost forgotten about Lothar--so great was my enjoyment of dessert--when the bastard called for entertainment. A couple of owners volunteered their slaves and the show began. The binding table was brought to the area inside the square made by the long dining tables up on the dais that dominated the dining hall. One man was tied down to it and another man made sport of him. Not really interested in the show before me, I watched Gabrielle in the periphery of my vision. I only had to turn slightly to get an unobserved glimpse of her. Her eyes were riveted on the scene of domination and submission taking place before her. Her expression was far from appalled. In fact, she looked rather interested. When I saw her unconsciously moisten her lips with her tongue, I smiled. Not only was she getting an education, my bard was a quick study. So absorbed was she in the show that she forgot to reach for another strawberry. I didn't mind; it gave me the opportunity to simply enjoy the chocolate on her fingertips. At the feel of my tongue circling her flesh, she turned her attention back to me. I continued my assault slowly, keeping her attention right where I wanted it.

Unfortunately Lothar had also given me his complete attention. "Perhaps you would offer yours for some entertainment this evening?" he asked hopefully.

I held Gabrielle's hand steady as I looked at him, then deliberately pulled her fingers into my mouth, drawing them in and out several times as I sucked. There was no hiding his physical response. "No," I answered when I finally released her hand, much to his disappointment.

"Oh, come now, Xena. You've never been shy about this before," Lothar challenged.

"I'm not shy," I countered with a smile, "just greedy."

No doubt that got Gabrielle's attention. Quickly she gathered up my dishes and headed for the kitchen. I was certain of it now--Gabrielle had enjoyed what I was doing, so much so that it scared her.

"Come, Xena," Lothar continued. "You ask a lot of me. You expect me to leave Kaltor alone, yet you won't entertain me or provide entertainment through your slave."

So that was his price, I realized. "I entertain you," I said carefully, "and you back off of Kaltor's lands for good?"

He laughed. "Oh, come now, Xena. Do you really think you're that entertaining? Maybe you *and* your slave, but that remains to be seen..."

I made a pretense of considering his words. "Maybe," I finally allowed. Something wasn't right. I'd been more or less timing Gabrielle's visits to the kitchen all evening. She should have returned already. I looked over to the kitchen entrance, noting several slaves hurrying out in a panic. Something was wrong.

"What's going on in your kitchen?" I growled to Lothar as I got up from the table, throwing my napkin down in the process. The two of us made it to the doorway in time to hear Arleia taunting my best friend.

"You might belong to Xena," she said with a sneer, "but you're no different than any other slave."

"I disagree with that," I growled from my vantage point in the doorway, mad as Tartarus at the scene. Gabrielle was tied up to the support beam in the kitchen, her arms bound over her head, legs bound to the floor, her muscular abdomen covered by several nasty whip welts. She was bleeding.

"What's going on here?" Lothar demanded from behind me.

"This slag attacked my slave, Your Majesty," Arleia replied with bravado. "I was reprimanding her." In moments I was across the kitchen, towering over the bitch, wrenching the whip from her puny hand.

"So you drew blood?" I demanded, inspecting Gabrielle's injuries.

"I didn't realize her skin was so thin," Arleia offered lamely, still trying to taunt me.

Focusing my attention on important things first, I reached up and unhooked Gabrielle's wrists from the chain that bound them. Gently as I could I lowered each arm to her side, wanting so badly to caress the sore flesh with my lips. Offering what comfort I could, I gazed into Gabrielle's face for a few moments before freeing her feet. Assured that she was essentially fine, I turned my attention and anger to where it belonged--to Arleia.

"Her skin is thin because she'd never been touched by a whip before," I said, dangerously.

"Unscarred Amazon stock, and you took it upon yourself to whip her until she bled."

Just then Gabrielle leaned forward, resting her head against my chest. At that moment I almost lost all pretense of acting the warlord. With every fiber of my being, I fought the desire to sweep her into my arms. I almost didn't hear Arleia's admission.

"It was an accident."

