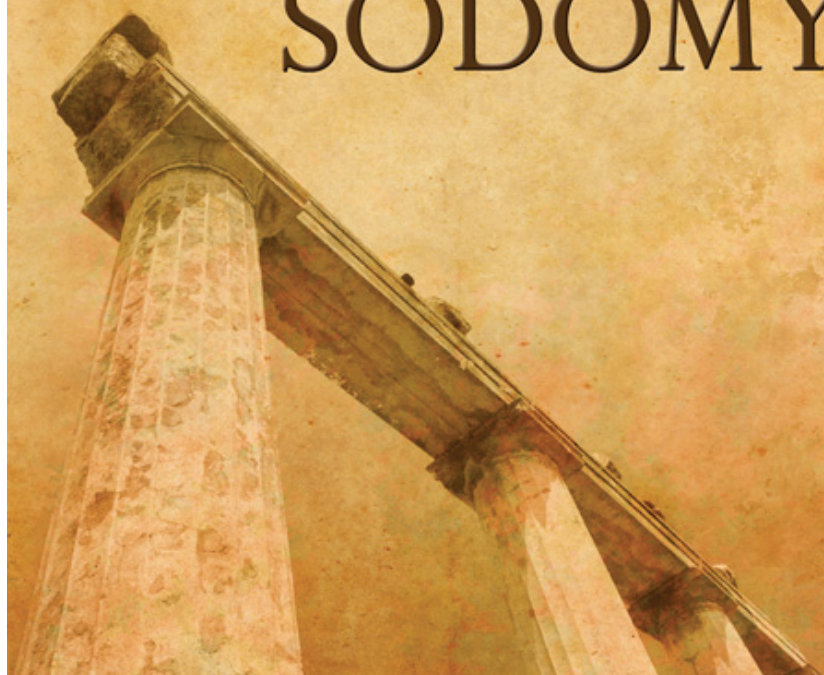


*A Dreamspinner Press Anthology*

# SANDALS AND SODOMY



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GREEKS  
BEARING  
GIFTS



D.G. PARKER



Antenor awoke to feel the sun beating down upon his unprotected head. A groan escaped his parched lips, and he raised a shaky hand to his head. Every part of his body hurt, but the swollen gash above his left eye throbbed with every beat of his heart. Turning his head away from the merciless sunlight, he opened his eyes and saw nothing but destruction.

The sight was so unexpected, so foreign, that it took him a moment to recognize the street he'd grown up on. The houses and shops he knew like his own home were gone, reduced to smoking heaps of ash and stone. Half-buried in rubble himself, he fought his way free and staggered to his feet, squinting into the distance for some sign of life. Columns of black smoke reached into the sky as far as he could see in any direction. Barely a building remained standing. Large flocks of carrion birds wheeled overhead. In the distance, Antenor could hear the muffled sounds of a celebration.

He fell to his knees as the horrible reality hit him. The long siege was over. The walls had been breached.

Troy had fallen.

Tears coursed silently down his cheeks, cutting twin paths through the caked blood and dirt on his face. The pain of his body was nothing in the face of his breaking heart, for in that instant he knew that all those he loved were beyond his reach. His aging father, his sister and her husband, everyone he knew, all gone – the men slain, the women violated and taken away to be slaves in Greek households.

Antenor rose to his feet, his legs unsteady but his face set in grim determination. He did not know if it was luck or the will of the

gods that he'd escaped detection and murder at the hands of the enemy, but he would make the most of the opportunity. He cast his eyes about for a weapon. He was no trained soldier and knew he stood no chance against the entire Greek host, but he was determined to have his vengeance before he fell.

It wasn't difficult to find the enemy. The Greeks were reveling in their victory, drunk on Trojan wine and fat with feasting, and in their arrogance they hadn't even bothered to post guards. They roamed the streets of the city, profaning the air with their drunken laughter and coarse words, searching gleefully through the ruined homes for plunder. They had slaughtered countless head of cattle, and the air was filled with the smell of cooking meat. All the while, the bodies of Antenor's countrymen lay where they had fallen, without the benefit of a funeral pyre.

His sight went red with rage. He clutched a dagger, the only weapon he'd been able to find, tightly in his fist as he crept toward the nearest group of Greeks. He knew he'd only have time to kill one – which one should it be? That one, he decided. Young and handsome, he had his face buried in the neck of a terrified teenage girl and his hands under her torn robe, groping her breasts. Yes, Antenor would kill that man. He would sacrifice his own life in doing so, but maybe it would buy the girl enough time to escape. Now all he had to do was circle around the group and get behind the bastard.

So intent was he on his victim, he never heard the footsteps at his back.

A hard punch between his shoulders sent him crashing to his knees. He was still arching his back in agony when a sandaled foot sank into his stomach, doubling him over. More kicks followed, and he curled up to protect his head and belly. Laughing, shouting voices surrounded him.

“What do we have here? Why, it's a little Trojan boy. With a dagger. Isn't that cute, he thinks he's a warrior.”



“Nothing cute about it,” said another man. “He got the drop on all of us. Kill him.”

“Let’s not be hasty.” This man’s voice was almost a purr. Antenor risked a glance at him and saw the handsome face of his intended victim. That same man now seized him by his hair, wrenching his head up and turning it from side to side. “He’s pretty. I think I’ll keep him.”

“Agamemnon’s orders were clear, Endymion,” another argued. “Take the women and children, kill the men.”

“Agamemnon isn’t here,” the man snapped in reply. “Besides, the king would not begrudge me this small trophy after my many victories in his service.”

“Take him if you wish, and risk his anger. If the king doesn’t order him killed, the boy will likely murder you in your sleep. I care not either way.”

“I did not seek your permission,” Endymion snarled. “He is mine to keep, and if his manhood presents a problem, that is easy enough to remedy.” He drew a curved dagger from his belt and held it before Antenor’s eyes, and his smile changed his handsome face into something ugly and profane. “He won’t need testicles for what I’ll have him doing.”

Sheer panic drove Antenor to lunge away from his captor in a bid so frantic he almost broke free. Within seconds, hands had secured him and pressed him into the dirt, still struggling.

“Put him with the women,” Endymion dismissed, sheathing his knife. “I’ll take him to my tent tonight.”

Antenor was dragged, struggling and swearing, to a large hole that usually held preserves. The wooden door was lifted up and he was greeted with the sight of dozens of Trojan women and children, squinting up at the sudden light. Without warning, he was shoved from behind and tumbled down the stairs, landing in a dazed heap at the feet

of the other prisoners. The door dropped, and they were left in darkness.

It was stiflingly hot in the cellar, and for a long moment it was quiet save for the occasional snuffle or whimper. Antenor pulled himself painfully into a sitting position, rubbing at one bruised elbow.

“Who are you?” a woman asked in a hushed tone.

“Antenor, son of Alcestes.”

One by one, the women introduced themselves. Antenor knew several of them who had been frequent customers in his father’s shop. From them he learned of the Greeks’ cunning deception, of the great wooden horse left on the abandoned beach. How King Priam had ordered it brought into the city as an offering to the gods. How the warriors had swarmed out of it in the dead of night and slaughtered the Trojans, drunk and vulnerable after a day spent celebrating the apparent retreat of their enemy.

He learned of the death of Priam, the good old king. Beautiful Helen, the cause of all their sorrows, was returned to her Greek husband. He listened with horror as the women told him of children torn from their mothers’ arms and of Prince Hector’s infant son thrown from the walls of Troy so that he would not live to seek revenge for his father’s death and his city’s defeat.

By the time the story was complete, many of the women were weeping. Antenor wept with them.

TIME passed slowly in their dark, stifling hole. When next the door opened, night had fallen. Antenor and the women were seized and dragged out of their prison into the cool night air. The Greeks were drunk nearly to a man, none more so than the fair Endymion. Antenor was pushed before the warrior. Weak from hunger and thirst, he stumbled and fell heavily to his knees.

“My lovely prize,” the warrior slurred. Light from the fire gave him an eerie glow like a demon straight out of Tartarus. The Greek snatched a fistful of Antenor’s hair and leaned over, bathing his face in sour wine breath. “I can wait no longer,” he rasped, “I must have you.”

Antenor was suddenly flat on his back, Endymion’s muscled body pinning him to the dirt. Fingers reached under his tunic, roughly fondling his genitals. With a panicked cry, he bucked his body and succeeded in throwing the Greek off. He flipped onto his hands and knees and tried to scramble away, but Endymion tackled him once more, crushing him to the ground and knocking the breath from his lungs. This time Antenor could feel the other man’s hardness rubbing clumsily against his buttocks. Humiliated tears burned in his eyes. His fingers clawed the earth, but he was helpless against Endymion’s superior strength.

Suddenly the weight was gone. Antenor sobbed in relief, pressing his face into the dirt to hide the tears that fell against his will. It took him a long moment to gather his wits enough to look up. To his surprise, he found that the Greeks were barely paying attention to him, caught up in the drama playing out before them. Endymion, his face flushed with anger, stood facing another warrior, who regarded him with barely-interested contempt.

“He is mine!” Endymion hissed. “My prize, earned with my sweat and blood!”

The other warrior was older, shorter and broader at the shoulders. He wore his hair cropped close to his scalp and his beard was short and neatly trimmed. His posture looked relaxed, almost lazy, but somehow that only made him seem more dangerous.

“You have taken many slaves this day,” the older man drawled. “Well earned, as you say. I have taken none. Surely you can spare this little one, as a reward for my own efforts in battle?”

Endymion’s frown grew deeper. “He is mine. Steal someone else’s property if you’re unable to win your own prizes.” His expression grew sly, calculating. “Perhaps age has caught up with you,

Calchas.” Encouraged by a few snickers behind him, he grinned and continued. “War is a business for young men. Go back to your tent, old man, and thank the gods you did not fall in battle. Anyway, what use would you have for a bedmate? I doubt you’d even be able to use him.”

Calchas smiled with the tolerance of a parent faced with an especially dense child. “I want the boy. If you require me to prove that I am still capable of using him, perhaps I shall demonstrate on *you*.”

In the space of a second, the older warrior covered the distance between them, cocked his muscled arm and slammed his fist into Endymion’s face. The younger man staggered, his hands flying to his broken nose, but didn’t fall until Calchas kicked him in the side of his knee. A brutal backhand sent the young warrior sprawling in the dirt.

“Would you seek to deny me?” Calchas hissed, shoving Endymion onto his stomach. “Would you seek to shame me? Me, who has fought at Agamemnon’s side since you were dragging on your mother’s tit? Were you a man, I would challenge you and kill you in combat. Instead, I will deal with you like the foolish, prideful child you are.”

Then, to Antenor’s amazement, Calchas pinned the younger man to the ground, flipped up the back of his tunic, and brought his open palm down hard on the exposed buttocks.

Endymion shouted, swore, and struggled to free himself, but Calchas must have been a champion wrestler, for he held his victim pinned tight. His big hand rained blows down upon the humiliated man while the rest of the Greeks jeered. It wasn’t until Endymion ceased struggling and submitted that Calchas stopped the beating.

Standing, the older warrior brushed a speck of dirt from his tunic. There was not a scratch on him. “Do you have any further questions about my vitality?” he asked mildly.

Endymion, huddled in the dirt with his arms covering his face, didn’t answer.

Calchas dismissed him and turned to meet Antenor's shocked stare. "Come with me, boy."

*Fool!* Antenor thought, *why didn't you run when you had the chance?* A hand closed in his hair and dragged him to his feet. "You heard him," a voice snarled in his ear.

"Let go of him," Calchas directed. He stood before Antenor and looked him in the eye. "You can follow me to my tent, with your head up, like a man. Understand?"

Antenor glanced at the other Greeks, then back to Calchas. He understood completely. He could follow the warrior meekly and avoid any further humiliation, or he could be dragged like a misbehaving child to the amusement of the enemy warriors that surrounded them. He licked his lips and nodded. "I understand. I'll do as you say." *For now.*

CALCHAS'S tent was large but unadorned, especially considering the man had lived there for ten years. Antenor stood just inside the doorway, unsure of what was expected of him. "What do you want me to do?"

"Wash," the warrior replied immediately. "You stink. Drink something first."

Antenor caught the water skin and drank deeply. He could not remember a time when he wasn't thirsty. Calchas pattered around the tent, gathering a basin and a pile of cloth. "Sit," he directed. The younger man did as ordered, perching on a stool and watching his captor with distrust. Pulling up another stool, Calchas sat before him and took his chin in one callused hand. "Nasty cut. Hold still."

Antenor hissed and grit his teeth as his cut was carefully cleaned.

"What's your name, boy?"

He debated withholding the information, but decided it wasn't worth risking the older man's anger. He didn't fancy a spanking of his own, public or not. "Antenor. Son of Alcestes."

Calchas grunted, rinsing the rag and dropping it in the Trojan's lap. "Wash your face, Antenor son of Alcestes."

The young man picked up the cloth and scrubbed at the caked blood and dirt on his face, always keeping one eye on his captor. Calchas moved about the tent, leaving bits of discarded armor in his wake. Antenor's gaze moved from the warrior to the tent door, judging whether he could reach the opening before the older man caught him.

As if reading his mind, Calchas spoke without looking at him. "There's nowhere to go. Anyone you meet outside of this tent will kill you or worse. Take your chances if you like, but you're safer here."

"Am I?" Antenor tried to sound defiant, but a tremble in his voice betrayed his fear.

Calchas sighed deeply, sinking down on a camp cot and tugging at the laces of his sandals. "Do as you're told and stay out of my way, and you have nothing to fear from me."

"And what," he whispered, his voice breaking, "what will you have me do?"

"You talk a great deal for a slave," remarked the older man, but there was a trace of humor in his expression. "I won't require you to service me, if that's what you're worried about. Your virtue is safe."

Antenor felt his face heat, to the warrior's further amusement. "I am not a slave. I am a Trojan."

"There are no more Trojans. There is no more Troy. The sooner you accept your fate, the easier it will be for you."

The warrior's tone was matter-of-fact, almost bored. Antenor felt fury well up in his heart. "I will never accept it! I will be free, and when I am free, I will kill you!"

Calchas stopped and slowly turned around. In two quick strides he was before his captive, gripping Antenor's face in one callused hand. The younger man twisted but could not break the hold.

"You will never be free again," the older man stated. "Your city is in ruins, your people dead or scattered to the four winds. You will live out your life as a slave in a foreign land. Nothing that you or I can do will change that." Antenor had the strange thought that he was taking no pleasure in his words. "This is your life now. Be thankful you will spend your days harvesting olives in Macedon. Most of your countrymen have fared much worse."

Thankful? *Thankful?* Antenor's eyes widened, but before he could retort, Calchas's grip tightened until it was painful.

"If I think you are a threat to me, you will spend the entire journey home bound in the hold of the ship. You will find I am a fair man. How you are treated depends on how you behave." Calchas shifted, his knees creaking slightly. "I go to meet with the others, to determine when we depart these shores. Think about what I've said." He stopped at the entrance to the tent, looking over his shoulder with a serious gaze. "Leave this tent at your peril."

Left alone, Antenor rubbed his aching cheeks and tried to calm the pounding of his heart. Conflicting thoughts raced through his mind, the Greek's words washing over him like breaking waves.

*There is no more Troy...*

*Never be free again...*

Antenor dropped his head into his hands as his eyes burned with tears. *Gods. Oh Apollo, help me!*

EXHAUSTION and stress combined to send Antenor into a deep, dreamless sleep. He awoke in the dark, disoriented by a pounding headache. Slowly, the events of the day came back to him and he swallowed hard, fighting down a sudden surge of panic.

Over the sound of his own heartbeat, he could hear Calchas's soft snores and the creak of the cot as he shifted in his sleep.

Antenor had two choices. He could go meekly forward into a lifetime of slavery in another land, or he could risk his life in an attempt to escape.

He was no warrior. He'd spent his life safely behind the walls of Troy, aware that others killed and died in his defense. But he'd never taken a life, never felt the bite of a sword blade or had his flesh pierced with a spear. It was sheer lunacy for him to consider taking on the entire Greek army, especially with no plan for escape and no destination if he did.

And yet...and yet, he was a Trojan, maybe the last Trojan man left alive. Did that not give him the incentive, the *duty*, to try and escape the enemy?

Antenor listened again, trying to detect any changes in Calchas's breathing. Rolling carefully to his feet, he took slow, cautious steps towards the tent opening. Once there, he peeked out of the flap at the sleeping Greek encampment. Nearby other tents stood dark and silent. Behind them, the dark hulks of beached Greek ships loomed silhouetted against the bright, full moon. He could see a campfire some distance to the left. If he crept behind the tent and headed in the other direction, he might be able to avoid the sentries.

He took one step out of the tent before a hand snagged his tunic and yanked him back in. Losing his balance, Antenor spun to the ground, landing hard on his rump.

"Fool." Calchas sighed, lighting a lamp. The glow cast his face in eerie shadows, making him look like Hades come from the underworld. "Little idiot."

Antenor scooted back on his bruised backside, afraid of the man's reaction although his voice held more frustration than anger.



“This is why I don’t take slaves,” Calchas muttered to himself, looking down with his hands on his hips. “Always more trouble than they’re worth.”

“Then let me go!” Antenor half-demanded, half-begged, ready to weep from sheer desperation.

“Boy, look at me,” Calchas ordered, squatting down to eye level. “Listen to me very carefully. If you stay with me, you will live. If you run away, you will die. The choice is that simple. Now, if you would rather die, tell me now and I won’t waste another moment of my time keeping you alive.”

“Why?” Antenor shouted, pounding his hands into the dirt. “Why did you take me as a slave? Why didn’t you let the other one kill me?”

Now Calchas’s temper began to mount as well. “I would have let him kill you, insolent brat! It’s what he would have done to you first that I could not allow!” The warrior sighed and ran a hand over his hair, visibly struggling to bring his anger under control. “I took you as a slave to keep you from being fucked to death. Now you must decide what will happen next.”

“I don’t understand,” Antenor moaned.

“In two days’ time, the fleet sails back to Greece. You can return with me to Macedon and serve in my household, where you will be well treated. If you can’t find a way to live with that, tell me now. I will put you to the sword myself before I turn you out amongst my fellow soldiers. At least then I know your death will be swift and painless.”

Antenor knew what his answer should be. A man, a true man and a Trojan, would demand death rather than live with the dishonor of slavery. But Antenor was only nineteen. Despite an uncertain future, despite all that he’d lost, he wasn’t ready to die. Calchas saw that truth in his eyes and nodded.

The warrior rose from his crouch and moved to a trunk in the corner. In the darkened tent Antenor felt the rope before he saw it and struggled to avoid the inevitable. In short order he was bound, hands behind his back, to the center tent pole. “You have abused my trust,” Calchas intoned. “I do not take that lightly. I have said that your behavior will determine your treatment. Consider this proof of my word.” The Greek moved to the lantern and blew it out. Antenor heard the cot creak as the warrior settled down and fell asleep without speaking another word.

The young Trojan spent a moment tugging at his bonds before giving it up as futile. Sighing, he squirmed against the post and tried to get settled.

It was a long, uncomfortable night.

ANTENOR awoke cold and achy with a maddening itch on his nose. Twitching his face like a rabbit, he tried to relieve it by rubbing against his shoulder, but found he couldn’t reach. A soft splash made him open his eyes with a start.

He turned his gaze to the tent’s other occupant. Calchas, he was startled to see, was standing before the wash basin completely nude. Flushed though he knew his face to be, Antenor could not help but stare.

Had Endymion seen the man like this, he would never have been so foolish as to challenge him. Calchas had round knots of muscle for calves and thighs like the trunks of old trees. His buttocks were high and muscled and might have been sculpted out of marble, so firm were they. Trim at the waist and broad at the shoulder, the Greek might have been the embodiment of physical beauty were it not for the myriad scars marking his dark skin. Even these, Antenor realized, were more badges of courage and honor than disfigurements, and somehow only served to add to the man’s appeal.

And when he turned around.... Gods! Antenor was sure he'd seen better physiques on younger, more attractive men, but at the moment none came to mind. Calchas was drying his face and hair with a rough cloth, giving his prisoner time to note the rippling muscles of his stomach and chest. The Trojan let his eyes drift lower to the thick cock lying lax in a nest of wiry hair. Antenor felt his own member stir at the sight and tore his eyes away, pulling his legs up slightly to hide his state.

Calchas tossed his towel aside and shrugged into his tunic. Forgoing his armor, he still buckled his sword belt around his waist, then sat on the cot to lace his sandals. "You must be hungry."

Antenor nodded, once again trying and failing to scratch his nose. The warrior moved behind him and he was suddenly free. His arms fell heavily forward, and his shoulders screamed in pain at the change in position. His hands crawled with pins and needles as the blood flow returned to them. Calchas waited patiently until he had recovered – and scratched his nose at length.

"Come, let's find some breakfast." Antenor followed him to the door, only to be stopped before he could leave. "Outside, you must walk five paces behind me. You must not speak unless spoken to, and you must not make eye contact with anyone. Understand, I do not insist on these things when we are alone, but amongst the others, it must be so. I do this for your safety, not to humiliate you."

Antenor's jaw worked as he absorbed this further debasement. Calchas watched him with steady, sincere eyes until the younger man nodded. The Greek gave him a quick pat on the shoulder and strode into the sunlight. Antenor let him take a few paces' lead before following, studiously keeping his eyes on the other man's heels. A moment later, he heard voices of other men and assumed they were nearing a campfire. He stopped when Calchas did, keeping his face downcast and his arms at his sides.

"Sit," the warrior ordered, and Antenor folded smoothly to his knees. A plate was set on the ground before him. As famished as he

was, he waited until Calchas tersely commanded him to eat before reaching for it.

As he shoveled food into his mouth, he paid close attention to the conversations taking place around him. Some of the men were merely bragging of the spoils they'd reaped from the fallen city. Most of them, however, spoke longingly of home.

"When I left Pella, my son was so small I could carry him on my shoulders," one said. "By the time I return he will nearly be a man."

Another murmured in agreement. "My daughter will have reached adulthood by now. I worry that my wife and father did not find her a suitable husband."

"Much has changed," Calchas commented. "Before I left, my sister asked my permission to marry our neighbor, a widower of good character. I asked her to wait, to run my household until I returned from Troy. Had I known how long my absence would be, I would not have asked her for such a sacrifice."

"Calchas, have you no wife, no children?"

"I had a wife, many years ago. She died in childbirth and the babe with her."

"Go and get yourself another," someone suggested cheerfully. "You've much to offer a wife, and with a plantation like that, you can attract a good one. You are young enough yet to sire many children."

Antenor risked a quick peek at his benefactor's face, just long enough to note the wistful sadness behind his smile. "Perhaps some day," Calchas replied, but Antenor saw the truth in the older man's face. He would never again take a wife.

The talk turned to their upcoming departure. Apparently, mobilizing a fleet of ships beached for ten years was no easy feat. The Greek camp had existed outside the Trojans walls for so long it had itself become a city. The entire fleet needed to be packed up and provisioned within the next two days in order to take advantage of the

tide. Antenor listened to their plans with a heavy heart. He would see the sun rise twice more on the land he called home, and then he would never see it again.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't realize the group had broken up until Calchas tapped him on the shoulder. "Come, boy." Antenor rose and followed him, surprised when they moved behind a tent and stopped. Calchas put a finger under his chin and tipped his face up to meet his eyes. The warrior was smiling. "You did well. I know that was not easy for you. Take heart, once we are back in Macedon, you will no longer need to observe these formalities."

Unsure of how to respond, Antenor merely nodded.

"Now that we've established that you're under my command, therefore under my protection, you have a measure of safety in the camp. I want you to help prepare the ship for departure. You'll take orders from one of my most trusted men. If you have a problem, tell me or Nictos, but you must not argue or do anything else to bring down punishment on yourself. Do you understand?"

So it was that Antenor found himself working under the watchful eye of Nictos, a short, barrel-shaped Greek with ropey muscles and a missing left eye. The man was gruff and impatient, but not cruel, and so long as his young charge worked sufficiently hard, he was satisfied. Antenor spent the morning pushing barrels of drinking water up the ramp to the ship's deck, then lowering them by pulley into the cargo hold. It was harder work than he was used to, and by lunchtime, his muscles were trembling with fatigue.

He took his meal with the others in the sparse shade of a spindly tree. From their joking familiarity, he knew that the men he'd been laboring beside all morning were free men, Greeks lower in the social order than Calchas who'd been reduced to manual labor now that the fighting was over. Antenor took Calchas's warnings seriously and therefore hadn't uttered a word all day.

As he finished his lunch, a young man with a long, wiry beard offered him a fig. "What is your name?"

Antenor told him, accepting the fruit but keeping his eyes on the ground.

“Where do you come from, Antenor? I know you did not sail from Macedon with us.”

Unsure of how or even if to respond, the young man darted a desperate look around, spotting Nictos in deep discussion with another man – too far away to assist him. He was saved having to reply when another Greek answered for him.

“That is Colchas’s little Trojan slave,” a wiry younger man laughed. “I hear he stole him right out from under Endymion’s nose.”

“I hear he beat Endymion near to death,” added another.

“I will not eat with a slave,” declared a deep voice. “I will take my meal over there – upwind of his Trojan stink.”

“Would that we could be upwind of yours, Menides!” someone called to his retreating back.

Antenor felt the first man’s eyes boring into him. “You are well away from Endymion in any case,” he said, biting into a fig and continuing around a mouthful of food. “He has a habit of breaking his toys.”

The wiry man made a scoffing noise. “I am happy to see that bastard denied anything, to be sure. He does nothing but brag of his conquests.”

“Good fighter, though.”

“Many are good fighters, but they don’t feel the need to constantly remind everyone of the fact.”

The men seemed to concede the point, and then one of them asked a question Antenor himself had been curious about. “How is it the boy was allowed to live? Agamemnon gave orders that all the men were to be put to death, only the women and children taken as slaves.”

“You know Calchas. Once he sets his mind to something, the gods themselves stand aside and let him go. I hear that he spent hours last night convincing the king to grant the boy’s life in exchange for his many victories in battle.”

“But why?” Antenor heard himself ask. His head shot up in panic, waiting for the results of his breach of protocol.

The wiry-bearded man smiled and shrugged his shoulders, taking the opportunity to stretch overworked muscles. “If you ask me, sometimes even Calchas doesn’t know why he does the things he does. I have known him many years and have never seen him take a slave. Perhaps you remind him of someone. Perhaps he is just sick of the killing. Anyway, you should be thanking the gods he took an interest in you. Of all Trojans, you will probably fare the best. There are not so many happy fates for the conquered.”

Antenor burned to ask more questions, but common sense had him hold his tongue. A few moments later, Nictos summoned them back to work, and the backbreaking labor soon cleared his mind of other thoughts.

When the sun set, Nictos dismissed Antenor and sent him back to Calchas’s tent to eat and rest. Tired but strangely content, the young Trojan made his way through the encampment. Thoughts of food and a bed so encompassed his mind that he didn’t notice the foot thrust into his path until he was face down in the sand. He looked up into a familiar cruel face, not so handsome now with its swollen nose and bruised eyes.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the little Trojan whore.” Endymion paced slowly in front of him, making sure to kick sand in his face as he passed. “I see they’re trying to teach you men’s work. You’d think by now they’d know that Trojan men are only good for one thing.”

Antenor pushed himself upright and moved to stand.

“Stay on your knees, slave!” the Greek barked, grabbing him by the hair. “Calchas has not yet shown you how to pay proper respect to your betters. I think I’ll assist you with that lesson.” Antenor heard the

rustle of cloth, and then Endymion's swollen member was right before his face. "Bite me and I'll bash your teeth in," the Greek snarled.

A sharp yank on his hair made him yelp in pain, and the long, thin cock poked into his mouth, leaving a sheen of foul-tasting liquid on his lips. Antenor tried to pull his head away but was held fast, helpless to do anything but try not to choke as Endymion shoved his cock in and out. The thrusts were long and brutal, sometimes hitting the back of his throat and causing him to gag. His eyes watered. His scalp burned. The assault went on for ages.

Finally the thrusts became quicker, jerkier. Endymion grasped his head on either side and pumped frantically into his mouth before seizing up with a groan. Thick, salty liquid pulsed from his cock and down Antenor's throat, some escaping from the corners of his mouth.

Abruptly the cock withdrew and the hands on his hair were gone. Unsupported, Antenor fell forward on his hands and vomited into the sand. As he knelt, retching miserably, Endymion crouched beside him to whisper in his ear. "Do not fool yourself, little whore. Sooner or later, Calchas will use you in this fashion, too. Whatever he has promised, *this* is your future." The warrior stood and sneered down at him. "I would have fucked you hard and then killed you. You will not receive that mercy from Calchas. He will fuck you, and fuck you, and fuck you, for years, until your mind and your body are damaged beyond recall. And then he will cast you aside, to die a slow, lingering death. I have seen him do it to others. His poor bride. He tells everyone she died in childbirth, but most know different."

Antenor spit and wiped his streaming eyes with the back of one hand. "I do not believe you," he croaked.

"What do I care what you believe? Your fate is sealed in any case. But I will tell you this, little whore. I'm sailing home on the same ship as you and your new master. If you tell him what happened here today, I will make your life a living hell. You think this was unpleasant? Imagine it with the whole crew of the ship taking their turns." Endymion laughed and kicked one last spout of sand in his direction, then disappeared in the maze of tents.



Dazed, Antenor rose shakily to his feet. He walked the rest of the way to Calchas's tent spitting and wiping at his mouth compulsively. By the time he arrived at his destination, his stride had steadied and he had mostly regained his composure.

Calchas glanced up as he entered. "Any trouble today?"

Antenor swallowed and shook his head. "No trouble."

"Good. I'm told you worked hard." Calchas gestured for him to sit on a stool, then handed him a plate. "Eat. Tomorrow we'll break down the tents and sleep on the ship so we can sail with first light."

Picking at his food, Antenor found he couldn't bear to put anything in his mouth. He watched Calchas move around the tent, picking up bits of armor and weaponry and stowing them in his trunk.

Antenor, deep in thought, barely noticed. Endymion was a sadistic bastard and a rapist to boot, and his word wasn't worth the dirt under his feet. And hadn't Calchas acted honorably towards him, at least so much as their circumstances permitted? Still, that niggling seed of doubt had been planted in his brain, nurtured by his own doubt. Why had the Greek saved his life? In the absence of the true reason, all reasons seemed equally plausible.

He started when a hand touched his own. Calchas took the plate from his hand and patted him on the shoulder. "You're exhausted. Get some sleep, more hard work awaits you tomorrow." The warrior gestured towards a pile of blankets heaped on the floor. "I think you'll be more comfortable tonight than last night."

Antenor stumbled over and dropped to the ground, gathering the blankets around him like an animal bedding down in leaves. He dropped immediately into sleep.

THE next day played out very much like the one before. Antenor helped disassemble the tents and structures that had housed the Greeks

for so long, loading the reusable materials on the ships and piling the rest to be burned. Little by little the camp disappeared.

Occasionally during the day, Antenor would catch Endymion looking at him with undisguised lust. His stomach turned over at the thought of being forced to service the man again. Luckily, Nictos was always nearby. Antenor made sure to stay within his sight.

By nightfall, the last of the Greek belongings had been loaded onto their ships. Calchas and the others who had been in council with the king returned with the news that all was ready for a dawn departure. The Greeks were jubilant and spent the evening hours clustered around the bonfires that burned along the entire length of the beach. Behind them, the ships bobbed gently in the surf, proving their seaworthiness after ten long years in dry dock.

Antenor stayed at his master's side during the festivities, but did not partake of the feast on offer. In the morning he would leave his ruined home for a life of slavery, so he could not bring himself to join the celebration. He craved solitude, even if only for a moment, to mourn his losses in private and find some way to come to terms with his situation, but with Endymion lurking about, he dared not leave the group.

So it was that his last night on Trojan soil was spent in the merry company of its despoilers. Not for the first time, Antenor thought that it was a blessing his father had not lived to see his son's fate.

It was very late by the time the celebration broke up and the Greeks drifted back to their ships. Antenor was surprised to see that Calchas was drunk. He leaned heavily on his slave's shoulder, and the slight young man was a poor crutch for the thickly muscled warrior. They stumbled up the gangplank and over to the section of the deck Antenor had claimed for himself and his master. A few of Calchas's personal items were arranged about his bedding; the rest of the warrior's belongings were secured in the hold, along with the treasures he had taken or been awarded during the war. Antenor deposited his charge on his bedroll and covered him with a blanket. "You're a good boy," Calchas muttered, and he immediately began to snore.

Antenor wrapped himself in a blanket and curled up nearby, but sleep would not come. He lay on his back and stared at the familiar night sky, wondering if the stars looked any different in Macedon.

He dozed a bit, but when dawn came he was awake, standing at the rail watching the sun rise over what remained of his city. For a moment he thought he might die from the sheer ache in his heart.

He was still standing there when the order was given to cast off. Troy grew steadily smaller. He stood there for a long time, long after the city had disappeared below the horizon.

THE next few days passed in a blur of misery. Having never sailed before, Antenor was plagued with sickness that saw him constantly bent over the rail “feeding the fish,” as the others laughingly called it. Calchas patiently plied him with water but knew better than to offer him food. When he wasn’t vomiting, Antenor passed the time curled in a wretched ball in the shade of the ship’s side.

One morning he woke up without the usual nausea. In fact, he woke up famished. As he sat up and scratched at his whiskered chin, a pair of sandaled feet appeared in his view. Calchas squatted down and eyed him appraisingly before offering him a plate of food. “You look much better,” he announced, settling down onto his bed roll. “Not quite as green.”

Antenor managed a small sheepish grin. “I am recovered, I think. Thank you for, well....”

“I remember what it’s like. The first time I went to sea I fed every fish from Macedon to Lemnos.”

Despite his hunger, the young Trojan ate cautiously, alert for a return of his earlier nausea. “Now that I am better,” he said between bites, “what would you have me do?”

“Rest. Take some sun.”

Antenor blinked. He'd expected to be behind in his "slave" duties. "Surely there is work to be done? Meals to prepare, laundry to wash?"

Calchas shrugged and leaned back on his elbows, turning his face up into the sun. "It's a ship, Antenor. There isn't much to do. Enjoy it while you can; the olives will be in season by the time we get home."

"How much longer will we be at sea?"

"Many days yet."

He laid aside his plate with a frown. "I'm not very good at doing nothing," he admitted. "There must be something I can do."

The Greek turned amused eyes on him. "The young are blessed with so much energy. Just wait until you're older, you'll relish the chance to rest." He sighed and returned to his reclined position. "Very well. Perhaps you can pass the time learning seacraft. Would that keep you safely from madness?"

Antenor grinned. "I think it would. You don't think the others would mind teaching me?"

"No. They're probably as bored as you are."

Calchas's prediction proved to be true. The Greeks were happy to pass the time teaching their skills to the eager young man and even happier to delegate some of their more boring duties to someone else. For his part, Antenor enjoyed not only learning new skills, but hearing the stories of his well-traveled shipmates. The others treated him like any other sailor. For a while, he was able to forget he was a slave.

Best of all, he barely saw Endymion. The haughty warrior spent his days with a small clutch of friends, drinking in the bow of the ship. Once, when Antenor's new duties took him to that area, Endymion slurred out an insult or two, but was too inebriated to pose much of a threat.

They'd been at sea for several weeks when they awoke to a sky dark with rolling clouds. By midday, the waves were higher than Antenor had ever seen them, and the boat pitched so violently that his seasickness returned with a vengeance. After an hour of clinging to the railing in heaving seas, Calchas took pity on him and sent him below.

"Go down in the hold," he advised. "You'll feel better when you can't see the horizon. If you do feel like puking, I recall Endymion gifted himself with a large jeweled urn...."

Antenor grinned despite his misery and took himself below deck, closing the hatch behind him. In the relative quiet of the hold, he realized that Calchas was right. Although he could still feel the bucking and pitching, he found it much more bearable when the ocean was out of sight. He sighed in relief and settled onto a pile of rugs, eventually falling asleep to the creaks and groans of the ship.

He jolted awake as a hand closed around his neck, tightening enough to constrict his breathing. Endymion's face was mere inches from his own, leering at him with a familiar lusty expression. Antenor clawed at his attacker, digging his fingernails into the Greek's wrist, struggling with all his might to throw off the other man's greater weight.

Just as his vision began to sparkle and turn gray, the pressure was gone. For a moment, he was so occupied dragging in great, heaving breaths that he failed to notice that Endymion's grip had transferred to Antenor's wrists. Before he had fully regained his wits, his hands had been bound tightly together with coarse rope and then secured to an iron ring set in the floor, meant for securing cargo against rough seas. Endymion grasped the Trojan's tunic in both hands and yanked, forearm muscles bulging, until the fabric gave way. Air on his exposed skin drove Antenor to more desperate struggles to free himself, but the ropes only seemed to tighten the harder he thrashed.

He began to shout for help, calling for Calchas, for anyone, to stop what was happening, even as his rational mind knew that no one could hear him over the storm. Endymion laughed at his panic.

“Scream, little whore!” he encouraged, biting down hard on the Trojan’s neck. “Scream all you want, it will only make it better for me.” Sword-callused hands fumbled roughly at his genitals and squeezed his testicles until Antenor thought he’d faint or go hoarse from screaming his pain. His cry ended in a breathless gasp of shock when Endymion’s long finger found his entrance and plunged in. Endymion’s erection, hard and leaking, rubbed insistently against his thigh while the Greek kept up a steady litany of filthy words and insults.

Suddenly Antenor felt the ship rise, then the bottom dropped out of his stomach as the boat fell hard and fast. The impact was bone-jarring. Endymion raised his head and glanced around the hold, but when nothing seemed amiss he returned to his task of decorating Antenor’s chest with bites. The young Trojan, however, was concentrating on a new sound.

Somewhere in the hold, water was trickling. As he listened, the trickle grew more pronounced, became a flow, then a torrent.

Oblivious, Endymion pushed himself back a bit, fumbling to free his cock from his tunic.

“Wait!” Antenor screamed, thrashing even harder against his bonds. “Stop, you idiot!”

The Greek blinked, puzzled by the swift departure of his victim’s fear and the equally swift arrival of his anger.

“We’re taking on water, you horse’s ass! Do you understand me? The ship is going to sink!” Antenor knew his face with red, both with exertion and anger. “Untie me!”

Still Endymion did nothing, blinking stupidly around the hold as if waiting for a sign from the gods.

“Release me, you pitiful excuse for a dog’s bollocks!” Antenor screamed, yanking at the ropes.

Both heard the bang of the hatch opening and the increased storm sounds that followed it. Calchas's voice preceded him down the ladder. "Antenor! You must come on deck, the main mast has snapped and the ship is listing!"

Antenor watched as something changed in Endymion's cunning eyes. His hand moved to his belt and closed around the hilt of his dagger.

"Look out!" the young Trojan screamed, but he could only watch helplessly as Endymion threw the dagger at Calchas's descending figure. Antenor's warning caused the older Greek to pause for just an instant. It was enough to avoid a fatal wound. The knife sank into one muscled thigh instead of his chest. Calchas slipped off the ladder and landed in the hold with a thump.

Unable to see the prone form around the piles of cargo, Antenor called his name anxiously. Endymion, his eyes wide and jerking in his skull, leapt up and seized a golden bust of Artemis from a heap of plunder. A wild grin twisted his face as he hefted his weapon and prowled through the hold.

"Calchas! Calchas, get up, for the love of the gods!" Antenor's wrists were slick with blood, but he was no closer to freedom. He gave a wordless cry of panic when he realized his hair was wet. Within a few minutes he lay in several inches of water. Twisting, he turned over and rose to his knees, trying to put as much distance as possible between the rising water and his face.

Behind him, the sounds of struggle continued as the men swore and fought. The ship tilted alarmingly to port, sending water and goods rushing past Antenor's face. A plank gave way, then another, sending great gouts of water sideways through the hold. Antenor wailed in fear, still jerking against his bonds spasmodically, as the water quickly rose to his elbows and kept going.

Very quickly the water reached his shoulders. Antenor tipped his head back. The water lapped at his chin.

*Oh gods, he thought as he shut his mouth against the taste of salt water at his lips, why? Why bring me out here, so far from my home, just to die at Poseidon's hand? Why not let me die in Troy with my countrymen?* He took a deep breath and held it as the water crawled past his nose. *Hades, receive me into the Elysian Fields, where I may see my parents again and dwell in bliss for all eternity....*

The water closed over his head.

His heart thudded dully in his chest, in his ears, counting down the seconds until his burning lungs gave out and he breathed the deadly ocean into his body. Black spots appeared before his eyes.

Suddenly a figure swam into view. He was so relieved to see Calchas that he nearly exhaled on the spot, but he strained to hold on to his remaining air as the Greek sawed at the rope.

Just as the rope parted, Antenor's breath left him in an explosion of bubbles. Calchas seized his still-bound hands and propelled them both upwards, breaking the surface just as Antenor gave in to the urgent need to inhale *something*, be it water or not.