"Xena, I am truly sorry for the deplorable behavior of one of my subjects," Lothar said in a soothing tone. "By all means, you're entitled to whatever retribution you feel you deserve."

As much as I hated to, I gently moved Gabrielle away from me. Now I had the leverage I needed. Lothar would get his entertainment, Kaltor would get his kingdom, and maybe, just maybe, Gabrielle would be spared any further disillusionment.

I looked at Arleia, then at her slave. "You damaged my property; I'll damage yours," I said reasonably. I turned to Lothar. "Have her tied to the table." He signaled for several slaves to carry out the demand. Not needing to worry about it for now, I turned to another slave. "Get me whip salve, now!"

"Xena, I'm fine," Gabrielle whispered.

I was putting the healing salve on her bleeding torso. It would form a protective barrier if allowed to dry uncovered. She'd be safe from infection and scarring. "Oh, yeah?" I said, showing her the blood on my fingers.

"Please don't hurt that slave," she whispered, with a glance out the door.

The warlord firmly in place, I steeled myself for what I was about to do. "Oh, I'm not going to hurt her, Gabrielle," I assured my friend. "I'm going to *ruin* her." With a look that forbade any further comment, I headed back to the dining hall. Gabrielle followed behind.

I held my chair for her to sit and she complied. Arleia's slave was in position, so before taking revenge, I took one more look at Gabrielle's welts to make sure they were completely covered.

"What is your name, slave?" I demanded, circling the woman bound to the low table. Not surprisingly, she didn't reply. "I see," I continued, tracing my finger down the woman's left arm. Letting her think about the touch she'd just received, I paused to remove my sword and chakram. After depositing them on the dining table, I removed my cape. Gabrielle stared, eyes wide. With a thin smile I turned away from my friend back to the slave. "Don't feel like talking?" I asked. "No matter. It isn't your conversational skills that interest me."

"You could call her Gabrielle," Frena suggested from a side table. Oh, now there was an idea. I looked at Frena, the slave, then finally at Gabrielle. For months I'd wanted to say that name at the height of passion. Now it seemed I'd get my chance.

"Yes, yes, I could. Very well then, Gabrielle," I said, looking carefully at my bard as I said it. She trembled visibly; maybe this little presentation would do something for her, too. "Your owner ruined my property," I continued. "So I'm going to ruin hers. Do you know how I intend to do that?" I asked, carefully running my hands over the woman's body. "I'm about to see to it that you never look

at your owner, or anyone else, the same way again. When Arleia demands your services in the night, you'll wish it was me. Every touch you feel, every sensation you experience, you'll wish it could be me. When you look at her, it will be my face you see in your mind's eye, and she won't be able to do a thing about it."

The slave's eyes went wide as she realized the stories she'd heard about me were true. I was a good lover for the same reason I was an invincible warlord: I paid attention, attention to a thousand tiny details that most people found insignificant. That, and I'd practiced a lot.

Casually I removed the slave's clothing. Already I could tell her arms were more sensitive than her legs, and her collarbone was especially responsive. I ordered her to look at me--to witness the power that would subdue her--but she turned her head, determined to fight. One tug to the chain linking her nipple rings and I had her undivided attention. Ready to get this over with, I leaned forward, capturing struggling lips. She tried to turn away but wasn't strong enough. I teased her lower lip before forcing entry into her mouth. With one hand gripping the back of her neck and the other tracing her collarbone as my tongue moved inside her mouth, she stopped fighting. Well, stopped fighting against me at any rate. She wasn't begging yet, and simply put, I wanted her to. I continued to assault her mouth, face and neck with kisses, trailing my tongue where she was most sensitive, nipping in places with my teeth where she was not.

She groaned as I drew my hand up the side of her breast, and it seemed she was ready. I tested her center with my fingers, discovering she was wetter than I'd imagined she would be. "You're ready now, aren't you, Gabrielle?" I asked slipping the wet finger in my mouth. "Too bad I'm not," I taunted as I touched her again. "Maybe you'd like to encourage me?"

The slave's hips jerked as she panted, "Yes, please."

"Sorry?" I asked, for the benefit of the room. "I didn't quite catch that."