The dank, musty air that was left in the hold was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted, but Calchas gave him no time to savor it. He was hauled, still whooping in great breaths, towards the ladder and given a shove.

"Hurry!" the Greek shouted over the howling wind. Antenor tried, but bound hands made climbing a ladder a clumsy affair, and Calchas's shoves were less helpful than he likely imagined. When he finally gained the top, the boat was listing so badly that he fell to the deck and started sliding to the port side railing. Calchas latched onto his ankle and arrested his tumble. "We must get away from the boat!" he screamed into Antenor's ear. "It will pull us down with it or the wreckage will batter us to death!"

The Trojan stared around in shock at what remained of the fine ship. The center mast had broken and fallen overboard. The proud prow was smashed, the rudder untended and moving wildly. He could not see one other living soul on the boat.



He turned to Calchas and held up his bound hands, but the Greek's eyes went wide at that very moment. Antenor followed his gaze and turned to see a giant wall of water bearing down on them. He was too stunned to move. He was dimly aware of his arms being grabbed, of his bound hands being looped around Calchas's neck.

The water slammed into them like a battering ram, lifting them off their feet and carrying them across the deck and beyond. They hit the water and sank, deep and fast, into the ocean. Blinded in the dark sea and stunned from the impact, Antenor never knew exactly which part of the ship bashed him on the head.

Darkness was swift to overtake him.

HE awoke to the confusing thought that he was still on the ship. The surface he lay upon rose and fell, rose and fell as though carried on gentle waves. It took several long moments to pry his eyes open, crusted as they were with brine, but at last he was able to lift his aching head and look around. His softly moving bed turned out to be Calchas's broad chest. The older man slept soundly, even when Antenor tugged the frayed rope around his hands apart and separated the men from their desperate embrace.

Rolling to his side, he thudded gently onto warm sand. He took in his surroundings with a dazed eye. Before him stretched the endless ocean, the tide far out from where the waves had deposited their unconscious bodies. The beach stretched as far as he could see in either direction. Debris spread across the sand and bobbed lazily in the calm water.

Over his shoulder he saw trees and bushes and rocks. It made Antenor, a city boy, feel very vulnerable, and not only because his sand-caked body was naked save for a few random scraps of tunic. The unfamiliar wilderness conjured images of wild boars standing as tall as a man's hip or lions that stalked and ate the unwary. Barely aware he was doing it, he scooted closer to Calchas's reassuringly large form.

The older man looked horrible, bruises coloring most of his exposed flesh. The wound in his thigh was deep, the edges gaping open to show the underlying tissue, though at least the bleeding had stopped. Antenor brushed drying sand from Calchas's lips and gently patted his face. When this failed to rouse him, he tried increasingly harder smacks, fueled by rising panic, until the man's head jerked to one side with each blow.

"Wake up!" Antenor heard himself demand, his voice tinged with hysteria. "Wake up wake up wake up –"

Calchas's fingers closed around his wrist, halting the litany of slaps. The warrior said nothing for a long moment, but his eyes moved rapidly as he assessed his surroundings. He released Antenor's hand and slowly sat up. After he'd taken in the tide, the flotsam, and the wilderness, he turned wide eyes to his young companion and said, "I can't believe we survived that. When that wave hit, I thought for certain we –"

"Don't say it," Antenor begged, shivering a little. "Just be grateful the gods spared us. First chance we get, we'll make an offering to Poseidon."

Calchas nodded his agreement and made as if to stand. Pain shot across his features and he started to sink back down, but then he set his mouth in a grim line and forced himself to his feet. Limping noticeably, he headed toward the tree line, Antenor trailing cautiously behind him. "Where are you going?"

"To explore our new home," came the answer. "I don't know how long we'll be here, but we must assume the worst and make preparations."

"What preparations?"

Calchas sorted through the tree limbs that had fallen to the ground. "First we must discover if we are the only occupants of this land. Second, find a source of fresh water. Third, build a shelter. Fourth..."

"I get the idea," Antenor interrupted. "Do you have any idea where we are?"

The older man found a stick he liked, one with a forked end, and jammed it under his arm as a crutch. "We were blown so far off course, we could be anywhere."

"Do you think anyone else from the ship survived?" Antenor watched Calchas stacking the rest of the dead wood into piles and began to do the same.

"I doubt it. Sheer luck brought us this far."

"Then...Endymion?"

"Definitely did not survive."

"He is drowned, then." Antenor felt badly for being happy over another man's death, even if he was a Greek, but he couldn't deny the relief he felt at Endymion's demise.

"He never got the chance to drown. I crushed his skull in the hold. I might have forgiven him for trying to kill me, but attacking you when he knew you were under my protection? That was unforgiveable. Did he hurt you much?" The warrior's eyes strayed to the bite marks on the younger man's chest, distinct among the other bruising he sported.

Antenor blushed. "He...no, it didn't hurt much. You came for me before he...you know."

"I'm glad. Your first time should be with someone kind and experienced."

"How do you know I haven't?" protested Antenor. "I could be very experienced, for all you know."

"Ah, but you are not." Calchas chuckled. "You are the very example of a blushing virgin."

"I don't blush," the young man sulked. Calchas snorted in response.

They explored their new surroundings for several hours. Antenor called frequent breaks, claiming he needed to rest. Calchas never failed to grumble about the delay or their slow pace, but the Trojan noticed he never missed an opportunity to rest his injured leg, either. At one point, it was the Greek who called a halt. “How are you at climbing trees?”

Antenor followed his gaze up, and up, and up. The tree was certainly the tallest he’d ever seen. Its branches were dense and sturdy, however, so he reached for the nearest one and hauled himself up with a gulp.

“Go as high as you can, and look in every direction. Tell me what you see,” Calchas instructed.

Complying with a grumble, the young Trojan made his slow way up, choosing each branch carefully and pointedly not looking down. When he finally stopped, the trunk he clung to was thin enough to sway with the breeze.

“No ships or land from here to the horizon,” he called, squinting in the direction of the beach they’d recently left. Turning cautiously, he looked to his right. “Trees, trees, and more trees,” he reported. He slid around the trunk. “More water this way, though a ways off. Hey! There’s water this way, too. I think we’re on an island.”

He picked his way down while Calchas watched with an upturned face. “Did you see any sign of other people? Buildings, livestock, orchards?”

“Just trees.” Antenor jumped the last few feet and brushed his hands together. “Looks like we’re alone. What next?”

“Water. Once we find it, we’ll decide where to build a shelter.”

Surviving alone in an unknown land for the gods only knew how long was a daunting task, one that should have been overwhelming. Somehow, Antenor wasn’t worried. He followed the limping Greek through the woods, completely trusting Calchas to keep them safe.

WITHIN an hour, they located a small spring and quenched their thirst. They spent the rest of the day building a shelter out of pieces of the ship that had washed up on the beach, lashing them together with vines and bits of rope found in the debris. They slept that first night curled together for warmth, waking to the familiar sounds of each others' breathing.

Calchas sent his younger companion foraging for firewood while he cleared a spot free of undergrowth. He gathered rocks and arranged them in a circle, and shortly after Antenor returned with the first armload he had a small fire going. The Trojan watched, impressed, as the older man sparked the dry tinder with a stick and a flat rock.

"Amazing," he admitted with a shake of his head. "Of course, a man who's lived as long as you probably knows a great number of tricks."

Calchas froze, slowly turning a baleful eye on him. Antenor panicked, his heart thudding and a chill racing along his skin. With all that had come to pass, he had allowed himself to forget he was now Calchas's slave.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, bowing his head. "Sir – master –"

"Antenor, look at me."

The young man raised his eyes timidly, half expecting a blow. Calchas's eyes held only concern and a shadow of regret. "You're not in trouble," the warrior spoke softly. "Here there are no slaves or masters. We are two men trying to survive. We are equals." He gave a wry smile and playfully tossed a twig at his companion. "Except of course, for my extremely advanced age. In fact, perhaps I should nap here by the fire while you fetch more wood," he said, stretching out on the moss-covered ground. He folded his arms behind his head with a contented sigh. "When you're done with that, see if you can find some fruit or berries. I'm starving."

"Yes, Master," Antenor replied, sarcastically this time.

“That’s better.” Calchas grinned. “Oh, and Antenor? Don’t eat anything before I check it. Wouldn’t do to poison yourself.”

It was a sobering thought, one that helped him keep his growling stomach under control as he prowled the island. He was pleased to find a small almond tree not twenty minutes into his exploration. Using a large, curved piece of bark as a dish, he picked a good quantity of the nuts and started back to the camp. He hadn’t gone far when a familiar scent caught his attention. It only took a moment to discover the source.

He made his way back to camp, arms loaded with treasure, only to stop short at the sight of Calchas sitting by the fire totally nude. The older man smiled and held up his tunic, now in two pieces. “One for each of us,” he explained. “Better to have a breech cloth than risk snagging your privates in a thicket, eh?”

“Thank you,” Antenor replied, laying down his makeshift plate. “But I may use that as a carry sack for now. There are almonds nearby, a plentiful supply, but best of all...”

“Pomegranates!” Calchas’s eyes lit up like a child’s at the sight of the treat. “My favorite,” he declared, reaching for the fruit. A quick slice with his knife and he handed half to Antenor, and for a while they feasted ravenously on the juicy red seeds. “Did you see any animal tracks?”

The young man shrugged, as he hadn’t really been looking.

“No matter. I will look tomorrow. We cannot live on fruit alone, not for very long.” Calchas leaned back once more, closing his eyes.

Antenor opened his mouth to question why they could not hunt today – there were a number of hours left before sundown – but the words died on his lips. Without thinking, he reached out and laid his hand on Calchas’s cheek. “You have a fever,” he blurted.

The Greek’s eyes opened, and he regarded his charge with sober eyes. “I know.”

Antenor's gaze slid down the muscled body to the injured thigh. The flesh around the knife wound was hot and red.

"It has become infected," Calchas said, his voice infuriatingly matter-of-fact.

The young Trojan settled back on his heels and bit his lip. "I will return," he announced, bolting to his feet.

"Where are you going?"

"To look for herbs. While I am gone, you are to remain just as you are, understand?"

Calchas raised an eyebrow. "I would not dare disobey you," he quipped, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Be careful."

Once more Antenor headed into the woods, keeping his eyes on the overgrown ground. He could only hope that this island had plants and herbs similar to those found in his homeland. He scoured the undergrowth, eventually reduced to searching on his hands and knees. It took hours, but he was able to find both thyme and comfrey. He also found a promising stone, flat on one side and round on the other. Hauling it all back to camp, Antenor dropped it and settled in for some work.

For an hour he used a smaller stone to chip and chisel while Calchas dozed. When he was finished, he had sore fingers, bruised knuckles, and a concave stone that made a serviceable bowl. He rinsed it and filled it with spring water, then used sticks to prop it carefully over the fire. Calchas awoke in time to watch him feed the plants he'd gathered into the boiling water.

The warrior eyed him with mild concern mixed with amusement. "If that is soup, I'll stick with pomegranates."

"No," Antenor smiled, "it's not for eating. I'm making a poultice to draw the infection from that wound. Don't worry," he added at the doubt on his patient's face, "I know what I'm doing. I was apprenticed to an apothecary." The scrap cut from Calchas's tunic was

far from sanitary, but it would have to do. Antenor added it to the steaming brew and let it steep. A few minutes later, he used a stick to fish it out and held it aloft until it cooled a bit. Folding it into a neat pad, he laid it over the gash in Calchas's thigh.

The warrior hissed at the heat, but made no move to stop him. Picking at the edge of the fabric, he said "You're determined to remain naked, aren't you?"

Antenor snorted. "Look who's talking. I notice you haven't rushed to cover yourself." In truth, Antenor was indifferent to his own nudity, but acutely aware of the other man's. Even as he fussed over the wound in the muscled thigh, he couldn't keep his eyes from traveling upward to that cock, soft and quiescent in its nest of curls.

"It's hot," Calchas replied with a shrug. His expression changed to one of concern. "I'll cover up, if you like. Perhaps you're ... uncomfortable, after what nearly happened on the ship."

After a quick internal debate, Antenor made a decision. "It was not the first time. He attacked me once before, before we left Troy." He described the ordeal, a shiver crawling across his skin, and he reminded himself that the sadistic Greek was dead.

Calchas did not take it well. The variety and length of his swearing was impressive. By the time he wound down, Antenor had returned the poultice to the mixture for another steeping.

"If only Hades would return the miserable cur to life, I would kill him again!" Calchas huffed, crossing his arms. "Why did you not tell me of this before?"

"He said he would make sure it happened again on the trip home, only worse – he'd invite the whole crew to join in."

More swearing. Antenor wondered if he dared tell the rest.

"What else? There's more, I can tell by your face."



The young man sighed. “He told me that you would do the same to me, one day. That you’d ... fuck me, until I was old and mad and used up. That ... that you’d done the same to your wife.”

This time the Greek was too incensed to utter a sound. For a long while he lay still but for the grinding of his jaws, his face purplish-red with rage. Antenor busied himself with replacing the poultice, startled when his wrist was caught in a tight grip.

“Did you believe him?”

Antenor felt vaguely ashamed, as though he had betrayed a friend. “I did not know what to think. I still don’t. You took a big risk to save my life, and I still don’t know why.”

Calchas was silent for another long moment. At length he announced, “I’m a fool.”

“You’re a Greek,” Antenor responded. “It can’t be helped.”

“Funny. What I mean is, had I explained myself from the first, so much could have been avoided.” Pulling himself to a seated position, he settled his back against a fallen tree. “Come and sit with me, Antenor, and I will try to explain. I begin to think things are more different between our peoples than I thought.”

After checking to make sure the warrior hadn’t dislodged the poultice, Antenor did as he was bid. Calchas sliced another pomegranate and they shared the seeds as he spoke.

“In many parts of Greece, when a boy nears manhood, he is placed with an older man, a mentor who teaches him what he needs to know. He is taught to fight with sword and spear, to wrestle and throw the discus, to farm, to sail, to appreciate music and literature. Most importantly, he is taught to give and receive pleasure. In this way he learns to be a good husband, companion, and brother-in-arms.

“It is the closest bond a man will ever know, more than with his parents or his wife.” The warrior’s gaze grew soft and distant. “I still remember my mentor with great fondness. To me he was god-like,

mighty and all-knowing, kind yet fierce.” Calchas gave himself a mental shake and blinked. “That is why Endymion’s actions were so repulsive to me. It was a betrayal of the most important relationship in a man’s life.”

Antenor frowned thoughtfully. “So if he had merely wanted to kill me....”

“I would have let him. It is the fate of men to die in times of war. But there is no honor in treating another man as he would have treated you. To engage in deliberate cruelty shows weakness of character. To stand by and watch while others do so, that is weakness of the worst kind. That is why I saved you from Endymion. My mentor would have expected no less.”

Antenor had a lot to digest, but somehow only one question came to mind. He carefully did not look at the Greek when he asked, “Have you ... mentored anyone?”

The warrior smiled fondly. “I have had that privilege several times. It has made me a better man. That’s the beauty of it; both benefit.”

The Trojan busied himself with refreshing the poultice, aware of the older man’s speculative gaze. They passed the rest of the day companionably, and that night when they entered the shelter to sleep, Antenor hesitated only a moment before slipping into Calchas’s arms. He fell asleep held tightly against warm skin, to the sound of soft breathing and the distant rushing of the ocean caressing the shore.

By morning Calchas’s fever was gone. Antenor watched with interest as the Greek bound his knife to the end of a sturdy stick with a bit of rope. “We don’t have enough rope to set a snare, so we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

They made their way through the forest, Antenor with a great deal less stealth than his older companion. Before long Calchas paused, lowering himself stiffly to one knee and motioning Antenor to follow suit. The warrior pointed to slightly parted leaves, a bent blade of grass – they meant nothing to the younger man, born and raised in a walled

city, but Calchas smiled and motioned him to follow. Doing his best to step quietly, Antenor fell in behind the Greek as he followed barely perceptible tracks.

Truthfully, he was paying much more attention to the movements of Calchas's naked rear than the stalking of prey, and therefore nearly walked into the man's back when he suddenly stopped. With a smooth movement and a ripple of muscles, Calchas lifted his right arm and let his makeshift spear fly. A pitiful squeal let them know he'd struck home.

Calchas pushed his way through the brush into a small clearing. The younger man caught up with him just as he was using the knife to slit the rabbit's throat. Antenor tried not to wince.

"Not a bad size," the Greek mused, wiping his blade on some leaves. "This should do nicely for today. Perhaps tomorrow we'll catch some fish, eh?" Calchas was in high spirits as he gutted his kill. By the time they got back to their camp, however, it was clear that all was not well.

"Your leg hurts," Antenor observed with a frown. He laid a hand on the warrior's forehead. "And your fever has returned."

"It is only the sun," Calchas dismissed. Nevertheless he sat carefully on the fallen log with his injured limb stretched out before him. "Sit, I will show you how to dress and butcher a rabbit."

Antenor obeyed, but only after setting another bowl of water over the fire and laying out his fever herbs.

Antenor found the butchering process rather stomach-turning, but eating the spit-roasted meat was worth it. He forced the older man to drink copious amounts of water to combat his rising temperature and applied the poultice faithfully throughout the rest of the day. To keep his charge from getting restless, he asked him questions about his home.

"I would simply like to know more about your household. After all, I will be spending the rest of my life there."

“You may be spending the rest of your life here,” Calchas pointed out.

Antenor avoided his eyes. “Would that be so terrible?”

“No,” the older man admitted. “It is peaceful here, and you are good company. But I have responsibilities in Macedon. My poor sister awaits my return to marry.”

“My sister is likely dead,” Antenor said wistfully. “At least, I hope she is. Better that than a bed slave to a Greek soldier.”

Calchas rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Women are most cruelly treated in war. Not only do they not get the mercy of a swift and honorable death, they must rely on the strength or weakness of others to decide their fate. I think it must be worse to wait than to fight.”

Antenor felt a tingle in his skin where the big hand rested. “Anyway,” he said, wanting to change the subject, “tell me all about your plantation.”

As Calchas nattered on about the tending of olive trees and the breeding of sheep, the younger man allowed himself to hope that they would never be rescued.

By nightfall he’d changed his mind. He lay in the shelter with Calchas, feeling the heat rising from the other man’s body. He slept little that night, kept awake by worry and the warrior’s increasingly restless sleep.

When the sun rose, Calchas lay drenched in sweat, mumbling incoherent words. His limbs twitched with occasional muscle spasms and his eyes, when they opened, gazed around him without comprehension. Antenor bathed the warrior’s skin with cool water from the spring and continued to treat the angry red wound in his thigh, but he could do little without more herbs – and he dared not leave his charge alone while he foraged for them. His fears mounted as throughout the day, Calchas grew steadily worse.

Late in the afternoon, the Greek experienced a few moments of clarity. “Antenor,” he croaked. “You must listen to me. When they come to rescue you, tell no one you are Trojan. Say you are from Corinth.”

“Stop,” Antenor demanded, feeling the first seeds of panic take root within him. “We will be rescued together. We will go to Macedon together.”

Calchas didn’t seem to hear. “Tell them your name is Phyllos, from Corinth. They will take you back and help you arrange passage home. It is a big city, you will be able to make a living there.”

“Do not speak of leaving me!” Antenor slid the damp cloth over the warrior’s heated skin with a shaking hand. “You will fight, you stubborn Greek.”

His patient only grew more agitated, finally seizing the Trojan’s wrist. “You must do as I tell you!” he insisted. “No one will know you or what happened at Troy. Your slavery dies with me.”

Stunned, the young man paused in his ministrations. Was it true? Could he have his freedom back? Nothing could ever replace what he had lost, but he could be free to start a new life in another city. He could start over, in a foreign place....

All alone.

With a jolt, he realized that he did not want to be parted from Calchas’s company. He wondered for a moment if he’d suffered too many blows to the head. Was he really choosing slavery over freedom? Servitude over solitude?

He jumped as hot, dry fingers brushed against his cheek. “My Antenor,” Calchas whispered through chapped lips. “I am glad for you. I would not see you harmed for the world. I only wish we’d had more time.”

Tears burned in Antenor’s eyes. He let them fall, continuing to sooth the fallen warrior. “Time for what, Calchas?”

“I could have shown you so much. I could have ... I would have shown you that not all Greeks are like Endymion, that the touch of another man can be pleasurable, more pleasurable than you can imagine. I would have....”

“What? Calchas, tell me!” But the older man had slipped from consciousness between one word and the next. “Damn you! You will not die on me, Greek! You’re all I have left!” Antenor wiped his face and backed out of the shelter. Clouds were gathering in the east, promising to deliver a storm soon. With one last glance at his patient, he took off into the woods.

He didn’t know how much time passed while he crawled through the woods searching for herbs, but the trees were thrashing in the heightened wind and the rain was falling in fat, cold drops by the time he returned to the shelter. He tossed the harvested plants in the direction of the shelter and ran to the fire, rescuing a burning brand just as it began to sputter. Setting it up just inside their makeshift doorway gave it some cover from the rain without filling their shelter with smoke. He pulled an armful of firewood in, as well as his stone bowl. It wasn’t until he had water on the boil that he dared take a moment to check on Calchas.

The warrior lay still as a corpse on a pyre, his skin hot and tight like old parchment. He was no longer sweating, and Antenor knew that was a very bad sign. “Please, Apollo, guide my hand. Don’t let me lose him now.”

Antenor brewed a fever tincture and scooped it out of the bowl with a dried pomegranate rind. As the hours went by, he ceased to hear the storm battering the island or the wind whistling through the gaps in their shelter. His world had narrowed down to patiently trickling the liquid between the warrior’s lax lips – slowly, so the unresponsive man didn’t choke. When he wasn’t doing that, he was bathing the man’s limbs with cool rain water. Afraid to sleep for fear Calchas would slip away from him, he maintained his vigil throughout the night. Finally, sheer exhaustion overtook him and he nodded off, slumped awkwardly over the warrior’s legs.

His first waking thought was that the storm had passed. He raised his head blearily and squinted against the sunshine streaming into the shelter, listening to birds singing just outside. Suddenly his pillow moved.

“Calchas!” Antenor scrambled to his knees and touched his hand to the warrior’s face. It was cool to the touch. The fever had broken, and Calchas was in a deep, healing sleep. “Oh, thank you, Apollo,” he gasped. For a moment, he was content simply to watch the man’s chest rise and fall and listen to his soft snores. His stomach growled loudly, reminding him there was work to do. He ran a gentle hand across the warrior’s forehead, then planted a shy, experimental kiss on his dry lips. “I will be back,” he whispered.

He stumbled onto a rabbit track by sheer luck, but finding the beast turned out to be the easy part. Because he didn’t trust that his strength was sufficient to impale the thing at a distance, he had to wait, utterly motionless, until it innocently grazed its way within range. With a wince and a silent apology, he used all his strength to thrust Calchas’s spear through its neck.

To his relief, it died almost immediately. On his way back to camp, he picked a few herbs he knew to be restorative as well as tasty. He gave their little bowl a thorough scrubbing, then set it over the fire once more, adding the herbs and jointed pieces of rabbit.

By the time Calchas began to stir, a thin but nourishing stew was waiting for him. Antenor laid the bowl aside to cool as he helped prop the warrior in a seated position. “How do you feel?”

“Like a giant has stepped on me,” came the groan. “Is there water?”

Antenor held the cup to his lips as he slowly drank. “You must eat, as well.”

“Pomegranates? Again?”

“Rabbit stew, after a fashion.” He lifted the bowl and set it in Calchas’s lap. The warrior raised an eyebrow, and the gesture was so

familiar and comforting that Antenor felt his lips stretch into a smile. “Yes, before you ask, I successfully hunted a rabbit. I know you find that hard to believe.”

“Not at all,” was the serious reply. “You are a capable man.”

As the warrior sipped his meal, Antenor fidgeted. Did the man remember anything that was said? Was it all a figment of fever dreams? “I am glad you pulled through,” he ventured. “I was not looking forward to becoming Phyllos of Corinth.”

Calchas looked up over the rim of his bowl. “Why not? You would have been free. You still could.” The older man’s face grew calculating. “You could still go to Corinth and start fresh.”

“I don’t want to go to Corinth.”

“But –”

“I want to be where you are.” Antenor blushed at his temerity, but forged ahead. “If that means bearing the name of slave, so be it.”

Calchas was clearly stunned. Antenor forged ahead.

“I don’t mind belonging to you, because you’ll belong to me, too. At least, I hope you will. Will choose to, that is, choose to belong to me. Because obviously I won’t own you,” he babbled. Calchas stopped him with a finger over his lips. The warrior was smiling, and the sight of it warmed the young Trojan to his bones.

“We will belong to each other,” the Greek whispered, caressing Antenor’s face. “I hope it is long before we are rescued.” His smile turned devilish. “I have much to teach you.”

Antenor’s face burned hotter, but he couldn’t help smiling back. “I look forward to my lessons. But it will be some time before you’re up to teaching them. You must rest and recover.”

Calchas still grinned, but his eyes were growing heavy. “I believe I’m properly motivated,” he said, lying down and closing his



eyes. “You should rest, too. You’ll need your energy once I’ve got my strength back.”

“Promises, promises....”

Calchas did little but sleep over the following days. Antenor continued to hunt and forage for food, even managing to spear a few fish for variety.

One morning while he was combing the beach for “treasure,” Calchas emerged from the woods. The Greek had clearly lost weight since his illness, but he seemed steady on his feet.

“You look better,” Antenor observed, tossing wood onto a pile.

“I feel better. Dirty, but better.” Scratching his chest, the warrior made his way to the shoreline and plunged into the water, surfacing after a moment’s submersion. Antenor noted with a slack jaw how the sun caught every droplet streaming down his body. He looked magnificent, rising from the surf like the sea god himself, water flying from his beard as he shook his head like a great lion. The younger man felt his member fill and lift at the sight.

Antenor’s feet carried him straight into the ocean without pause, heading to the older man like a bee drawn to pollen. Calchas was so caught by surprise to find his arms full of eager Trojan that he lost his footing, sending them both into the water. Surfacing, he barely had time to draw a breath when Antenor’s mouth was on his, hungry and demanding. The Greek responded eagerly, his hands touching every bit of flesh he could reach. Both men were panting and hard by the time they broke the kiss.

“I’m ready for my lessons,” Antenor gasped, running his hands over the warrior’s broad chest.

“So I see. Let’s go back to the shelter.”

“I don’t want to wait that long,” the younger man pouted.

“Consider it your first lesson,” Calchas laughed. “Anticipation is nearly as enjoyable as the act itself. And of course there’s your second lesson,” he added as they walked, hands brushing.

“Which is?”

“Don’t make love on a beach unless you want sand in uncomfortable places.”

“You are wise in the ways of love, old one,” Antenor intoned.

“Little brat.” Calchas aimed a light smack at the Trojan’s naked buttock, laughing at the yelp that resulted. “I’ll show you old.” He delivered a series of little slaps this time. Even as Antenor squealed in protest, he marveled at the stinging warmth that spread across his skin.

They stopped in the clearing and kissed again, deeper and slower than the first time. Antenor reveled in the taste of the older man’s mouth, the feel of callused hands sliding down the curve of his backside to knead his buttocks. He moved his own hands from the Greek’s chest, down across the flat stomach, tentatively brushing the wiry hair at his groin. Calchas pulled him up tight against his body, causing their cocks to rub together, and Antenor saw stars.

The Greek chuckled into his mouth and pulled back. “I think this first lesson will be very quick indeed.” Antenor abruptly found himself sitting on his rump in the mossy clearing, partially reclined against the fallen log. He watched in breathless anticipation as Calchas knelt between his spread legs.

The warrior stroked Antenor’s testicles with one expert hand, using the other to retract his foreskin. At the first touch of his tongue, the younger man thought he would release then and there. He couldn’t seem to look away from that pink tongue swirling around his swollen head, teasing at the slit, and when Calchas took the entire head into his mouth, the Trojan nearly screamed. He had never seen anything more arousing than his own member disappearing between another man’s lips. An embarrassingly short time later, he reached an orgasm so intense he was too stunned to utter a sound. When his vision cleared

and the pounding of his heart began to slow, he focused on the older man. Calchas was licking his lips and looking just a bit smug.

“You seem to have enjoyed that.”

Antenor could only nod. He had pleased himself before, of course, but never had it been that good.

“Good. Now that we have that out of the way, we can begin.” His pupil gave him a blank stare. “I know,” he chuckled. “That’s usually beginning, middle and end for you, right? There is so much more. Where would you like to start?” Antenor’s eyes fixed on Calchas’s erect member. The Greek smiled knowingly and stretched out beside him. “Have you ever touched another man before?”

“Not willingly.”

“Damn Endymion. If anything we do upsets you –”

“Calchas.” The young man smiled, touched by his concern. “You’re not him. That’s all that matters.”

The warrior touched his fingers to Antenor’s face, then parted his legs and beckoned him over. “Care to take a closer look?”

Antenor gave in to his urge and buried his nose in those dark curls, reveling in the musky, male scent. He pulled back and explored with his fingers, tracing the veins of Calchas’s cock, weighing the heavy sacs in his palm. Timidly he touched his tongue to the glistening drop suspended at the tip of the swollen member. He found the taste unpleasant but not unbearable. Remembering what the older man had done to him, he swirled his tongue around the head experimentally. Calchas watched him with a practiced eye, occasionally offering praise or direction. “Stop,” the Greek finally directed.

Confused, the younger man lifted his head. “Am I not doing it right? Don’t you want me to finish?”

“You’re doing fine, and no, I don’t want to finish, not yet. Come here.” Antenor slipped into the warrior’s embrace. They kissed for a long while, learning the geography of each other’s bodies. “I

would dearly love to enter you, but that will have to wait until we have some oil,” Calchas groaned as his young lover suckled experimentally at one nipple.

“Oh! I almost forgot.” Antenor scrambled to his feet and ducked into the shelter, emerging with several long plant stalks. He snapped one and squeezed thick golden sap into his palm. “I thought we could use this. I, um, heard some of the sailors talking.”

Calchas trailed a finger through the liquid and nodded in approval. “Well done. Does that mean you’re ready for this?”

“Oh, yes, I’m ready.” Antenor’s cock was fully hard again, and he was eager for the next lesson. “What should I do?”

“Lay on your back,” the Greek directed, taking the stalks from his hand. As Antenor complied, his eyes widened at the sheer amount of sap Calchas was squeezing. At the warrior’s urging, he pulled his knees to his chest. “I’m going to touch you in places you have never been touched,” Calchas said. “It will feel odd, perhaps even uncomfortable, but it should not be painful. If you need me to stop, I will. All right?”

Antenor nodded, watching intently as sap was smoothed over his cock and rubbed into his balls. Callused fingers next spread the liquid over his buttocks, kneading and massaging it into his skin. He jumped when he felt a touch at his opening, but the finger didn’t penetrate, merely rubbed slickly at his entrance. It was both moving and frightening to be touched so intimately, and only his complete trust in Calchas kept him from squirming.

When a single blunt finger pushed inside him, he drew in a breath and held it. He wanted to savor this moment, remember every sensation of this very first time. It didn’t hurt, merely felt odd to have a foreign object moving inside his most private place. Just as it began to feel pleasurable, the pressure increased. This time there was a slight burn and he hissed, glancing down. Calchas was entering him with two fingers now, slick with the golden sap. “Relax,” he soothed, sliding his digits slowly in and out.

Antenor closed his eyes and let his head fall back, concentrating on the strange new feeling. What happened next caught him entirely by surprise.

Lightning shot through his body. He jerked and cried out as tingles sped from his insides out to his fingertips, to his toes and straight back to his cock. Panting in the aftermath, he opened his mouth and managed, “What...?”

It happened again. He wailed, clenching hard on the fingers in his ass, riding wave after wave of pleasure. When it was over, his body flopped limply to the ground, except for his cock, which was harder than ever. Calchas urged him onto his front, pushing his knees apart until his ass was tilted upward. He heard the sound of another stalk snapping and waited breathlessly for the next sensation.

The pressure at his opening was back, but this time it was bigger than a finger. The head of Calchas’s cock nudged his entrance and slowly began to push inside. Antenor whimpered a bit at the feeling, which was not quite pain – fullness? Tightness? He felt as though he were being stretched. He grunted, shifting his hips to try to accommodate the intruder, feeling his own erection begin to wilt.

Calchas stopped moving, absently rubbing Antenor’s buttock while he waited for the younger man to adjust. After a moment or two and a few deep breaths, the Trojan pushed back just a little to let his lover know he was ready. Hands grasped his hips, pulling him up and back even as Calchas’s cock slid home.

Eyes squeezed shut, mouth open in a soundless cry, Antenor was aware of every nerve in his body. He could feel the moss under his palms and his knees, the breeze working to cool the sweat on his back. He felt Calchas’s balls nestled against his backside and could almost feel each individual pubic hair teasing his skin. He remained that way, suspended in a pure, endless moment of sensation, for a small eternity. And then Calchas pulled out and gave him a long, deep thrust, and the tingles were back.

The older man soon gave up gentle in favor of thorough and pounded his ass at a punishing pace. Each thrust hit that magical place that sent fire dancing across his nerves. Antenor laid his head on his folded arms, so overwhelmed with physical pleasure that he was helpless to do anything but take the fucking and howl in wordless lust. His cock was hard again, leaking a steady stream of clear fluid to the ground.

Calchas's thrusts quickened and became erratic. Antenor felt a hand close around his cock and three strokes later he was lost. His body seized, his mind went blank, his howl became a scream. Pleasure sang throughout his entire being, flooding him in pulses like waves on the beach.

Things went dim for a time. He returned to his senses at the feel of a cool cloth on his backside. He raised his head muzzily and met Calchas's grinning face. The older man looked extremely pleased with himself.

"So, do you have any questions about today's lesson?"

"Yes," Antenor mumbled, pulling his lover down to lie beside him. "When can we do it again?"

TO Antenor's utter joy, they did it quite often. Calchas took his role as mentor seriously and spent hours teaching his young charge the many ways a man may pleasure another – and himself. There were lessons of the less carnal variety, as well. Using sticks, Calchas taught him the basics of wielding a sword and led him through daily exercises that would increase his strength and stamina. He also helped Antenor refine his hunting skills, and in return the younger man shared his knowledge of herb-lore. Together they made a fine living off of the land and truly wanted for nothing.

Antenor stood on the beach, soaking wet and shivering. He'd needed a bath after their activities of last night, not to mention this

morning, but winter was in the air and the ocean was less welcoming than when they'd arrived. The seasons would change soon.

By his best guess, they had been there nearly half a year. For Antenor, it had become nothing less than a paradise. He had everything that he desired and would happily spend the rest of his life on their island. Calchas... The boy frowned. His lover was happy and attentive, but once in a while his gaze would turn inwards, and Antenor would know he was thinking of somewhere else. Of home. And that was the difference between them. Antenor had no home to return to. For him, the island was home now. But Calchas had a home, a family, friends, waiting for him in Macedon, and while the older man was happy here, part of him would always be somewhere else.

Antenor was conflicted. He wanted them to stay here forever. But when he saw Calchas standing here on the beach, looking out to the horizon... the Trojan raised his eyes and looked out to sea.

He was dumbfounded to see a ship.

For a wild moment, he thought about fleeing into the woods, hiding until the ship had gone away. Calchas need never know they were there.

The choice was taken from him when he realized a longboat was rowing its way ever closer to shore. He watched them approach with a heavy feeling he hadn't felt since the day Troy fell. It was the knowledge that things would never be the same again.

He turned and left the beach. They had preparations to make.

They were both on the beach to greet the newcomers when they landed. Before they'd even disembarked, a sailor with a long white beard was calling out in relieved amazement.

"It is you! Thank the gods, we had nearly given up hope!" The old one leapt out of the boat into the surf, splashing his way to shore and making a beeline for Calchas, who squinted in disbelief.

"Senegus?"

The man in question smiled, revealing yellow, uneven teeth, and thumped Calchas on the back. “Aye, my old friend. We have been searching the entire Aegean for you since news of the shipwreck reached Scione. Young Tereus has been on a tear. He has never lost faith that you survived.”

“He always was a willful child,” Calchas grinned, clasp hands with the others as they came ashore. “Well met, all of you.”

Senegus raised a bushy eyebrow. “That willful child is now king. The good old king his father passed nearly six years past.” The old man seemed to notice Antenor for the first time. “Well met, friend! Who are you, and from where do you hail?”

Calchas opened his mouth, their well-rehearsed lie on his lips, but another Scionite spoke up. “I remember him from the war. This is the little Trojan boy you took as a slave.” The man narrowed his eyes appreciatively. “He’s filled out.”

Despair flooded Calchas’s face for the briefest of seconds before his smile was back in place. “He’s worked hard since we arrived here. We both have.”

Senegus clapped him on the shoulder again. “Truly this day is a gift from Poseidon himself. That we should stumble upon this tiny island as we were about to head home – it’s nothing short of a miracle. If there’s anything you wish to take with you, have your slave fetch it. Let’s get you on board and find you some clothes. No need to live like a savage anymore, eh?”

When Calchas turned to him, Antenor remembered at the last moment to drop his gaze to the ground. The Greek’s voice cracked a bit as he gave his command. “Antenor, bring the skins and whatever else you deem useful.”

Unable to speak, the Trojan nodded and took off, stumbling through the brush to their camp. Once there, he sank down on the log and dropped his head into his hands, fighting to control both his tears and his stomach. From one moment to the next, he’d gone from lover back to slave. Once more the bottom had dropped out of his world.



*You can do this, he told himself firmly. It is only until we reach Macedon, then things will go back to normal. You need only play the part until then.*

He gathered up what few things they'd accrued: their sword-fighting sticks, the hunting spear, his herbs, and bundled them up in the pile of rabbit skins. Looking around the camp that had been their home, he felt the overpowering urge to sit down and bawl. But if his experiences over the last year had taught him one thing, it was the ability to deal with loss. He took one last glance and headed back to the beach.

They were rowed back to the ship to the excited chatter of the sailors. Antenor, silent and downcast in the stern, gathered from their talk that Calchas had spent time in Scione before the war and had some history with the royal family, enough so that the king had sent a large portion of his fleet out in search of him. The Trojan was brimming with questions for his lover, but it didn't seem likely he'd get the chance to ask any time soon.

On board the ship they were shown to a well-appointed stateroom. "It's the captain's," Senegus confided. "After what you've been through, he figured you deserved a bit of luxury. Do you want your slave here or in the hold with the rest of us?"

"With me." Calchas's answer was reassuringly quick. "I have grown used to his company."

"As you like. There are clothes for both of you on that chest. Captain requests your company at dinner, two hours hence."

"Thank you, old friend." Calchas clasped his arm again and leaned in close. "In truth, I'm weary and would like to sleep until then. Would you ask that I not be disturbed?"

"Of course. May the gods guard your rest."

Calchas thanked him again and shut the door in his face, propping a chair under its handle. As soon as he turned around, Antenor was in his arms.

“Gods, I’m sorry. I never wanted to see you treated like that, ever again,” he breathed into the young man’s hair. “Blast that fool who recognized you!”

“It’s all right,” Antenor murmured. “It cannot be helped. I will play your dutiful servant until we reach your home. Then we can be together.”

Calchas touched his forehead to his lover’s. “Truthfully, you were never a very dutiful servant.”

“No, but I’ve been an excellent student,” came the playful response.

“Star pupil,” the Greek agreed. “In fact, I believe that today is graduation day.”

Antenor couldn’t deny he was intrigued. What was there left to do that they hadn’t already enjoyed?

Calchas leaned in for a long, sweet kiss. “Have you any stalks in that bundle?”

The younger man broke away to retrieve the plants. “You know, I am ruined as an apothecary.”

“Are you so? And why is that?”

“I can no longer look at these,” he said, brandishing the stalks, “without getting aroused. Very unprofessional.” He handed them to Calchas, who handed them back. “What?”

“I have made you a slave twice over now. Tonight I am making you the master.” The Greek inclined his head towards the captain’s bed. It was narrow, but leagues better than a hammock for what he had in mind. “How do you want me, Master?”

Antenor’s groin surged to see Calchas standing compliant before him. He licked his lips and ran a trailing hand down his lover’s lightly furred chest, tangling in the wiry pubic hair and giving a playful tug.

Antenor was beside himself with anticipation. He had received Calchas into his body many times, but the roles had never been reversed.

Slowly he walked around the unmoving warrior, pausing to touch a shoulder here, a hip there. Some impish impulse made him bring his palm down hard on one muscled buttock. Calchas flinched but took it without complaint. Antenor examined the handprint he'd left on the tanned skin. "Lovely," he murmured, leaving a matching one on the other buttock. Moving back around to face him, he put his arms around Calchas's neck and said, "Come to bed."

"As you wish, Master."

"No. You've never asked me for my submission, and I do not want yours. The fact that you offered it is all I need. However," he grinned, "I do want to take you. On your back, please."

Calchas stole a kiss before reclining on the bed. He propped his knees up and spread them wide, trailing his fingers over his swollen cock and heavy balls. "Come," he invited. "Let's see what you have learned."

Antenor lay between his thighs and applied himself to that cock, using every technique he'd been taught and a few he'd come up with himself. Soon he had his lover fully hard and sighing with pleasure. Snapping a stalk, he squeezed the sap over his fingers and sought out his hidden entrance. One finger slid in easily, so he added another right away. Calchas, however, was already running short of patience. "Enough," he growled, pulling his knees to his chest. "Do it."

Applying more lubricant to his cock, Antenor couldn't help but laugh. "Bossy." He couldn't let the Greek have all the control, however, so he grabbed his ankles and used them to pull his legs up and out.

Sliding into Calchas's body was like nothing else he'd ever experienced. He had to stop almost immediately for fear he'd succumb prematurely, and he fought to calm himself as his lover wiggled impatiently beneath him. Antenor pulled his thighs open wider in

retaliation. A bit more collected, he started to move. The tight heat of the Greek's body felt incredible around his driving cock. He knew from his own experience that in this position, every stroke would be finding Calchas's magic place.

His beautiful warrior was grunting, rocking his hips up to meet each thrust. Before long, his hand took hold of his own member, pulling in a matching rhythm to Antenor's own.

The young Trojan tried to slow down, wanting to imprint this memory in his mind forever, but the sensations were too intense, the urge to thrust too powerful to ignore. He felt his balls tighten and began to pound into Calchas as hard and as deep as he could, desperate to send the older man to completion before finishing himself. Just as he tumbled over the edge, his lover gave a low cry and jerked beneath him, spraying his own stomach with his seed. Antenor shuddered through his own climax and collapsed into Calchas's embrace.

As they lay in the growing darkness, their hearts pounding together, Calchas kissed his young lover's forehead. "I love you," he whispered. "No matter what happens, you must never forget that." Antenor, already half-asleep, simply smiled and pressed his face to the warrior's warm chest.

They spent most of their days at sea apart, Calchas keeping company with the Scionite sailors while Antenor was assigned various tasks. He was berated and given orders by the lowliest seaman on the boat, but even this could not upset him for long. Their nights together made up for everything.

On the day they pulled into port at Scione, Antenor was standing at the rail by Calchas's side. This was his first sight of a Greek city, and he was eager to take in everything. The market was set up right on the dock; vendors sold fish, fruit, and nearly anything else. He turned to ask a question of his companion, remembering just in time that he wasn't supposed to speak. Sighing a bit, he turned his attention back to the city.

A group of horses, well-bred and expensively outfitted, gathered on the dock, their riders equally resplendent beside them. The ship was moored, the gangplank lowered, and Calchas strode to the group with Antenor following the requisite number of paces behind.

A young man stood forth. He was perhaps thirty years old with a ready smile and a short, neat beard. He wore a plain circlet around his brow. "I knew it," he called, his eyes shiny with moisture. "Somehow, I knew you had survived."

"Your Highness." Calchas stopped before him and made to kneel, but the young king caught him by the shoulders and raised him up, wrapping him in a tearful embrace.

"Welcome back to Scione, Calchas. You will be my honored guest for as long as you choose to stay. Come, we will return to the palace. Once you have bathed and eaten, you can tell me all about your adventures." The king linked his arm through Calchas's and led him away, limping heavily on one leg.

That explained why the young king – Tereus, he recalled – had not sailed to Troy with the rest of his fleet. His leg appeared to be deformed, the right foot dragging with every step.

After such a long period of isolation, Antenor was finding the noise and bustle of the city unnerving. When Calchas was shown to a horse and whisked away, the young Trojan was left to follow on foot with the other servants. Suddenly, there was a very real possibility he might lose his lover in the crowd and never see him again. His skin prickled with panicked sweat as he fought to keep from running after him. By the time they got to the palace, his nerves were shot.

Antenor was sent to servant's quarters to wash and change into proper livery. He had lived completely nude for half a year, and now the complicated clothing seemed bizarre and unmanageable. At last he was deemed acceptable enough to serve his master in court and was led through side passages to the salon. To his surprise, instead of a formal dining table and high-backed chairs, the nobles occupied cushions scattered on the floor around low serving tables. Calchas, scrubbed

until he practically glowed, lounged on a pile of pillows next to the king, holding a large goblet in one hand and a partially eaten fig in the other. Keeping his head down, Antenor took his place against the wall, close at hand in case his master should require him.

As always, he couldn't quite keep his eyes on the floor and snuck frequent peeks at his lover. Calchas seemed relaxed, probably a little drunk given how long it had been since either of them had drunk wine. As Antenor watched, the king leaned over and spoke softly into Calchas's ear, placing a hand on his thigh as he did so.

They remained in the hall for some time, and by the time they left Antenor was vacillating between cold fury and utter despair. King Tereus bestowed a constant stream of intimate little touches on Calchas and, what was worse, Calchas didn't seem to mind. They left together, heads bowed in conversation, the king's hand tucked into the crook of Calchas's arm.

Lacking further instructions, Antenor returned to the servants' quarters. Curled up on a thin pallet, he lay alone for the first time since leaving Troy, feeling every bit as lost and bereft. It was a very long, very cold night.

In the morning he was shaken awake by another servant. "Wake up, you! The king has asked to see you. Get dressed, quickly!"

Antenor pulled on his clothing, suffering the other servant to tug and smooth until he was presentable. He was led once more through the maze-like corridors and halted at an ordinary door. The servant knocked and was bid to enter. He made a sweeping bow and announced, "The slave Antenor, Sire, as you requested."

"Thank you, you may go." As the servant scuttled away, the king himself came to the door. "Please come in," he invited, shutting the door behind them. Antenor stood in the middle of the simple room, unsure of how to behave. Belatedly he remembered he was supposed to kneel and dropped to one knee, head down. "Don't do that," the king sighed. "Everyone does that to me. It's tiresome." Antenor rose and

Tereus took his arm. “Please come sit with me. I understand we have much in common.”

“I can’t imagine that we do, Your Highness. No disrespect intended.”

Tereus made a face and reconsidered his words. “Let me rephrase that. We have one thing in common. We both love Calchas.”

Antenor knew he must look like a startled rabbit. “Your Highness, I am just a slave,” he stammered. “He is my master, there is nothing —”

“He told me everything,” the king interrupted. “Last night. We caught up with each other’s lives and drank a good deal of wine. My head still hurts.”

“Why ... why would he tell you that?” Antenor couldn’t help but feel betrayed. Who was this man, this king, that Calchas would reveal their secrets so readily?

“He was drunk and hurting. And he knows he can trust me with anything. I owe him this and so much more.” Tereus leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees. It was an oddly informal stance for a monarch. “Let me try and explain. I was born with a deformed leg, as you’ve no doubt noticed. When I reached manhood, my father found that despite my royal blood, few warriors were willing to tutor me. Calchas was traveling through and heard of my dilemma. He stepped forward and offered his services.” The king ran a hand over his beard and actually looked embarrassed. “I was a horse’s ass in those days, pompous and disrespectful. For our first lesson, Calchas took me behind the stable and beat me soundly.”

Antenor was horrified. The man he’d come to know would never act so callously to a cripple.

Tereus laughed at his expression. “No, believe me, it was well deserved. You see, I had been treated as something fragile and precious all my life. The idea that someone would strike me ... let’s just say it was an eye-opener. That’s not to say things were easy, but he would not

give up on me. He taught me how to compensate for my disability on the battlefield. More than that, he taught me fairness and wisdom. He said that those were the most important things a king could have, more important than two working legs. And of course, he taught me other things as well.” Seeing Antenor blush, the king laughed again, his eyes sparkling. “He is a very good teacher, is he not?”

Antenor could not bring himself to smile back. “You said you loved him,” he uttered miserably.

“I will always love him. He was my mentor. He made me the man, the *king*, I am today, and for that he will always hold a place in my heart. But you, Antenor, you are the one he truly loves. He is beside himself with concern over your fate.”

“My fate? I am to return with him to Macedon.”

“Is that what you want? To spend long hours harvesting olives in the sun, never to be free again?”

The Trojan shrugged. “If that is what I must do to be near him.”

“Antenor. Last night, Calchas asked me to help you find your way to Corinth.”

The young man’s head shot up. “Corinth? No! How can he do this? How can he send me away after everything we’ve done, everything he’s said?”

“He hopes to save you from a life of servitude. Understand that as a slave, you will have no rights. You will never own property. You will be forbidden to travel except in Calchas’s company. If he dies, you will be bequeathed as part of his household, like cattle or furniture. It is this future he hopes to spare you.”

“I don’t care about any of that! Why can he not understand that?” Antenor fumed, mentally cursing all stubborn Greeks. “He will not be rid of me so easily, the coward. If I have to swim back from Corinth, I will show up on his doorstep and demand entry.”



“Good!” Tereus clapped him on the shoulder. “He is a stubborn, willful man, and you will need to be tough to handle him.” The king leaned forward until their heads were nearly touching and continued on conspiratorially. “The thing about mentors is they think they’re always right. They always know what’s best for others, but seldom for themselves. However, you don’t become king without learning a thing or two.” Tereus stood and held out a hand. “Come with me,” he said, smiling with wicked glee. “I have a better plan.”

LATER that day, word spread that there was to be a formal reception that very night. All the highborn men and women of Scione were in attendance, as was the honored guest of the royal family, Calchas of Macedon. King Tereus, not usually given to dramatic antics as some monarchs were, nevertheless surrounded the festivities with an air of secrecy that had the entire city buzzing with gossip.

The king arrived late, making a grand, formal entrance for the first time since his coronation. Everyone at court immediately began to whisper. Who was the handsome young man on his arm?

Seated at the head of the long table in the seldom-used great hall, his companion beside him, the king gestured with his hand and the room fell silent. He stood, addressing his subjects and guests with a royal manner that those closest to him knew to be put on. “I would like to present my cousin, Sinon.” A whisper raced around the hall. Tereus silenced it with a glare. “Sinon is the son of my mother’s cousin and is not in the line of succession. He comes to us from Corinth.”

Antenor, for it was he, stood awkwardly in his elegant robes. His hair had been cut short and his beard shaved clean. His arms and neck were decorated with expensive baubles. His gaze drifted unerringly to Calchas. The Greek had recognized him immediately and now sat wide-eyed with confusion.

Tereus, too, turned toward his old mentor. “Calchas, my old friend. You have done so much in service to Scione already. May I impose upon your good will again?”

A smile spread across the warrior's face and was quickly subdued. He stood and gave a deep bow. "It is my honor to offer you my service, Your Highness."

The king nodded in acknowledgement, still upholding his haughty persona. "My cousin has spent his youth in the company of undesirables. He has picked up a number of bad habits." Tereus' lips quirked up on one side. "He needs a strong hand to teach him the proper way for a man of his birth to act. I can think of no better mentor than you, dear friend. I would have him travel to Macedon with you as your guest, for as long as you will have him. I will compensate you, of course. Will you accept him into your tutelage?"

"Sire, I will be honored to do so." Calchas stood and circled the table, offering his arm to 'Sinon'. "I am Calchas of Macedon."

Antenor clasped his arm, feeling the tender squeeze of that familiar hand on his skin. "Sinon. Of Corinth," he added hastily. Calchas's lips twitched.

"Your Highness, with your permission, Sinon and I will retire to the garden to become acquainted."

Tereus waved airily, clearly enjoying himself. "By all means," he dismissed. Bowing to the monarch, the men turned and moved at a leisurely pace from the hall.

They barely made it to the gardens before embracing. "Gods, can this actually work?" Calchas asked.

"It can. It will," Antenor assured him.

"But so many saw me arrive here with you...."

"No one pays attention to servants. Tereus will tell anyone who will listen that he took the slave Antenor off your hands, and that he's at work somewhere in the kitchens, or the stables, what have you."

"So Antenor stays in Scione, where he fades from memory."

“And Sinon emerges from obscurity and is immediately sent off to Macedon, where he’ll be out of sight and mind.”

Calchas dropped a tender kiss on his lips. “And free.”

“Mmm, and free,” the former slave agreed, pulling his lover down for another, longer kiss. “And,” he added, a bit breathlessly, “possessed of a rather large amount of property, gifted to him by the king. I’m afraid I have a lot of luggage.”

The warrior considered. “Maybe Antenor could carry it?”

“I doubt it. I’ve heard he’s not a very obedient slave.”

“Churlish,” Calchas said, diving in for another kiss.

“Willful.”

“And stubborn. Still, I believe I will miss him,” Calchas sighed.

Sinon took his hand and began leading him to his suite of rooms. “Trust me, mentor. By morning, you’ll hardly miss him at all.”



D.G. Parker spends her days posing as a mild-mannered hospital administrator in upstate New York. Her alter ego has been reading and writing voraciously since childhood and dreams of one day publishing the Great American Novel. She's taken her pen name from the very quotable Dorothy Parker, who reminds us all that you can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think.



TROY  
CYCLE



DAR MAVISON





APHRODITE had come. The battle had vanished, and at any moment the air, thick with dust and blood, would clear, and the ethereal form of the goddess would appear swathed in the glow of a thousand stars. Paris opened his eyes.

But he saw not the mountaintop to which Aphrodite customarily whisked him in times of danger. This was a tent, and the voices from the camp outside were Greek. Faint light seeped through an over-stretched seam in the canvas a few feet from Paris. Not the hovel of some poor soldier, this tent was high-ceilinged and well-stocked, if the crates at his back were full. This was the tent of a warrior of some stature, perhaps even a king.

Paris did not know if this was to his advantage or disadvantage. He was not wise in the arts of war or diplomacy, though his brother had tried to instruct him. His talents and tendencies lay firmly in the realm of seduction. If a bed, a maiden, and her virtue had been part of the stakes, he would have been more confident. With his mind so clouded by pain, he could not even remember how he'd come to be here.

He remembered his challenge to Menelaus. He'd been badly outclassed in the duel. He remembered falling to the sand, grains grinding into his knees as he called for Aphrodite's protection, shaming himself in front of all. There was the sound of the Greek army fast closing in, the roar of battle, then nothing.

Something trickled down his neck and the base of his skull throbbed with pain and humiliation. He could not reach to feel for more injuries with his hands tied in front of his body, elbows bound at his sides, legs similarly trussed. Fear befuddled his mind, and a gag bit into

his mouth, leaving his throat dry, his tongue parched. He appeared to be utterly helpless.

The smack of the tent flap beyond a thin curtain was followed by voices. Two shadowy forms moved, silhouetted in the light of a lantern.

“What were you thinking? I have never seen a less disciplined assault!” a low voice admonished. “A duel turned into a free for all, ranks broken, command ignored –”

“I am well aware of the shortcomings of the skirmish, as is Agamemnon. It is only by some favor of the gods he does not blame me for this fiasco. It is your bad luck, my friend, that he conserves his ire for you.”

“A reflection of his madness, to blame one who was not even in the fray. More men will die tomorrow, and he will hold me responsible still.”

Paris strained to see around the edge of the curtain. Who were these men to speak so disdainfully of their king? And why had they taken Paris hostage instead of killing him on the field?

“Discipline hangs by a thread, but Agamemnon will not listen to reason. What would you have me do, Achilles?”

Achilles! Paris must be in the tent of the mighty warrior himself.

Achilles laughed. “Put no faith in your beloved reason. War is without logic. But do at least offer me a drink, Odysseus. Drinking does make sense.”

Odysseus! Paris was truly doomed if he was held captive by the wily king of Ithaca. He had no hope at all. Paris panicked and struggled with his bonds. His leather greaves creaked.

“Who is there?”

“No one. It’s just a –”

Sudden light blinded Paris. He shut his eyes tightly.

“What’s this? A trussed Prince of Troy? You hoard the best spoils for yourself, my old friend.”

“Leave him, Achilles. He’s no concern of yours.”

“Oh, so my Briseis is taken from me by Agamemnon, but you get to keep your pretty prince? Hardly seems fair.”

Paris kept his eyes closed, feigning unconsciousness. A booted toe prodded his thigh. “This is quite a prize to keep from worthy Agamemnon. You should take better care of him.”

A flagon clinked against a metal cup. “I am in a quandary. If I hand him over to Agamemnon, he’ll be slain without mercy. Our general would make an example of him for all of Troy and drag his body around the camp until it fell to pieces.”

“That is what you are supposed to want. Or have you forgotten why we fight?”

“I was not aware that you were still one of *us*,” Odysseus said dryly.

Paris barely hid his flinch when someone leaned down and sniffed at his hair. “All you Trojans must bathe together,” Achilles murmured. He tugged at the rope around Paris’s torso. “What do you care if this one lives or dies?”

“I care for tactics, Achilles. We cannot risk Paris’s death at this time. A heady whirlwind blows across the field. The men say it is the goddess seeking him. If we kill him, Aphrodite will crush us.”

“We have our own gods. Athena would not allow Aphrodite her revenge.”

“But what of Hector? He searches through the dead himself and has sent scouts in all directions. If he does not find Paris, Aphrodite’s whirlwind will look scant. He will turn his eyes to our camp soon

enough. All the gods in the heavens will not be able to protect us from Hector's wrath."

So, the great Odysseus feared Paris's brother. As he should, Paris thought. When Hector discovered who was responsible for this, blood would be shed.

"Slay him and get rid of the body. If you haven't the stomach for it, I'll do it. It would madden Agamemnon," Achilles replied.

"I am hoping to negotiate something with Hector," Odysseus said. "I may be able to keep him behind his walls."

"Jeering at each other over walls gets us nowhere. I'd rather have the fight out in the open," Achilles scoffed.

"Ah, but your pride took you out of the fight," Odysseus countered. "It's up to me to continue this war without losing every man we brought. I can use him to buy what we need most: time to regroup."

"You would gain but little respite."

"I could gain enough time to make Hector see reason, perhaps even to make him return Helen to her rightful husband."

Never! Paris fumed. Helen was his and fairly so. Aphrodite had promised her to him, and Hector respected that. Hector may not have agreed with the war in the beginning, but things were too far gone. Hector would not forsake him, nor would Aphrodite. He would be rescued somehow.

"Agamemnon will settle for nothing less than the destruction of Troy," Achilles said. "Helen is just an excuse now. The king cares not in whose bed the slut lays."

Paris bit his lip to keep from crying out. Then a hand moved down to cup his chin and fingers tightened under his jaw. "Open your eyes, Prince Paris. I know you are awake."

Paris looked up at the outline of Achilles, limned by the glow of the lantern, which gave him a godlike aspect. Behind him stood

Odysseus, stroking his beard, lost in thought. “We play a dangerous game,” Odysseus said, seemingly to himself.

Achilles gazed down at Paris with hungry eyes. “I’d rather play with him,” he said. Paris tried not to shrink back against the crates. Odysseus appeared not to have heard.

All three men jumped when the flap of the tent abruptly opened. “My lord, the king desires your counsel.”

Odysseus and Achilles both moved swiftly to shield Paris from view. “I will be there presently,” Odysseus replied as he ushered the messenger out of the tent. He motioned for Achilles to join him beyond the curtain. They conferred too quietly for Paris to make out their words. At length, Odysseus reached to open the tent flap. “Agamemnon awaits,” he announced.

Achilles nodded. “Fear not. I shall keep your pretty prince well hidden.”

Odysseus turned to glower at Achilles.

Achilles spread his hands in a gesture of harmlessness. “Do you not trust me with your prize?”

Odysseus raised his hand, pointing his index finger and shaking it as one would to admonish a child. “Do not break him, Achilles. I warn you.”

Achilles turned his back on the king of Ithaca and smiled wolfishly at Paris. “Break? I wouldn’t dream of it, my friend.”

PARIS tried to steady his riotous heartbeat. The gag pressed his tongue back, threatening to choke him. The ropes around his arms tightened his breastplate, restricting all movement and stifling his breath.

“I’m going to remove this gag,” Achilles said quietly, squatting at his side. “Do not make a noise. If anyone hears you, you’ll be dead

before you can beg for mercy. Odysseus did not exaggerate; they would tear you limb from limb. Do you understand me?"

Paris nodded.

"Such a pretty prince," Achilles murmured. He pulled the gag out of Paris's mouth and stroked his cheek. Paris recoiled when a blunt fingertip strayed over a cut. "Tsk. To mar such beauty.... I can see why Helen would prefer you to all others. But at the expense of your father's kingdom? For shame, Prince of Troy. For shame."

Hector had tried to teach Paris strength and composure in times of trial. Hector's beloved voice ran through Paris's head, commanding him to scrutinize his assets and liabilities and identify his most effective weapons.

None. He had no weapons. He was trussed and unarmed, but even unbound and in possession of a hundred swords he could never hope to overpower the great Achilles. His freedom lay on another route.

He had his beauty. Beauty was a curse in the business of war, but this was not war; this was negotiation, and Achilles thought him pretty. He should be able to use that to his advantage. He had his position. Achilles was still calling him 'prince', even if his voice held more scorn than respect. He had his voice. It had served him well in the past. He could try to talk his way out of this.

"Do you know how you came to be here?" Achilles asked as he hauled Paris up to sitting.

Paris opened his mouth to speak, but could only cough dryly. So, he did not have his voice after all.

Achilles retrieved a goblet from the other side of the curtain, and after a sip of wine Paris was ready to try again. "I know not how I came to be here," he said in as noble a manner as possible. "I must assume it is due to the munificence of King Odysseus."

Achilles chuckled. "That must be a fancy Trojan word for 'greed'." Achilles leaned over Paris and untied the rope from his waist.

Achilles's scent flooded the air, earthy and metallic, the scent of a man who knows war. It was almost overwhelming. "Mark me, little prince, Odysseus will profit from this somehow. No one gets the better of the king of Ithaca, no matter what honey drips from his pretty tongue."

Paris was dismayed. Sycophancy would not work; he would have to use other tactics. He was determined to turn his helplessness to his advantage. He coughed and leaned toward the held out cup again. He drank enough to soothe his throat and let the rest wet his lips, spill over and trickle down his chin and throat. He tried to catch the overflow with his tongue, and was satisfied to see Achilles's eyes track the movement. He licked his lips and heard a faint intake of breath.

Not so helpless after all.

He accepted another sip of wine, swallowing what remained of his pride along with it. He'd already sunk to the lowest depths by begging for help in the midst of battle. Seducing his captor would shame him no further.

Achilles touched Paris's hair once more. "He says he dragged you into his chariot in the middle of the battle. I can't imagine why. He would have gained more glory by killing you on the field. He must fear Hector."

"He *should* fear Hector!" Paris could not help exclaiming.

Achilles smiled, a smile that was tempered by something far more dangerous than battle lust. "Perhaps. But I am *not* afraid of your brother. You would do well to remember that."

Paris pressed his lips shut.

Achilles traced a single finger up Paris's arm, pausing to follow the pattern on the bronze cuff around his bicep. "Hector is hoping the goddess has spirited you away to safety, as is her wont." Achilles leaned closer and rubbed his nose against Paris's hair, inhaling deeply. "She loves you, but it was Odysseus who saved you this time."

Paris blinked. Was that really what had happened? Aphrodite had forsaken him? And Hector?

Achilles watched Paris closely. “You are not only held captive in his tent. You are in his debt,” he said.

Paris took a deep breath and tilted his head back so he could look Achilles in the eye. He had always found eye contact to be useful in any negotiation. What he saw was unnerving, but he gazed steadily into the cold blue. “Pride and arrogance took me onto the field, and I stood no chance of defeating my opponent. I owe Odysseus my life.”

“It was duty and honor that put you on the field, something sadly lacking in your previous actions, but that matters not. Helen sits behind your walls, unobtainable. The king of Sparta was wounded in the skirmish, and his pig of a brother would gladly see you burn with the corpses of all who’ve given their lives so you could dip your dagger between Helen’s legs. Your little visit to the war accomplished nothing but to make things worse for you. So, shall I hand you over to Agamemnon?”

Paris shook his head. “No, please! Remember what Odysseus said. I can be of more use to you alive.” Paris tried to keep his gaze steady. As he studied Achilles, he had to admit that his motivation went beyond pragmatism. Achilles was magnificent, possessed of a masculine beauty that commanded admiration. It would be no great sacrifice for Paris to seduce his way to freedom, disgraceful as it might seem. He felt no obligation to live up to his brother’s expectations of nobility. Paris had been left to fend for himself in the only way he knew. “Please,” he said, putting his voice to the very edge of begging, “I am sure you can find some use for me.”

Achilles tilted his head to one side, studying his captive. “Use? I have no doubt of it. But satisfaction?” He looked amused and aroused at the same time. He might be toying with Paris, getting his hopes up only to humiliate him further. Paris’s only chance was to encourage the arousal to overtake the amusement.



He lowered his eyes, as he'd seen servants do. Pride would not be to his advantage now. Submission would be. Submission and allure. He would have to wield those weapons better than any sword. "Whatever you desire, my lord," he whispered.

"Anything?" Achilles grabbed him roughly by the hair. "But willingly," he demanded. "It would be an insult to me if I had to use force."

Paris would have retorted that Achilles's demand for willingness constituted force, but this was not the time for that argument. Paris understood Achilles all too well. He, too, had no sympathy for men who took what was not freely offered. But then, so much had always been freely offered to Paris. He'd rarely had the need to even ask. The same had to be true for Achilles. And now it was Paris's turn to make an offer.

He turned his head to the side and rubbed his cheek along Achilles's heavily-muscle forearm. "I understand, my lord," he whispered against the bronzed skin and flicked his tongue out to caress it delicately.

Achilles still gripped his hair tightly. "No tricks," he warned. With his free hand, he pulled the ropes free of Paris's waist, leaving his hands and legs bound.

"No tricks," Paris replied honestly and licked the salty skin again. "I wish only to give you sufficient reason to keep me hidden and alive."

Not entirely true. Paris wanted a little more than that. He had partaken of both women and men, particularly the men who honored his goddess above all others. It would not have been decorous of him to submit to his lessers, not even in the relative privacy of the temple's darker rooms, but he had tasted enough to know his own desires.

Achilles moved to face Paris fully. "I thought you were only interested in other men's wives, not other men," he sneered.

“Not all men.” Paris licked once more at the taut skin where veins bulged on Achilles’s forearm in sinuous ridges. “Some men are difficult to resist.”

Glorious as Achilles was to behold, his taste was even more thrilling. Earthy as his scent, yet sharp like the sea. Paris wished his hands were free to touch the tanned skin, to knead the thick muscles. When Achilles pushed Paris’s legs straight and straddled them, Paris strained to run his tongue up the rounded bicep to the massive shoulder. He worked his lips back down to the bulging forearm.

Achilles dropped his skirt and Paris was confronted by a hard member, as magnificent as the rest of this warrior. He wrapped his lips around the head and traced the prominent ridge beneath with his tongue. He was rewarded with a hiss and the loosening of the fingers in his hair. Achilles spread his hand over Paris’s scalp. Paris closed his eyes, took the cock deep in his mouth and hollowed his cheeks. Achilles guided his movements, pulling his mouth further along the shaft. Paris did what he could to relax the muscles of his raw throat. The head of Achilles’s cock was a balm to it. He tightened his muscles, caressing and milking it.

“Someone has trained you well,” Achilles purred like a dangerous cat.

Paris hummed around the hard flesh.

“Your brother, perhaps?”

Paris spat out the member, his pride rearing up in him, an untamed and uncalled for beast.

“Temper, young prince. You look as if you’re about to make the sort of noise that will cause us both no end of trouble.” He ran his thumb over Paris’s swollen lower lip. “Forget who taught you that. It’s not your pretty mouth I desire most.”

Paris swallowed noisily.

“But you knew that.”

Paris had suspected this would not be so simple. He did not protest when strong arms lifted him effortlessly and set him on his knees with his shoulders resting on a crate. His skirt was pushed up roughly and hands swept over his backside.

“Pretty, indeed,” Achilles said. “Do not move.”

Paris did as he was told. The heat of Achilles’s body disappeared, and Paris shivered. There were noises from the other side of the tent and then Achilles reappeared at his side, with his hand on the swell of one buttock and his mouth close to Paris’s ear. “There are whispers among the troops, rumors to explain your brother’s tolerance of your appalling behavior. Answer truthfully and there will be no pain at all.”

Paris stared straight ahead, lips pursed tightly together. He tried to ignore the massive hand kneading his flesh. He was willing, more than willing – eager, even – to submit physically, but to be forced to make such an admission would be more shameful than his cowardice in battle had been.

“You know of what I speak,” Achilles whispered softly, seductively. “Is it true?”

Paris’s chin jutted out. Pride, unending pride. Plus he had Hector to think of, not just himself. “My brother is an honorable man,” Paris said. “He protects me as he would protect any of his brothers.”

Achilles’s breath was hot, his chest heavy against Paris’s side, his hard shaft nudging Paris’s hip. “And...” he prompted.

Paris blinked hard to stop his tears. “He does not love me. You heard what happened on the field. There was no rescue. He holds me not dear.” Paris hoped he was lying. He prayed to Aphrodite that his words were false, but he feared them true. Too true.

The wet warmth of oil on his skin told Paris his denials had been believed. “Too bad for Hector,” Achilles said. “My gain.” He slipped a finger inside Paris, tentatively at first, growing in confidence

when Paris did not shy from the touch. Achilles spread the oil and felt deep inside Paris. “Your brother has never done this?”

Paris pressed his hips back, forcing himself onto Achilles’s fingers. “No,” he answered truthfully. Hector had never done that. He had never taken the time to carefully prepare his brother, to make Paris slick and open and ready for his thick cock. Paris had always had to do that for himself.

Achilles seemed to like the answer. He must have wanted it to be true, that Hector held no special love for Paris. He wanted to take Paris without worrying about Hector’s wrath. Beyond that, he probably hoped he was the first to do this.

And he was.

Paris closed his eyes and felt himself stretched open.

Achilles moved behind him and moaned as he pushed his cock all the way in. “Ah, that is what every man wants. Hot as the fires of Hephaestus.” He ran his hand over Paris’s bound arms.

The edge of the crate dug into Paris’s shoulders. He groaned and tried to turn his hands within their bindings, to push them down, to put some pressure on his own hard member.

Achilles reached around and took him in hand. “No forcing,” he rasped. “You submit willingly, so I will give you pleasure as well.”

Paris was grateful for Achilles’s hand on his cock and doubly grateful for Achilles’s other hand over his mouth. He feared he would call out and reveal himself, shout from the fullness, the friction, the warmth of the hand between his legs. He could almost imagine... it was almost as if...

“Turn your head and open your eyes, young prince. Know who makes you feel this way.” Achilles twisted his wrist and tugged Paris’s jaw until Paris opened his eyes and looked.

No, Paris realized, this was not Hector taking him with such care, more care than Hector had ever shown. This was a stranger. His

enemy. Yet that enemy tilted his hips and angled his cock until Paris's muffled cries reached their peak. His enemy stroked him and coaxed the seed from him with a sure and almost gentle hand. His enemy kept him from tumbling over and doing himself injury when he came.

Paris kept looking into Achilles's eyes, until Achilles closed them with a low groan.

THE message came discreetly, through a servant who had been contacted by a goatherd. No soldiers were involved, no officials. Hector left the city quietly, cloaked in muddy gray that could not disguise his size but did give him some camouflage in the last hours before dawn. He stole through the darkness to a low hut almost within sight of the walls of Troy.

Negotiations began with a demand from the man Hector knew to be Odysseus of Ithaca. Hector could have Paris back if he would agree to keep his army behind his walls until the new moon. He would halt all forays. He would let the Greeks retrieve their dead now that he knew Paris was not among the corpses that littered the field. He would at the very least argue for the return of Helen to Menelaus.

It was not his decision to make, Hector protested. He could do what he could to sway the king, but Priam was the ultimate authority, and he owed his father obedience. "Let me see him," Hector demanded.

"You have my word he is safe," Odysseus replied coldly. "Agree to my terms and he's yours. Until then, nothing."

Hector fumed. Odysseus's demands were unreasonable. Impossible. How could he tell his men to draw back on behalf of the one prince who had done everything to cause this war and had contributed so little to the fighting of it?

"Consider the alternative, Prince Hector. Would you prefer to burn his body?"

"No!" Hector said swiftly and vehemently.

Odysseus's smile was sly. "I thought not."

But this seemed too easy. Hector knew the Greek troops were in disarray, but a short reprieve was hardly worth the return of one of Paris's worth. "You will forgive my suspicions, Odysseus, but your reputation precedes you. I do not wish to fall victim to your trickery."

Odysseus laughed quietly. "You are wise to be suspicious, Hector, but the simplest answer is often the truth. I believed I carried a great prize in my chariot, but too precious a treasure is impossible to keep safe. The most beautiful jewel will dazzle you as it cuts your finger and infects your blood. Your brother is precious, but very sharp."

"Precious," Hector repeated. He could not deny that. Nor the sharpness.

"If I had given him to Agamemnon he would be worse than dead now, but for what? The death of Paris would not ensure the return of Helen; it would only antagonize you. And if I kept him for myself, he would serve no purpose but to be discovered eventually, and then he and I would both be dead – him for taking Helen, me for not giving him to Agamemnon at once. But it's your choice; take my offer or leave your brother with me. "

"You do not wish to honor your king?"

Odysseus sighed wearily. "It is not a matter of honoring my king, but tempering him."

Hector had suspected as much. "The council will not agree to return Helen to you. I have already tried to convince them of that."

"You don't agree with this war," Odysseus noted. Of course, Odysseus would suspect it as much of Hector as Hector did of him.

And Hector did not agree with it. It was not a reasonable war. Odysseus knew that already. "Nor do you."

"I do not agree with any war, but I am a warrior. As much as I would like to see your brother die for what he's done, I do what is best for my men."

Hector understood. Agamemnon was bent on the destruction of Troy. It had little to do with Helen any more. Hector had known that for too many of these seven long years. He wondered how many other Greek commanders were camped on the beach and the plains, balancing the lives of their men against their leader's bloodlust, fighting out of fear of their king as much as genuine hatred of their enemy. It was no wonder Odysseus bargained so hard for a break in the fighting. He had to know that an army of men who cared not for the cause would never be able to overcome the defenses of Troy.

Given rest and time for Odysseus to convince them of the justness of their cause, through whatever trickery he could conceive, the Greek armies would be more difficult to resist. Hector greatly desired the return of Paris, but what would be the true price of this bargain?

"You must see that our arrangement is most valuable to us both," Odysseus insisted.

It was far too easy. "A ransom. You must require a ransom of me."

Odysseus laughed again and gestured toward the hut. "His battle wounds need attention, but I have done nothing to harm him."

"So we are agreed?"

Odysseus nodded. "You will stay behind your walls a while, and I will stay alive a little longer, but know this, Hector of Troy – when the time comes, there will be no more mercy from me, for you or your brother, or any who stand in my way." He turned to leave.

Hector went after him and caught him by the sleeve. "Why? Why do you return my brother to me so easily?"

Odysseus smirked. "We will meet again, and you will understand more. Until then, consider this: any other man would have asked 'Why do you return our Prince to Troy for so small a price?' You ask why I return your brother to you. Those are different questions, are they not?"

Hector watched the dark figure of Odysseus fade into what remained of the night. Paris lay within the hut, bound but captive no more.

A mute servant left Hector's chambers, bowed over almost double. The silence left in the room was broken only by Paris's short, shallow breaths and the creak of Hector's sandals on the stone floor as he paced. Curtains drawn tightly across the windows and doors kept the rising sun at bay.

Paris rolled to his back and stared at the ceiling. "I am sorry, brother. It would be better if I were dead."

Hector fell to his knees beside the bed. "No, Paris, do not say such things. You are returned to me. It is a blessing."

Paris turned his head to stare at the wall. He had not once looked Hector in the eye.

He had been injured in the duel with Menelaus, but not drastically so. The servant had tended his wounds and done a passable job of washing him, but Paris had refused any more attention. No one else yet knew of his return. Hector would not let any in the chamber, especially not Helen. He would not let that woman anywhere near his brother. She had caused enough trouble. Hector stroked the freshly washed hair, marveling at its softness.

"It is a blessing you are returned," Hector repeated.

"What did you give for me?"

"Nothing."

"Hector..."

"Nothing I did not give willingly. Do not trouble yourself with it. Rest and heal. There will be time for talk later." Hector was almost glad that Paris was turned away. He did not want to risk looking



directly at his face, fearing – knowing – Paris would avert his eyes once more.

For the first time since he was a boy, Hector had prayed, honestly, truly prayed. After the battlefield was searched and searched again, after night fell and the Trojan dead retrieved and Paris had not yet been found, Hector had gone to the temple of Aphrodite and knelt at the foot of her statue and prayed for his brother's return.

“Give me back my brother. Deliver my Paris to me, and I shall be your faithful servant.”

The words had been simple enough to say. It was meaning them that had hurt.

Hector laid his head on the bedding next to Paris's hair. “I'm sorry. I am so sorry.”

Paris had flinched at Hector's touch in the hut. He'd refused to let Hector examine him for injuries. He'd had no choice but to touch Hector as they rode back to the city, but he'd clasped his own wrists in front of Hector's chest, even though they were rubbed raw from the ropes. He'd insisted he was not badly hurt, but he'd groaned pitifully when he settled on the horse. Now Paris studied the marks on his wrists with a look of confusion.

“This was not what I intended,” Hector said.

Paris barked a harsh laugh. “What could you have possibly intended, Hector? I was alone in the midst of battle, wounded and alone. This is the best possible outcome. I hate to think of what you would prefer. For my death to be quick? Painless?”

“Never!” Hector protested. “I would never wish you dead.”

“You abandoned me!”

“I tried to find you. I waded through the hordes; I cut down men as a farmer cuts grain with a scythe. I prayed that Aphrodite had borne you to safety, but when the dust cleared and you were gone, I felt my

very heart torn from my breast. Will you not meet my gaze and see the truth written in my eyes?"

Paris did not look. He took a deep breath and Hector felt the shudder in his own chest.

Hector buried his face in the bedding at Paris's side. His heart would truly be ripped apart if Paris believed he had left him on the battlefield on purpose. That could not have been further from the truth.

"When I woke, all I could think was that you had abandoned me," Paris said, and for the first time his petulance did not grate on Hector.

"No," Hector groaned into the bedding. He would ache until Paris deigned to touch him again or at least look at him. "I would never... I have thought of nothing but you. I sent scouts, I searched the dead. I would have done almost anything."

"You would not betray Troy for me."

"No, but I promised to keep the men behind the walls."

"Because that is what Odysseus wants."

"And I as well. I gave it gladly. For you."

Hector was floating. He could not feel the hard stone under his knees, only the coolness of the sheet under his cheek, cool and even cold, knowing Paris was only inches away. Please, he thought. Just touch me.

He felt fingers on his cheek. Paris's fingers. They burned his skin, filled him with a dreadful warmth.

Paris was touching him.

"You do love me, then."

Hector raised his head to meet Paris's steady gaze. "Yes," he answered. Anything to keep those dark eyes upon him.

“Like a brother?”

Hector nodded. It was true. Not the whole truth but it was true.

“As something more than a brother?”

Hector nodded again. There was no point in lying.

Paris stared at him with a solemnity that reached inside Hector’s body and sent fiery tingles through his limbs. Hector needed to uncover Paris, to see every part of him and be sure he was whole and really in this room, on this bed, with his hand on Hector’s stubbled cheek and his eyes really that wide and earnest.

Paris had started at the touch of the servant. Hector had not meant to spy but Paris’s hiss could not be ignored. Hector had peered around the curtain to see Paris batting the servant’s hands away. Away from between his legs.

What had happened while Paris was held hostage?

“If they harmed you in any way...” Hector growled. He knew Paris would not tell him. He would view any violations as further cause for shame. Shame he should not feel – Hector should feel the shame. He should not have pushed Paris to fight. Paris was not meant for fighting.

Hector tore the sheet away and looked upon Paris’s naked body. The freshly washed skin gleamed. There were bruises on his ribs, on his shoulders, his hips. A white bandage at the top of his thigh contrasted with the dark, soft hair at his groin.

Paris tugged the sheet back. “Do not look at me!” he cried. He twisted away, tangling himself in the bedding.

“I must, Paris. I must see you are unharmed. Paris, do not fear me,” Hector rose onto the bed and put his arms around Paris. Paris surrendered immediately, sagging against Hector in defeat.

“I do not fear you,” he choked against Hector’s neck. “You... as always, you can have what you want of me.”

The familiar scent of Paris's hair, the comforting slide of it across his cheek, made it easier for Hector to breathe. He ran his hand over Paris's shoulder. "Shhh. You are safe now. I want nothing but your safety."

Paris clung to his shoulders. He pressed his lips to Hector's jaw, his whole slender body against Hector's thick muscles. Hector drew his brother closer still, avoiding injuries as he passed his hands over silky skin, beloved contours he'd taken for granted in the past but swore now to cherish forever. "You are still wanted," he reassured Paris. "You are always desired." He inched his fingers around the perfect swells of Paris's buttocks. When his fingers dipped between them, he found the flesh heated, swollen. There were still traces of oil.