"Please," she said clearly, "finish it. I'm yours."

"Really?" I wondered aloud, "I thought you belonged to Arleia?"

"Please," she pleaded again.

I strolled around the table again. A glance at Lothar told me he was more than enjoying his little entertainment; Arleia looked like she wanted to disappear; and Gabrielle looked like she wanted to flee and join in at the same time. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes wide. Wanting to end little game, I selected a leather phallus from the basket below the table. After strapping it on, I leaned over the squirming woman and held her hips down. I was running this show and made that fact painfully clear.

Giving her only a little at a time, I prolonged my entry, a fact that drove her as crazy as I suspected it would. When I withdrew the phallus, she groaned in despair. "You like that don't you, Gabrielle?" I asked, envisioning my bard writhing beneath my hands.

"Yes!" she panted.

"You want more?" I demanded

"Gods, yes please," she panted again.

I pressed forward, more smoothly this time, but quickly pulled back. Slowly I built up a rhythm as her pants became urgent and needful. Then I slowed deliberately, making her frantic with disappointment. Tired and bored with this conquest, it was time to finish it off. I leaned over, taking the slave's nipple ring in my mouth, and clamped down with my lips as my thigh thrust forcefully forward. The slave cried out, then sobbed uncontrollably as I extracted myself from her body and stood. I took the strap off, dropping it back in the basket, and turned my back indifferently on the bound woman. With a meaningful glance to Gabrielle, I picked up my wine and drank.

"That was exquisite," Lothar beamed.

"I think we were going to discuss Kaltor's territories?" I said as I put my cape and weapons

back on.

"Of course, of course," Lothar said hurriedly. "Stay tonight--your usual room is ready for you--and I'll have a new treaty drawn up by morning. One thing can be said about you, Xena--you mean what you say. I do believe you've ruined Gabrielle for anyone else."

I smiled, although I didn't really care about Arleia or her slave. Still, a point needed to be made, so I made it. "The next person to lay a hand, whip or anything else on my property, dies," I promised the room at large. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Your Majesty," I continued, returning my attention to Lothar once again, "I'd like to retire for the evening."

"But Xena," he pleaded, "the evening is just getting started."

"Yes, well, were I not required to make some repairs to my property, maybe I'd stay. As it is, I've had enough." The excuse was plausible if nothing else. My blood was boiling with rage, power and lust. It was clear to me that five minutes more in this environment would have me doing the real Gabrielle strapped to a table, whip welts or no whip welts.

I nodded for her to stand, then instantly felt horrible as I saw her wince. The gel had hardened, and her movements made it tug painfully against her wounds. Moving to her side, I gently lifted her into my arms. Forcing myself not to sigh at the blissful closeness, I decided to taunt Arleia instead. "If this scars," I warned. "I'm going to come back and settle accounts with you. That," I continued, nodding to her slave, "was for the insult. We've not begun to settle for the damage." My piece said, I marched up the stairs, away from the dining hall.

Thankfully, my room was at the far end of the hall, well away from the sounds of revelry and sex. I ordered supplies from a nearby slave as I kicked the door open. "Bring me wine, whip salve, water and some bandages."

My room was just as I'd remembered it. The bed was large and comfy, with exquisitely soft sheets. One thing I had to give Lothar credit for, he owned the most comfortable beds I'd ever had the pleasure to enjoy. Gently I deposited my precious cargo on the soft down bedding, catching the fresh scent of her hair as I moved.

Turning away from my friend, I reacquainted myself with the room. Everything appeared to be in order. Moments later the slave returned. I took the wine for myself and put the rest of the stuff on the dresser. As I moved, I saw myself in the mirror. How different I must seem to Gabrielle, dressed in the old armor with the old lusts coursing through my veins.

Half-heartedly I told myself that it wasn't too late, that I could finish this mission without violating the body of my best friend. A few more flagons of wine was all it would take, perhaps. Or maybe that and a sound blow to the head. Idly I wondered if Gabrielle would be disappointed to leave Lothar's kingdom with only whip-welts to show for her ordeal.