Rage grew inside him. "You were violated."

Paris jerked away from him. "I... you were not there to protect me. I was left to my own devices." He stared at Hector in a way that looked as if it were trying to be bold.

Hector refused to acknowledge the defiance in those eyes, seeing only the concurrent shame. He directed his anger outwards. "Odysseus swore he did not harm you!"

"He did not."

"You deny it happened?"

"I deny nothing. Violation can only occur when there is a lack of will."

"You wished it?" Hector could not believe it.

"My choices were limited, but I was not forced. Like you, I gave nothing I did not wish to give."

The words finished the job of shredding Hector's heart, as he feared they'd been meant to do.

Hector was at fault. If he had shown his brother the proper respect, if he had not taken advantage of the love Paris felt for him,

Paris would never have wished for such a thing. If he'd known how Hector felt... but Hector had never told him.

"You've never shown me love before now," Paris said simply.

Hector choked. He hadn't. He had shown lust, not love. He wanted to show love now. He wanted to hold Paris and comfort him, to give him pleasure as he'd never felt before, to atone for the grave injustice he'd done him. "Paris, let me make amends."

Paris turned his face away. "Do not pity me."

"I don't pity. I do not want to pity you. I only want to love you."

With a sigh, Paris let Hector pull him close again. He turned in Hector's arms and pressed a heated cheek to Hector's face. Hector kissed the high cheek he'd admired many times, but never taken the time to explore with his lips. He kissed the curved lips that he'd never tasted properly.

Paris was a treasure. Hector's own tears trickled down as he slid his tongue inside Paris's sweet mouth and felt the indescribable pleasure of Paris's tongue curling around it. Tender and reverent, Hector's actions were meant to erase the past. He lowered Paris to the bed, stretched out beside him and spent countless minutes trailing his fingers and lips over golden skin.

He watched, fascinated, as Paris's member grew before his eyes, long and proud, the ruddy skin stretching and smoothing itself magically. He had never touched it, never tasted it, not in all this time. He had only ever used Paris for his own pleasure.

Paris moaned softly when Hector's mouth closed around him. Hector treasured the silken shaft between his lips, the firm flesh under his tongue, the glide of Paris's thigh along the top of his shoulder. Paris's moans increased in depth and volume. His slim hips writhed under Hector's hands. His taste turned bitter as his cries sharpened.

Hector slid up the bed and reached for the oil beside it. Paris drew back at the sight.

“Shh, no, Paris. I told you, do not fear me.” He would not take his brother now. Never again. He would only give. He slicked Paris’s shaft with the oil. Paris whimpered when the back of Hector’s hand caught the edge of the bandage.

“I’m sorry,” Hector whispered into his hair. He slid his wet hand between his own thighs. “Just hold me tightly, Paris. Hold me and feel the strength of my love for you.” He ached for release but ignored his own cock, refusing to succumb to its demands. Paris’s cock slipped between his thighs, hot and eager. Paris gasped and clawed at Hector’s back. Hector wormed his hand between them to slick himself. They slid together, with Hector’s cock pressing into Paris’s hard abdomen.

“Paris,” Hector moaned.

Paris pumped his hips, dragging his cock in the tight space between Hector’s hard thighs. He clamped his lips on Hector’s throat and sucked hard. Hector thrust against the firm ripple of Paris’s stomach muscles. He tightened his thighs yet more. They moved together until Paris opened his mouth in a startled gasp. Hot seed flowed between Hector’s legs. Hector hunched his hips and slipped across tense muscles. A quick hand took him up and pulled at his cock until his seed spilled out onto Paris’s soft skin.

Paris collapsed to the bed, but they did not stop touching until Paris finally fell asleep, head on Hector’s shoulder. Hector lay still, panting softly. He heard a faint rustle and opened his eyes wearily.

His wife stood beside the bed, sadness making her eyes heavy. “Do not even speak,” Andromache said as she bent to rub a warm, wet cloth across Paris’s belly.

Paris murmured in his sleep at her touch, but did not wake.

“You promised. You promised you would never...” She rinsed the cloth in a bowl by the bedside. She quickly wiped the seed from her husband’s thighs. “We had an agreement,” she concluded.

“I didn’t,” Hector whispered.

“Lies do not become you, my husband. Prince Hector is always honest and true.”

“I do not lie. I did not....” Hector stared at Paris, who slept still, exhausted by his ordeal, sated from his orgasm, overwhelmed by all he’d encountered. “I did not take him. It was... different.”

Andromache squeezed her eyes shut, as if to shut out the words.

Hector struggled to make her understand. “It was not a matter of... lust.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“YOU broke your word!”

Hector whirled to face the man who had been so cloaked in shadow he’d been all but invisible.

“I did no such thing.” It was not Hector’s usual voice. He was weak, exhausted, beaten. “I told you at our last meeting – I could only try.”

“You said you would keep your army behind your walls!” Odysseus burst into the open, face painted with rage. “You have dishonored yourself by breaking our agreement.”

It was clear from Hector’s reaction that few words could have hurt him more. His shoulders sagged under the weight of his anguish. Good, Odysseus thought. Let him suffer, if his reputation meant more to him than his word.

“I did all I could. I was overruled.”

“You expect me to believe that brave Hector, the heir and prince of Troy, holds no sway in his own war chamber?” Odysseus sneered. He would not allow himself to feel sorry for his enemy.

Hector slumped to a low stool, the only place to sit in the wretched little hut. “Odysseus, you are king of your own land; you cannot understand. I am but the general of an army. My father is ruler. I spoke at council. I petitioned for restraint. I even begged them to return Helen to her rightful husband. I was rebuffed. I had no choice but to lead the attack.”

“Against your will, and yet you did it so very well,” Odysseus observed wryly.

Hector did not reply.

“Your pride is such that you could not even mount an ineffective assault, to honor our agreement in spirit if not to the letter?”

Hector rolled his head back as if to cry out to the heavens. “I cannot change what I am, Odysseus. I do not mount unsuccessful assaults. I am Hector of Troy!”

“And Hector of Troy is the consummate warrior. He cannot be defeated by the enemy, nor by anyone wearing his enemy’s armor.”

Hector only groaned at that.

“Your regret does not correct your error,” Odysseus spat with intent to wound. “Patroclus is dead and Achilles does not forgive.”

“I swear to you! I believed I fought Achilles!”

The edge of remorse in his voice cut deep. Odysseus had to struggle to maintain his anger. He’d summoned Hector so he could lash out at him in person and had looked forward to a good fight. Seeing Hector like this was wearing down his resolve. He found himself almost pitying the man.

“I know it,” Odysseus said, resisting his own compassion. He lit a second lamp to better see his foe. “And Achilles knows it, too. But it only hardens the blow to know that Patroclus died in his stead.”



Curse Hector's eyes. They were even bigger than his brother's, even softer. The beauty of these sons of Troy was nearly painful to behold. Curse them all.

"Achilles is in agony, and when the sun rises on Patroclus's ashes, he will seek revenge," Odysseus said. "Then you will wish it had been Achilles you fought, even though if it had, it would be you on the pyre now."

Hector sat straighter, which was better. "Not even Achilles is invincible. Every fighter can be beaten by someone."

"Including you. You'll find that out soon enough," Odysseus forced himself to jeer. The attack on Hector's fighting skills had been deliberate. He could not bear the sight of this demoralized, subjugated man; he wanted the warrior back. The urge to defend his honor would restore some of Hector's strength. Odysseus would goad Hector into his usual temperament if it took all the night. It was an old trick, but it rarely failed.

Fortunately, Hector's pride was indomitable. Odysseus thrilled to the sight of Hector squaring his shoulders and clenching his fists in anticipation of the fight to come. "I will be prepared," Hector vowed, but his voice betrayed something else. Regret. Decency. Shame.

"I do not doubt it." Odysseus pulled a wineskin from beneath his cloak, "In the meantime, you look as if you need this more than I." He had not been intending to share the wine. He'd not expected to feel anything other than anger. Sometimes, one must adapt one's plans to the situation.

Hector took the offered skin and drank deeply. "Patroclus should not have died like that, not by my sword." He sighed. "If it were not for me, this war would never have started."

Odysseus sat on a barrel next to him and took his turn with the wine. "Don't speak nonsense, prince. You are upset. I am upset. There is no need to blame yourself for the folly of others."

“I should have known my brother would bring Helen to Troy. I should have... I take the blame for my inability to restrain my kin.” Hector looked out into the gloom of the night. The hut was barely large enough to contain the two of them, but Hector seemed to find it a refuge.

“You are not responsible for the actions of your brother,” Odysseus said, but he knew it for a lie the instant the words left his lips. Hector alone could have stopped Paris from his rash actions, if he had wished to. He’d chosen not to.

So that explained Paris’s eagerness to give himself up to Achilles.

Odysseus had questioned Achilles. Harangued him. Why had he violated the young prince when so much was at stake?

“Violate?” Achilles has responded. “The man offered himself to me, Odysseus. The only thing missing was a silver platter for him to lounge upon. I merely took advantage of an opportunity.”

An opportunity for Paris to find affirmation from someone other than his brother, who must have rejected him before he’d ever stolen Helen from Sparta. Hector had likely pushed Paris to take to the field, knowing he stood no chance of success – another rejection.

And Odysseus has assumed that Paris had simply been trying to fuck his way out of captivity.

He’d not been surprised to find the two of them together upon his return to his tent. Leave a captive, especially one that pretty, alone with Achilles and it was inevitable that the captive would end up with Achilles’s cock inside of one orifice or another. The Myrmidon was insatiable. After having his way with Paris, he’d probably gone to Patroclus, and would have been more than happy to take on Odysseus too, if Odysseus hadn’t been unavailable for such frivolities. He’d been too busy returning Paris to Troy that night. Someone had to act responsibly.

Judging by the look of bliss on his face and the smears of his own seed on his skirt and thighs, the young prince had taken part of his own will, despite his bonds. When Odysseus arrived, Paris had been maneuvering himself out from under the still heaving Achilles, who seemed to have lost his sense momentarily.

Odysseus could not blame Achilles for being overwhelmed. To be inside that exquisite body would render almost any man insensible.

Hector took the wineskin again. Odysseus should have brought a keg. Hector was massive. Bigger than Achilles. He did not have the immensity of Ajax - which was almost unnatural, although still unable to decisively defeat Hector – but Hector was possessed of a truly impressive size, the result of a lifetime of battle and training for battle, of working as hard as his men and living almost as hard as them.

Not quite as hard. Hector enjoyed a wife and apartments in the city which must be as finely appointed as any prince's, and Odysseus knew from rumor and now his own observations that Hector must also enjoy the favors of Paris. He doubted the average warrior of Troy had ever sampled that particular delight.

Although one never knew. Paris had not seemed out of his element beneath Achilles. Achilles had certainly enjoyed himself.

But now Achilles did not have Paris. Or Patroclus. That would cause no end of trouble for Odysseus. "I will be blamed," Odysseus said. "I will be blamed for not recognizing Patroclus. It was reckless of him and unwise, and I should have realized he was not Achilles from the moment I laid eyes on him."

Hector let out a short, harsh laugh. "How could you? He wore Achilles's armor and helmet. The two have trained together for years. I myself did not know I fought Patroclus until it was too late. How could you have known?"

"I should have known Achilles would never have swallowed his pride to fight for Agamemnon."

“That is the problem with your side in this war. Too many kings,” Hector said.

Odysseus was surprised. “What would you know of that?”

Hector gave him a sad smile. “My brother looks like a pretty plaything but he is not entirely without wits. He told me what happened in your tent.”

Everything? That would explain why Hector had been so determined to kill Achilles.

“He also insists you did not lay a hand on him,” Hector added.

“That is true,” Odysseus confirmed. Other than to bind Paris securely, Odysseus had not let his fingers stray one bit. “I told you that when I returned him to you.”

“I want to believe you, but I saw his state.”

Damn that Achilles and his insatiable cock!

Odysseus had to save face. “You accuse me of lying?”  
Odysseus rose suddenly, overturning the stool. Hector tried to stand as well, but Odysseus pushed him down. “You have no rights here, prince of Troy, and you are not forgiven. You brought your men out of the city, attacked my camp, slaughtered the beloved of my ally, all after promising to —”

“I do not deny my failure,” Hector entreated. “I tried to keep our bargain but I am sworn to the defense of my city and obedience to my king. It was my choice, so I will accept the consequences. That is why I came here: to beg your forgiveness and offer obeisance.” Hector slid from the stool and knelt on the packed earth, head bowed. “Name your price, Odysseus. I will gladly pay it to restore my honor.”

Odysseus frowned. This was not the Hector he knew, the Hector of lore. That Hector would never admit to a mistake and offer himself as a sacrifice, put himself in a position of subservience. Not even Odysseus could have anticipated this. He had planned to demand some assurance about future battles or perhaps secure payment of some kind,

in weaponry or supplies. His men were beginning to run low on foodstuffs. But this?

This was Hector's suggestion, not his. Hector was placing himself at Odysseus's disposal, just as Achilles claimed that Paris had presented himself.

What was this need of the princes of Troy to offer themselves to their enemies?

Odysseus did not take time to analyze the question. The sight of Hector kneeling, such power, such glory, kneeling before him, was dizzying. Odysseus was well-known, well-respected and even well-liked. He did not hold court and demand tributes in the manner of Agamemnon, but men *did* bow before Odysseus. None had ever come close to giving him the thrill of having Hector at his feet. Heat rushed to his loins.

"You will pay for your offence," Odysseus said, trying to convince himself of the aptness of his sudden desire. He wondered how long Hector would be able to keep up this façade of humility and obedience. Surely he would rise up to crush Odysseus at the first available opportunity, as soon as Odysseus did something to spark his pride. It had to be a trick, the sort of trick Odysseus might play.

"I submit to you," Hector whispered. "I give you my word I will not resist."

Odysseus placed both hands on Hector's head, more to steady himself than to subdue Hector. Hector swayed forward at the touch. Odysseus felt another rush of heat, the pulse of his cock beneath his robe. He pushed the linen aside and Hector leaned the rest of the way forward, taking Odysseus's cock into his mouth without hesitation. Odysseus stifled a groan and gripped Hector's hair.

Hector was not skilled. Whatever experience he'd had on the receiving end of this act gave him a rough idea of what to do, but he moved his mouth in a particular way, probably the way he liked a mouth to move on his own cock. He did not take it deep into his mouth.

He gagged when Odysseus pushed forward, breathing noisily through flaring nostrils.

Odysseus had never been so aroused by incompetence before in his life.

He gave Hector a few seconds to compose himself and begin again. Hector pressed his tongue up against Odysseus's cock and worked his lips down the thick shaft. Odysseus could not fault Hector for having difficulty fitting it all in his mouth. Rarely could anyone fit it all in. Odysseus was used to others choking and gagging on his account. But he could not settle for anything less than complete satisfaction from Hector. It was a matter of honor. Hector did not deserve to fail again.

Odysseus looked around the dim hut. It was the home of the lowly goatherd, the same he'd used to deliver Paris. It was tiny. Odysseus had larger quarters on his galley. The rickety cot in the corner would be of no use. It had barely fit Paris. The only seats were the stool and the barrel. There was no luxury here. But there was a small jug in the corner by the fire. It had to contain cooking oil sufficient for his purposes.

He pushed Hector's mouth away.

Hector looked up stunned, his mouth open and lips swollen from his efforts.

Odysseus refused to look at those lips. One does not go about kissing one's enemies. He pushed Hector's shoulder and told him to go on his hands and knees.

This was it. Hector's face darkened, and Odysseus was sure for one exhilarating moment he would be tossed against the wall, squashed like an ant, but Hector was a man of his word. He obeyed.

If Odysseus were to be more honorable, he would have examined the situation further and concluded that Hector had argued against the resumption of hostilities and lost, that he'd had no choice but to lead his men into battle against the Greeks, and that Odysseus

was not, in fact, owed anything. Odysseus would have been honest, but Hector was in front of him, offering himself, an irresistible enticement.

No more preliminaries. Hector would not appreciate gentleness at this time, and he could take anything Odysseus could give, and gladly, for he'd come seeking punishment. Punishment and absolution. Odysseus pushed up Hector's skirt and guided his cock, resisting the urge to stroke heavily muscled flanks, straining thighs and the dark, inviting cleft. He poured some oil on himself and rubbed the thick head of his cock up and down until it came to rest, of its own will, at the right place. He pressed inside.

Hector grunted but did not cry out. Odysseus used all his willpower to do the same. He did not stop pushing until he was fully seated, for if he slowed, he knew he would want to touch and play and he did not want to insult Hector. He did place his hands on Hector's hips. For balance, he told himself. He gripped the solid muscle as hard as he could, pulled out, heard Hector's harsh breath, pushed back in, heard Hector not breathe. Faster. Harder. He yanked Hector's hips back, thrust deep inside, where he was resisted and welcomed at the same time. With every lunge, every withdrawal, every re-entry, the power beneath him, accepting him, was awe-inspiring.

Then Hector spread his legs for more.

Odysseus was blinded by the sudden change of angle. Then he pulled his hips away and slammed back in.

Hector moaned, softly at first.

Odysseus's worries about protocol vanished. If Hector could ignore the rules, so could he. He slid his hand around Hector's hip and encountered a stiff, quivering shaft. Odysseus draped himself over Hector's broad back. Slabs of muscle heaved under him. He tightened his grip and Hector's hips began to shimmy like a slave girl's, dancing for her master. He was fucking himself on Odysseus's cock and into his hand at the same time. Odysseus rode the bucking warrior prince until he could bear it no more. He grunted far too loudly for decorum and felt the anger drain out of him along with his seed.

“By the gods...” Odysseus groaned. He did not finish the statement. He could think of nothing to say. He reluctantly pulled out of Hector’s heat, his member spent but not willing to admit it was over.

Hector responded with a groan of his own, and then went down on one shoulder so he could grab his own cock and spend onto the dirt. He sat back on his heels, panting. He did not look up at Odysseus. “I am sorry to have offended you,” he said, not quite as subserviently as before. “I thought... I’d assumed it was you. But I know you are a man of your word. I believe you did not use my brother.”

Odysseus steadied himself against the wall of the hut. “Just what do you think happened to Paris?”

Hector shrugged, a massive shift of muscle. Odysseus could scarce believe it had been under his control. “He was...” Hector paused. “He was violated, but he claims it was by his own choice.”

That was true, to a point. Odysseus doubted anyone could resist Achilles for long. “And you honestly believed I would do such a thing?”

Hector looked up sharply. “Who else?” he asked.

Hector really did not know.

Should Odysseus tell him? Would it make any difference? Would it increase his chance of survival? Would it make Hector fight harder? Did Odysseus *want* Hector to fight harder?

“You face him tomorrow. Ask him yourself.”

**ANGER.** Anger threatened to consume Achilles’s being. So heavy it would crush him. So ravenous it would devour him. So hot it would incinerate him.

He enjoyed it. He’d always enjoyed anger. But this went beyond the usual. This fury was venomous. Corrosive. He’d welcomed it at first, not banishing it as long as he had the chance for revenge. He



needed the anger to draw on, to harness, to use and then be free of, for all time.

Achilles had never been so sure of himself. He'd never felt the rage so strongly, all his ire, all his frustrations, all that was wrong with the world would be made right once Hector, foul murderer of his beloved Patroclus, was dead. Dead by the hand of Achilles.

And so Hector was.

But Achilles was not sated.

It was unjust to the extreme. It was inconceivable that Hector's demise granted him no succor. The gods must be punishing him.

He'd tried to exhaust the anger in the course of desecrating Hector's body. He'd dragged the corpse until his horse flagged, spat on Hector, cut him, abused the shell of the accursed prince. No relief. He'd then tried to purge the poison with strong drink and debauchery, but all that did was give him a headache on top of his fury. Achilles turned to the only thing left. *War*. He trained his men ruthlessly, and then he trained the slaves of the Greek camp. He drilled them under the hot sun, showed them no mercy.

And still he drowned, lost in the depths, Achilles no more. He was some wanton, rabid beast, out of control and full of senseless bile.

Now he found himself under the intense gaze of Odysseus.

Odysseus. Surely he was to blame, Achilles thought. Odysseus with his scheming and plotting. Odysseus, who turned everything to his advantage. Odysseus always managed to make everything that turned out badly to look like the other man's fault. Modest, Odysseus might call himself. Duplicitous, Achilles thought him.

"You train the men hard," Odysseus said, in that benign kingly manner of his. "You inspire the lowliest cook to fight worthily for Greece."

Achilles laughed harshly. That had been meant to diminish his anger. It was insulting that Odysseus thought he would fall for such a transparent appeal to his pride.

“You think to trick me into forgetting this was your fault from the start?”

“I hardly think I am responsible for putting you in a rage. You are perfectly capable of doing that on your own.”

Achilles looked into Odysseus’s eyes. They were not the same eyes that had admonished him for taking advantage of his Trojan prize. They were darker, sadder, older, greener. And, Achilles was sure he was falling prey to trickery in this, they seemed very much more honest.

Hector was dust; Achilles still raged. It was something inside Achilles gone awry. Odysseus was not to blame.

“Let us take a walk, old friend.” Odysseus held out his hand to Achilles.

Achilles refused the hand, but set off down the beach at a brisk pace.

Odysseus shouted a few orders to his men, and then jogged until he caught up with Achilles. “No peace yet?” he asked when he drew alongside.

Achilles looked straight ahead, where the golden sands met the green sea. “Peace? What peace can there be as long as Troy stands? I would see it burnt to the ground.”

“That won’t help,” Odysseus replied smoothly.

Achilles increased his speed. “You think I lie?”

“I think you say it to hide the truth.”

Clever Odysseus. There were no secrets as long as that man breathed and walked and thought.

“Really? And what would I, or could I, ever hide from you?”

“You have no quarrel left with Troy. You are in this for the glory and the spoils, not the cause. And the spoils you desire are not riches. No gold or jewel will quench your thirst; only the girl Agamemnon took from you or the pretty prince. I cannot decide which.”

Neither could Achilles. That was part of his problem.

“Will you betray your fellow Greeks?” Odysseus asked.

A blunt question. Achilles would have killed him for asking it, if he’d been anyone other than the king of Ithaca. Instead, he answered truthfully. “I feel no loyalty to Agamemnon, but I will not betray him, my countrymen or you.”

“What, then? Steal the girl from Agamemnon in the night? Collect your Trojan prince on the sly?”

Odysseus knew him too well.

Achilles had thought about both. The girl would be easier. She would come to him willingly, and if he promised to leave war behind, she would even love him. But Achilles knew he could never leave war behind. It was what he was born for.

*Paris.* Paris would be more difficult. He would never forgive Achilles for slaying his beloved Hector, and even if Achilles took him by force, what would he do with him? Paris would be recognized in an instant. Achilles would have to cut off his hair and maim him in some way to hide him, which would defeat the purpose, or at least part of the purpose, of taking him. Even if he could render him unrecognizable, how would he explain the presence of a Trojan male? The girl would not be questioned.

*But Paris.* Achilles longed for Paris. The smell of sandalwood and sharp hot sex, the dance of sinew and muscle under silken skin, the waves of soft hair, the curve of his spine and the hard solid evidence of

his desire. The willing submission. Achilles hated to admit it, but he wanted Paris again. And again. And again.

“That good?” Odysseus asked with a smirk.

Achilles realized he was standing in the sand, staring at the dunes beyond which he knew lay Ilium and Paris.

“Paris?” Odysseus prompted him.

Achilles scowled. “What do you want of me? You want me to admit weakness?”

Odysseus smiled, and it was a kind smile. A smile of understanding and empathy. Just the sort of smile to bring Achilles’s rage back to the surface.

“I don’t know why I don’t cut off your head right now,” Achilles growled.

Odysseus’s smile widened, revealing neat white teeth and deepening the creases at the corners of his eyes. “Because you left your weapons in the camp. Sit here, by the sea.” He pulled a wineskin from his robe.

“Always have wine, don’t you?”

Odysseus rubbed his hand across his beard. Could it be he felt bashful? Never! “Only on special occasions,” Odysseus said. He shrugged off his outer robe and lowered himself to the warm ground.

Achilles sat next to him on a wide, smooth rock, and stared out at the flashes of sunlight on the still sea. “Patroclus would bathe in the sea after every kill, trying to wash the stains from his flesh,” he reminisced.

“Do you miss him?”

Achilles remembered Patroclus’s power and ferocity tempered by his good nature and the generosity that shone in his eyes, dark as night. What he felt was beyond missing. A man did not ‘miss’ his right arm after it was cut off. “He is gone. The Trojan prince is not.”

Odysseus winced. “Now I am sorry I returned Paris to the city. Had I kept him hostage, Hector might have been convinced to stay behind his walls.”

“If you had kept Paris, Hector would have come looking for him personally, and the outcome would have been the same.”

Odysseus agreed.

“But Patroclus might still be alive.” And, Achilles did not add aloud, Agamemnon would have given back Briseis as a reward for killing Hector, and then Achilles would have had Patroclus, and Paris as well. That might have been enough to convince him to leave war behind.

But Patroclus would not have approved. He had been upset about Paris. When Achilles had returned to their tent, satiated and smelling of pampered Trojan royalty, Patroclus had lashed out, accusing him of treachery. Achilles did not understand how Patroclus knew whom he’d bedded; it was an instinct, a magical power, gift or curse. Perhaps Patroclus had not been meant to be a warrior at all, but an oracle. Patroclus had left him alone in his quarters, telling him to wallow in the “reek of that peacock”, and as he’d left, he’d turned to whisper, “Pray I don’t go to Agamemnon with tales of your spoils of war.”

But Achilles knew Patroclus would never betray him. Patroclus did not appreciate Achilles’s appetites, but he was not so threatened by them that he would bring Achilles to any harm.

And there he sat, yearning for Paris. How could he even think of such a thing when his grief for Patroclus was still so fresh? How dare he desire Paris, the root cause of Patroclus’s death?

“I miss them all,” Achilles said honestly.

Odysseus drank.

“Do you miss him?” Achilles asked suddenly.

“Miss?” Odysseus repeated, fumbling with the stopper. “Miss whom?”

“Your precious Hector.”

That made Odysseus sit up and listen. Good. It was pleasant to be the one to wield the power of secret knowledge for a change. “You have a rare scent, Odysseus, unlike that of other men. You smell like your home.” Achilles had scented it on Odysseus’s wife often, always when Penelope looked most pleased. “I could smell you on him as I took his life.”

Obviously Hector had not had the time, or the inclination, to wash the scent away. Had he kept it to taunt Paris? Was he angry with Paris for offering himself to Achilles? Did he even know what Paris had done?

Achilles would never know for sure. He hadn’t taunted Hector with what had happened in Odysseus’s tent; it might have flustered Hector and given Achilles an edge, but Achilles already had an edge and thoughts of Paris would have fueled their lust, not their rage.

How would they have looked together? How would Hector have taken Paris? Would Paris have taken Hector?

Odysseus had. Achilles could read that in Odysseus’s eyes, and the way he shifted his hips at the memory, the clenching of his fists. The scent on Hector had smelled like submission.

It was all too easy to read the great Odysseus. Achilles feared for a moment that they’d somehow switched places, gained each other’s gifts and curses, for here was Achilles with knowledge of Odysseus’s transgressions, and Odysseus was the one who had taken what he wanted without thought for tomorrow.

“Recompense for his attack on our forces?” Achilles asked. It felt wonderful to be the interrogator for a change.

“Something of that sort,” Odysseus admitted. “But...”

“You don’t miss him, do you?” Ah, to anticipate another’s answers, it was its own kind of delight.

“No. I did not have him long enough to miss him.” Wistful.

“You likely had him as long as I had Paris.”

“True, but it was no more than a business transaction.” Rueful.

“That was a cruel thing to do to a man who knew he was going to die in the morning.” Achilles would not have thought Odysseus capable of it.

Achilles had known of Odysseus’s first meeting with Hector to negotiate the return of Paris to his loving family. He had not been aware of their second meeting until he got close enough to Hector to smell it on him. “Pig,” he’d called Hector. He’d expected Hector to smell of Paris and had worried it would break his concentration. Instead, the smell of Odysseus had shocked him and fed the fires of his rage.

Hector had been confused for a moment, and rightfully so. There had not been anything piggish about him, except for his unique bond with his younger half-brother, for which Achilles could not fault him. If Achilles had been blessed with a brother such as Paris, he would have done no different.

Achilles banished thoughts of Hector from his mind. He’d thought too much already. It was time for action. Odysseus must have sought him out for some reason. “What are we to do?” he asked.

Odysseus sat straighter. “We are to finish this thing. Penetrate the city, burn it to the ground and end this war for good. Then I will be allowed to go home.”

“I was thinking of the more immediate,” Achilles said. He reached for Odysseus’s thigh. “You thought you would lessen my grief, but it appears you grieve as well. Let us help one another.” Patroclus would understand.

Odysseus sighed. “Do you honestly regard yourself so highly, you think I brought you here to seduce you?”

“We are alone... the talk is of longing for lost lovers... you brought wine...” Achilles slid his hand up the thigh and felt muscles tense. “If you do not intend to seduce me, then I shall have to seduce you.”

Odysseus tensed from head to foot, as if to fight. “I will not succumb.”

Of course not. Odysseus would never yield to anyone, would he? Nor would Achilles. “I ask no such thing of you. We’ve both had enough of power.”

Odysseus studied Achilles. “How is it that the princes of Troy have wielded so much power over us, left us both bereft, after they both acquiesced? It is not right.”

“Enough of them!” Achilles did not want any reminders of the brothers. He had fucked one of them and killed the other, and neither act had satisfied him for long. “Let us think only of ourselves,” he said.

The rock was blessedly smooth. Its warm contours fit the curves of Achilles’s knees perfectly when he placed a leg on either side of Odysseus’s thighs. Then both pairs of thighs molded together, back to front. Odysseus, like Achilles, wore no armor but panels of thick, oil-treated leather still hung from his belt. One of the straps pushed between Achilles’s legs, against his heavy balls. Achilles had not realized how much he needed release until that moment. He swiveled his hips.

Odysseus’s arms flew up, hands spread over Achilles’s wide shoulders. He let his forehead rest against Achilles shoulder and tilted his hips upward. Odysseus was not one to waste his time on entertainments while at war – he was far too occupied with his machinations to bed the soldiers – but even a philosopher needs relief.

Achilles could not feel Odysseus’s cock, but it must have been pressed against the very same leather panel, or so the hiss from



Odysseus suggested. Achilles arched his back and forced his cock down, and the two began to rock together, separated by only the leather and the thin linen of their robes. Achilles shifted his hands over the expanse of Odysseus's back, testing the solid muscles that strained to stay under control, and was able to feel the pounding of Odysseus's heart as it tried to escape its confines.

Achilles groaned. This would not be enough.

He leaned back and scrabbled at the knot at Odysseus's waist. Odysseus pushed his hands away and deftly untied the girdle. With the leather out of the way, Achilles could make out an admirably trim stomach and lean hips under the linen tunic, and the thick cock between Odysseus's legs. Achilles was not sure how much older Odysseus was, but he hoped he would be as fit when he reached that age. *If* he reached that age. He lost all thought of time when Odysseus's hands slid under his robe, callused hands scraping over hard thighs, fingers creeping toward Achilles's hard cock.

"You are in need of attention," Odysseus observed. There was a thinness to his voice, a strained neediness.

"As are you." Achilles took firm hold of Odysseus and gasped when Odysseus's hand wrapped around his shaft. Their sword-calluses scraped each other's tender skin deliciously. Odysseus was thicker than he'd expected. Longer, too. Achilles was glad they'd decided against any power imbalance. It would have been a bit too much to take.

He squeezed his thighs against Odysseus's legs and savored the answering moan. Odysseus had his head back, and Achilles could not resist rubbing his cheek against the wiry beard. No kissing. That wouldn't be right. But this catlike affection, tactile and spontaneous, was not amiss. Achilles rocked his hips so their fists collided, the heads of their cocks slipped across each other, their balls mashed together. The body under him twisted and heaved, thrusting for more friction. Achilles hastened his hand's movements, and ducked his head down to nip at the corded tendons of Odysseus's neck.

He'd never had Odysseus before. He would likely never have him again. But he knew he would remember this for the rest of this life. Slickness spread over the smooth cock head, the cock he tried to forget had been inside Hector. Hector had caused Achilles enough pain already. He would not let the dead prince spoil this.

Odysseus grunted and cursed as his seed spurted up over Achilles's hand. Achilles followed his lead, orgasm drawn out by Odysseus's skilful manipulations. Caught in the air, between the sky and the sea, Achilles closed his eyes and felt the power of the sun god course through him.

But it was only the afternoon sun beating down on his face, and the waves of pleasure washing from his center to his extremities.

In the end, nothing had changed. His anger was still present. Patroclus was still gone. Paris was not his. And he was still Achilles.

He was still Achilles.

He had Odysseus to thank for that. But Odysseus would not have accepted the credit. He would modestly claim that Achilles had never been lost.

MAGNIFICENT in his anger, glorious in his masculinity, spectacular in his nakedness. It mattered not how Achilles had tried to main him – cut out his tongue, gouge his eyes, sever his ears, burn him with the heat of the sun – Hector had crossed the River Styx and was now flawless.

He strode the bank of the river without rest, day and night, night and day, if there were such a thing as day and night and night and day in this place. He stalked back and forth, muscles coiled by his barely contained fury, unchallenged and therefore unbeaten. Even Cerberus did not hinder his passage.

Each time Hector passed the fierce three-headed hound at his post, Cerberus growled at this ingrate, this human who thought himself so grand he need not traverse the gates until he deemed himself

prepared to do so, but the winged demon of the boat assured him that Hector would never dare to cross back over: he had too much respect for the way of things. "It is only a matter of time," Kharon explained with a casual swing of his hammer.

Cerberus glowered at the volcanic rock that crumbled under Kharon's hammer. Crossing the river was not what irked him. Hector was flaunting convention, and that made Cerberus look weak. Unacceptable! How long would he have to endure these flagrant violations? "I cannot tolerate this disruption!" the dog scowled with all three heads, throwing yet more terror into the eyes of the already terrorized deceased who waited to enter Hades.

"Patience, my friend," Kharon said with a smile far more dreadful than the dog's triple scowls. He shouldered his hammer and surveyed the latest crop of the dead.

There had been a time when he'd ferried the lifeless one at a time, two at most. Now he had to leave them teeming on the far bank, so crowded was his boat. Some wandered, despite having paid the fee for passage. Some fell in with those who had been buried or burned without the means to cross. The coins of the unferried weighed heavily in Kharon's purse and would do so until the confused, drifting dead made their way back to his jetty. The world above was growing, and mortality along with it. If this continued, he would have to hire help. At the very least, he should get a bigger boat.

Hector had learned all this and more as he listened to the mutters of the boatman and the guardian, to their arguments and complaints and invectives. And he kept moving, always moving. To stop would be to surrender.

When Hector drew near, the assembled dead trembled as much, if not more, as they had when they'd first laid eyes on Kharon. Many of these were soldiers, mighty warriors, even princes in their lives, and all were determined to face the boatman, the guardian and Hades itself with honor and valor, yet they cowered before a mere human. Lifeless beings unable to grasp that the fires within would burn far more than Hector's glare, they were happy when they were ushered through the

gates. All they understood was that there was a hunter among them, and they did not wish to come between him and his prey.

That suited Hector. He had no desire to treat with them. He waited for one and one alone.

Cerberus lashed the air with his scaled tail. “What kind of human is this who disobeys the customs so?” the middle head of the dog asked.

Kharon sighed. Cerberus was fearsome, but the splitting of his brain between three heads had dulled his wits. They had been through this before. “One not ready to pass through the gates until he attains peace,” he said.

“No dead have peace,” the right head contradicted him.

“Fine, then one with an unpaid debt,” Kharon sighed. The right head never recognized the peace argument.

“He awaits his enemy?” The left head always assumed enemy.

“You are obsessed with enemies,” Kharon muttered. “Do you not think he may wait for a warrior worthy of his company? Maybe he does not wish to enter alone.”

Hector tilted his head back and shouted a single word.

“Achilles!” he bellowed into the hot, dry air, his first word since his arrival.

“My mistake,” Kharon apologized to Cerberus. “Not just anyone after all. You were right – his enemy.”

“Achilles!” Hector roared, summoning his enemy, daring Achilles to cross over and face him. “Show yourself!”

The right head snorted and jerked toward the gate. “He would be wiser to leave unsettled scores behind and fear what lies beyond.”

“What do we care whom he awaits? I only care that he not encourage this sort of rebellion in others,” the left head said officiously.

“With any luck, this Achilles will receive a proper burial,” the middle mused, “If he falls untended, he will be fated to wander the far bank for a hundred years.”

“Fear not,” Kharon whispered. “I will bring Achilles to Hector, coins or no coins. Ordinarily, time would mean nothing to me, but the prospect of *that* for a hundred years... most unnerving, even for the likes of us.”

Hector whirled and snarled at the demons. “Enough! You talk as if I cannot hear.” He gestured at his restored ears. “I am whole once more.”

Kharon curled his lips upward and showed his teeth, a demon’s version of a smile. “Indeed, Prince Hector, I can see that you are more than whole.”

“Most pleasing to behold,” Cerberus’s middle head rumbled. “But your attitude, dear prince, is less than attractive.”

“A little more respect,” the left added, “and a little less hubris.”

The third head took a moment to study Hector from top to bottom. His beady eyes flicked back up to the impressive staff jutting out from Hector’s groin. “This Achilles did not try to take *that* from you, did he?”

Hector made a noise not unlike the dog’s growl.

He had grown up hearing horror stories of the fierce three-headed dog Cerberus, the winged demon Kharon, and all the tortures of Hades, stories told to encourage headstrong young boys to behave and be brave at all costs. He had never really believed them any more than he’d believed the tales of friendlier gods. He had thought, at first, that Paris’s return was proof of Aphrodite’s existence, since he’d prayed to her for his brother’s safety, but it was clear that Odysseus had been free from the influence when he’d made his decision. No gods, only a clever man playing the odds.

Hector had been disappointed, from his youth to his death, by the non-appearance of Aphrodite, of Ares, of Apollo. Priam's entreaties to the sun god had never been answered. It had always fallen to Hector to protect Troy, but Apollo had not protected Troy's protector. Hector had seen little to convince him the gods existed in any realm beyond the minds of believers – it had never occurred to him that they had not appeared to him because he had not been in need of them. Not until it was too late.

Hector's first sight of the boatman had confirmed that the stories were true; nothing that hideous could be imagined. And the three-headed Cerberus was real enough. Hector could smell the hound's fetid breath each time he passed.

Despite his lifelong disbelief, Hector had been seized by an irrational urge to hedge his bets and had bargained for the funeral rites required to ensure his safe journey. Achilles, of course, had denied him those rites. But they must have been granted, for here he was, whole again after being maimed after death. He could still feel the pains Achilles had inflicted on his corpse, excruciating phantoms of the now-healed wounds. He may have been restored by the purifying tears that had fallen freely as Paris washed his body and prepared him for cremation. Hector could feel the sting of those as well. Or perhaps the gods really did love him, as the people had always said they did, with a love that would not allow the desecration of his corpse. His body restored, he now sought the restoration of his honor.

Hector faced the smooth waters of the river. Deceptive, he knew them to be, as placid and unfurrowed as Paris's brow while he'd slept in Hector's arms. But if Hector touched his toe to the surface, his flesh would be singed. If even a god drank of the river, he would be incapacitated by the illness it brought. The river's power was undeniable; it was no wonder the gods swore their oaths upon it.

Its stillness made its impassibility all that much more infuriating. He would have expected it to be roiling with foulness or even flames, as did the River Phlegethon, as one would expect of a river of hate. Not as calm underneath as it looked on the face of it,

currents whirled below the surface, oil spilled in a creek, swirling in a never-ending dance of red bleeding into purples seeping into browns chroming into blacks and blues, rank eddies, the effluence of human depravity, everything negative merging into one eternal, interminable river of sorrow.

Or was that Acheron? No, this was hate, and it filled Hector's soul as it filled his cock, welling to painful, unprecedented proportions. Hector felt the eyes of the demon on his naked flesh. He tried to ignore them. He had nothing of which to be ashamed.

He looked down.

Perhaps, in life, he might have been ashamed, for his cock stood out angrily from his body, huge and unrepentant. Such a thing should have been repulsive to him; he had never associated carnality with battle or aggression. He had considered it disgraceful to be motivated by hatred. But now, here, under the influence of this accursed river, waiting for his enemy to come, hate made him indomitable. It gave him strength. It gave him... power.

He hated Achilles.

Hector had gone out to face Achilles with dignity, but Achilles had not challenged him to honorable combat. He'd been out for more, for blood from Hector to ease his own suffering. The loss of Patroclus he blamed on Hector. Rightfully so – they had settled that score. But Achilles also blamed Hector for his loss of Paris and that was wrong. Paris had never been Achilles's. He was Hector's. He had *always* been Hector's.

Was it not the basic instinct of a man to defend what was rightfully his? That was why there were gods and temples and rules, so that men would be forced to behave, to curb the inherent greed and insatiability that would lead to endless, senseless, devastating wars, because man wanted everything to be his.

Gods and temples and rules, it turned out, were not enough.

But this hatred was not his way. Was he not Hector, noble and brave and true? It was the vileness of this place, this foul miasma that stirred him to this brutality, he tried to tell himself. He'd had to adapt to his surroundings to survive. But what did honor matter any more? Or duty? Had they ever mattered?

No. All that mattered was revenge. Achilles was on the other side. Hector needed Achilles on this side if he were to avenge himself, his brother, and all of Troy.

There were no weapons here, no armor, no shields. Just men. Perhaps without his armor, with only his bare skin and hands, Achilles would not be so formidable. Now Hector would be able to use his size to his advantage, his size and this uncontrollable rage.

Hector had returned to the city in the middle of the night before his death in a state of confusion and denial, trying to understand how Paris could have offered himself willingly to Achilles. Achilles, of all men! For Hector to learn this after offering himself so sordidly to Odysseus was doubly confounding.

Hector had tried to excuse his own submission as a matter of honor, to convince himself he had not actually taken pleasure from it. But he *had* taken pleasure. Great pleasure. Aching pleasure. Was that the same pleasure Paris had taken from Achilles? And from Hector?

He'd gone directly to Paris's rooms, without changing, without bathing. The scent of Odysseus and sex was strong on his body, and he could feel his own openness, the moisture seeping from him. He'd ignored it. He'd found Paris, sleepless and distraught, and had drawn him into his arms, held him close, hushed him, consoled him, and consoled himself.

Hector had done everything wrong. None of his training, his years of self-imposed hardship and self-sacrifice could have prepared him for these trials. He had chosen wrongly at every turn.

"I should not have used you so, my brother. Now we will all pay for my selfishness," Hector had said.



No, it was Paris's fault, Paris had protested. Of course, he would say that. He loved Hector. Loved him to a fault. Did he not?

"I cared too much for you," Paris said.

Did that mean he cared no longer?

When Hector said the name of Achilles, Paris had leapt away from him. "Do not think of me when you face him. Do not fight him because of me. He did nothing to harm me."

No, he had not. Achilles had probably given Paris more pleasure than Hector had ever given and had probably done it with more respect.

"Not so noble after all," Hector muttered to himself as he swayed by the water, regretting every time he'd treated Paris with the slightest disdain. He had done more than take advantage. He had callously used. It was not in his character to do such things, but Paris had brought it out in him. Inspired it in him.

And here he was blaming it all on Paris, instead of taking responsibility for his own actions. It was out of character, or he was mistaken about his own character. He purposefully turned his anger outward, away from himself where it would inevitably turn on Paris.

"Achilles!" he roared, the force of his voice creating ripples across the river.

What would happen if he threw himself in the water? He was already dead; could it get any worse? Would it cure him of this insatiable need for revenge? Would it purge him of this illness, this urge to do himself enough harm to disintegrate his own guilt in the flames of hate? Would it at least make this shameful hardness cease?

"Achilles gave me what I needed," Paris had confessed. "And I no longer have need of him." But he had not said that what he needed was Hector.

The scraping of the boat on the river bottom roused Hector from this rumination. That and the smell of hate.

He had arrived.

Achilles stared not at the imposing, twisted gates of Hades, nor at the demon piloting the boat, nor at Cerberus, frightful though he was. If he had, he would have seen the gates looking foreboding and grim, Kharon looking as smug as his repugnant face would allow, and the dog watching him with six eager eyes, the middle head glowering in triumph, the left bearing a sophistic sneer, and the right licking its lips lasciviously. He saw none of that because he saw only Hector towering on the bank.

Hector clenched his fists and drew himself to his full height. He could not help noticing that Achilles, too, had nothing to be ashamed of in his nakedness. Thickly muscled, sculpted to perfection, and as stiff and proud as Hector between his legs.

Hector wondered what drove Achilles. Was it lust for sex or for battle? The desire to continue the duel? To punish? Or was he always that aroused?

Achilles disembarked and stood before Hector.

“So we meet,” Achilles said.

“Again,” Hector agreed, reveling in the burgeoning hate, growing hotter within his belly, making his cock yet harder. He liked it. “I have been waiting for you.”

Achilles looked pointedly at Hector’s groin. “So I see.”

“Do not flatter yourself,” Hector growled. “Your tricks may have convinced my brother to submit to you; they will not work on me.”

Achilles raised his eyes to meet Hector’s. “You have confused me with another. I am not the one who tricks men into submission. That would be your friend Odysseus.”

Hector wished for a weapon. A lance, a sword, even a rock in his hand. Anything to wipe that smirk from that face. *He knew*. Odysseus must have told him. Had they laughed over Hector’s corpse?

Hector lunged at Achilles.

Achilles was almost knocked off his feet, but his instinct for survival had remained intact, even in death. One leg thrust back to stop his fall, and he gripped Hector's arm for balance. He twisted his upper body, bringing Hector's torso with it, and tried to throw Hector over his bent thigh.

Hector compensated by throwing one arm to the other side and gripping Achilles's waist with the other. They grappled, half standing, hands slipping over slick skin.

"You've lost your composure," Achilles taunted. "You fight like a boy, impetuous, with poor timing."

Hector grunted and reached up to grab a handful of golden hair, wrenching Achilles's head back. What he'd lost in finesse he'd gained in sheer determination.

Kharon glanced across the river. More souls waited for him on the other side, a great horde of Trojan dead, but he did not want to miss this brawl. His serpentine hair writhed in anticipation of the outcome. He would stay to the end.

Achilles was bent backward now, as Hector pushed his body to the ground.

"You fight with anger now, with hatred. It gives you glorious strength," Achilles goaded him.

Hector did feel the strength. Alas, it was too wild. Uncontrollable.

Achilles twisted up, seizing Hector by the throat. He straightened his body and pushed Hector back, to the river's edge. "Not enough to defeat me," he snarled. "How does it feel, noble Hector, to fight *my* way?"

Achilles was guided by the desire to destroy, while Hector had always fought for the greater good. But not this time. Hector gripped Achilles's arm with a fist of steel and forced it to fall back.

Achilles bounced on the balls of his feet, fists up and at the ready. "It suits you well, Hector. Far better than the fighting style I defeated so easily outside your city." He gestured for Hector to come closer.

Hector lashed out and caught Achilles with a brutal uppercut.

"That's it," Achilles laughed and spat blood. "Now you fight from the heart, not the mind. I can smell it on you!"

Achilles rushed him, smashing their torsos together. Hector grimaced when their cocks were crushed together. He'd been watching Achilles's eyes, dazzling blue, to see where they darted. He'd been watching Achilles's legs, long and bulging with power, to see how he'd been settling his weight, at Achilles's fists and tensed forearms, the striations of his chest, the bulk of his shoulders, so he could anticipate Achilles's next move. And he'd looked at the menace of Achilles's cock, slick and eager.

Now Hector looked over Achilles's shoulder, all the way down, and saw that Achilles had brought one memento from life with him to the underworld. He pulled back from Achilles in shock, almost tumbling to the ground.

An arrow still pierced Achilles's heel, the shaft broken above the tip, which had protruded from the other side. The rest remained intact.

Hector stared at the distinctive feathers.

Paris had always been so particular about his flights.

"Yes," Achilles said softly. "Paris did what you could not."

Hector sank to his knees on the rocky ground.

Paris slew Achilles?

"I do not blame him," Achilles said. "He was justified, for I took you from him."

Hector gaped up at Achilles, unseeing.

“Not when I killed you,” Achilles clarified, “but when I gave him the pleasure you never could.”

Hector wanted to throw Achilles in the river and be done with it, but he was so twisted and aching he could not move. The hate no longer gave him strength; it was eating him from the inside.

Achilles said, “He still lives.”

“And you do not.”

“He found my weakness,” Achilles admitted.

Anger welled again. “He was my weakness.” Hector heaved his chest and pushed himself up off the ground looming over Achilles’s crouching form. He fell on him suddenly, squeezing an arm around Achilles neck, pinning them together. “No longer....” Everything was changed.

Every curl of muscle, every sinew and bone, fed Hector’s lust. He no longer wished to defeat Achilles. He needed to possess him. He breathed deeply of the tainted air.

Achilles struggled. He must have known his struggle would urge Hector on. He spread his legs, the crunch of gravel under his knees drowned by the sound of his panting. He fell forward, and Hector settled behind him, between his wide-spread thighs, with his cock stabbing furiously at Achilles’s balls. Hector ignored Achilles’s groans and concentrated on the slabs of slick muscle beneath him. It was like harnessing a mighty titan, containing the force of a raging storm with his closed fist. Empowering. Stimulating.

He covered Achilles’s body with his own. He let go of Achilles’s neck only to guide his cock, but by then there was no longer any need to subdue Achilles. He was arching his back and all but begging.

Hector reached down and sheathed himself within Achilles.

At the same moment, he pulled the arrow from Achilles’s ankle.

Achilles lifted his head and howled with both pain and relief. No blood came out with the shaft, but a rush of power flowed through Hector's limbs. Hector threw both arms around Achilles and brought their bodies upright. He was taller, so Achilles was lifted up, impaled with his thighs spread wide, arms flung at his sides. Hector closed his fist over Achilles's rampant cock.

"You first," Hector growled in his ear. "You want this as much as I do."

"More..." Achilles threw his head back on Hector's shoulder. "More."

Hector could not tell if Achilles was referring to the depth of his desire or to what he needed. Hector would have responded the same for either. He pumped his fist up and down and spread a huge hand over Achilles's chest. "You will be renowned forever," Hector said. "What do I get? What is *my* reward?" He thrust his hips forward and up, and pulled hard, milking Achilles's cock roughly. "I think I should get you. Forever."

Achilles squirmed, and ground his ass back at Hector, hooking his legs around Hector's thighs. "More," he demanded again.

Hector obliged. He crushed Achilles to his chest and heaved him up and down. The tension around Hector's cock scorched like the fires of Hades, and when the muscles began to pulse around him and hot seed flowed onto his hand, Hector cried as if in pain. He was sure Achilles's seed would prove more dangerous than the waters of the Styx. Intoxicating and corrupting. Addictive.

He would never be able to get enough. He smeared the fiery liquid over Achilles's hard belly and slid his hand down, between Achilles's legs, between his own legs. The slippery seed oiled his cock as it pushed inside. The little bit of lubrication allowed him to pump faster and deeper. Hector fucked hard, and bent over again until Achilles spread out under his thrusting body. He began to fear he would never spend, that he would be trapped here forever, in an endless, exhausting, enraging coupling. Achilles started to keen under him.

Arms and legs scrabbled on the hard ground and the ass beneath him shook until Hector felt all the hate and anger surge into it.

“Achilles!” Hector shouted, but this time he was not summoning an enemy. He was proclaiming a truth.

Kharon pushed off from the shore and left the gasping warriors behind. The damned dog would be happy now. Two more would enter where none ever left.

PARIS crouched in the shadow of a boulder. He could feel the poison from Philoctetes’s arrow spreading. He’d been brought here by Helen, to a nymph who had once loved him. Helen had pleaded for his life. Of course, she had – without him she would be at the mercy of what was left of the Trojan court – but Oenone had refused to heal him. Helen had returned to what she assumed was the safety of city, but it was too late for both of them. There was no saving Troy now. Even if Paris found a way to defeat the poison that coursed through his veins, what chance did he have of saving his city? May the gods save Troy if Paris was its last defense.

Paris would die here alone, except he was no longer alone on this mountaintop, and he was determined not to die at the hands of whoever was out there.

Paris went over his situation as Hector had taught him to do. He was alone, but so was whoever was on the other side of the boulder. He was armed, but he did not have the strength to wield his sword and could barely use his bow. Aphrodite had deserted him, and there was no Hector to make a trade for his freedom. All in all, he was in roughly the same position he’d been in back in Odysseus’s tent. His one advantage was that he was dying, so he had nothing to lose.

He drew an arrow from his quiver and tensed his muscles. He owed it to Hector not to die a miserable death here. He would go out fighting.

Hector. When Hector died, Paris had died. Crying over his brother's body, Paris had felt himself close in on himself, disappear. It was something he could not have imagined, Hector lying on a slab of marble, his body desecrated by Achilles, his skin ashen, his heart silenced.

Hector's heart silenced.

Achilles was a beast, a fiend! It made Paris sick to think that he'd enjoyed that man's mouth on his skin, that cock deep inside, those hands on his body, the same hands that slew Hector, bound his feet to the chariot, dragged him for nine days. Silenced Hector's heart.

He should not be thinking about his dead brother. He should be worried about his wife.

Helen. Funny how after all this time, after all this suffering, his thoughts did not dwell on her safety. Really another man's wife, wasn't she? When Troy fell, Helen would bewitch her old husband and go back to him. She would take care of herself. She always had. He worried more about his brother's widow.

Andromache. He wished she were here to touch his brow with a cool hand and tell him everything would be all right in the end. He'd always been fond of her, since long before their games had started.

*Games.* That was what Andromache called them.

Late one night, Hector had confided in Paris. Hector was frustrated. His son had just been born, and Andromache was more beautiful than ever. Hector wanted her, badly, but Andromache's mother had died in childbirth, a second child born too soon after the first. That second child had been Andromache. Hector refused to endanger his wife, but he refused to go to another. That would be wrong. Hector had never lacked for bedmates, but since marrying, he'd been absolutely faithful.

Paris had found it terribly amusing at first, to see his great warrior of a brother brought down by sexual frustration. Hector's unhappiness had soon grown painful to observe, and Paris had offered



himself. How could he not? He'd always loved Hector, and it was his duty to ease his brother's suffering.

He'd used every trick and technique he'd ever learned to give Andromache the utmost pleasure from the first time he put his mouth between her legs. Hector might have done that to her before, but not with Paris's finesse. That first time, she'd been so dizzy with pleasure, she'd barely noticed how Hector had taken Paris from behind with a zeal unbecoming a man who was, as he claimed, reluctantly using a substitute for his beloved wife. Paris learned to go to them prepared and grew to enjoy the touch of his own fingers, slick with oil, an enticing preface to the evening's entertainment.

Paris had worried Andromache might resent Hector's lust for him. It was difficult to avoid jealousy. She could see how much Hector enjoyed Paris. She'd even begun to taunt Paris a little, teasing him with Hector's love for her, reminding Paris that he was only there because she was unavailable to Hector, for the time being. All the while, Paris had found himself wanting Hector more and more. And so the roles were reversed; Paris was the frustrated one, and Hector the one who could have eased his frustration by showing the smallest amount of compassion. One kiss, one tender kiss would have been enough, instead of the almost violent rutting that occurred after Paris had satisfied Andromache with his mouth.

Finally, when Hector did give him the love he craved, it had felt wrong. Forced. Motivated by love but tainted by pity and remorse, which soured the tasted of victory.

Paris had blamed Achilles for that. And he blamed Odysseus for leaving Paris alone with Achilles in the first place. It did not matter whether Achilles or Paris had been unable to contain himself – Odysseus should have known what would happen. Odysseus was to blame. Odysseus should have returned Paris to Hector unsullied. Then Hector would never have had to face Achilles. And Hector's heart would still beat.

Odysseus. There he was, skulking up the path. A good tracker, a skilled warrior, but not careful enough. Paris was in his blind spot.

“At this range, my arrow would take off your head,” Paris quietly warned. “If you move, I will kill you.”

Odysseus halted, raised his hands slightly. “If I don’t move, you are dead. But I can help you,” Odysseus said.

Paris refused to be fooled. “You wouldn’t. Not after I murdered Achilles.”

Odysseus smiled. Sly. Untrustworthy. “It is not murder to avenge the death of your beloved brother,” he said. “Nor is it murder to avenge the theft of your own —”

Paris used all his energy to draw the arrow back. “Enough!” he shouted.

“What he took from you was even more valuable, by my estimation.”

“He took nothing from me. I gave.”

“Then why kill him?”

Paris blinked the sweat from his eyes. His skin crawled with effects of the poison.

“Paris, I have the antidote.” Odysseus reached into his robe and withdrew a vial.

“There is no antidote. Not for this.”

Odysseus took a tentative step forward. “There is, and I will give it to you. I ask only for your forgiveness in return.”

Fire streaked through Paris’s veins. He downed the contents of the vial. It had a sour, biting taste, but his fever seemed to cool, and the itching faded as Odysseus pulled the arrowhead from his flesh and bandaged his wounded side.

“You will heal,” Odysseus said. “For that, I am grateful.”

Paris watched Odysseus's deft fingers tie the bandage. "And for what do I owe you forgiveness?"

Odysseus tucked the edge of the bandage under. He knelt at Paris's side humbly. "For taking what was not mine."

Paris was confused. "That is what war is about, to take by force."

"I was speaking of your brother," Odysseus corrected him, a guilty expression on his face.

"Achilles took Hector's life," Paris said. It still hurt to say it aloud, but he no longer choked on the words.

"Yes, but I took Hector, and I fear it broke him." Odysseus bore a look of true remorse. "He was not made to be taken. He might have defeated Achilles, if it were not for my actions the night before."

Paris propped himself up against the boulder. He thought the strength might be returning to his limbs, or maybe the poison had only been slowed. Odysseus's face blurred, as if Paris were looking at him from a great distance. He tried to make sense of Odysseus's words.

The night before Hector died, he had come to Paris's room. He had been distracted, disheveled. Broken.

Hector had been with Odysseus.

"Why must you fight?" Paris had asked.

Hector's handsome face had darkened, and he'd said, "Honor," in a strange choked voice. Paris realized that Hector somehow knew about Achilles.

How? Paris had never mentioned Achilles by name, never admitted to the act. He'd sworn he was unharmed, and that the gods and Hector had rescued him. Praise Aphrodite, Paris had said solemnly. Hector had kissed him and told him he loved him. Was that not what Paris had always wanted?

But Hector had been so tender because of what Odysseus had done to him, not because of what Achilles had done to Paris.

“It was wrong of me,” Odysseus said. “He offered, but I should not have taken.” He knelt with his head bowed. “I offer myself to you, to make amends.”

Paris could only stare for a moment. He was queasy from the poison, the antidote, he could not tell which. He lay down and waited for either to do its work. “I do not accept your offer,” he said, finally.

Odysseus laughed.

Paris could see nothing funny about his situation.

“Perfect,” Odysseus said. “You refuse me....” He rose. “You should feel better in a little while. I will return.”

Yes, he would return, Paris thought. After he’d finished the job, destroyed Troy. Why not? He’d already destroyed Hector.

Odysseus would return, and then Paris would kill him. Paris would slay him and be done with it, done with Troy, done with war, done with everything.

But Odysseus did not return for some time, weeks, maybe months. Paris did not count the days. He grew strong, hunted for food, found what else he needed in the forest, thought about what he wanted.

He wanted to live. He wanted to be free. He wanted the world to be set right again. But he did not want revenge. The gods had spoken. It was not his place to seek compensation.

And when Odysseus finally did return, Paris had grown tired of being alone. He found himself towering over a kneeling Odysseus. He was fully aware of Odysseus’s size and power – he could easily toss Paris to the ground and render him unconscious or worse – but if he’d wanted Paris dead, he would have withheld the antidote.

And if he had not wished to submit, he would not have said, “Take me, the way I took your brother.”

Odysseus's hands were rough on his thighs. They inched up, asking permission as they traveled, continuing when they met no opposition.

Not violent, Paris sighed. There would be no violence to this. He'd feared more violence. Like Odysseus, he'd had enough of fighting. He wanted this to be about fulfillment, not justice. To fulfill his needs, caused in part by Odysseus. For Odysseus to fulfill him.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of sure, clever hands on his legs, his hips, pushing his bedraggled kilt to the side. The leather panels weighed too heavily on Odysseus's hands. Paris moved to unfasten it.

"Let me," Odysseus breathed against him, close enough for the heat to raise the hairs on Paris's thighs. Paris let him and told him to remove his own clothing. There was not need for hurried rutting on the earth like animals or brutal men in too much of a hurry to rid themselves of their armor. They had time, and space, and both were alone.

Odysseus spread his cloak on the ground and slipped his plain tunic from his body. Paris subdued the growl in his throat. Lean and hard, Odysseus was not so imposing as Hector, not so godlike as Achilles. He was more welcoming. Paris touched coarse chest hair and the softer belly pelt and the surprisingly smooth hairs of Odysseus's beard, and the thick locks on his head. He touched pale skin of hips, tanned skin of arms, scarred skin there on his chest.

"You do not spend all your time plotting and scheming," Paris murmured as his fingers traced scars old and new.

Odysseus ran his hands over Paris's smoother skin, lingering on the still angry mark on his leg. "And you do not spend all your time stealing other men's wives."

Paris could remember it now: Odysseus tending his wounds in the stifling dark of the tent, anxious that his prize remain healthy enough to be used as a bargaining tool. How things had changed. No one would think him worth trading for now.

Paris fell back on the cloak and gave himself up to Odysseus's hands and mouth. Playful, stirring, probing, soothing hands. Teasing, searching, scorching mouth.

Paris closed his eyes again and could almost imagine Hector's mouth on him, circling his cock, sucking him lightly. But the hands were not using him as Hector had used him before his capture, and they were not reverent and trembling as they'd been after. They were calm and sure of themselves, determined to wring cries of ecstasy from him. And they did. And once they had, Paris buried himself inside his former enemy and found peace.

ODYSSEUS stroked Paris's soft hair. Soft, sticky and sated, their bodies were plastered together under shelter of Paris's cloak as the evening fell around them. Odysseus did not think he could ever tire of this, but he knew that nothing could last forever. In another decade or so, he would feel the urge to return home again.

He was not sure how he would explain his long absence to Penelope, but he was a clever man. He was sure he would think of something.

Dar Mavison lives and writes in Toronto in a household full of punks, animals, books, musical instruments and subversive attitudes. Sex has always been a common, not to mention favorite writing theme, and as a true Canadian, Dar proudly delves into issues of identity in just about every tale. Dar has worked in construction, copywriting, health care, the psychic industry, mainstream pornography, and web retailing, but always returns to writing. First love, last love.





UNDEFEATED  
LOVE



JOHN SIMPSON



In ancient Greece, beauty of the human form was prized above all else, and the male form was considered the most beautiful and desirable of all. For many adult men in those ancient times, nothing was more common than the desire to possess a beautiful youth who would be for them a source of vigor, pleasure and pride. They would be mentor as well as lover to these young males. These were different times than the reader finds him or herself in today; different mores and different standards governed what was deemed acceptable and honorable. Simply put: men married women out of duty and to continue the bloodline, but they sought out comely youths for companionship, admiration and passion.

There was also another, rarer, class of love between men. Sometimes it happened that a man in his early twenties found a soul mate in the form of another male of that age. These young men became partners, both emotionally and physically involved, and they did not choose to secure wives, preferring the company of one another.

And it is this category of love that we find our story centered upon...

IN the heart of Thebes, as in any Greek town in 340 B.C., was a gymnasium, a place for Greek youth to gather under the tutelage of teachers and admirers of male beauty. This was where the promising young sons of the nobility learned academics, and pursued physical perfection through sports. As was the custom in this time, the training and participation in games was done in the nude, as they believed nature had intended.

Two of the students that had reached their eighteenth summer as perfect specimens of young men, found that their physical relationship had given rise to an emotional attachment that grew stronger every day. They were called Alexandros, son of Adelphos, and Agapitos, son of Nicedermus, of good families both. And both spurned the oft-proffered courtship of older, wealthier, more powerful men for they desired none but each other.

The gymnasium was the arena of continual competition for the young men. They strove to make better grades than the others, attempted to jump further, throw further, and wield a weapon better than their classmates. Their competition became legend throughout Thebes, but the only area in which they could not compete was physical beauty. Both Alexandros and Agapitos had the perfect chiseled bodies of athletes that inspired sculptors to immortalize their forms in marble and their golden hair outshone the sun. When they made love, Mother Earth herself trembled and the gods wept in jealousy that something so divine existed below Olympus. It was perhaps inevitable that other men would grow envious of the bond shared by the two beautiful, gifted young men, but they heeded it not. Nor could they know that their great love would become of historical import, or that tellers of tales would relate the deeds of these two men and their comrades down the centuries even unto today.

AS Alexandros hurried through the streets of Thebes, he knew he was late for morning practice. The entire school and of course, Agapitos, would be waiting for him on the sports field. Today they began advanced fighting skills, a course eagerly anticipated by all. Most of the men were already skilled, but they all wanted to be better than merely competent, they wanted to be unbeatable.

“Ho, Alexandros!” Markus the instructor greeted the young man with bluff sarcasm. “I’m glad you could join us this morning. I hope we didn’t drag you away from something important now.”

Some of the more gifted youths brought out a jealous streak in their elders that the mentors couldn't suppress at times. This was such a time. Well-used to such treatment, Alexandros answered readily.

"I apologize for being late and keeping everyone standing around, but I had to brush my hair repeatedly so that it flowed just right!"

Everyone in the group broke out laughing at this response. Markus's grim scowl became a grudging grin. "Okay, let's get started," he bellowed.

As the group wielded their swords as one, Alexandros kept an eye on Agapitos to see how his friend was doing and to make sure Agapitos's sparring partner wasn't being too rough. He need not have worried. Agapitos fought his foe down to the ground, disarming him in the process, and Alexandros increased the speed of his own attack, defeating his opponent in a matter of moments. Alexandros and Agapitos had upheld their reputation as the finest swordsmen at the school.

The practice session lasted well over two hours, and at the end Markus told everyone to go soak their bruises in the baths, a large room with communal pools where the young men could bathe and have philosophical discussions with one another. Occasionally, it was a place where passions were publicly displayed to everyone's enjoyment.

Agapitos turned to Alexandros, bare skin glistening with sweat and dappled with the marks left by the strenuous sword practice. "I saw you watching me during the fighting. You really should concentrate on your own battle so that you don't lose, or worse, get hurt."

"I'm more than able to wield a sword and keep an eye on you at the same time, though I do not really need to. Your fighting skills are impressive, my friend, very impressive," Alexandros replied with a smile.

Alexandros took Agapitos by the hand and led him over to the hot pool, heated by thermal steam from beneath the earth's crust. As they entered the water, they felt the familiar pleasurable release as their

bodies drank in the heat, beginning the relaxation of their sore muscles. The men already in the bath made way for the couple as they reached the far end and sank down into the water, still holding hands.

“I think this is the part I most enjoy about learning the art of war,” Agapitos smiled at his friend.

“Any time I am with you and naked is my favorite part of life,” Alexandros said as he gave his friend’s cock an affectionate squeeze. As soon as he touched Agapitos shaft, his own cock sprang to life, the tip rising above the surface as though it searched for attention.

Agapitos saw and took hold of Alexandros’s rod under water, jacking it so eagerly that the others began to notice. No one minded; all present knew of the tender feelings between the gymnasium’s two stars.

Overcome with passion, Alexandros took his friend’s face in his hands, kissing him long and deeply, forgetting the watching eyes, intent only on satiating the hunger in his loins. When the kiss finally ended, the occupants of the bath applauded, beaming smiles on their faces. Agapitos laughed as he playfully splashed water into the eyes of the spectators.

Alexandros grasped his friend’s biceps and lifted him onto the edge of the bath, exposing Agapitos’s handsome cock and balls to any that cared to look. Just as quickly, the shaft was hidden again as Alexandros fell upon it with a vengeance, sucking his lover’s cock with an urgency that engulfed it to the root. As Alexandros swallowed the rather large dick, he played with Agapitos’s balls, caressing his friend with a passion that made everyone in the room stop to watch. Erections sprang up throughout the room as the other students unabashedly ogled the public display of exuberant sex, but that was something they’d all seen many times. What captured their interest and inspired their desire was the obvious love and affection between their two most illustrious classmates.

Agapitos moaned loudly as he enjoyed the oral attention and the needy sound made the onlookers reach for their hard-ons. Alexandros was totally oblivious to the others present, totally consumed with his

act of love, wishing to gift his friend all the pleasure he was capable of giving. As Agapitos felt his orgasm coming far too swiftly, he tried to push Alexandros's head away to no avail. Alexandros was determined and unstoppable, finishing off his friend in one fiercely passionate session. Agapitos spurted powerfully and Alexandros was careful not to waste a single droplet of his friend's manly nectar. With a last swallow, he looked up into the eyes of his companion and was struck with the full weight and impact of the love for Agapitos that had been developing over time.

Glowing with the same emotion, Agapitos put his hands on Alexandros's shoulders and slid back down into the water. He kissed his friend passionately as he fondled Alexandros's stiff cock, the motion generating small ripples that ran away across the surface of the pool. For several minutes, they embraced like this, only their hands moving beneath the water.

"Let us go to the bench so that I might return the favor you gave me moments ago," Agapitos whispered into Alexandros's ear.

"By all means, lead the way, my friend."

All eyes followed the couple as they left the warm waters of the bath and walked to a bench intended for cooling off and drying. Alexandros reclined upon the bench as Agapitos bent over his friend's erect cock and slowly, lovingly sucked his manhood deep into his throat. Agapitos had trouble taking all of Alexandros as he was quite large and so Agapitos faced more of a challenge to give his friend total pleasure with his mouth. However, Agapitos did his best and by the expressions on his friend's face, he was succeeding. With one hand, he kneaded and rubbed Alexandros's nipples, making them rigid and more sensitive. This induced a deep guttural moan from the depths of Alexandros's broad chest that told the entire bathhouse that the two were going to finish what they had started. While it was not necessarily considered rude to watch two young men make love, many turned away at this point to give the couple privacy.

Agapitos released his comrade's cock and ran his tongue up the hard body until he reached Alexandros's mouth. Once again, they

kissed long and passionately, probing one another's mouths with tongues agile as their swords. As the kiss drew out, their very souls intermingled and became one, radiating the love that had laid hidden in their hearts, falling like a sun shower on everyone in the room.

Alexandros stood and urged his friend down onto his knees. Reinserting his cock into Agapitos waiting mouth, he began to pump his hips back and forth. Alexandros took his friend's head between his hands as he increased the speed and intensity of his thrusts. Agapitos strained to accommodate the long, thick cock driving in and out of his mouth. The low moaning coming from Agapitos's throat caught the attention of everyone in the room and they watched as if mesmerized while Alexandros fucked Agapitos beautiful face. As the inevitable climax built in Alexandros's tight balls, he tried to withdraw his dick so as to spill his seed onto the face and body of Agapitos. He was balked by the hungry mouth servicing his cock and let loose with torrent after torrent of hot cum, splashing the inside of his friend's mouth and throat as Agapitos struggled to swallow all of the spewing seed. It was a gallant effort, but he failed, some of the precious fluid dribbling out of his mouth and down his chin.

When his cock finally began to soften, Alexandros pulled out of his lover's mouth and collapsed onto the bench in pleasant exhaustion. Agapitos wiped his mouth and chin and settled down next to Alexandros, fully content. The room began to empty now that the show was over, a few still sporting erections that had not been relieved by a friend.

"That was incredible, Agapitos. My thanks for taking my seed into your mouth and making it part of your body."

"Did you not do the same for me? Would you deny me the honor of partaking of your very essence, so that we might become closer to being one than two?"

"Is that how you see us? Do you wish us to live out our daily lives in this city as a single element rather than two separate ones?"



“My Alexandros, I would be happy to be with you and no one else the rest of my life. I have loved you in silence for the last four years, not knowing how you would feel if I should speak of it. I did not know if you some day wished to take a wife and sire children.”

“My precious one, I too have loved you these past few years. Seeing you in the morning brings a smile to my face and when I am not with you, I think constantly of you. I long to possess your body, to love you, to give you satisfaction, to care for you when no one else is there for you; this is how I feel about you. I have no interest in taking a wife if I can have you all to myself for the rest of our lives. And I really don’t care what the city will think about such an arrangement.”

“If you are certain that this is how you feel and this is what you want, I am ready to commit to you, now and forever. Come; let us be one as lovers and soul mates. Let us be friends who are equals in social setting and status. Let our friends celebrate our love so that we might openly share our lives. This is my desire,” stated Agapitos.

“Then so shall it be. We will pledge ourselves in the temple of Eros, and proclaim that our love will be eternal and loyal, subject to neither jealousy nor selfishness.”

“Agreed, let us do this thing one week from tonight. I love you Alexandros as no other.”

DURING the week that followed the couple’s decision to dedicate their lives to each other, the gymnasium had a visit from the military in the person of a Theban general on a recruiting drive. General Gorgidas had formed an elite battle battalion and its reputation for fierceness and invincibility was well known. The students were called to assemble, and Alexandros and Agapitos sat side by side as the general began to speak.

“Over twenty years ago, I chose three hundred men from the ranks of my army who excelled at the art of war in order to form a special battalion. As you know, this unit, this “Sacred Band of Thebes,”

has fought the Spartan army on four occasions, and won the last three wars. Since that first defeat of the Band, no group has ever bested them again. Aside from their love of Thebes, the thing that these men have in common is the love they hold for each other. As you have heard, the Band is made up of one hundred and fifty pairs of lovers who have dedicated their lives to each other. No less a personage than Plato suggested that such a Band be formed in the first place, and I will quote his immortal words: *And if there were only some way of contriving that a state or an army should be made up of lovers and their loves, they would be the very best governors of their own city, abstaining from all dishonor, and emulating one another in honor; and when fighting at each other's side, although a mere handful, they would overcome the world. For what lover would not choose rather to be seen by all mankind than by his beloved, either when abandoning his post or throwing away his arms? He would be ready to die a thousand deaths rather than endure this. Or who would desert his beloved or fail him in the hour of danger?* I have come here today because the Sacred Band has a vacancy for one pair. Who among you considers himself the best?"

"Should I raise my hand, Agapitos?" Alexandros asked.

"Well, we are the most skilled in our class, and we would meet the other requirement," he replied with a smile.

"Here, sir," shouted Alexandros. "We are the best this gymnasium has to offer in the art of war!"

The rest of the assembly seconded this opinion by clapping, shouting and stamping their feet.

"Give me your names then, and come here," ordered the general.

Alexandros and Agapitos crisply declared themselves as they got up and moved towards the general. As they approached, two honor guards threw swords to Alexandros and Agapitos and shouted, "Protect yourselves!"

The general's aides set upon the young lovers with all their might as the general watched. Much to Gorgidas's amazement, the young Thebans recovered quickly from the surprise and defeated his aides in minutes and pointed their swords at the general's throat.

"Well done, young men, well done indeed!" The general cleared his throat, eyeing the two swords pointed at his neck. "Now drop your weapons and take your places, one on each side of me. I ask you before these good men here present: do you meet the requirements to be members of the Sacred Band of Thebes?"

It was Alexandros who responded. "Only yesterday, Agapitos and I decided to become lovers for life and to make this pledge in the temple of Eros six nights hence."

"Will you join the Sacred Band as guardians of Thebes?"

Alexandros looked at Agapitos. Agapitos nodded, and Alexandros replied to the general with a resounding, "Yes!"

"Then on the morning after you make your pledge in the temple, you will report for duty with the Sacred Band and receive the colors of the army."

All of the teachers and students cheered wildly for the two most admired members of their gymnasium who were chosen for the famous Sacred Band of Thebes. It brought honor on them all and would be celebrated long after the two young men had gone to enter military service. Their names would be inscribed on a pillar in the athletic field along with their accomplishments, joining the ranks of those that had brought glory to the school.

After a dinner held in honor of the day's events, Alexandros and his lover parted ways for the night determined not to sleep as one until after they were bound in the temple. It would be a night of sweet celebration and would herald the dawn of a new age for both men in more ways than one.

A week later at sunset, Alexandros and Agapitos met outside the Temple of Eros, God of Love. Both were dressed in their best tunics and finest sandals. In the entryway, they embraced and kissed each other chastely.

“Are you ready to pledge before the God that we shall be as one from now on?” asked Agapitos.

“I have been ready for this night for over three years. Ever since I first laid eyes on you, I knew that we were to be united in love one day. You are the most beautiful and the best man that I have ever known, and I am honored that you take me as your beloved.”

“And you are the most beautiful man I have ever shared intimacy with, but even more beautiful than your face, or body, is your heart, and it is your heart I have fallen in love with. I could not be happier than I am right now. Let us go into the temple and pledge before the gods.”

Entering the temple, both men lit incense and an oil lamp before the statue of Eros to ask his blessing of their love. They then pledged their love to each other and asked that Eros bring joy to their love-making and maintain their bond for eternity. They held one another in their arms, each shedding tears of joy at the realization that they were now one forever. They kissed and left the temple arm and arm to attend a festive evening that their friends had planned for them. Later they would spend their first night together as a couple, united by Eros in love, body and soul.

The wine flowed freely along with the finest of food, which by custom was served by naked youths who were past puberty, but unattached. Music played and lovers danced away the night, ending up in each other's arms for a more intimate celebration of brotherhood and sexuality.

“Come, my love, let us depart from our friends and retire to make love in private. Let me show you how much I love and adore you,” Alexandros coaxed.

“Where shall we go now that we will no longer sleep apart?”

“Markus has allowed us to use the roof of his home tonight, which our friends have covered in fine carpets and pillows. There shall we celebrate our union.”

The newly united couple walked together to their instructor’s home, and found everything arranged as promised; the roof was covered with fine carpets, potted ferns, a small lamp that shone brightly upon the surroundings, and more wine. Agapitos poured two cups of wine and both reclined on the luxurious heaps of pillows laid out for them.

Slowly, they began to kiss each other and remove their tunics. A slight breeze caressed their naked flesh as they intertwined, stroking one another at a languid pace. Both soon became lost in the love and passion they shared as their bodies reacted to the unfolding sensuality. Alexandros bent his head to Agapitos’s lap and sucked gently on his cock, cupping his lover’s balls with one hand and stroking his chest with the other. Ever so gently, he moved his head up and down on the engorged cock, burying his nose in the thick pubic hair with each downward thrust, ignoring the fact that his air supply was cut off each time. He alternated this ardent sucking with long strokes of his tongue over the balls that hung heavily beneath his lover’s cock. As he labored at his agreeable work, his ears were filled with Agapitos’s quiet moans of ecstasy that spurred him to even greater efforts.

Alexandros moved up to his beloved’s chest, licking and sucking at both nipples, making them rigid with delight. Agapitos ran his hands through his lover’s hair and down his strong back as he enjoyed the attentions lavished on his nipples. Abruptly, Agapitos could wait no longer to reciprocate and shoved his comrade back onto the pillows. He dove onto Alexandros’s cock and sucked it eagerly, milking it up and down with his hungry mouth. Both men excelled at this activity, as philosophy wasn’t the only subject they learned at the gymnasium. As Agapitos tended to his lover’s cock, Alexandros let his hands wander to the crevice between the solid well-muscled ass cheeks of his man. He gently ran a fingertip down Agapitos’s crack where the

treasure of all treasures waited. As his cock was soundly sucked, he began to insert his finger tip into the anus of his beloved. Alexandros was pleased, but a little surprised when Agapitos responded by shoving his ass eagerly down onto the probing finger.

In their society, penetration of the anus was the privilege of superior males and committed on males of inferior social standing. It was also an acceptable practice for older men and their youthful companions, but the social status of each party was always of prime importance as to when it was permissible to engage in anal sex, and in determining who was penetrated. As equals, Alexandros and Agapitos had never experienced this act of love.

Sensing Alexandros's trepidation, Agapitos stopped his sucking and laid his head next to his lover's, looking deep into his eyes.

"Do you want to take me that way, Alexandros? If it would give you pleasure, I will give you what no other man or boy has ever had of me."

"I cannot lie to you, beloved. I want to fill you with my cock, but we are equals and of the same age. It is not the custom for two such as us to engage in that act."

"I have the answer for that. You once told me that no man has penetrated you. So let us each give the other that gift that is so treasured and so we shall remain equals. This night we shall take one another in love under the stars and the moon. We know not what will come tomorrow as we become part of the Theban military, and face the possibility of battle one day. Let us deny nothing to each other."

Alexandros leaned over and kissed his beloved once again. "Your name means beloved and you truly are beloved to me. I accept this gift and give you the same in return."

"And your name means victory, Alexandros. That is what we achieve here tonight: the victory of love over so many other things, including class and the restrictions it imposes. Let us make love in all the ways possible."

“We shall.”

Alexandros spied a jar of olive oil that had been thoughtfully placed near the nest of pillows. Raising his lover’s legs over his shoulders, he anointed his fingers and inserted one carefully into Agapitos’s opening, lubricating both the entrance and the passage beyond. When he felt the small aperture was slippery enough, he applied olive oil to his cock until it shimmered with a slick coating. He bent his head to kiss Agapitos once again as he eased his cock forward. As the taut head pushed against the untried opening, the oil enabled it to slide an inch into the hot tunnel of love. At this intrusion, Agapitos let out a cry of mingled pain and passion.