"Xena?" she asked softly, her gentle voice making me ravenous with need.

"Yes, Gabrielle," I replied. Not willing to look at her--sure the need I felt would show on my face like a beacon--I made a pretense of opening the dresser drawer. That was a mistake; I should have remembered that the top drawer was for ropes and toys.

"Xena, please. Look at me," she insisted.

I drained my wine, then poured another goblet before turning around. There she was, my heart stretched out on a soft bed before me. Her legs, torso, all supple muscle and flesh. I drank it all in like a woman dying of thirst. Finally my eyes settled on her face and my heart thudded painfully. She was close, too close, and my resolve was beginning to weaken. As if reading the hunger of my thoughts, she leaned forward and touched my arm. I moved away with what little resolve I had left.

"Don't touch me, Gabrielle. Not right now," I warned.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking at me intently.

I took another drink from my wine goblet. "We can talk about it later, when we're well away from here," I replied. I had to think of something to do. "Those wounds need to be cleaned," I said,

deciding that focusing on one part of her body might keep me from ravaging all of it. My decision made, I turned back to the dresser and filled a bowl with water. If I removed the caked salve and replied some fresh, then wrapped her wounds, she'd have the benefits of the healing ointment without the painful cracking.

"I'm thirsty," she announced as I prepared a bandage to remove the old ointment.

I handed her my goblet, mesmerized by her mouth as she drank. Her lips were so full and inviting. Setting the goblet down, she laid back, inviting me with her body. I gritted my teeth. I could do this, I assured myself. It was Gabrielle, my best friend, after all. A little more selfcontrol and I'd get through this. Perhaps she'd even decide to sleep, giving me the opportunity to satiate my lust, either alone or with some other slave. My course of action decided, I squeezed some excess water from the soaked bandage and touched it to my friend's flesh. She grabbed my arm this time, her strong fingers digging into my flesh. I came dangerously close to losing it right then.

"Gabrielle, I'm not kidding," I warned her through gritted teeth. "Don't touch me. It isn't safe."

"But it hurts," she protested.

Gods, didn't she see how close I was, what kind of hold she had on me? "You're going to hurt a lot worse if you keep touching me," I mumbled to myself.

Her next words hit me like a bolt of lightning. "So tie me down," she whispered. I stared at her to assure myself that I'd heard her correctly and that she knew exactly what she was suggesting. She shrugged once. "You have to clean it, it hurts, I can't keep from flinching, and you won't let me touch you."

There was no way she could mean it, yet here she was inviting me to take her. "Gabrielle," I warned, giving her a final out. "You don't know what you're--"

"I know exactly what I'm suggesting, Xena," she said, cutting me off. "My question is what will you do about it?" So my friend had made her decision. She had chosen me, a warlord. I turned my back to her, wondering if I could indeed go through with it. A smile eased across my face. I opened the dresser drawer and withdrew some rope. I decided I could. I turned my attention back to my bard and soon-to-be lover. I measured a length of rope and proceeded to tie her ankle to the bed post.

"What...what are you doing?" she asked, sounding frightened as I tied the first knot. If she'd been bluffing, she was in for a rude awakening.

"I'm giving you what you want, Gabrielle," I answered as I worked "And what I want. After all, it was your suggestion."

"Xena, I'm scared." The whispered words reached my ears as I finished binding her other leg.

I glanced at her, letting her enjoy the adrenalin I knew would be pumping through her veins. "You should be," I said. Taking my time as I moved around to the other side of the bed, I gazed at Gabrielle for a moment before looking pointedly at her top. After a moment's debate, I decided not to rip it from her body. "Take that off," I said. "You won't be needing it."

Gabrielle's hands shook as she struggled with the laces, but she managed to shrug it off and handed it to me. Oh, I was enjoying this too much. Bringing the garment to my face, I inhaled the scent of my bard's skin before tossing it aside. I secured one of her wrists to the bedpost, carefully wrapping the rope around her wrist and hand, as well as through the ring on the binding. Once one arm was secured, I moved to the other side of the bed and repeated the procedure. Finished, I headed back to the dresser.

I removed my sword and chakram, putting them on the trunk at the foot of the bed. My cape came next, followed by the rest of my armor. Seeing Gabrielle's eyes studying my every movement, I leaned forward slightly as I removed my boots. I finished with the removal of my bracers until I was dressed only in my leathers. Returning to the bed, I climbed up and straddled Gabrielle's hips. She gasped, then relaxed, realizing that the hard salve on her abdomen protected her from the leather of my skirt brushing against her skin. When I leaned forward to attach her collar to the headboard, she

leaned forward into me. I sighed as I felt her face press beneath my breasts. This was going to be so good. Drawing a slow hand up her bare back, stopping at the collar, I tied a length of rope between the ring on the collar and the one in the headboard, then leaned back.

Returning to the dresser, I picked up the bowl and bandage once again. I sat next to her and slowly, carefully washed the welts. The crusted salve came away cleanly and the welts looked good. I doubted there would be a scar. In fact, I suspected most traces of the encounter would be gone within a week. When I finished cleaning, I scooped a liberal amount of the healing salve on my fingers and reapplied it carefully to the tender skin. There were painkillers in the ointment, and I felt confident that in moments Gabrielle would be totally unaware of any discomfort. As soon as I finished applying the salve, I carefully wrapped a bandage around her middle. That would keep the ointment moist and limber.

I was inspecting my work when Gabrielle whispered, "Xena, what are you going to do?"

I looked at her and smiled, brushing my fingers across her cheek. "Everything," was my whispered reply. Returning my attention to my bard's body, I eased my fingers beneath the band of her skirt. Once I removed it, I let my hands wander, delighting in the feel of skin I'd so often fantasized about. Her breasts were firm yet soft, with nipples that instantly contracted at my touch. She gasped as I teased her, and I hoped I'd be able to draw a number of pleased sounds from those perfect lips.

I leaned in close. "You are so beautiful, Gabrielle," I whispered near her ear. "Bringing you here was a mistake. I've wanted you for so long. I knew that restraint with you here would be next to impossible." A little surprised at my own admission, she responded to the truth of my words, perhaps echoing truths known only to her own heart. "Your lips are so soft," I continued, brushing my fingers against those perfect lips. "Feeding you tonight was wonderful."

"So kiss me," she whispered.

At that moment I realized that she was in control here. I was helpless to do anything but fulfill her every desire. I moved in slowly, not wanting the moment to pass too quickly. She reached up to meet me but was stopped by the restraints. When the wait was finally over and my lips brushed against hers, it was incredible. Her lips were soft--soft and welcoming and very responsive. I took it as slowly as I could, imprinting every new sensation on my memory. I drew my hands to the side of her face and neck, supporting her weight so she didn't have to fight against her bindings. When my tongue asked for entrance into the warm confines of her mouth, she moved against me again, welcoming me. Never before had a simple kiss effected me so. I salivated and my heart beat furiously at the thought that my bard's body would be this responsive everywhere. We continued to kiss, both enjoying the perfection of it for long moments. With each passing second her confidence grew and before long her tongue was at my lips, demanding entry. Gabrielle's kiss was exquisite, satisfying and intensifying my need at the same time.

"You are so sweet," I murmured when I broke for air.

"Please, Xena, more," she begged.

"What is it you desire, Gabrielle?" I asked, helpless to refuse her. "I will do anything you want."

With a nervous swallow she told me her heart's desire. "The slave," she whispered. "What you did to her."

She didn't look at me, so I drew her face up to mine. With my eyes I told her she would have her heart's desire. "I will do much more for you than that, my love," I said.

I got up again, and moving a short distance away from the bed, I shrugged out of what remained of my clothing. I stepped out of my leathers and watched Gabrielle look at me, her eyes hungry. Unable to restrain myself any longer, I let go. It may have been the wine, or the desires of my deepest heart, but I needed to have her now. And take her I did. Returning to the bed, I claimed hungry lips, making them my own. Gabrielle encouraged my abandon with her responses and the small sounds that escaped her throat. My hands and lips were everywhere, tasting her flesh, delighting in

every sensation. I worked my way down her neck to her shoulders, then lower, finally claiming her breasts with my mouth.