“Am I hurting you, my love?” Alexandros’s face was tense with concern.

“Only a little and it is already passing. Your cock feels even larger than it looks,” Agapitos said with a laugh. “Go on then. Deposit your seed deep within my bowels.”

Alexandros smiled fondly at the innocence of his lover’s words and felt a rush of lust at the thought that he was the first to love Agapitos in this way. He needed no further encouragement and began to rock back and forth, gliding his cock in and out of his willing husband’s ass. Alexandros’s balls struck Agapitos’s ass at each forward thrust, the slap of flesh on flesh a soft counterpoint to Agapitos’s moans of sheer delight at the feel of his man’s cock moving inside him. The sounds of his lover’s pleasure drove Alexandros wild and his thrusts took on an urgency that bordered on frenzy.

“Please, Alexandros!” Agapitos gasped. “Don’t stop! Go all the way and empty your balls into me. I have never felt pleasure this great before and ...”

Alexandros let out a sharp cry as the sweet tension at his center reached the snapping point. He slammed his cock deep into his beloved and froze as his balls drained of cum, flooding the tight passage. When the last of his seed squirted forth, he pumped his cock slowly in and out a few times before withdrawing. Sated, Alexandros collapsed onto

Agapitos's heaving chest, their sweat together mixing together as they caught their breath.

After only a few minutes of rest, Agapitos rose up on one arm, and reached for the olive oil.

"Here, let me do that," said Alexandros.

Alexandros took the bottle and applied oil to his own anus, lubricating it well so that he could accommodate his lover's large cock. He then applied a copious amount of the lubricant to Agapitos's hard length. Alexandros had never measured, but he would wager that his lover's manhood measured over half a cubit, nearly the length of his foot. When Alexandros tried to rest his legs on Agapitos's shoulders, he was told to roll over onto his stomach. Agapitos put his arms around his husband's waist, reached down and pulled him up so that Alexandros was on all fours. He applied more oil to Alexandros' hole, enjoying the sensation of sliding his fingers into the tight heat before he began to push with his cock.

"Let me know if it starts to hurt, and I will stop."

Alexandros nodded, but he was resolved not to complain no matter how much it hurt. He would never tell Agapitos to stop; he was a man and would take care of his lover's needs whatever the cost. Yet, Agapitos had barely slipped the head of his cock into Alexandros's opening when he heard the plea to halt his forward motion.

The pain was something that Alexandros was not prepared for since he had never experienced it before. It was not like bruising impact of a punch, or the sharp slice of a sword; it was something completely unknown, though akin to a burn. As soon as Agapitos stopped, the searing pain eased. When it finally ceased, Alexandros bravely decided he was ready to take more.

"Go ahead, my love, but go slowly."

Agapitos leaned forward, entering Alexandros by degrees, his cock disappearing little by little in a long tantalizing slide. He was so wrapped up in the novel sensation that he only realized he was all the



way in when his nuts were squeezed against his lover's ass. Becoming aware that Alexandros was having some trouble accommodating his size, Agapitos paused with his cock sunk deep in the clenching passage. After a few moments, Alexandros relaxed a bit and Agapitos began to move, sliding in and out of his lover's ass, increasing the speed as he gained confidence. The feeling was unlike anything he had ever experienced. So this was what it was like to penetrate another man? Along with the physical pleasure of fucking a tight ass, he also felt a sense of power and domination.

"Shove it in good. Fuck me hard, my love," Alexandros urged.

In response to this appeal, Agapitos thrust so hard that Alexandros had trouble staying up on his hands and knees, but he voiced no word of complain. Like Agapitos, he was drifting off into a world of unknown pleasure, where unknown feelings bubbled to the surface. It dawned on both men that this was what it was like to truly give yourself. There was a deepening awareness of the bond of love they shared, a bond so deep and strong that it could withstand anything.

Finally, Agapitos couldn't delay his climax any further, and he exploded in an array of sensations, emotions, and harshly whispered words as he shot stream after stream of hot cum into the well-pounded ass. Only when Agapitos's load was spent did Alexandros allow his arms to give way. He collapsed onto his belly with Agapitos atop him, both limp with total fulfillment. What a gift to have been able to give each other, what a way to celebrate their vows! They now knew the true meaning of bliss. Never had the gift of virginity been so rightly sacrificed on the altar of love as it was that night.

They cleaned up with soft cloths provided by their host, talking lazily as they finished their wine. Lying back in one another's arms, they promptly fell asleep for the first of many such nights to come.

THE next morning the couple rose with the sun and headed to the gymnasium. At the baths, they cleaned off a night of celebration and lust, but they didn't linger over it because this morning they had an

appointment with their destiny. Today they made the transition from young men of learning to full-fledged warriors.

Agapitos and Alexandros donned their best garments and buckled on their swords. Each inspected the other and gave approval of the appearance that they presented. They ate a quick breakfast of bread dipped in wine and set out for the encampment of the Sacred Band of Thebes. At the camp, they were challenged by a sentry. After identifying themselves, they were escorted to the tent of General Gorgidas.

“Good morning General. As ordered, Agapitos and I are reporting for duty.”

“Welcome to both of you. This man is General Pelopidas, my second in command and very dear to me. I have researched both of your backgrounds thoroughly, spoken to your teachers, fellow students and families, and I am pleased to have you with us. It is my intention that after you have both undergone additional training, to assign you to us as scribes when not in battle. Until then, report to the officer of the watch for your bedding assignments and the issuance of your gear. That is all.”

“Yes, sir,” the young men replied in unison.

When they found the officer of the watch, they were quickly given their leather battle gear, a shield, a new combat sword, and were guided to an infantry tent that already housed eighteen men of the unit. As the couple entered their new living quarters, they saw several couples that were not on guard duty or training lying around at their ease. The men boldly eyed the new recruits from head to toe and whispers began to fly commenting on their beauty.

“This is your area where you will both sleep,” the watch officer informed the couple. “It is considered a private area that the other men will stay out of as they expect you both to stay out of their areas unless invited. Niko-Lysandra, who sleeps there with his lover, is in charge of this tent. If you have any questions, see him.”

Alexandros and Agapitos settled into their new home, an area of about seven square feet, until a gong sounded announcing that all should assemble for lunch. As the soldiers sat down together, bread and wine were served by slaves captured in previous wars, most from other city states within Greece. Several men introduced themselves to Alexandros and Agapitos and inquired as to where they came from and how they came to join the Sacred Band. It was then announced by a drill instructor that immediately after lunch there would be mandatory battle training with sword and shield.

The instructors here were among the best in the entire Greek military system, as their skill made obvious to the recruits. During practice, Agapitos and Alexandros were surprised by how much they did not know about the art of sword play. After a couple of hours of intense training, the men were given rest and wine was distributed to refresh the body and raise the spirits.

Agapitos had suffered a minor cut on the upper part of his right arm which Alexandros tended, as was proper for a lover. The wound was cleaned and a soothing salve applied to the cut. As Alexandros concentrated on his task, his lover commented on their fellow soldiers.

“Have you noticed that all of these men are exceptional in both looks and skills? Is it any wonder that they have the most glorious battle records?”

“We are fortunate to have gained membership in such an elite group and we must not fail in our responsibilities to them and to each other. Our personal honor, as well as the honor of those that trained us, is at stake.”

“Indeed, but I doubt not that we will be equal to the task and still have time for our love.”

The instructor’s shout followed hard on Agapitos’s words. “All right, men, you are free to bathe, or to rest as you please.”

“Come,” Alexandros said. “Let us get clean. I cannot help notice that I do not smell too good, and, I might add, neither do you!”

The couple laughed together as they followed some of the other men to the stream that served as their bathing place. All the fellows were in good spirits, eagerly stripping off their brief garments and jumping into the stream, as carefree as boys. Agapitos and Alexandros could easily see how beautiful their comrades were from head to toe. All were toned with sculpted, well-muscled bodies. For the first time in recent memory, Alexandros felt slightly insecure as he compared his body to others'. He was reassured when the other men nodded their approval of the shape the recruits were in and allowed their gazes to linger, drinking in the newcomers' beauty.

Venturing into the stream, Agapitos and Alexandros received a shock. They were used to the heated pools of their gymnasium, not the crisp, breath-stealing cold of swift-flowing water. With chattering teeth, they watched as the men who belonged to couples began to clean one another's backs as the moving water carried away the dirt and grime of the day. Agapitos took Alexandros into his arms so that everyone knew for sure that they were together before he tended to his lover. Tenderly and thoroughly, he made sure that Alexandros was clean before receiving the same attention.

Both felt invigorated by the freedom of being naked in a stream with other men who loved men. It was easy to see how this group became so close, and they better understood the reasons behind the original formation of the Sacred Band, the elite fighting force of the entire Theban Army, a force that remained undefeated after their first battle, until they were all but wiped out in 338 B.C. by mighty King Phillip of Macedon and his remarkable son, Alexander. This was the brotherhood Agapitos and Alexandros would become part of.

After a pleasant time frolicking in the cool water, the men reluctantly began leaving the streams in twos and threes. They walked naked to their tents so that they might be dry when they arrived to don their tunics for dinner. When the dinner, with lectures on former battles, was over, the men retired for the night, save those whose turn it was for sentry duty. As the new couple settled into their bed to sleep, they could hear that others had different pursuits in mind. As well as snores, the sounds of lovemaking began to drift through the night air,

brightening the darkness like the flickering light from the small watch fire. As Alexandros and Agapitos lay side by side listening to their comrades in arms make love, the urge to join them became overwhelming.

Alexandros's hand began to wander down the body of his beloved. "I want you Agapitos," he whispered in his ear.

"I love you, Alexandros and I am grateful that we have a place of such honor, that we do not have to hide our love, and we can live together. Tell me what you desire and it will be yours."

"It has been a long day, full of new experiences, and I am tired, but still I desire you. If you would give me release by your hand, I would be satisfied. After all, we must get some rest so that we are fresh for tomorrow's challenges."

Agapitos shoved off the thin blanket, and found Alexandros hard and ready. Taking the thick rod in his fist, Agapitos moved his hand slowly up and down. Alexandros began to moan deep in his throat as the pleasure grew, and Agapitos pumped faster. Unable to resist, Agapitos bent his head and took the tip of his lover's cock in his mouth. He sucked strongly and in just a few more strokes, he felt the head swell against his tongue. Alexandros cried out hoarsely as he came, filling his beloved's mouth with a thick stream of cum. Agapitos swallowed all that his man had to offer and suckled hopefully for more until Alexandros could take no more. Pulling Agapitos into his arms, he lay back in breathless wonderment that such a beautiful, loving man was in love with him.

"Thank you," he murmured. "That was more than I had asked for."

"I will always give you more than you ask for. I treasure you above all things in this life, my Alexandros."

"Let me give you equal pleasure."

Agapitos smiled and shook his head. "You did not notice that I took care of myself as I gave you your second most favorite act of

lovemaking. I am flattered that you enjoyed it so deeply, but let us go to sleep now. Tomorrow may be harder than today.”

Gradually, the sounds of pleasure faded until only snores could be heard as all the occupants of the tent fell asleep. Secure in one another’s arms, Agapitos and Alexandros slept too.

Morning found the encampment buzzing with activity. Every soldier could sense that something was amiss and before long a full assembly was called. All the men gathered to hear the commanding general speak.

“Men!” Gorgidas addressed the troops. “Once again we are called upon to defend Thebes by force of arms. Two days ago, peace talks failed and, even now, our great enemy, King Phillip of Macedon and his son are on the march. We, the men of the Sacred Band of Thebes, will once again serve as the point of the spearhead that will stop them. Remember, it is the year three hundred and thirty eight and this battalion has not been defeated in battle in over thirty years. This battle will end no differently! You will prepare yourselves for a two day forced march, carrying only that which is necessary. We must be the first to reach Chaeronea where the main army composed of Thebans and Athenians under the command of General Epaminondas will join us. Remember who you fight for!”

A mighty battle cry rose from the throats of the warriors and a rush to the tents began. As Agapitos and Alexandros entered their dwelling and went to their private space, Alexandros felt fear for the first time. Not for himself, but for his beloved one. The thought that Agapitos might be injured or worse was almost unbearable. Hugs and kisses were exchanged between couples, as the men gathered their body armor in silence, all traces of boyish exuberance gone and Alexandros felt the hitherto unknown weight of dread. The warriors gathered outside and assembled into what they were: the most fearsome undefeated elite fighting force in all of Greece.

The command was given, and the march began.

For sixteen hours a day, they marched, and rested the other eight. There was little time for anything but eating and sleeping. At night, Agapitos and Alexandros held one another close, conscious of the treasure they possessed and determined to keep hold of it. Some of the men who had battled Phillip before slept fitfully, for the king of Macedon was fearless in a fight, and his cub, Alexander, was a gifted warrior as well. No matter how well or ill the soldiers slept, they were woken at the same early hour by the braying of their unit leader.

“Get up, men! It’s time you earned your pay. Breakfast is in five minutes sharp, and then we take our place on the field.”

Everyone sprang up, most fully dressed as they had slept, and accepted rations of wine and bread so they would not enter battle hungry. Agapitos and Alexandros quickly donned their armor, carefully checking each other’s equipment. Before they exited the tent to join their comrades at breakfast, they hugged and kissed for a long moment. Their battalion ate in complete silence, each man lost in his own thoughts, many casting worried glances at their lovers. The tension grew moment by moment and once again Alexandros felt that cold fear in the pit of his stomach for his beloved.

“Stay close to me, Agapitos,” he whispered urgently. “And fight hard. Worry about your adversary and not about me. Stay close, and we will make it through this day.”

“I will not leave your side, and I will fight like a thousand men. None shall harm you today, this I swear!”

“No matter what happens today, know that I love you and will love you through eternity when we meet on the other side. We shall never be parted, Agapitos.”

“EVERYONE, assemble,” a senior officer yelled. “It is time to take to the field.”

Camp was struck, and the soldiers marched onto an open field, becoming part of the larger army. The commanding general rode up

and ordered the Sacred Band to the extreme right flank which they were to hold at all costs. As they were new and had received the least amount of advanced training, Agapitos and Alexandros were placed in the center of the Band. Once the entire force was deployed, there was naught to do but wait.

“Are you nervous Agapitos?”

“Of course I am, Alexandros, but you are with me, so I do not fear overmuch. I have always said that as long as we are together, we can do anything.”

The two armies drew up facing one another. None other than Alexander himself along with the Companion Cavalry was in command of the flank of Phillip’s army across from them, but not one member of the Sacred Band flinched. When battle was joined, the Athenian soldiers were tricked into breaking the line, allowing Alexander to drive his cavalry of two thousand and two hundred expert horsemen into the very midst of the Theban ranks. In very quick order, the units of Athenians and Thebans broke and fled in disarray. The only group to hold its ground was the Sacred Band, though they were surrounded by Alexander’s cavalry and hoplite foot soldiers. The men of the Band found themselves attacked on all sides by superior numbers. Though they fought bravely and skillfully, killing many Macedonian troops, one by one the members of the Band were felled and died with their lovers.

Out of the three hundred men of the Sacred Band, two hundred and fifty four were killed in place. They did not flee; they obeyed the order to hold their flank at all costs and their bravery is unmatched in military history. Among the few dozen of the battalion left alive were Alexandros and Agapitos. Alexandros had fought his way through fourteen men to get to his beloved. As Agapitos lay bleeding from a bad shoulder wound, Alexandros stood over him and repelled any enemy soldier that tried to kill his mate.

When Alexandros was so exhausted he did not think he could raise his sword again, Alexander ordered a halt to the killing. As the remaining members of the Band were taken prisoner, King Phillip II



rode up and was told who these brave men were. The king dismounted and walked among the dead, noting the many soldiers that lay across the body of another in a last desperate attempt to shield a loved one from harm.

Stern Phillip began to cry, saying, “Perish miserably they who think that these men did or suffered aught disgraceful.”

It was the custom of the era to burn the bodies of dead soldiers and to rape the living ones, but Phillip forbade it. He decreed that the dead members of the Sacred Band be buried together with honor in a mass grave. Phillip then allowed the Thebans to erect the Lion of Chaeronea above this grave, as a monument to their love and bravery. Further, he ordered that the captured members of the Band not be molested, but cared for and treated with respect.

And what happened to Alexandros and Agapitos? While the Sacred Band of Thebes was defeated that day, the love between them survived and remained undefeated for eternity. After Agapitos’s recovery from his wound, both he and Alexandros were put in charge of the Companions, the personal bodyguard of Alexander the Great. The other surviving members of the Band became soldiers of the bodyguard and found that Alexander had the same taste in lovers as the men of the Sacred Band of Thebes. They had fought with honor, bravely following their orders, and now served the master of all Greece.



## Author's Note

It is a fact that in 1881, an archaeological excavation of the reputed mass burial site unearthed the remains of the Sacred Band of Thebes. The plighted warriors were found to have been buried exactly as reported by Plutarch: two hundred and fifty four bodies arranged in soldierly rows. The statue of the lion was found and repaired and placed back over the grave. Down to this day, the men of the Sacred Band of Thebes are remembered for their valor, their honor, their devotion to duty, and also for their great love for each other.



John Simpson, a Vietnam era Veteran, has been a uniformed Police Officer of the year, a Federal Agent, a Federal Magistrate, an armed bodyguard to royalty and a senior Government executive, with awards from the Vice-President of the United States and the Secretary of the Treasury. John now writes and is the author of "Murder Most Gay," a full length novel, with a sequel entitled "Midnight Shift," both coming out through Dreamspinner Press, and numerous short stories for Alyson Books. Additionally, he has written articles for various gay and straight magazines. John lives with his partner of 35 years and three wonderful Scott Terriers all spoiled and a breed of canine family member that is unique in dogdom. John is also involved with the Old Catholic Church and its liberal pastoral positions on the Gay community.



# HADRIAN



REMMY DUCHENE





*Rome, 118 ADE*

Silence flowed through the bathhouse as all the men scrambled to clear out. That was what happened whenever Emperor Hadrian wanted to bathe. He hated company and what the emperor wanted he got; plain and simple. It had been a rather trying day and every muscle in the man's body ached as he stood silently and allowed his royal dressers to disrobe him. When he was fully naked, he walked toward the water and climbed in effortlessly. Finding a low wall beneath the warm water, he sat down, rested his head back against a column and closed his eyes. A moan escaped his lips as the heat began taking effect on his aching bones

One year had passed since he inherited the title of ruler over all Rome and her conquered regions, and not one day passed that he did not think his life was a cruel joke conceived by his cousin, the former emperor of Rome, Trajan. Trajan knew Hadrian was different from most men, and that was why he named Hadrian future emperor. That had angered Hadrian, for he was perfectly happy with his duties as a counselor and later soldier in the army.

He shifted slightly but had the overwhelming feeling that he was being watched. That could not be, for his dressers left after they undressed him and everyone else had evacuated the bathing house for him. Then his overpowering sense of paranoia raised its ugly head. Because the feeling persisted, he opened his eyes. That was when Hadrian first saw him. Without moving, Hadrian eyed him; the man was tall, had wide shoulders, gorgeous blue eyes, and long hair down to his shoulders. A smile curled Hadrian's lips as he sat up slowly.

“My most sincere apologies, my emperor,” the man bowed his head before reaching for his clothes. “I did not know you were here, for there were no guards posted at the entrance. I shall take my leave.”

“Wait,” Hadrian spoke. “What is your name, man?”

“Antinous,” the man replied. “My name is Antinous.”

“You are of the Greeks.”

“Yes, sire.”

“Well, Antinous,” Hadrian spoke. “You are in luck. For today I value some company. Join me.”

Hadrian watched as Antinous glanced around to see if, by chance, there was someone behind him to whom the emperor was speaking. Then he climbed into the water without a word. He sat a good distance from Hadrian.

“Come now, Antinous. I do not bite. Closer, man.”

Antinous moved closer and Hadrian rested his head back against the post. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply and felt Antinous’s eyes move over his body. Heat began rising throughout Hadrian’s body, because for some reason, just having the eyes of his guest on him was turning him on more than he cared to admit. Still he lay there, unmoving.

“Do you see something you like, Antinous?” Hadrian’s voice was husky, almost as low as a lion growling with deep satisfaction.

ANTINOUS had not meant to enter the public bathhouse to see the emperor there, and most of all, he had not wanted to be beheaded for who he was. But when he saw the body of his ruler, there was no way he could move. His feet froze in place as he watched the man in the water. Even though his mind told him to run for his life, nothing worked except the throbbing hardness between his legs. What was the Greek to do? Many would kill to have a chance like this. Many would

love the chance to study the emperor's mind, to ask him questions, and to see what made him work. But all Antinous could think of was those deep brown eyes, that sensuous mouth, the cleft in Hadrian's chin, the wonderful sculpture that was his chest. All Antinous wanted to do was taste his ruler.

When Hadrian spoke, Antinous had to shake his head and pull his mouth shut. How could he answer that question without getting killed for being a deviant?

*Beg for leave and run!*

"Yes, my emperor," Antinous said – it seemed the sound of Hadrian's voice clouded his senses.

"Tell me what," Hadrian ordered softly, and Antinous wondered how he could just sit there, so still, so unemotional, and ask him such questions. How could he be so calm?

"Everything." Antinous was shocked; he could no longer control the words that left him.

That was when Hadrian opened his eyes, and Antinous gasped and pushed backward. slightly.

"Do not be frightened, Antinous. Are you saying that you are curious as to the touch of a man?"

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Antinous nodded. "Not of just any man, for I know about those. I am curious of the touch of *this* man..."

Antinous's gaze fell to the water. He was abashed to admit that. He had gone that far; he might as well be honest. His body jerked when a large hand took his chin. Antinous felt his chin lifting slightly, and he allowed his eyes to wander up. Hadrian was too close now, and Antinous couldn't breathe. The touch was warm against his flesh as his heart hammered inside his chest. He didn't need anything else in the world now that Hadrian had touched him. He could die a happy man.

He watched in shock as Hadrian's face got closer and closer to his. Antinous's breathing completely stopped now, his eyes rolled back into his head, and his mouth opened slightly. Hadrian's tongue wet his lips slightly before pushing gently into his mouth. Opening his mouth wider, Antinous sucked Hadrian in, savoring the taste of an emperor. The kiss got rougher and wilder, and the more Antinous leant into his ruler's chest, the more Hadrian deepened the kiss.

Hadrian's head swam slightly, and he used his tongue to dance against the tip of Antinous's. How could something deemed so wrong be so good? When Antinous's hand touched his chest, Hadrian growled against his lover's mouth and pushed it away. Instead, he lowered it below the heat of the water and wrapped it around his cock. When Antinous's hand tightened, Hadrian wrenched his mouth away from Antinous's and threw his head back.

"Squeeze," he ordered. "Harder...."

Antinous complied and Hadrian was in heaven. "I should very much like to give you pleasure, my lord," the Greek said.

"Oh, you are...." Hadrian managed as his hips began thrusting up into Antinous's hand.

"With my mouth," Antinous explained further and Hadrian's eyes shot open.

"I shall go to pieces," Hadrian admitted. The thought of having Antinous's hot wet mouth around his hardened flesh caused his toes to curl.

"Then I shall go with you."

Getting up, Hadrian backed out of the water to a higher step and sat down. He watched as Antinous locked eyes with him and moved slowly towards him. Hadrian licked his dry lips and waited with anticipation. "What do you have planned, Antinous?"

"I am planning to suck your cock, my emperor. Do I have your permission?"

“Yes ... oh Hera ... yes....”

Slowly, with his eyes still locked with Hadrian's, Antinous sank to his knees and leaned forward. Hadrian watched, holding his breath, as Antinous's sexy mouth closed over the head of his cock. Instantly, Antinous's tongue danced over the head and Hadrian fell back against the floor in sheer bliss.

The suction picked up, harder and harder, and Antinous made soft slurping sounds as his tongue danced over the shaft of Hadrian's hardened meat.

To Antinous, Hadrian tasted different from his past lovers. Hadrian was sweet and tangy on his tongue. Small dots of hot liquid flowed against his tongue as reward for his hard service. Over and over he heard the emperor whisper his name, and that sent a feeling of utter pride through the man.

Licking along the Hadrian's length, Antinous felt Hadrian's penis throbbing against his tongue, and he moaned in pleasure before moving up to flick the sensitive head mercilessly. Hadrian gripped his shoulders, but Antinous didn't stop. He simply tortured his ruler sweetly until he felt that if he didn't stop, it would all be over too soon. He moved away from Hadrian and knelt down facing away from the emperor, ass in the air.

“What shall I do?” Hadrian questioned.

In response, Antinous lay forward on his shoulders, his hands behind him to spread his cheeks. He wiggled his ass invitingly. “Enter me, sire. Enter me hard and fast....”

He was panting for air, impatient and needy, but he didn't care.

HADRIAN crawled forward on his knees, stuck out his tongue, and licked at Antinous's puckered hole. The young lover arched his back and reared from the ground.

“Hadrian!” he cried. Was that something lovers did to each other? If so, why hadn’t anyone done it to him before? It was amazing. The hot wet muscle wiggling over his flesh caused his heart to slam against his rib cage as his ass rode his emperor’s tongue.

Hadrian pressed deeper and deeper until his nose smashed into the crevice of his lover’s ass. He enjoyed every taste, every scent, and every sound of satisfaction that left Antinous’s body. Using his tongue as he would his cock, he drove Antinous to the brink of orgasm only to leave him hanging. Instead, Hadrian moved to pull the rather large Greek cock into his mouth. He had never tasted a man’s come before, but Antinous was sweet against his tongue. He growled as he inserted one finger into his lover’s ass and worked it around while his mouth sucked.

Antinous could not believe he was lying in a bath house, riding the emperor’s face while the man had a finger in his chute. It was the most exhilarating feeling he had ever experienced. Pumping his hips slightly, he got the head of his cock within Hadrian’s throat. Antinous’s head fell back as he relished the feeling of having his cock squeezed by the tightest orifice he could find.

“Now,” Hadrian lifted Antinous off his face. “On your knees.”

Without so much as a hesitation, Antinous moved to spread himself again. This time Hadrian didn’t disappoint. He aimed his hard cock to where Antinous had begged for it earlier and drove his hips forward.

“Antinous!” Hadrian cried out at the sheer pleasure of it. The tightness that clenched around his cock threatened to drive him mad. Especially as Antinous began pushing back against him, he could not speak nor think – all he could do was drive himself madly in and out of Antinous.

Every other man Antinous had been with thus far paled in comparison. Maybe it was because Hadrian was an emperor, but he stretched Antinous beyond any width and it felt marvelous. He could

not control himself and reached under to tug at his own cock. He was sobbing, begging, pleading with Hadrian to go harder, faster, deeper....

“Was this what you wanted?” Hadrian questioned vulgarly.

“Yes,” Antinous cried.

“I cannot hear you!”

“Yes!”

Antinous got even more turned on as Hadrian spoke to him. There was something about Hadrian’s voice filled with lust that drove Antinous crazy. Bowing his head, he squeezed his cock and tugged. Then, while getting drilled from behind by the Hadrian, Antinous felt hot come flying from his body. His breathing stopped, his brain fried, and his body stiff, he took his release against the ground but still pushed for more.

He began hardening again and Antinous wondered briefly what had come over him.

Hadrian felt the moment Antinous took his release, but he wasn’t about to let this end. Leaning forward he took Antinous’s ear into his mouth and licked. Antinous whispered something before sighing. Pulling back from his lover, Hadrian turned Antinous onto his back, lifted his legs and entered him again. This was a highly sexy position, for their eyes locked. As he slammed into Antinous over and over, he reached up and took Antinous’s already hard cock and began stroking it.

“That is it,” Antinous encouraged his lover. “Stroke me, my emperor...Stroke me....”

With one hand, Antinous reached up and began pinching Hadrian’s nipples between his thumb and forefinger.

Hadrian lost it then, he couldn’t take so much. That was when Hadrian, ruler of the most powerful empire in the world, tossed his head back, causing his long hair to flow down his back, slammed his hips forward and began to come. His body stiffened before his hand

tightened on Antinous's again-spurting cock. With his hips moving quickly in and out of his lover, Hadrian felt as though he was draining his soul and loved it. Every gush from his body into Antinous caused his eyes to roll into the back of his head.

When he was spent, he pushed into Antinous a few more times before pulling out and slumping forward onto Antinous's chest.

"Was that your first time with a man, my emperor? Will this be your last?" Antinous managed.

"No...That was my first...," Hadrian whispered.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"I am not sure," Hadrian found himself joking. "Let us do it again and then I shall see."

HADRIAN finished his duties as emperor in the high courts, but his mind had barely been on the law. He was too busy thinking of Antinous and what they had shared the day before. As he sat there listening to a murder trial, he made a decision that would no doubt alter his history. He decided to make Antinous his lover – for there was no way he could ever be without him. When he entered his bedchamber and closed his door, he did not have to turn around to know Antinous was there. Hadrian could feel him.

A smile graced the emperor's lips as he moved towards the bed.

"How goes your day, my emperor?" Antinous questioned with a sly grin. He was naked and already hard.

"As well as could be expected. But I think you shall make it perfect," Hadrian growled before crawling up onto the bed. Like a cat leaning down to drink its milk, Hadrian bowed his head to suck the head of his lover's cock into his mouth. A low purr left Antinous's throat and Hadrian began sucking.



Antinous's fingers were soon buried in Hadrian's hair, pushing his mouth down as Antinous's hips lurched forward. Over and over Hadrian deep throated his lover.

"I have a present for you, my emperor," Antinous said, and Hadrian dropped a gentle kiss against Antinous's hardness before looking up.

"You do?"

"Oh yes, my lover. Lay on your stomach."

Doing as he was told, Hadrian waited. He felt Antinous's hands spreading his cheeks, and Hadrian's breath caught. Then he gasped before moaning, "Your tongue," he whispered fiercely through gritted teeth, "Lick me...."

Over and over Antinous's tongue washed over Hadrian's hole, and each time, a tingling feeling curled Hadrian's toes. Now Hadrian knew how Antinous had felt the night before in the bath house.

"Oh yes...", Hadrian pleaded.

Hadrian's eyes widened as Antinous's cock head slipped into him. It stung at first, but when Antinous began pulling back, Hadrian growled, "Deeper."

Slowly, and inch by delicious inch, Antinous pushed forward. Hadrian reared onto his knees and Antinous sunk deeper. "Good," he told the ruler.

Antinous felt like a god, for he was the first man to take the emperor. But he couldn't dwell on that, for he wanted to *please* the emperor. Antinous wanted to turn Hadrian on as much as Hadrian did him. Leaning forward, Antinous licked at Hadrian's neck.

"I want you to let go, Hadrian," Antinous whispered. "I want you to feel our bodies becoming one. Feel everything I am doing to you, then I want you to yell at what I am doing to you."

Hadrian felt Antinous's words in his soul as the cock throbbed as it moved in and out of him. Every word, every stroke was starting to make his body shudder. Their bodies were pressing together, moving against one another, and soon Hadrian was too far gone to care, to think. All he did was pull away from Antinous and roll onto his back. Lifting his legs against Antinous's shoulders, the emperor greedily spread himself for his lover.

Together their bodies danced, rolled, and sweated. Together the two lovers rolled from one position to the other; each taking both men to the highest peaks of desire. Even as the storm broke outside the palace, neither heard nor cared. They whispered unashamed love for each other as Antinous made the emperor his.

There, nearly on the brink, Hadrian rose forward and behind Antinous. He stuck two fingers into his lover and that ended it all. Both men screamed for each other, as the dam broke. Antinous reached back and pressed Hadrian's fingers deeper as Antinous slammed his hips forward one last time.

Together, their bodies shook and then went stiff. That round was over.

LATER as Hadrian lay with his head in Antinous's lap being fed grapes by his lover, he spoke. "I cannot live without you now," he admitted. "That is not easy for me to admit."

"You never have to live without me, my emperor," Antinous spoke defiantly.

"I fear you will die."

"No matter if I die, Hadrian. I shall always find you."

"And I you," Hadrian confirmed. "That is because I have fallen in love with you, Antinous of the Greeks. I have fallen so hard so fast."

“And I have loved you since you returned home after so long with your troops. I oftentimes wondered if you had taken any of them as lovers.”

Silence flowed over them as Hadrian chewed. “And now?”

“Now I know the Gods made you wait for me...,” was Antinous’s candid reply.

Hadrian turned his body slightly and licked at the head of Antinous’s cock, “I am in need of your mouth.” He moved to lie on his lover. He felt his cock being crushed against Antinous’s, and both men moaned in pleasure.

Before Hadrian took Antinous’s lips, he whispered his love for Antinous who beamed.

“And I love you, my emperor.”



Remmy Duchene is a Canadian-hockey-watching-baseball playing kind of guy. He loves walking in the rain and bugging his friends about his latest story ideas. Remmy believes that true love comes in all shapes, sizes and sexualities. He is always saying “I’d rather see two gay people in love get married than two straight people that hate each other.



AFTER  
THE  
GAMES



CONNIE BAILEY





Rufus Lupus! Rufus Lupus! Rufus Lupus!!”

The small amphitheatre still reverberated from the shouts of the commoners saluting their new hero. None of these lower class Damascenes imported as laborers spoke much Latin, but they knew enough to name the flame-haired gladiator who gave them such a good show; Red Wolf, they called him. Below the arena, the members of the victorious teams had already bathed and sat at their ease in the sauna recounting their battles. Only one man sat alone and listened to the echoes of his fame growing fainter as the crowds began to leave.

A feminine giggle impinged on Alaric’s brooding and he looked toward the entrance. As was the custom, those wagering nobles that had won large sums of money had sent gifts to the victors. Alaric looked down in disinterest again as a bevy of young and comely slave girls was shepherded into the chamber. The gladiator closed his ears to the lewd laughter, vulgar boasts of prowess and high-pitched girlish shrieks as the men chose partners.

“Barbarian.” The slave-master’s voice cut through the din.

“What do you want, you bugging panderer?” Alaric growled, looking up from Gallus Optio’s gilded, tooled leather sandals to glower at his owner.

The Roman took no offense; he didn’t expect his chattel to like him, only that they earn him money. Gallus was well aware that the big northern savage hated him, but prisoners of war fought well and that was all that mattered. It was not as if the Germanic warrior would

ever get the chance to vent his rage on his master. All that roaring fury was set loose on other gladiators in the arena.

“Men need release,” Gallus stated. “You have refused every whore and pleasure-slave sent to you. That ends now. You will take a woman on my orders because I wish you to stay healthy and earn me more gold.”

“I will not,” the gladiator said, rising to his full height, half a head taller than Gallus.

“I say you will.” Gallus stood his ground, his expression unchanging. “Come, barbarian, let yourself be coaxed. The Emperor himself has sent a gift. After hearing that you refused every woman offered to you, he has chosen a tribute from among his own pleasure-slaves for the finest fighter he has ever seen. His very words as he spoke them to me.”

Alaric very much doubted that Gallus had gotten within a hundred feet of Emperor Verus, but he let it go. “I don’t care if your Venus came down from Olympus. There is nothing in your rotting empire that could tempt me.”

“You may want to take a look before you make that judgment.”

Alaric glanced where his owner pointed and stared at the young man standing quietly amidst the raucous sounds and sights of the fighting men taking their pleasure. The beautiful dark-haired youth was clad in a long white tunic of fine-spun wool edged with deep, royal purple and belted with a chain of gold discs. Alaric assumed the stranger was a scion of the nobility that had come to gawk at the gladiators, but now he looked closer, noting the docile demeanor and downcast eyes. Though richly dressed, this was no aristocrat.

“I don’t want a boy, either,” Alaric said firmly.

“If the Marcomanni doesn’t want him, I’ll have him,” said a heavy-set fighter, eyeing the youth’s elegant lines covetously. “He’s prettier than any of these hussies.”

“Line up right behind me, Porcinus,” laughed another scarred man, grasping the young man by the biceps.

“I am tired,” Alaric said, his disgust patent as he pushed past Gallus. “And I am going to drink myself to sleep.” He had reached the doorway when a soft sound reached his ears through the racket. He clenched his hands into fists and futilely tried to ignore the small sob of distress. Cursing his weakness, Alaric turned.

Porcinus held the concubine from behind, rubbing his arousal against firm buttocks while Minos the Cretan tried to strip off the lad’s expensive garments. Alaric ignored Gallus’s voice as he passed the slave-master again. Intent on their prey, Porcinus and Minos failed to notice the barbarian coming toward them. This proved to be a costly and painful error. Alaric pulled Minos away from the slave-boy, incidentally yanking the Cretan’s shoulder out of the socket. Raising his right arm high, the barbarian smashed his elbow into Porcinus’s nose, spraying the youth’s neck and shoulder with the gladiator’s blood. Porcinus howled in pain and reeled backward to be caught by two other men.

“Hold him,” Alaric ordered, getting instant obedience. The barbarian’s eyes flicked down to Minos, writhing on the floor and swearing in his native tongue. “Someone fetch a healer for him,” Alaric said.

“Curth you, northern bathtard,” Porcinus said, spitting out a mouthful of blood. “You broke my nothe! Why did you do that?”

“Shut up,” Alaric suggested. “You cannot get any uglier, so why are you complaining?”

“I think your fellow gladiators may be a bit concerned that you have gone mad,” Gallus said dryly. “But you are not insane, are you, barbarian? You are just clinging stubbornly to a conscience that will do you no good in your new life.”

Alaric’s lips curved up in smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Taking hold of the emperor’s gift by the upper arm, the gladiator walked away, pulling the slave with him. Gallus stared suspiciously

after them; he didn't like it when the slaves behaved unpredictably. It made him nervous, but at the moment, he was content that he could report to Emperor Verus's man that the tribute had been accepted.

"Go, boy," Alaric said, once they were out of hearing. "I have no need of you."

"Surely not alone." The youth's Latin was stilted and formal, but his voice was as sweet as a flute well-played.

"Blast it," the gladiator cursed. "I was not thinking. You would not last five minutes with the rabble with their blood lust roused by the games. I will take you back to Gallus."

"Sir," the young man said. "May I not stay with you until someone comes to collect me?"

Alaric frowned. "Do I not frighten you?"

"Not as much as the others," the concubine replied candidly. "Please, sir. My master has wagered that he knows why you have thus far refused the gifts of pleasure. If I return too soon, he will lose."

"I see, and what is your stake in this?"

"I will not be punished."

"They would whip you if you fail to bed me?"

"No, sir. My master would not allow me to be marked. My punishments take other forms than beatings or floggings."

Alaric reached out and tilted the young man's face to the light. "You do not lack for beauty, that is certain. I would not wish to see this face marred, either."

"Thank you, sir."

"Do not call me sir, boy. I am a slave like you."

The pleasure-slave nodded as Alaric released his jaw. "Shall I call you Rufus, then?"

“If you wish; I care not,” the man said as he turned and stalked away. After a few steps, he stopped and looked over his shoulder. “Well, come along, boy,” he said brusquely.

“THIS is where they make you live?” the young man asked incredulously, looking around Alaric’s cell. “But you are famous.” Aside from a cot with a couple of blankets, and a table with a basin and a stool, there were no furnishings in the tiny chamber. “My quarters are one hundred times, nay, one thousand thousand times better than this.”

“Your value is no doubt much greater than mine,” Alaric said bitterly.

The young man’s expression changed subtly as he turned the talk to more practical matters. “Do you have anything I might clean myself with?”

Alaric looked up to see the royal concubine dabbing at the blood that dappled his skin. Silently, the gladiator pointed the basin and jug. Seeing no cloth, the young man sensibly wet the hem of his tunic and wiped at his neck.

“What is that smell?” he asked absently as he scrubbed.

“Tigers,” the gladiator said curtly.

“There are tigers here?”

“Don’t worry, boy. They’re caged, just like me.”

The pleasure-slave looked down at the man’s bowed head for a long moment, his dark gaze enigmatic. “I am called Valerius,” he said at last. “But my foster mother named me Lujan.”

In spite of himself, Alaric’s interest was engaged by the unusual name. “Who are your people?” he asked.

The young man smiled and Alaric could not help noticing that his smile was charming.

“I am afraid that only the gods know the answer to your question,” Valerius said. “I was found near the entrance of a cave by a tribe of Mongols who were taking their horses to winter pasture. The matriarch claimed me for service to their Goddess, the Mother of Mares, and gave me the name Lujan.” Valerius paused before he spoke again. “Forgive me, sir,” he said. “This can be of no interest to you.”

One corner of Alaric’s mouth quirked upward as he replied. “Call me Alaric; it’s the name my father left to me. Sit, boy, and tell me how you came to be an Emperor’s toy.”

“If you wish it, but I am content to stand, Alaric.”