It was hard to believe it was really happening, the perfection of the experience so intense. Carefully I removed the fake rings around each nipple, then brought each to a stiff peak with my teeth and tongue. She gasped and moaned, fanning the fire of my desire. I started at her neck, trailing feather light touches down her body, watching the muscles quiver and tremble beneath my fingers. Taking my time I finally reached her center and placed a slow gentle caress there. I was pleased at my discovery. "You're soaked, Gabrielle," I said.

"Yes," she gasped, offering me her body with a tremble of her hips.

Putting my soaked fingers in my mouth, I smiled at my first taste of Gabrielle. Gods, she was wonderful. Already she had surpassed my fantasies. "You taste good," I told her, reaching for another taste. "I want more."

"Then take it," my friend groaned. "Anything you want..."

Oh, I'd take it all right. Still, I wanted her to know the rules. "You won't be a virgin when I'm done, Gabrielle," I explained, watching her carefully for any signs of second thoughts.

"Xena, *please!*" she begged, struggling against the restraints that held her secure.

I moved between her legs and teased my hands up her thighs. She squirmed in delight, shaking in anticipation. Slowly, deliberately, I opened her up and lowered my mouth to her glistening entrance.

"Gods, Xena, yesssss," she moaned low in her throat as I lapped at her sweetness. She was more responsive than I'd dared hoped, reacting to every touch and stroke with passion. I took my time, enjoying myself completely, learning all the secrets of her body. There was such depth to Gabrielle, so many subtly different responses my ardent caress evoked. I let her fire build slowly, not giving her too much of anything at once. As I experimented and played, her body gradually became more demanding, insistent in its need. Deciding she'd waited long enough, I focused my attention on the bundle of nerves at her center as I drove her higher with my assault. Tension built steadily as she began to shake. Finally she released with a powerful cry, then sobbed openly.

"Gods, you're good," I told her, removing my soaked face from her center. "I could do that all night." It was no lie. I'd just developed an insatiable appetite for her. Still, there would be time for more of that later. For now it was time to finish her education. I returned to the dresser and extracted a leather phallus. Gabrielle stared at the object nervously.

"Xena, um... will it hurt?" she asked.

After the whipping she'd received, she was worried about this? "It's only pain, Gabrielle," I replied with a grin. "I don't think you'll mind too much. I'll stop if I have to, but I don't think you're going to want me to stop." I held the phallus near her hand. "Touch it," I said. She opened her hand and held out her fingers. I moved the leather back and forth as I saw a smile ease across her face. She was ready for anything; she trusted me.

I leaned back against one of the posts and guided the leather into my own body. "It doesn't hurt," I explained, as the pleasurable sensations coursed through my being. I pushed it in again, then realized I'd have to stop. It was Gabrielle's pleasure that was paramount at this point. Any more of this and my own need would take over. "See," I said, showing her the leather slick with moisture. "It's better when it's wet."

I strapped the toy to my thigh, then leaned over my love. I touched her, making sure she was good and ready. When she was close to another orgasm, I moved in, teasing her opening with the leather. She tried to move forward, but I backed off. Holding her eyes with mine, I pushed in again. This time she opened her mouth a little, but let me do the work. I continued like that, taking my time, enjoying every nuance of our passion. When it seemed she could stand no more, I pushed forward fully, claiming her mouth with my own.

I swallowed Gabrielle's cries along with her kisses as her virginity was made a memory. She was

magnificent. I rode her for awhile, sensing another climax. Deciding she might like to be in the driver's seat, I withdrew from her completely.

"Noooo," she groaned in protest.

"Relax," I assured her. "I'm not done yet." Reaching into my discarded clothes pile on the floor, I extracted the key to her bindings. I released her ankles, and neck, making sure the shackles hadn't bit into her skin. When I finished with that task, I then repositioned the ropes that held her arms above her head. I tied her arms up at shoulder level, so that while on her knees she'd have room to maneuver.