Alaric’s smile was genuine this time. For some reason, hearing his cradle name spoken in a conversational tone made him feel almost like a man again. Resting his elbows on his knees and his chin on his interlaced fingers, the gladiator listened to Valerius’s mint-cool voice as the slave recounted his childhood.

“I grew up apart,” Valerius said in his mellifluous voice. “I was raised by the priestess, who was, not coincidentally, the sister of the matriarch. I ate well and followed a rigorous exercise program. I was being... groomed, so to speak, to play the role of the Stallion King at the rites of fertility.”

Alaric looked up.

“The Stallion King’s main responsibility is to lie with the Goddess’s representative during the public rites,” Valerius explained. “At the end of a seven-year reign, he is sacrificed and his blood sprinkled on the mares of the herd to make them fertile. It sounds barbaric, but...”

“Like me?” Alaric interrupted.

“I meant to give no offense.”

“And I took none. Go on.”

“There was a raid,” Valerius began.

Alaric nodded his understanding of all the word implied; raiding was a way of life for his people. “Who was foolhardy enough to raid a Mongol camp?” he wondered aloud.

“Sarmatians,” Valerius said.

The barbarian nodded again. “If there are fiercer fighters, I have not met them.”

“I was ready to assume my duties when the Sarmatians attacked and I was taken captive. The one who claimed me was First Warrior of his tribe and rich in horses, jade and slaves. On my first night as his property, I learned why he kept me in his tent while the other slaves slept in pens.”

“He wished to slake his lust on you,” Alaric guessed.

“It is a thing reviled among the Mongols,” Valerius said. “I am afraid I reacted quite violently when my new master tried to mount me.”

Alaric grinned, picturing the scene. “Good for you, boy,” he said.

Valerius shrugged. “I was no weakling, but he was the finest warrior of a people who prized strength above all else. He subdued me quite easily and took me, somewhat less easily. I was defiant at first, but he treated me more as a squire than a slave and I soon grew used to serving him in bed as well as out of it.”

“Had you bedded a woman before this?” Alaric asked.

Valerius shook his head. “I was kept innocent. After reaching the age when my manhood began to rise, the priestess showed me how to pleasure myself, but I was a virgin until claimed. I have made love with both men and women since,” the young man finished.

“And which do you prefer?”

“Perhaps because it was my first experience, I prefer being taken by a strong man,” Valerius said candidly.

Alaric cleared his throat and changed the subject. “How did you get from a Sarmatian camp to Rome?”

“It occurs to me that I am doing all the giving,” Valerius said. “If you wish to hear more, you must do something for me.”

“What can I give you?” The gladiator spread his arms to indicate the meager contents of the room.

“Give me a kiss and I will tell you how the Sarmatian lost me.”

“Come and get it.”

Valerius crossed the short space without hesitation and cupped the other man’s face in his hands. Alaric looked up with lifted brows and waited to see what the concubine would do. Valerius bent forward and brushed his lips against the gladiator’s. The young man’s tongue flicked in and out so quickly, Alaric had no time to react before Valerius was pulling away. Bemused by the tingle in his groin, the man shifted slightly on the cot.

“The Sarmatian often took me hunting with him,” Valerius said. “One day, while pursuing a pure white doe, we rode farther west than any Sarmatian had ever gone. My master was fearless and excited to be the first of his tribe to see these lands, and he decided to keep riding. Near a mighty river, we met some Suebi tribesmen and were invited to join them. That night, the heathens attacked my master while he slept and divided his possessions among the survivors. I was claimed by a savage with the outlandish name of Stilicho.”

“And then?”

Valerius smiled. “You owe me a kiss,” he said.

Alaric sighed and patted the spot next to him. Valerius sank gracefully down and turned to face the other man. Alaric focused his gaze on the sweet curves of the concubine’s lips and leaned toward him. Valerius met the gladiator halfway, his hands alighting upon the



broad shoulders. Alaric reminded himself that he had faced Centurions, tigers, and winter in the Alps; surely he did not fear to kiss a slave-boy. He pressed his lips harder against Valerius's and was taken aback when the youth's mouth opened softly. The fierce gladiator had to suppress a whimper of need when the pleasure-slave's tongue darted into his mouth. Emboldened, Valerius licked at Alaric's lips, teeth, every surface of his mouth and tongue. The barbarian savored the erotic caress for a few moments before he pulled sharply away. Meeting the fathomless eyes, inches from his, the gladiator spoke briskly.

"What use did this Stilicho find for you?"

"The same one," Valerius said, as he sat back. "He took me across a small strait of water far to the west to a green island so beautiful I thought we might be in Paradise. In the north of this land, Stilicho traded me to a clan chief for a cartload of bronze spearheads and cloak pins. Later that night, he stole me back."

"Go on."

Valerius raised a charcoal eyebrow and Alaric grinned.

"What is the price this time?"

"Show me your gladius," Valerius said.

"Will you show me yours?" Alaric challenged.

Valerius whipped the tunic over his head in less time than it takes to tell of it. Alaric pulled off his kilt, as naked beneath as the concubine. The pleasure-slave's gaze dropped below the gladiator's waist and his eyes widened in a most flattering manner.

"Does it grow?" the young man asked, reaching automatically for the shaft curled against Alaric's muscular thigh. "It is more than respectable and quite adequate as is, but I am wondering if it does not enlarge when roused."

Quick as a cat, Alaric caught Valerius's wrist in a strong grip. "You asked for a look," he said. "Touching will cost you more."

Valerius smiled. “I like you, Alaric, so I am going to give you some advice. You have not been a slave very long and you have not learned that masters have no use for clever property. Simply do the tasks your owner sets you and do not think too much.”

“That’s your advice, is it?”

“It will save you some whippings.”

“I do not care,” Alaric said. “Let them whip my body. My heart is dead.”

“What did they take from you?”

“Everything,” the barbarian said tersely. “Do you intend to continue your story?”

Valerius eyed Alaric’s cock as he began to speak. “I could not believe it when Stilicho sneaked into the Pictsie hill-fort and pried the collar from my neck.”

“You were glad to see him because the Celts treated you badly?”

“To be completely honest, I had fallen in love with Stilicho. I was so heartbroken when he sold me that I did not care that the chieftain shared me with the champions of his war-band. But Stilicho came back for me. He cared for me, too.”

“Then why are you not still with this man?”

“He gave his life so I could get away. We were overtaken by the war-band as we reached Stilicho’s boat. He launched the skiff and it took me farther and farther away while I watched my brave master battle a half-dozen warriors. I saw him fall and knew I was alone in a strange land. Do you wish to hear more?”

Valerius glanced at Alaric for permission and then took hold of the gladiator’s rod. Lightly, the young man trailed his fingers from the base to the tip, delicately stroking the silky flesh before taking a firmer

grip. The shaft quickly grew harder in the pleasure-slave's hand, lengthening and gaining in circumference as it was fondled.

"You are cocked like a centaur!" Valerius remarked, hefting the stiff flesh and weighing the velvety balls on his palm. "And you are not even fully aroused."

"I am not a boy-lover," Alaric said in a strained voice.

"Perhaps not," Valerius dimpled. "But I think this fellow might be."

Alaric could not suppress a groan of sheer pleasure as the young man tugged suggestively on his shaft. "That fellow has no conscience," the fighting-man said a bit breathlessly.

"But you do," Valerius said. "Or you would have left me to the others."

"Gallus would have stopped them before they did any lasting damage," Alaric answered. "I am sure my master fears the wrath of yours. Tell me, boy. Why did you fall in love with your master, Stilicho?"

A wistful smile and a gaze of bittersweet longing turned the young man's face into something seen in the fond daydreams of poets in love. Here was deep spiritual beauty blended with the physical until the objectivity of the beholder was destroyed. Alaric could no longer appreciate the young man's beauty as he would that of a statue, or any other inanimate object. Valerius had a heart: a heart that had been shredded just like Alaric's.

"You do not have to speak of him," the gladiator said.

"I want to talk about him, and I understand your curiosity. Why did I fall in love with my owner? A good question, but I fear I have no answer that will satisfy you." Valerius was silent for a moment before he spoke again. "I will risk your scorn and tell you that I loved him when first I saw him. My Stilicho was a man and a handsome one with hair like the sun and eyes as blue as the sky. He had the body of a hero,

and his manly parts... But, that is only what he looked like. How can I describe his spirit? I can say he was brave and generous and cherished me for the short time we had, but now I am telling you more than you want to know.”

“I am sorry he died,” Alaric said simply.

“It was five years ago,” Valerius said with a touch of wonder in his voice that so much time, or so little, had passed. His eyes sparkled with excess moisture and he blinked rapidly. “Thank you. Do you wish to hear the rest of it?”

“Please tell me,” Alaric said, taking one of the young man’s hands in his.

“I crept back after dark and buried my lover under a cairn of stones. I do not know how long I lay there weeping, perhaps days, but finally I rose and wandered away. In my fog of misery, I entered a grove and lay down beside a stream. The flowing water soothed me to sleep and when I woke, I was no longer alone. I was surrounded by folk in white robes.”

Gently, Valerius disengaged his hand from Alaric’s and placed it on the man’s hard flesh. Alaric affected not to notice as the story continued.

“They were Druids,” Valerius said. “They had come out to gather mistletoe by the light of the full moon and my appearance, my strange speech, and the location I had chosen for my nap convinced the priests that I was a messenger of the gods.”

“I am not sure they were wrong,” Alaric said as talented fingers caressed his cock to an aching tautness. “There might be witchcraft in your hands, boy.”

“They took me to a small island they called Mona,” Valerius continued as he stroked the rosy hot flesh in a regular rhythm. “They live outdoors and worship trees, Alaric; is that not a lovely faith?”

“Aye,” Alaric gasped as a thumbnail traced the throbbing vein on the underside of his rod. “Aye. Ah gods, stop!”

Valerius stilled his hand on Alaric’s shaft. “I beg your pardon. I thought that if you were distracted, I might relieve your tension.”

Alaric caught his breath. “I know what you are doing, but I have never been with one of my own sex. You are skilled, but I am not sure I can...”

“I will leave if you wish it, but I would rather you let me stay and finish what I have begun.”

“You are kind,” Alaric said. “Though I do not know why.”

“Because you are a person like me and I would rather ease your pain than add to it.”

The big barbarian cleared his throat. “Tell me where you went after Britain.”

Valerius felt unexpectedly warm when the gladiator took his hand and placed it on his crotch. The royal concubine was both flustered and amused by his reaction to the man’s touch. He felt his cheeks heating and knew they must be red as a Praetorian’s cloak. To cover his flustered state, he began speaking quickly.

“The priests fed and sheltered me and watched me for signs of the gods’ message. My grief confused them and they spent much time puzzling out the meaning of this omen. They were wise and gentle and tended me well, but they would not let me leave the island.”

Alaric’s hand touched the back of Valerius’s head and the young man looked up in curiosity. Alaric was gazing at Valerius’s hair as he slowly ran his fingers through the long, loose curls.

The concubine resumed his narrative without comment, fearful of breaking the fragile spell. “I might have stayed with the Druids until I died, if the magician had not come to Mona,” Valerius said. “Before you ask: yes, he was a proper magician, not a clever juggler. His name was Brendan and he had the long-sight.”

“He knew the future?” Alaric asked softly, letting his hand drift down the young man’s back.

“Sometimes.” Valerius shivered as a finger traced his spine from his nape to the top of his cleft. “He was good at talking to people and making predictions, but sometimes he truly saw things that had not yet come to pass. When I spoke to him of his composure in the face of danger, he told me that it was easy to remain calm when you already knew when, where and how you were going to die.”

“Your skin is as smooth as a woman’s,” Alaric said absently, half-stroking, half-massaging Valerius’s back and shoulders.

Valerius’s blush deepened. “Brendan told the Druids that the gods wanted me to come home and that is why I was so sad. To my shock, he spoke to me in the tongue of the Mongols, a language I had not heard since I was taken captive by the Sarmatians. Brendan knew the Druids of old and told them I was the cupbearer of their sun god, Lugh Shining-Spear. He also told them that if I were not returned, Lugh would take away the light.”

“And they believed him?”

“He emphasized the dire nature of the message by plunging the world into darkness for a few moments.”

“He did what?” Alaric stopped caressing the silken skin of the young man’s flanks.

“He told me later that he rendered the priests temporarily blind as it would be most inconsiderate to take the light from the rest of the world simply to make a point.”

The gladiator smiled. “It is plain he was not a Roman.”

“Brendan was a Gael, or so he claimed. I never believed above half of what he told me of himself. That he had genuine magic, I never doubted; I saw too much evidence of it. But I do not think he was a Gael, or any other nationality. I am not sure he was a man at all.”

“You think this wizard was a woman?”

Valerius laughed softly. "If so, the beard was most unfortunate."

Alaric chuckled as well and the sound startled him. It had been a long time since his laughter had been aught but bitter.

"I think this Brendan must have gifted you with a measure of his magic," the gladiator said. "I have not felt this light of heart since the shackles were put on me."

"If I ease your spirit, I am glad. Come, Alaric, will you not let me show you the way of a man with a man?"

"You present a compelling argument for buggery," Alaric said. "But I would rather hear more of your history."

Valerius inclined his head gracefully. "Brendan took me with him on a sea journey around the bottom of the world to a land where I parted from him at the request of a young warrior."

Alaric raised an eyebrow.

Valerius smiled as he resumed speaking. "We were lovers, as your smirk tells me you have guessed. I did not love him as I loved Stilicho, but I needed someone, and I came to love him in a way that pleased him. Another powerful lord attacked his master and his army was defeated. He chose to die with his liege, but he arranged for my escape, even as Stilicho had. I fled west, taking to my heels anytime anyone looked at me for too long. I had a small store of coins, but they did not last forever."

"How did you survive?" Alaric asked.

"I had skills," Valerius said wryly. "When I came to western lands, I found employment as a harper. One day, my master sent me to a private party, and when I arrived, I found that the host expected to lay with me. This wealthy man had seen me in the shop and gave a tidy sum to my master for my services, but I refused to submit."

"Go on," the gladiator said when the young man paused. "Touch me, if that is your wish, but finish the story."

“What if I wish you to touch me?”

“Fire from Heaven!” Alaric swore mock-crossly as he put a hand on Valerius’s leg.

Valerius boldly took hold of the gladiator’s shaft and stroked it back to oak hardness as he continued his narrative. “I do not know why I chose that moment to rebel, but I did. I broke the rich man’s neck and found myself facing execution. I did not have a pleasant time of it as I awaited death. By the time I was led forth to the arena floor, I was ready.”

“But you did not die,” Alaric said, stroking the soft flesh of the young man’s inner thigh.

“No,” Valerius dimpled. “Indeed, I did not, or I would not be able to tell you this story. As often happens in tales of this sort, the emperor was observing the executions that day. He saw beneath the grime, bruises and blood and, moved by my beauty, pardoned me on the spot and claimed me as his own. I am a slave once more, but I have my emperor’s word that I will be freed on my twenty-fifth birthday. While in his care, I am being educated along with the sons of his nobles, so when I have my freedom again, I will be my own master.”

“Your ambitions are somewhat modest.”

“All I truly want is to be left in peace.”

Silence followed the pleasure-slave’s words, until Alaric broke it. “A rousing tale,” the gladiator said a trifle too loudly.

“Rousing?”

“Rousing,” Alaric repeated, his voice trailing off in a moan as the young man bent over his rod to kiss the tip.

“Alaric,” Valerius said softly. “Let me give you release. It would please me.”

Alaric closed his eyes and tried not to think as skilled lips and fingers caressed his body, ruffling the patches of ginger hair, toying



with his nipples, sucking, tweaking, kissing, rubbing and licking pathways of flame that led ever downward until he trembled with anticipation. By the time Valerius wrapped his lips around the head of Alaric's cock, the gladiator was ready to scream. When the warm wetness finally engulfed him, he was undone, leaning back against the stone wall in surrender as Valerius sank to his knees.

"Relax," the young man whispered. "You need do nothing."

Moving closer, Valerius rested his arms on the gladiator's thighs and dipped his head to lap at the tight balls. Rubbing the tip of his nose against the underside of Alaric's shaft, the young man sucked the sensitive flesh between his teeth, nibbling his way gently up to the foreskin and back down. The barbarian lifted his buttocks from the thin mattress, thrusting shallowly and Valerius took him in his mouth. Bobbing his head to a rhythm that gradually increased in speed, the pleasure-slave relaxed the muscles of his throat until he was taking the full length. Alaric pumped his hips, his breath coming harsh and fast, echoing in the close confines as his excitement notched ever upward. Valerius judged the moment fortuitous and nudged a fingertip against the other man's hole. With a growl, the gladiator surged up, taking Valerius by the shoulders. Pressing the young man to his back on the cot, Alaric forced a knee between his thighs.

Valerius didn't resist, but rested a gentle hand on the hard muscles of the barbarian's forearm. "You need not prove your strength to me," he said. "I prepared myself before I came here, but it would be a kindness if you would enter slowly."

"I did not intend to spear you like a wild boar," Alaric protested. "I have never done this, but I am not ignorant of how it is done."

Valerius smiled at the gladiator. "Do only what you wish to do," he said.

Alaric nestled the tip of his shaft at Valerius's opening and the young man spread his legs wider, resting his thighs atop the gladiator's. The barbarian cupped Valerius's buttocks, his thumbs pressing on

either side of the dimpled rosette. Rocking his hips gently, Alaric prodded the young man's nether port with the head of his arousal.

Valerius's breath came faster in his throat as the big cock demanded entry again and again. "Now," he panted. "Let me be your sheath."

"Does this excite you?" Alaric asked, pushing a bit harder.

"Aye."

"I would rather die than let a man top me."

"Then you will never know a very particular pleasure."

"So be it."

Alaric drew the head of his leaking shaft up and down the concubine's crack and over his balls, rubbing their cocks together briefly before returning to the crinkled opening. Valerius squirmed against the cot, imploring and encouraging the man that teased him with a rapid patter of breathless words. Despite Alaric's reservations, he found himself aroused to a degree he'd experienced only a few times in his life when he took a woman in the heat of a victory, when his blood was up and the tide of passion ran high. He leaned a bit farther and the end of his rod popped through the resilient ring of muscle. Valerius cried out softly and clutched at the folds of the rough blanket as the thick cock forged ahead. Alaric saw the tense set of the pleasure-slave's chiseled features and withdrew to the threshold. He set up a steady stroke, pushing a bit deeper with each successive thrust until Valerius cried out sharply.

"What is amiss, boy?" Alaric asked.

"Naught. This is that particular pleasure I spoke of."

Valerius gasped as the other man shifted his weight, inadvertently rubbing his cock over the same spot. The gladiator moved subtly, watching his partner's pretty face for signs of the effect he was having. As Alaric thrust shallowly, the young man moaned and moved restlessly, reaching for his lolling shaft. The barbarian knocked

the questing hand aside, taking the concubine's arousal in his big fist, squeezing firmly.

"Is that good?" Alaric asked. "Or is there more I can do to pleasure you?"

"Pretend my cock is yours and you are alone."

The gladiator chuckled as he pumped Valerius's rod. "If someone had told me this morning that I would be holding a man's cock before nightfall, I would have killed him on the spot."

"You are killing me now," Valerius groaned. "If you would please me, move your cock as you are moving your hand."

Alaric rolled his hips, sinking a bit deeper in the hot, clutching quicksand of the concubine's sheath and he shuttled his fist languidly on the young man's arousal. Valerius bore down with interior muscles, clenching his opening on the rod that stretched it. The barbarian shivered with pleasure, kneading the smooth skin under his hands as he thrust. He did not close his eyes and imagine a partner with breasts, but let himself discover the differences in caressing a male body.

"It's plain you are not a woman," Alaric panted. "But I no longer care."

"Nor do I. Only keep doing what you are doing and I am more than content."

With steady shallow strokes, Alaric rocked into the snug sheath, dragging across the young man's prostate as he entered and withdrew. Valerius had enjoyed the attentions of many skilled lovers in his career, but this savage moved in concert with him the way it had been with Stilicho, needing no coaching, sensing the right thing to do at the right time. It had been a long while since the pleasure-slave had forgotten himself in the pure enjoyment of the act and he was gratified to find that he could still feel the old rough magic. Callused hands sliding on his sweat-slick skin, the hard cock that filled him, the soft slap of flesh on flesh and a million other details, both tangible and ephemeral, combined in just the right way to ignite an explosion of joy.

Valerius's unabashed yelp of pleasure as his rod gave up its seed elicited an answering snarl from one of the captive tigers. Thick, hot fluid spilled over Alaric's knuckles and he let go of Valerius's sated shaft. The pleasure-slave's cock thumped to rest on his taut belly as Alaric met his eyes, looking a question at him. Valerius nodded his readiness, raising his legs to lean his calves against the warrior's broad shoulders. Alaric kneaded the concubine's firm backside as he eased more of his length into the young man. Valerius let out a long sigh as the thick shaft sank into him, stretching him in a way that was far from unpleasant. In a few moments, the pressure became an agreeable fullness and Valerius lifted his buttocks, urging the other man to move.

"On my honor," Alaric said in a strained voice. "The emperor is a lucky man, Valerius."

Drawing back to the brink, the gladiator pushed in again, relishing the tightness that gripped his shaft. It was not the same as covering a woman, but it was pleasurable, to be sure. The contracting muscles that massaged his length and the flexing ring that clamped around the thick base conspired to break his self-control. Valerius whimpered as the savage pulled his buttocks higher and thrust into him deeply, alternating long languid strokes with flurries of short sharp thrusts. His fingers sinking into the soft flesh of the young man's flanks, Alaric leaned forward, burying himself in the quivering quicksand of the tight channel. Throwing back his head, the big man clenched his jaw to hold in his shout of fulfillment, but it emerged through his teeth as a low purling growl.

"Please." Valerius opened his arms. "Indulge me."

Alaric let the young man pull him down and embrace him, enjoying the sweet smell of the herbs in the silken hair as his climax reverberated in his bones. Kneeling on the floor with his head against the pleasure-slave's smooth chest, listening to the racing heartbeat begin to slow, Alaric felt a peace he'd not known since his defeat. There was at least one other person in the world that knew how he felt and though it did not lessen his pain, he was comforted and he was grateful for it.

“Thank you, Valerius,” Alaric said as he gently disentangled himself.

Valerius sat up and ran a hand through his tangled ringlets. “My thanks to you as well.”

“For what?”

“Nothing I could explain, but you remind me somewhat of my Stilicho.”

Alaric bent to pick up the young man’s clothing and offered it to him. “If that is true, I am glad. We slaves must take pleasure where we can, I suppose.”

“Now you are learning,” Valerius said. “I would like to come to you again.”

“If our masters will it...”

“If I ask the emperor for a favor, he will likely grant it,” Valerius interrupted. “He will like being able to brag to his friends that his fancy-boy pleasures the fearsome Rufus Lupus.”

“I would like to see you again,” Alaric said. “I must warn you though, that I will likely not top you again. I was simply curious.”

“Of course.” Valerius smiled. “You are no boy-lover, after all.”

“But I find that I enjoy your company. You may tell your master you pleased me well.”

“I shall, but I wager he has already heard the news. He has spies everywhere, you know.”

“You knew someone was watching?”

“You did not?” Valerius’s tone of incredulity matched Alaric’s.

“Romans,” Alaric spat the word like a curse. “They are so corrupt and lazy that they have their slaves indulge in excesses for them while they watch.”

“I will not argue with you, but I see no point in talking about it. You are a prisoner of war and I am a prisoner of lust.”

“I would free us both if I could. The thought of some horrible old man pawing and slobbering over you...”

Valerius’s laugh surprised the gladiator into silence. “Forgive me,” the young man said. “I may have given you a false impression of my master. The Emperor Verus is barely eighteen summers old. He inherited the post from his father, who died of stomach cramps.”

A smile spread slowly across Alaric’s scarred face. “I begin to wonder who is the master and who the slave. I would wager that a clever young man with your beauty could wrap a green lad around his finger like wet string.”

Valerius’s expression was neutral. “Remember my warning about cleverness, Alaric. And may fortune favor you until I see you again.”

Alaric watched as the young man walked away. “You were never frightened at all, were you?” the gladiator asked.

“I hope you can forgive me.” Valerius paused in the doorway. “I had to coax you into laying with me somehow and I thought the fastest way would be to gain your sympathy.”

“Why would you do this to win a wager for your master?”

Valerius shook his head, a complicated look shadowing his lovely features. “I saw you from the stands,” he said. “And something in the way you will not be cowed stirred my memories. Wise or no, I had to meet you, and I devised this plan with my master’s permission. May I still come visit you again?”

“Of course.” Alaric chuckled. “At least until I am killed.”

“Until then,” Valerius said and continued out the door.

“Wait!” Alaric called after him. “I have to know. Was your story true?”

Light laughter floated like birdsong back down the tunnel to where Alaric sat upon his cot, listening to the rumble of the tigers and smelling their musk. He waited, as they did, for it to be time to kill again, but for the last hour, the man had been free as he followed Valerius on his journey around the known world. With a rueful smile, he realized that he was already looking forward to Valerius’s next visit.

Still smiling, Alaric stretched out upon his bunk and closed his eyes. In moments, he fell asleep to dream of riding a fine fiery steed across grasslands that rolled away like a green sea to the horizon. And as long as he dreamed, he was free.





## **Connie Bailey**

I was born on an Air Force base and I've been in flight ever since. My father took the family with him wherever he was stationed; Spain, Morocco, Turkey, and Alaska were among his postings. While studying commercial arts, I married a musician who turned out to be a pilot in disguise. Having no burning ambition of my own at the time, I devoted myself to his dream. His job as aircraft designer and competition pilot has taken us all over the world. I have now set foot on almost every continent (a personal life ambition), but I don't hold out much hope for Antarctica anymore.

I have always loved to read. Since I was four, reading has been my favorite diversion and books my best friends. A few years ago, with my husband's support, I set out to become a writer. I wrote every day and posted what I wrote at various Internet groups and later on livejournal. I cannot recommend this school of writing highly enough. The candid feedback I received was invaluable to my development. I kept working at it, and one day I received the most exciting e-mail ever. A publisher wanted to talk to me.

That's pretty much it so far. There are a few fun facts like: my only child is a rescued Greyhound named Lizard, I live at a small grass airfield with a hang gliding school, I have what's commonly referred to as a "photographic memory", I collect words as a hobby, and my only nickname is "The Judge".



THE  
VOW



ARIAL TACHNA



**Y**ou have proven your skill at arms, showing your devotion to Ares,” Alexios, general of the Kythirian army, intoned solemnly, looking down at the three young men still standing in the arena below him. “Now you must prove your worthiness to Aphrodite as well.”

All three youths went to one knee, well coached in this part of the ritual. “As Aphrodite wills it, so shall it be,” they declared as one.

Alexios waved a hand to the priests who stood in readiness, the three older men coming to take one potential recruit each and lead him away to be prepared for the rest of the initiation.

Leading the three recruits to the baths, the priests ordered them to perform their regular ablutions before stepping back out of the room. Paramonimos, chief priest of the temple of Aphrodite, watched in silence from behind the latticed screen of delicate marble that hid him and his companions from the boys currently splashing in the stone baths. There was no denying the beauty of any of them, but beauty alone would not suffice. Every candidate who had failed thus far had possessed as much beauty, yet none had managed to entice the lonely man standing beside him.

On Adrastos’s other side stood four other men, his friends and comrades-in-arms. As Paramonimos expected, three of them studied the youths preparing for the final test, but Eleutherios’s eyes were fixed on the man between them, watching his friend for any sign that might indicate his preference among the recruits. Adrastos had mourned long enough. If he did not find a replacement for the deceased Kapaneus soon, he would be forced from the army in dishonor and left to fend for

himself. No one had said it so bluntly, but Eleutherios feared tonight was his last chance.

Physically, the three young men differed little; tall, lithely muscled, olive skinned, with dark curls framing their faces damply, but if Eleutherios's eyes did not deceive him, Adrastos's gaze followed the eldest of the three more closely than the other two. Shifting his weight enough to draw the priest's attention, he signaled their choice with a slight nod of his head.

Paramonimos nodded in return and gestured the warriors toward the baths on the other side of the temple complex to prepare for their own part in the final test facing any who would join the Kythirian army.

Stepping from behind the screen, he gestured for the chosen one to follow him. Erasmos swallowed down his nerves as the priest guided him deeper into the temple. Stopping just outside the inner sanctum, Paramonimos took up an urn of scented oil, dipping his hands in it and beginning to anoint the younger man's skin.

Erasmos tensed automatically at the unfamiliar touch but did not speak. He and the other candidates had been told they would face a test from the Goddess, but no one would give them any details. He had only whispered snatches of overheard conversation on which to base his expectations. His nudity, the oil, and the probing hands that did not hesitate to tweak his most sensitive places brought back the illicit images inspired by those moments of eavesdropping. And when the grey-haired priest's fingers parted his buttocks and probed deliberately at his tight portal, oiling it and his passage as well, those images became that much more real.

His body quickened beneath the provocative touches until his shaft had swollen to its full length. The priest coated it, too, with the fragrant oil before wiping his hands on a cloth and handing Erasmos a chalice filled with wine.

"Drink," the old man encouraged. "You will be glad of its fortification before the night is through."

Erasmus drank as bid, swallowing down the entire contents, the strong wine and potent herbs going quickly to his head. He staggered slightly as he took a step forward. Paramonimos caught his arm and led him into the center of the temple, helping him to lie back on the altar so he was spread out blatantly, an offering to the Goddess herself and an undeniable temptation to the warriors who would soon be joining him.

“I will return in the morning,” the priest informed Erasmus. “You have until then to prove your worth to Aphrodite.”

Left alone in the falling darkness broken only by a small hearth fire and a few scattered candles, Erasmus struggled against the lethargy that held him in place. The priest had placed no bonds on his flesh, no restraints to keep him from moving, yet his arms remained thrown wide, his legs parted, knees bent over the edge of the altar as if bound. Raising his eyes to the image of the Goddess painted on the ceiling, he implored Her blessing as he faced whatever trial awaited him.

As if in response, the hearth fire flared at the same moment the door opposite the one the priest had used swung open and five men stepped through. Turning his head with great effort, Erasmus studied them as they fanned out into the room, obviously appraising him as well. Three older men, easily nearing thirty and two younger men, perhaps twenty years old each, not so far removed from his own seventeen years. He realized in surprise as he watched them that the two younger ones, while not submissive by any means, seemed attached to two of the older men, making him wonder suddenly what his role would be not only this night, but later as well if he passed the test before him.

Pushing aside questions he could not answer, he focused his gaze again on the closest pair. Like him, they were naked and well-oiled, though he was clearly the offering and they the priests of the Goddess this night. “What... would you ha... have of me?” he asked, hating the lethargy in his voice, the way it cracked as he spoke.

The one nearest him laughed heartily. “Many things,” he answered enigmatically, “but first of all, your name.”

“Erasmos.”

“Be at ease, Erasmos,” the man urged. “I am Eleutherios, and I assure you, we have only one goal tonight: the pursuit of pleasure in the service of our Patroness. None will seek to harm you, and in truth, She would not allow it if we did. And if, come morning, you have taken all we have to give and been proven worthy, you will join our ranks.”

Eleutherios did not need to mention what would happen if the boy failed.

Erasmos had no reply for that, but it seemed none was needed, for Eleutherios’s attention was drawn immediately by the arms of one of the younger men snaking around his waist, his lips nuzzling the older man’s neck, moustache tickling lightly, sending a frisson of desire down the heniochoi’s back. “He’s even more beautiful up close, Theri. I want him.”

“And you shall have him,” Eleutherios promised. “After all, that’s why we’re here.” He glanced behind him at Adrastos, leaning against the stone wall. His friend’s arms were crossed defensively over his chest, his expression closed though his eyes remained fixed on the youth spread out for their enjoyment on the altar, the shadows from the candles and fire playing seductively over the dips and curves of his oil-glossed skin. “Although perhaps Rast would like first shot at the lad?”

Adrastos shook his head. He appreciated the offer, knew his friends were here because of him – though he imagined they would have no hesitations about taking advantage of the situation – but he wished he could be anywhere else. Anywhere away from the temptation to forget the one he had loved and lost.

The one he had failed.

Disappointed but unsurprised, Theri turned back to his lover. “Go ahead,” he urged, turning in the embrace to pull Kleitos in front of him. “Take your pleasure with him.”



Kleitos took a step forward before realizing Theri hadn't immediately followed. Turning back, he grabbed the older man's hand and tugged. "Only with you."

Theri laughed and kissed the soft lips, enjoying as always the brush of the younger man's thin moustache against his mouth. "I won't miss out, I promise. I simply thought to let you decide how you want him."

Kleitos returned the kiss, clinging for a moment to the hard body of his ever-dominant lover, fingers twining in the older man's shoulder-length hair. "As much as I love having you inside me," he murmured for Theri's ears alone, "I sometimes miss sinking my cock into a tight ass."

"His won't be tight for long," Theri joked, loudly enough for everyone to hear, eliciting ribald laughter from the other warriors and sending a frisson of desire and fear racing along Erasmos's nerves. "Loosen him up for all of us, love. His mouth will suit me admirably for now."

Assured now of his lover's approval and participation, all hesitation left Kleitos's demeanor. He moved swiftly between the parted thighs of the offering on the altar, his fingers sliding up one marmoreal thigh, gathering oil as he went. He knew from previous initiations that the sheath he sought for his eager sword would be slick but not stretched. Theri had promised the youth only pleasure and Kleitos would not have him be foresworn. Lifting one of Erasmos's thighs from the altar, he parted the slender legs more fully, giving him access to the glistening port. "Relax, boy," he ordered, seeing the trembling in the corded tendons, as if they would resist but could not. "You know the way of this already and She will not let you fight."

Erasmos recognized the truth in both of those statements. His eispnelos, his previous mentor, had seen to it that he knew the ways of the flesh as well as the ways of the sword, and he had certainly enjoyed himself with the other youth during the final weeks of their training before the trials that morning. His nervousness arose not so much from the fact that he would soon be speared by another man's shaft as from

his own seeming inability to take any control in the situation. Even his first time, his mentor had always given him a measure of control, a way out if the situation became too much. Tonight, there would be no respite.

His eyes flickered back up to the image of Aphrodite again, Her beautiful face smiling down on the scene. At any other time, he would have counted it a trick of the imagination, but now, in a ceremony meant to honor Her and seek Her blessing, the sense that She directed Her eyes, and his, to the man standing alone by the wall was too strong to ignore. Canting his eyes sideways – his mouth was too full of Theri's hard shaft for him to turn his head – Erasmos focused all his attention on the older man even as his body was worked into a sexual frenzy.

Adrastos felt the boy's gaze like a brand, though he could not make out his expression in the deep shadows, drawing his eyes inexorably to the scene playing out before him. He knew the way of it, had been here enough times to outline every movement before the first one took place. He had been in the boy's place once, in Theri's and Kleitos's positions more than once, to his pleasure and the pleasure of the boy on the altar. And most recently, he had been in the place he now occupied: outside observer. It was a self-assigned exile. Theri, Kleitos, Damianos, Timaneus ... they would all step back in an instant if he made the slightest move to claim the boy. That was why they were there, after all: to find him a new lover, a new partner, a new mate.

A cry from the altar drew his attention from his inward musings back to the compelling scene playing out before him. The boy writhed between the two men, his untouched cock twitching against his stomach as they wrung the first climax of many from his lithe form, his clean-shaven face a set mask of drugged passion. Rast's hand itched despite himself, wanting to wrap around that length of flesh, to encourage its renewal. He clenched his fist to dispel the sensation, cursing the herbed wine that made him more susceptible to the lures of the flesh.

He didn't want this, his mind protested even as his body reacted. He already had a lover, a mate, though Kapaneus now resided within the realm of Hades. He didn't want another! Silently, he damned the Gods who had separated him from his beloved, cursed the waywardness that had driven Kapaneus to go into battle alone while Adrastus was too injured to watch his back, too weak to curb the foolish arrogance that had led to his death.

Closing his eyes momentarily against the pain in his psyche, Rast opened them again to see the situation changed. Theri and Kleitos had stepped back, momentarily sated, giving way to Damianos and Timaneus. Dami's shaved head bent to taste the offering from the twitching cock as Tima teased the copper nipples, making the boy moan. His eyes had not moved, though, still fixed on Rast as the older man fought himself, fought the will of the Gods that compelled him forward. Tearing his eyes away, he scowled up at Aphrodite, daring Her to react to his defiance. He almost wished She would. Even being smote by the Goddess herself could not be worse than the hell he was currently living in.

No bolt of lightning struck him, though; no angry deity appeared to end his misery and send him to join his lover.

Theri appeared at his side, chalice in hand, insisting he drink. Rast almost knocked it away, knowing that imbibing would only add to the temptation assailing him. In the end, though, he gave in, sipping a little before handing it back and watching his best friend take a large gulp. He quailed, knowing the wine would renew his friends' flagging passions, allowing them to torture him, however unwittingly, for hours more as they continued to take their pleasure in the smooth-skinned boy on the altar.

He spared a glance for the boy, seeing Dami holding a separate chalice to the youth's lips, one laced with different herbs, to keep him relaxed enough to accept the debauchery pressed upon him by his initiators. Angry now, at the ritual that forced him to be here, at the precepts that bound him to his fate, he forced his eyes away from the sight of his best friend running his hands over nearly hairless skin,

focusing instead on the candle to his right. Anything to distract himself from the growing desire to push the others aside and take their place between the burnished thighs. He could imagine all too clearly the way they would feel wrapping around his waist as he slid into the seed-slick sheath. It would be so easy.... One step forward. That's all he would have to take and Theri would step back, gladly giving up his place in Rast's favor.

He bit his lip when he heard another passionate cry fall from the boy's swollen lips, hoping the pain would hold back the angry growl at the idea that someone, anyone else was touching the boy intended for him. He knew this temptation, had fought it for six months, fought the wine and the conditioning and the pressure from his friends. Fought his own body's reactions to the sudden lack of sex after six years of having a steady and generous lover in whom to release himself.

Six months, he had fought and succeeded. Tonight would be no different, he vowed. There was no reason why this boy should break his will when the others had not, nothing about this particular youth to draw him more strongly than the others he had been offered and rejected. He was comely enough – more than, if Rast were honest with himself – but he was not Kapaneus and next to that consideration, nothing else mattered.

"You don't know what you're missing," Tima's voice murmured to his left. "He's as eagerly responsive as you could wish, clamping tight around you, his cries making you feel like the best lover in the world."

"You know as well as I do that the herbs in that wine guarantee he'd react to even the clumsiest touch," Rast growled in reply. "He's no different from the rest."

"But he is," Tima insisted. "I don't know how to explain it, but he is. What are you waiting for, Rast? Kapaneus to return from the dead?"

"And if I am?" Rast demanded, turning angrily on his friend. "What right do you have, any of you, to demand this of me?"

“It’s our way,” Tima replied calmly, familiar with the bursts of temper that had grown stronger with Adrastos’s continuing grief rather than abating over time. “You should know that better than any of us. We are only complete when we’re all paired. Your stubbornness endangers us all.”

Rast’s fist flew without any conscious thought, headed straight for Tima’s insolent mouth. Only Damianos’s quick reaction kept it from connecting. “That’s enough,” the big man insisted, holding back Rast’s arm as if his strength were nothing. “You won’t defile Aphrodite’s temper with violence. If you must fight him, do it tomorrow, away from Her sacred ground.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Adrastos answered in a dull voice. “Tomorrow won’t matter. I won’t even be here tomorrow.”

“So you do realize what’s at stake,” Theri’s voice interrupted. “I wasn’t sure.”

“They’ve been patient with me,” Rast replied with a shrug, “but they can’t wait forever on my whim. I know that. I’ve known it from the moment I got the news that Neus was killed. They’d rather cast me out than have me unmated. Fine. I’ll go.”

“And do what?” Theri demanded. “You’ve never known any life but this one, and with no purse for your service if you’re dismissed this way, you’ll have no way to support yourself.”

“Maybe it isn’t life I want anymore.”

“So you’d do what?” Tima challenged. “Wander the streets of Kythira until you died of starvation? Good for you, but what about us? Have you thought about what that would do to us?”

“Three hundred,” Kleitos intoned. “Three hundred bonded warriors to defend the island. If you leave, we will be two short, and you know what will happen. One bonded pair will be separated, each to seek a new initiate. And you know as well who they will look to.”

Rast did know and it was the only reason he had stayed as long as he had. If he left this way, his friends would be seen as failures for not having convinced him to bond with one of the new recruits. One of the two pairs before him would be separated, given no choice but to take new lovers in order to restore the army to its full complement. They all understood that they would have more than one lover in their lives when they entered the army, but it was usually death or old age that separated a pairing and moved one man from initiate to mentor. To have it happen this way, to force his friends to part by his choice, was a responsibility he was not quite ready to accept.