Unable to resist, I ducked my head below her thighs, tasting her sweetness once again. She panted in excitement, her body thrusting against my face. Repositioning myself once again, I moved so she could lower herself onto the leather strapped to my thigh. She smiled a slow sexy smile as she moved, gazing into my eyes with radiant hunger. She moved her body up and down in an easy sensuous motion, enjoying the ride, pleased beyond words. I caressed her body as she moved, my hands finally coming to rest on her breasts. She moved faster as I fondled her, her hips shaking almost out of control.

With another mighty cry she slumped forward, breathing heavily. I unlocked the shackles at her wrists and neck as her body collapsed against mine. She was spent, drained and utterly happy, and I felt my heart beat joyously in response. She sobbed for a few moments, just letting all the feelings reverberate through her. When her breathing slowed, she traced my damp cheek with her finger.

"You own me," she whispered, placing a tender kiss on my lips.

I shook my head emphatically. "No, Gabrielle, I love you." To this day I don't think truer words have ever been spoken.

She smiled at that, then nodded in agreement. "I love you, Xena,"

Fighting back tears that threatened to fall from my own eyes, I held her close. Never wanting to let her go, even for an instant, I carefully pulled down the bed covers. Without letting her go, I snuggled us underneath the warm blankets. It was hours before I drifted off to sleep, so amazed was I at the treasure nestled in my arms. Gabrielle loved me, the same kind of love that I had for her. In spite of it all, my past and everything else, Gabrielle loved me. She shifted a couple of times in her sleep, making slight adjustments to get more comfortable. For the most part she slept on top of me, her head resting on my breast, her warm breath caressing my skin. When I finally drifted off to sleep, it was with a huge grin etched into my face. What dream could sleep possibly offer that could dare compare with what slept peacefully in my arms.

When I woke several hours later, it was to a soft caress at my nipple. "Gabrielle?" I asked groggily, blinking a couple of times.

"Yes, Princess?" she purred.

My mind reeled as my vivid dreams warred with my surroundings. The bedroom, the shackles, our naked bodies... it seemed I had in fact not been dreaming. "Gods...I...I..." I stammered.

"Verrrrry well," she said, a sensuous edge to her voice as her hands wandered over my body. I could feel myself blushing as my body instantly responded to her touch. I wasn't numb from the wine, although I would have liked to have been. If I had done all the things I dreamt...

"Gabrielle," I said in a rush, as much for my benefit as hers, "I'm so sorry... I never would have..."

"What?" she demanded indignant, "made love to me if you weren't drunk. Is that what you're saying?" Her voice began to rise in volume, anger and fear tugging at its edges. "You only did it because you had too much to drink?" She was ready to bolt from the bed, so I hung on to her for dear life.

"No!" I insisted, forcing her to look at me. "I never would have tied you up for your first time if I hadn't been completely drunk. Gabrielle, of all the times I've imagined making love to you, all the

different ways I pictured it, you tied to the bed was not one of them. Gods! I could have hurt you!" I still couldn't believe I'd actually done it. Hades, what had I been thinking?

She smiled at me, a warm inviting smile. This Gabrielle had indeed received an education. She could play me like dice. She touched my face gently. "You would never hurt me, Xena. No matter how drunk or warlord-like you are at the time. As for my first time being like this, I've no complaints." She smiled as her hands continued their assault, growing more bold with each intimate caress. "Now," she continued, "why don't we finish your business in this creepy little kingdom and go somewhere nice and secluded where *I* can tie *you* up."

I laughed at that. This was an educated Gabrielle, indeed. Still, I was who I was and unfortunately not capable of that type of submission. I touched her cheek with the back of my hand. "I'm all for getting out of here, but *I* do not get tied up--*ever!*"

"We shall see, Princess," she replied thoughtfully. "We shall see."

As she continued her loving assault, I had to admit that if anyone were able to shackle me to a bed, it would be Gabrielle. My only prayer, I realized, would be to keep her adequately distracted... for eternity.

The end...