Movement on the altar drew their attention as Erasmos struggled to sit up, fighting the lethargy from the wine and from the multiple climaxes the others had wrung from his body over the long hours since nightfall. “What do I have to do?” he asked, his voice cracking on the words.

The circle around Adrastos broke apart, all five men tensing as they faced the unprecedented event. Never before had they known an initiate, successful or unsuccessful, to rise from Aphrodite’s altar unaided after the ceremony had begun.

“What do you mean?” Kleitos asked warily.

“To pass the test and keep what you described from happening,” Erasmos clarified. “What do I have to do?”

The four friends looked at each other questioningly even as Rast looked away. To answer the boy went against every tenet of their beliefs, yet nothing this night had gone as it should have. Rast should not have been able to resist, though they had grown almost used to that. Moreso, though, the boy should not have been able to ask the question, much less begin to rise on his own.

“Seduce Adrastos,” Theri answered before he could reconsider the wisdom of speaking at all.

Legs trembling, Erasmos forced himself to stand. ““Would it be such a terrible thing?” he asked, addressing the older man. He took a hesitant step forward, not sure of his balance yet. When his legs held

him, he took another one. “Would letting me succeed be so awful that you would give up your place here, your home and your friends rather than touch me?”

The bonded pairs stepped away, leaving Rast to face temptation on his own, four silent prayers winging their way to the Goddess that this boy would succeed where the others had failed.

Rast glared at the boy who dared to challenge him. “You have no idea what you’re suggesting,” he snarled.

Arriving to stand in front of the angry man, Erasmos sank to his knees. “I know exactly what I’m suggesting,” he replied calmly, his hands settling on solid thighs, marveling at the wiry strength beneath his palms. Looking up, he met Adrastos’s eyes. “It doesn’t have to be anything more than a means to an end,” he offered softly, though he knew that if Adrastos accepted, he would do everything he could to convince the older man to turn their relationship into something more.

Cynically, Rast considered those words. Perhaps this would be the apostasy that pushed the Gods into granting his desire for death. With a sharp nod of his head, he gave permission, turning his head to hide the pain that wracked him at this final betrayal of Kapaneus’s memory. He had failed to protect his own bonded mate, but at least this way, he could protect his brothers a little while longer.

Theri and Kleitos exchanged worried looks at the unorthodox suggestion, even as Theri grudgingly admired the lad’s tactic. He doubted any other approach would have worked, but he feared the charade would endanger them all. If the Goddess took offense and turned Her gaze from them....

Before the thought could form completely, a shaft of moonlight angled down through the slatted cupola, bathing Adrastos and Erasmos in its pale rays. Theri’s breath caught as he marveled at the sign. He didn’t understand, but it seemed the Goddess herself had blessed the union they were witnessing as the boy bent his head to fellate Rast. Feeling suddenly like a voyeur, Theri gestured for the others to withdraw, leaving the other two men alone in the temple.

Outside standing watch, Paramonimos looked up in surprise when the warriors exited the temple. His eyebrows climbed farther up his furrowed brow when he realized that only four darkened the doorway. Hope leapt in his heart, for he had long had a soft spot for Adrastos and had hated to see him mourning. His eyes asked the question, to which Eleutherios responded with a subtle nod. Glancing toward the horizon, he saw it lightening, the first herald of dawn. Decisively, he strode into the temple proper, fully expecting to see Adrastos and the boy entwined on the altar.

The sight that met his eyes should have been impossible. He had mulled the wine himself. Erasmios should not have been able to rise from the stone pedestal unaided, yet he knelt at Adrastos's feet, head bobbing enthusiastically as Adrastos leaned against an offering table near the wall. The look of unbridled passion on the older man's face told the priest all he needed to know. However the boy had accomplished it, whatever strength Aphrodite had bestowed on him to allow him to rise, Erasmios had succeeded where the previous candidates had failed. Satisfied, he stepped back out of the temple, giving them the privacy to finish.

A part of Rast wanted to resist the boy's mouth even after he agreed, but the self-imposed sexual drought had already strained his control and the wine the priests prepared to ensure a long and successful initiation stole what little remained. When the wet heat surrounded the head of his cock, he thrust mindlessly, his pace increasing frantically as he realized that the boy had no trouble taking his sizeable length. Back arching, he let go of his hesitations, his doubts, everything but the passion driving him toward release. He forgot the charade, forgot his anger and resentment, forgot everything but the heavenly suction on his aching member. And then he forgot even that as his climax overtook him with the speed of a racing chariot, blanking his mind, dulling his senses, stealing his breath and the strength in his limbs. He sank to the ground limply, arms automatically encircling the boy who had broken down his resistance.

They stayed there, tangled together on the cold stone, as their senses leveled. Erasmios tilted his head slightly, nuzzling the line of



Adrastos's jaw, offering the older man his affection along with the ruse that would allow them both to be part of the army.

The feeling of soft lips on his neck brought reality crashing back on Rast. "Don't," he ground out. "I'll say and do what I have to for this to be legal, but don't pretend it's something it's not. Don't ask me for something I can't give."

ERASMOS kicked viciously at a stone in his path as he stalked out of the small house he now shared with Adrastos. He knew it was a childish gesture, knew if his heniochoi saw him acting this way it would only further complicate an already complicated situation, but he had to let his frustration out somehow, and sex, his usual choice of stress release, was denied him at every turn.

Custom dictated that he have sex with Adrastos or not at all for the first year of their bonding, and while Erasmos understood the logic behind it, in their case, it simply didn't apply. They weren't really bonded, and Adrastos had made it clear after they finished the ceremony that inducted Erasmos into the army and bound them together in the eyes of the Gods and men that he had no intention of allowing a repeat of what had occurred within the temple. And nothing Erasmos had done since had swayed the soldier from his stance.

Thus his mounting frustration.

And his current destination.

If anyone could help him figure out how to overcome Adrastos's defenses, it was surely Eleutherios, and from all Erasmos had seen of their interactions, the other heniochoi would help him if only to have the perpetual scowl gone from Adrastos's face.

It hadn't been an easy two weeks, but he hadn't expected it to be. After all, both he and Adrastos were making huge changes in their lives, learning to live together, work together. The work had been the easy part. Adrastos was a demanding taskmaster, but not an unreasonable one, and Erasmos was eager to learn all the more

experienced man could teach him. The training ground was the one place they seemed in complete accord, the hours spent there productive, if not exactly peaceful.

The same could not be said for the rest of their time together. In their house – he snorted, at that – in rastos’s house, nothing productive or peaceful took place. Clearly intended for a bonded pair, the small building had only one bedroom, only one bed, which Adrastos refused to share, indicating a pallet on the floor for Erasmos to use. The cupboards intended for their personal effects were full, some of the items obviously belonging to Adrastos, but many of them clearly the property of Adrastos’s former lover. Erasmos had tried suggesting moving them elsewhere, but that had been met with such a display of temper that he had settled for leaving his things in his pack next to his pallet.

He kicked another stone. Adrastos’s words still echoed in his ears. “Can you be any more thoughtless?” the older man had accused, eyes blazing. Erasmos had not known how to reply, taken completely aback by the comment and the vehemence behind it. He knew he was there on sufferance, but anyone who walked in their house would immediately realize the sham of their relationship. That no one had so far was a matter of pure luck.

“Thoughtless, am I?” Erasmos had challenged. “At least I’m trying to make a go of this. All I see you doing is pushing me away!”

“I never promised you anything more than a charade,” Adrastos reminded him coldly before walking out that door.

Erasmos had reached his limit, though, when Adrastos had all but banished him from the house simply for examining a carving above the hearth. From what he could glean from the older man’s tirade, it was the last carving Kapaneus had completed before he was killed in battle. Erasmos humphed silently. As if he would deliberately damage anything in the house. He wasn’t a fool. He knew the charade he had proposed meant living with Adrastos until he was experienced enough to take a paraibatai of his own – some years from now. The last thing he wanted to do was complicate the situation more than it already was.

Unfortunately, everything he did seemed to complicate it instead of helping.

With a sigh, Erasmos raised a hand to knock on the door to Theri's house when sounds from within stopped him. He swiped at his face with a trembling hand, the grunts and moans of pleasure only adding to his own frustration. It was so easy to close his eyes and remember, despite the drugged haziness of his memories, what it had felt like to have the two men inside touching him, taking him. They weren't the one he wanted – for he wanted Adrastos still, desperately, in spite of the older man's refusal – but had he not been constrained by the military law, he might have sought his release with them simply to take the edge off his own temper.

Slumping down on a bench nearby, he resigned himself to waiting until the occupants of the house had finished before knocking. After all, he wanted Theri's help, and interrupting him now probably wasn't the way to get it. As he waited, one hand played idly with the torque around his neck, symbol of his new rank and all its attendant rules and responsibilities.

“At it again, are they?”

Erasmos spun on the bench to meet Damianos's amused smile. He nodded mutely, not sure what to say.

“They're positively insatiable,” the older paraibatai confided. “I swear if they aren't on the training field, they're in bed. Did you need them for something important?”

“Nothing that can't wait until they're done,” Erasmos replied diffidently, not completely comfortable yet with the openness he had discovered between the group of friends who had participated in his initiation. He paused for a moment, wondering if he dared ask his questions to the big man beside him. Deciding to take the chance, he turned to face Damianos more fully. “You must know Adrastos pretty well,” he began.

“Well enough,” Damianos replied. “Is that why you're sitting on Theri's doorstep?”

Erasmus nodded. “I hoped he could give me some advice.”

“If anyone can, it will be Theri,” Damianos agreed. Concern for his friend prompted him to continue, “What’s going on?”

In a few short phrases, Erasmus explained the situation.

Damianos frowned. “Theri is still the best person to ask for advice,” he decided, “but has anyone told you about Kapaneus?”

Erasmus shook his head. “Only the little I heard in the temple, but you all clearly knew the story and didn’t need to explain things. I know he was Adrastos’s previous paraibatai and that he’s dead, but that’s really all.”

“He was Rast’s only paraibatai,” Damianos elaborated, “despite being of an age where he could have taken on the role of mentor. Rast resisted dissolving their bond, saying Kapaneus was still too headstrong, still too arrogant to become heniochoi, and the generals agreed, but while Rast wasn’t wrong, the truth of the matter was he loved Kapaneus and didn’t want to think of him moving on to someone else, someone younger.”

Silently, Erasmus mused that Adrastos had nothing to be concerned about on that count. He was a man in his prime, everything about him proclaiming him an alpha male.

“To make matters worse, Rast was injured training. Nothing serious, but enough to keep him from fighting when the Athenians tried to land on the island six months ago,” Damianos continued. “He didn’t want Kapaneus to fight either since he wouldn’t be there to watch his lover’s back, but Kapaneus ignored him and went into battle alone. He was one of the first to fall. We drove back the invaders and brought him back with all honor, but nothing could diminish the loss.”

Erasmus winced. It was hard enough, he imagined, to lose anyone in battle, but to lose one’s lover and in such a way was more than he could take in. “And now he’s stuck with me,” he mused aloud. “A responsibility he doesn’t want and a reminder he doesn’t need.”

“You’re certainly right about him not wanting the responsibility,” Theri interceded, straightening his clothes as he stepped through the doorway, “but I’m not so sure about the rest. He was dying on the inside, giving up on life. At least with you to fight with – I assume he’s fighting you?” Erasmos nodded. “Then at least he’s feeling something again, even if it’s anger.”

“So what do I do now?” Erasmos asked.

“He needs to see you for yourself, not just as an interloper trying to take Neus’s place,” Theri mused aloud. “Do you play the pipes?”

Erasmos frowned at the sudden jump in conversation. “No, but I’m passable with a lyre. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“Rast loves music, but it wasn’t a passion Neus shared so they never played together. Even so, I don’t think he’s played in six months, just one more sign of how dead he is inside.”

Inwardly, Erasmos quailed. He had known when he proposed this ruse that it would not be easy, but he had never imagined the situation would be this complicated. Music nurtured a man’s relationship with the Gods. To voluntarily give it up when it had been something he loved... “I didn’t know he was hurting so badly. Obviously, I’ll do what I can to help, but I don’t even know where to begin.”

“With music,” Theri insisted. “Don’t say anything about it. Don’t ask him to join you. Just play when the mood strikes you. You might even go outside so he can choose to listen or not, but play. Let him hear music again. Perhaps it will awaken something inside him.”

If he didn’t enjoy playing so much, Erasmos would have given up on the idea of his music reawakening anything within Adrastos. Every time he picked up his lyre and headed outside to play, the older man retreated into the house and slammed the bedroom door shut. Theri

insisted that was a good sign, that Rast wouldn't listen because he didn't want to remember, not because he didn't care, but Erasmos found it more and more difficult to believe. Stilling his fingers, he bowed his head, ready to admit defeat.

He had naively believed Aphrodite had given him a sign in the temple, encouraging him to pursue this, but it had been over a month now with no progress, unless one could count fewer outbursts of temper. Erasmos didn't. That was purely a matter of him learning how to avoid angering his heniochoi.

In every other respect, things were exactly as they had been since the first day. Certainly his fighting skills had improved, but that was a matter of training. Adrastos was a proud enough man not to let his paraibatai appear anything less than perfect and Erasmos did his best not to disappoint his mentor. Their personal relationship may have been built on a lie, but making Adrastos look bad in front of the other soldiers was no way of improving matters between them.

The sound of pipes broke into his despondent musings. It took him a minute to place the sound and another to realize where the music was coming from. Inside the house, Adrastos had picked up the haunting melody Erasmos had been playing before giving in to his melancholy. Pausing only a second to see where in the refrain Adrastos had begun playing, Erasmos picked out the accompaniment on his lyre, letting his chords blend with the reedy sound of the pipes.

Almost immediately, the pipes stopped, but Erasmos couldn't help his smile. Adrastos had played with him once. Surely he would do so again.

Inside the house, Rast let the pipes fall to his knees, staring at them blindly. He hadn't played since Neus died. He hadn't wanted to do anything since Neus died except die himself. Cradling his head in his hands, elbows braced on his knees, he felt the tears he had refused to shed begin to fall. He wept for his lost love, for the time they had wasted, the words they hadn't said, the emotions they hadn't acknowledged. He wept for the injury that had kept him off the field of battle, the arrogance he'd never been able to temper that convinced

Neus he didn't need anyone watching his back. He wept for the empty space beside him as the grief he couldn't let go welled up and overwhelmed him. He wept for the beautiful young man on the bench outside, so obviously eager to please and just as obviously frustrated that his efforts bore no fruit.

If things had been different, if *he* had been different, they could have made a formidable pair. Already, Erasmos showed more self-awareness, more determination than Neus had shown since he was accepted to the army. Erasmos deserved more than an empty, dried-up husk of a man, but he hadn't had a choice. He'd been offered up as a temptation for a man who had no interest in living anymore, much less in anything else. The herbs had roused him that night, but nothing had touched him since then. Until this week. Until Erasmos had brought music into his life again. That was one lure he could not resist. And now, with his softer side stirred by the artistic expression, he felt his heart coming to wretched, painful life again, all the emotions he'd locked away the past six months tearing through him at once. With a clatter, he threw the pipes in the corner. He didn't want to feel again. He just wanted to fight the next battle so he could die with his honor intact.

It took three more days before Erasmos heard the sound of pipes again, but this time, Adrastos didn't stop playing right away. He still remained locked in the bedroom, still refused to acknowledge the connection in any way. But he played.

Theri was thrilled, encouraging Erasmos to spend as much of his free time as he could with the lyre. "He's coming alive again," the heniochoi insisted, a relieved smile on his face. "You may not be able to see the difference yet, but I can. His step is lighter than it's been in months."

Erasmos allowed himself to be persuaded, though he was still not completely convinced. And then it became a game, not that either of them planned it or talked about it when they did talk, but Erasmos was sure that was what Adrastos was doing: deliberately trying to pick melodies that he thought Erasmos wouldn't know. So Erasmos started

doing the same thing. Adrastos almost always won, but Erasmos refused to make it easy for him. He had his own pride, after all.

Finally, determined to win at least one round, Erasmos began playing a tune he remembered his grandmother singing to him when he was barely able to walk. He didn't remember the words, but the melody had never left him. Surely this time he would win! But the pipes picked up the air almost instantly, blending easily with the lyre. Sighing, Erasmos finished the song, ready to concede defeat yet again.

"I didn't think anyone else knew that one but me."

Erasmos spun around on the bench to see Adrastos standing in the doorway. "My grandmother used to sing it," he replied, hoping the faraway look on the older man's face was a good sign.

Adrastos smiled. "So did mine. I hadn't heard it since she died."

"We could play it again," Erasmos suggested, already composing a variation on the accompaniment in his head.

The eagerness in the words widened Rast's smile. Sometimes Erasmos reminded him of nothing so much as an eager puppy, ready to do anything for a kind word from his master. He squelched the thought, not wanting to think of the young man as anything more than a means to an end.

The boy made it so difficult, though. He could have resisted seductive ways. He could ignore the hurt looks at his coldness. He couldn't resist the music, not when it called to a part of him he'd thought dead.

He'd fought it. He didn't want to live again, to feel again, without Neus at his side to share the joy and beauty, but Neus had never truly shared this passion, preferring to spend his time elsewhere when Rast played, and that made resisting now even harder, for how could it be a betrayal to share with Erasmos something he and Neus had never shared?



Bringing his pipes to his lips, he began to play, gesturing for Erasmos to join him. The boy did so quickly, competently weaving his music around the melody this time rather than playing it himself. Rast nodded his encouragement and approval as they blended their notes.

One song led to the next, which led to the next. Rast could feel his heart lightening with each one as he finally accepted this new interaction with his paraibatai. Only the darkening sky recalled him finally to his surroundings, to the world outside their music. “It’s time to eat,” he said off-handedly, not considering the suggestion until after he’d made it. Only then did he realize it was the first time he’d made any such offer.

Guilt assailed him immediately at the silent acknowledgement of his desire for Erasmos’s presence. To spend time with him on the training grounds fulfilled his duty to the army, to his brothers, and to the Gods. To share a few minutes or even a few hours in the pursuit of music likewise honored the Gods. But to seek his company for something as personal as a meal, to deliberately invite his companionship for nothing more than self-gratification ... that was the betrayal he had sworn to avoid.

He wasn’t supposed to live again. He didn’t want – had never wanted – a new companion, a new lover. He’d made it clear to the boy from the start that he’d entered this charade to protect his brothers’ bond, yet Erasmos seemed determined to ignore that, to drag him back to the living whether he wanted it or not.

Angry with himself for being taken in by the music and by the pretty face that created it, he turned on his heel and stomped back inside, clattering pots and dishes as he set out a light repast. It was too hot for anything heavy, but even if he’d been starving, he wouldn’t have prepared a large meal. He couldn’t stay in the boy’s company that long. Not if he intended to keep his vow.

“THAT’S wonderful news!” Theri enthused when Erasmos told him of the afternoon spent playing and the dinner he and Adrastos had shared. “I told you it was just a matter of wearing down his resistance.”

“So what now?” Erasmos asked, his glance including Kleitos in the question as well.

“You’ve done the hard part,” Kleitos agreed. “All that’s left is to seduce him.”

“You don’t think that’s rushing things?” Erasmos questioned, remembering how Adrastos had pulled away in the temple.

“I can’t believe he’s held out as long as he had,” Theri replied. “Catch him when his guard is down and then go after him in earnest.”

“His guard’s never down,” Erasmos explained glumly. “The closest I get to him is when we’re sparring, but that’s hardly an arena for seduction.”

“Join him in the baths after you’re finished training,” Theri suggested. “Give him a massage when he retires to the laconica. The steam will keep him relaxed and the fact that it’s in public will lull him into letting you touch him. Once he remembers how good it feels to have that contact, he’ll want more. Then you can take him home and convince him to ravish you properly.”

Erasmos flushed, still not completely used to the openness between soldiers. He knew each bonded pair were lovers, but the frank sexual discussions still caught him off guard at times. A glance at the sun’s position overhead gave him the excuse he needed to escape. “He’ll be looking for me.”

“Good luck,” Theri told him.

“We want all the details,” Kleitos added, adding to the color staining Erasmos’s cheeks as he fled in the direction of the training grounds.

Hours later, Erasmos nervously followed Adrastos into the baths off the gymnasium where they had been training. Only one other

pair lounged in the heated water, giving Erasmos hope that the steam baths would be equally deserted and he could put Theri's plan into effect. Seeing the other paraibatai helping his mentor bathe, Erasmos grabbed one of the sponges and approached Adrastos from behind. Without asking, he ran the scratchy material down his heniochoi's back.

Immediately, Adrastos tensed, starting to pull away.

"Don't," Erasmos whispered. "This is what they expect to see."

Adrastos couldn't argue with that contention, although letting Erasmos touch him was surely a bad idea. "Just my back," he insisted in a harsh whisper. "There's no reason for you to help with anything else."

Erasmos didn't argue that if they were truly lovers, Adrastos would have no such qualms. He would save those arguments for later, when he was trying to make them lovers for real. Instead, he lingered as long as he could justify on Adrastos's back, letting his fingers skim the darkly tanned skin as he ran the sponge up and down the older man's back.

Rast tensed even more when he felt the younger man's touch. He knew he should pull away, but the memory of Erasmos's initiation still haunted him, making him long for things he had no right to want.

He stayed where he was, though, for Erasmos was right about one thing; the others would be far more likely to notice them if he pulled away. Only when he felt his cock swelling did he put an end to the bath, declaring himself clean and ready to relax in the steam.

Erasmos trailed behind Adrastos, his eyes drinking in the sight of the older man's hard body as they walked. Most of his memories from the night of his initiation a month earlier were a vague blur, pleasurable but indistinct, sensory images of being filled repeatedly, of overwhelming passion and never-ending ecstasy. One memory, though, was as clear as if it had occurred only that morning. He could recall in exquisite detail the time on his knees before Adrastos, could recall the taste, the smell, the sounds of the other man, the feeling of the

heavy cock on his tongue, the vision of reluctant desire on the other man's face as he finally gave in. He wanted that experience again, wanted as well everything he had been denied that night. Instinct told him that Adrastos would be a masterful lover once he made up his mind. The problem remained overcoming the scruples that held him back.

With a heavy sigh, Rast stretched out on one of the stone benches, letting the heat and humidity soak the tension from his muscles. He hated the reminder that he was getting old, but he never used to hurt this way after a sparring match. Inwardly, he had to admit some of his aches and pains came from trying to keep up with Erasmos. It had been some time since he'd had to work this hard. As much as it pained him to admit it, Kapaneus had gotten lazy in the last couple of years, only training enough to keep himself in shape rather than pushing himself to improve. While not yet as skilled as Neus, Erasmos had none of the laziness, pushing his body to the limits. And pushing Adrastos as well.

The hands that settled on his back, kneading firmly at sore muscles, should not have surprised him, Rast mused even as his body jumped in reaction, but he obviously hadn't given the boy enough credit for initiative. He knew Erasmos desired him. A part of him was flattered, but he refused to let it influence him since he knew, too, that his paraibatai had no other outlet for finding his release. No one on the island, seeing the torque around his neck, would touch him, not wanting to anger Aphrodite by defiling a bond She had blessed. Never mind that there was no bond, not really. Never mind that the Goddess could not possibly have blessed such a sham. The boy was young and randy and used to finding his release on a regular basis, at least if Rast's own youth was any guide. It was no surprise then that Erasmos would turn lustful eyes his way. It also changed nothing.

It couldn't change anything. Rast refused to let it, refused to let himself be swayed by the longing he saw in the dark eyes, refused to acknowledge the need that longing awoke within him. He couldn't completely control his body's reaction as the boy skillfully massaged his back and legs, but when the tempting fingers would have moved

over his buttocks, he grabbed a towel to hide his erection and rolled to his feet. “Enough,” he growled, prowling toward the door and the tunic he had left there.

Erasmus followed his mentor, hoping the discreetly placed towel meant his ministrations had borne fruit. Adrastus kept his back carefully turned as he dressed, adding credence to those hopes. Biting back a smile, Erasmus dressed as well, gathering their weapons and sweaty sparring gear. Now that he was finally making progress, he didn’t want to give Adrastus cause to be annoyed with him again.

Rast stalked through the streets between the gymnasium and their house, trying to find an excuse to leave again as soon as they arrived, or else an errand for the boy. Anything to avoid being alone with him until he could trust himself again not to betray Kapaneus’s memory. Nothing had come to mind, though, by the time they crossed the threshold. Erasmus followed him into the bedroom, putting their weapons away as carefully as always. The process seemed to take less time than usual, however, or else Adrastus was not as quick as usual in leaving because Erasmus caught him before he could slip back into the other room.

The arms that encircled his neck were slender still, despite the hard muscle he knew covered them. He had matched himself against that strength often enough on the arena grounds to know that size was, in this case, deceiving. The lips that touched his were smooth, unlike his own chapped lips, cajoling rather than demanding as Neus’s had often been. The body that pressed against his was lithe and pliable, an offering, not a command.

He allowed himself one deep moan, one thorough taste, one lingering caress down the narrow back and up again before setting Erasmus from him. “Don’t.”

“Why not?” Erasmus demanded, the hesitation he felt from the other man enough to give him the courage to speak when he had remained silent before.

“You want something I can’t give,” Rast answered honestly. “Find someone else.”

“Who?” Erasmos shouted. “No one will touch me with this around my neck. I’m not asking you to love me. Just fuck me once in a while. And don’t tell me you can’t. I could feel just how much you want me.”

“I’m tasked with teaching you more than just skill at arms,” Adrastos ground out, his body reacting to the enticing words even as his mind resisted. “I’m also supposed to teach you wisdom and self-control. It looks like those are lessons you still need to learn.”

“Perhaps when you learn some and stop denying the blessing of the Gods upon us, you can teach me.” Gathering his pallet and pack, he stormed into the other room, tossing them in a corner before stalking out of the house.

“SAILS, ho!”

The cry echoed up from the watchtower over the harbor, shouted from sentry to sentry across the island until it reached the barracks. At the sound, bells began to toll, calling every soldier to fight. The slow, sonorous knell brought men out of their houses, the battle cry raised by three hundred voices as one.

Erasmos rose from his seat outside the house he still shared with Adrastos, though he had given up any hope of it ever becoming a home. The drums took up the call, sending women and children to safety and summoning the men to war. Running into the house, Erasmos gathered his gear, strapping on his armor and girding his sword around his waist. His thoughts raced as he prepared, tactics and strategies, feints and parries flashing through his mind. Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself that he would not be fighting alone, that Adrastos would be at his side, guiding and defending him, just as he would defend the older man. They would face the invaders together, not just the two of them,

but an army of brothers and lovers, an interwoven fabric of such strength that none could tear it warp from weft.

Knowing Adrastos would be preparing their chariot, Erasmos gathered the older man's gear as well, setting it all together on the table they never shared so that it would be ready when his *heniochoi* arrived. He had just finished when he heard the clatter of hooves and wheels on the cobblestones of the street. Slinging their bedrolls over his shoulder, he grabbed Adrastos's sword and armor and headed outside. He gave no thought now to the tension between them. It had no place in the preparations for war.

As he cleared the doorway, he tossed Adrastos his helm, then his sword. The older man caught them in a steady grip, fixing the helm on his head and the sword around his waist before extending an arm to Erasmos, who took it without hesitation, stepping into the chariot and bracing his feet for the run to the coast. All around them, he saw others doing the same.

The bustle of military preparation filled the air as they moved into file, headed for the coast and battle. "It won't come tonight," Adrastos told Erasmos over the noise as they made their way north. "It's too close to nightfall. They'll wait and attack with the dawn, for they know they have a far better chance in daylight than they do on unfamiliar terrain at night."

Erasmos accepted the declaration without comment, his mind racing as he contemplated the night ahead and the battle tomorrow. If Adrastos was right – and he had no reason to doubt the older man's wisdom in this matter – then tonight would be spent in physical and mental preparation. The physical preparations would be easy, for their swords were already sharp. He suspected, though, that the mental preparations would be far more difficult, at least for them.

The battle tomorrow would be real, the danger they faced serious. Men would die, men he now considered friends. Perhaps even those he considered brothers. Some would lose lovers, though he didn't have one to lose. With that knowledge in the forefront of their minds, the lovers would surely keep vigil together, confirming their

bond in the most elemental of ways, creating one last memory to hold against the possibility of loss. That multitude of joinings would have another salutatory effect, worshipping the Goddess they were all sworn to serve, for surely the loving of three hundred men could be nothing but pleasing in Her eyes.

Except that it would not be three hundred men. Adrastos had barely tolerated his touch in Aphrodite's temple, and then only enough to seal the charade between them. Since then, he had refused all but the most innocent of touches. In the city, with no battle threatening, that had simply meant unrelenting frustration for Erasmos. Now, though, with battle looming on the horizon, the paraibatai wondered if their charade endangered the entire army. How could Aphrodite continue to smile on them if Adrastos persisted in his refusal to honor Her? He hated the thought of being turned away yet again, but the risk to himself, to his self-esteem, was negligible when the fate of the island itself hung in the balance. He resolved to speak of his concerns with his heniochoi when they reached the battle encampment.

Memories assailed Adrastos as they arrived in the camp overlooking the harbor. Glancing quickly out to sea, he could see the small flotilla that hovered on the horizon. Athenians, he judged from their sails. Good. He would take his revenge on those who had stolen Kapaneus from him. His heart ached as he drew rein at his assigned place on the open field, gesturing for Erasmos to descend with their gear. For the first time since having a place of his own, he would set up camp without Neus at his side. If he closed his eyes, he could still see the other man's handsome face, eyes laughing at the world, lips always curved in a carefree smile, the scar on his left cheek in no way diminishing his appeal, at least not to the lover who adored him. Suppressing the memories until tomorrow, when they would strengthen his resolve rather than weakening him, Rast directed Erasmos to set up their tent while he saw to the chariot.

Erasmos made quick work of the heavy canvas, erecting the temporary shelter with ease. He had just finished setting the last stakes to hold it in place when he heard his name called. Turning, he smiled when Theri strode into view.



“Where’s Rast?” Theri asked quietly.

“He went to see to the horses,” Erasmios replied. “He hasn’t returned yet.”

“Good. I need to talk to you without him around.”

Erasmios frowned in surprise. He didn’t think the two older men had any secrets from each other. “What is it?”

“You must not let Rast refuse you tonight,” Theri directed urgently. “You must honor Aphrodite or you risk your lives, and perhaps ours as well.”

“Tell him that,” Erasmios pleaded. “He won’t listen to me.”

“You must make him listen.”

“How?” Erasmios demanded. “I’ve tried everything I can think of short of tying him down.”

“Then try that, but you must not fail this time.”

Erasmios started to protest that such a tactic would never work, but Theri was already gone, headed back toward his own tent and his own lover with whom he would honor the Goddess this night.

“Adrastos would kill me,” he muttered to himself as he stowed their gear inside the small enclosure. He pondered Theri’s words as he worked. Though he had made multiple attempts to improve the situation between Adrastos and himself, though Adrastos was clearly the one resisting, Theri’s words made it very clear where the blame would be placed if he didn’t succeed and the battle went ill tomorrow. The unfairness of the situation struck him, giving him another argument to use if Adrastos continued to be stubborn. They had undertaken this ill-conceived charade to protect others. Protecting Erasmios now might be the argument that swayed Adrastos tonight.

The sound of the general’s battle horn summoned him from his tent and his musings to take his place among the ranks. He didn’t even have to look to know when Adrastos took his place behind him.

Erasmus supposed the general's speech was rousing, encouraging his men to fight their best for the protection of the island they called home and the Goddess they lived to serve, but he didn't really hear the words. He was aware only of the man behind him, the man he had to seduce.

"Honor Aphrodite well tonight," Alexios finished. "Love your partners long and well, that She will find favor with your offerings and grant us Her blessing on the morrow!"

All around them, a cry went up, men cheering the general and his words, arms encircling their partners as they broke ranks and moved back toward their tents to fulfill their orders and sate the desires roused by impending battle.

Moving with the others back toward the encampment, Rast kept his face an impenetrable mask, not wanting anyone to see the turmoil within him. He should have expected Alexios's words, for the general gave a similar speech with similar orders before every battle, charging the men to find favor with their Patroness. He had never given those orders a second thought, needing no encouragement to spend himself in Neus's arms or, before that, to welcome his now-retired heniochoi into himself. It wasn't Neus, though, who walked at his side now, lover in truth and as eager as he. Rast didn't doubt Erasmus's eagerness, but he couldn't completely erase the memory of Neus's face, and that held him back.

"What will it take?" Erasmus asked bitterly when they entered the tent and Adrastos moved away from him rather than closer. "An order from Aphrodite herself?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Rast spat back, angry at the situation and at the boy for daring to press him so hard.

"You keep telling me that," Erasmus challenged, "but I know exactly what I'm saying. We've fooled enough people that we might get away with it, but if the battle goes against us tomorrow, Theri, Kleitos, Damianos, and Timaneus know, and they won't be able to keep silent forever. The blame will come to rest squarely on us for not

fulfilling our commitments to each other and to Aphrodite. And no one will imagine you're the one resisting. I'll be the one blamed, cast out for my sacrilege. Am I so repulsive to you that you can't bear to touch me even this one night, to protect us all?"

Repulsive had nothing to do with it, Rast admitted silently. "I made promises," he exclaimed, "promises you're asking me to break."

"You made promises to me, too," Erasmos reminded him, "the morning after my initiation."

"So we could both stay in the army."

"You swore before Aphrodite to honor Her always," Erasmos pointed out, "yet now, when we most need Her blessing, you would back away from that, claiming promises to a mortal over the ones you made to Her. You don't have to love me. You don't have to feel anything but lust for me, and then only enough to do the job. Just don't make me break my vows to Her, too."

A meaningless fuck.

That's what Erasmos was suggesting.

Rast frowned. That had never been his way. Not all of his relationships had been as deep as the one he shared with Neus, but they had never been meaningless either. Even the passionate, lust-filled initiations had meant something, served a purpose besides the plain release of sexual tension. Could he do that now? Could he simply flip the boy over and sate himself in the willing body, knowing it meant nothing more than a mechanical fulfillment of a commitment he had never wanted in the first place? Did he even have a choice?

"This changes nothing," he stated dully, reaching up to pull his tunic over his head.

If it weren't for Theri's words, for the general's order, Erasmos would have called things off right then. He wanted Adrastus – by the Gods, did he want him! – but not like this, not coerced into it. It didn't have to mean anything. It didn't have to be a sign of any great love or

devotion between them, but this felt wrong, a rape of Adrastos's spirit, if not his body. Removing his own clothes, he stretched out a hand to caress his heniochoi's cheek, trying to soften the tension between them, but Adrastos reared back. Defeated, Erasmos lowered himself to the bedrolls, bracing himself on knees and elbows, a sacrifice to the Goddess who surely reviled what they were about to do.

The sight of Erasmos's supple body on such blatant display shouldn't have had the power to rouse him, but Rast was helpless to fight the attraction he had been denying since the night of his paraibatai's initiation ceremony. That night, he had stood back and watched as his four best friends took their ease in the svelte form. Tonight, no one else would intercede with Aphrodite in his place. No one else would touch the hard planes of Erasmos's back, no one else would part the smooth buttocks or plunder the tight passage. Tonight, Erasmos would be his because military law demanded it. He took a step forward, sinking to his knees behind the delectable form.

Before he could lay a finger on the younger man, a shaft of moonlight filtered through the tent flaps to bathe Erasmos's body in its white light. Rast's breath caught in his throat, the sign reminding him that nothing between the two of them could ever truly be meaningless. Aphrodite was blessing their union. While he did not love his partner the way he should have, the Goddess herself had blessed them, taking the sting of betrayal out of his actions.

Given the argument that had led to this moment, Erasmos expected a cursory preparation and swift fucking, nothing more. He certainly didn't expect the almost tender hand that swept the length of his spine, sending tendrils of arousal through him. Silently, he chided himself. Adrastos was not a cruel man. Even now, forced into the situation, he would be kind because it was not in him to do otherwise.

Allowed finally liberties he refused to acknowledge he had imagined taking, Rast let his hands linger, learning the contours of the slighter man's body, tracing every curve and plane, learning the lines of bone and sinew. Slowly, he could feel the tension seep out of the hard muscles, Erasmos becoming more pliant as the pleasure built within

him. Rast smiled smugly. He hadn't lost his touch, apparently. He still knew how to please a lover, even one the Goddess had insisted he take.

Grabbing the oil he kept for sharpening his sword, Rast coated his fingers and slid one between the perfect hemispheres of the boy's buttocks, seeking the tight portal. A moan beneath him encouraged his attentions. Continuing to work the snug sheath, Rast slid the other hand around to fondle Erasmus's lengthening shaft. His smugness grew as the young man bucked frantically, rocking between his hands.

Erasmus bit back the words that crowded his lips, sure any declarations would be unwelcome. Instead, he expressed his appreciation in moans and gasps, letting them give voice to his pleasure. Before long, words were beyond him, all thought of duty washed away by the mind-numbing ecstasy Adrastus created within him. He knew only the burning desire to be possessed. As if reading his mind, his heniochoi withdrew his fingers, replacing them with his cock, spearing Erasmus.

Exquisite heat engulfed him as he sank within Erasmus's willing body. For the first time in many years, Rast found himself fighting for self-mastery almost before he began. Gritting his teeth, he held back his climax by force of will alone, muscles trembling against the need to thrust mindlessly into the moist passage. Beneath him, Erasmus moved instead, shattering his control. Unable to stop the rising tide of lust, he slammed forward, meeting the young man's movements, pounding into the welcoming body with the accumulated need of months of self-imposed celibacy.

Fortunately, Erasmus seemed as needy as Rast was, bucking beneath him in encouragement. In a matter of minutes, his climax was upon him. Incapable of selfishness even in these circumstances, he sped his hand on the boy's cock, hoping to bring him to release quickly.

Erasmus's orgasm ripped through him with enough force to steal the strength from his limbs. He collapsed beneath Adrastus, wave after wave of bliss washing through him as his lover found his release within his body.

He must have blacked out for a short time, because when awareness returned, he lay on his side on his bedroll, the blankets tucked carefully around him. He turned his head, searching for the older man, but the tent was empty. Too sated to worry about Adrastos's withdrawal, he shrugged and let sleep take him.

Outside, Rast breathed in the cool night air, listening to the sounds of passion from all quarters. His comrades-in-arms were all doing their part in worshipping Aphrodite. For the first time in months, the noises didn't torture him with everything he'd lost.

"Now there's a sight I'd despaired of seeing again. You look like you've had a good night."

Tima's voice brought Rast out of his reverie. "Tomorrow we fight," he replied.

Tima nodded, accepting the explanation in the spirit it was offered. "May Aphrodite protect us all."

Suddenly, it truly was that simple again. A tribute to the Goddess in exchange for Her protection on the morrow. Rast let the last of his tension fade, accepting the events of the evening in that light. Nodding his good night to Tima, he ducked back inside and settled onto his bedroll, falling asleep quickly.

EXHAUSTED, Rast collapsed onto the bedroll in his tent, his body weighed down by the long day's battle. They had won, the Athenians pushed back onto their ships, their might breaking against the steadfastness of the Kythirian army like waves against the rocks of the harbor. Perhaps a day would come when, like those rocks, the army would crumble beneath the relentless tide, but it had not happened today. For a little while longer at least, their island was safe and free.

All around him, Rast could hear the sounds of celebration mixed with the keening of those whose lovers had not survived. Tomorrow would be soon enough to count the cost. He had seen Theri

and Tima, faces unmarred by grief, and so knew that those closest to him had survived. Even more importantly, Erasmos was with him still.

He had sent the boy to fetch fresh water for washing, not so much because he could not stand the stench of battle as because he needed a few moments to compose his thoughts, to come to grips with a suddenly changed reality. Erasmos had acquitted himself honorably today, fighting with all the vigor and skill Rast had known he possessed, but skill alone was no match for the odds they had faced that day, and it had taken the combined cunning of the entire army to wear down their foes. At one point, Erasmos had fallen, caught off guard by a joint attack from a band of Athenians. He had fought bravely, but the odds were against him. Theri's shout had warned Rast in time to stop the blow that would have ended the young man's life, giving him time to scramble to his feet. Together, they had driven back the host assailing them and then gone on to other invaders, but the panic that clenched Rast's heart at the realization of how close he had come to losing Erasmos had not faded.

Theri found him after the battle ended, took one look at his face, and smiled. "So you have come to it at last."

"For all the good it does me," Rast replied harshly. "He surely must hate me, especially after last night."

"That boy could not hate you if he tried," Theri laughed, his eyes daring Rast to contradict him.

"This is not like with Neus," Rast admitted slowly. "Never did I feel beside him in battle the fear I knew today when I saw Erasmos so hounded, and not because Neus never landed himself in trouble."

Theri nodded. "He is young still, but he will be a far more able soldier than Neus ever was."

"And much in demand for his guidance because of it," Rast added bitterly. "I kept Neus at my side, but I'll never manage that with Erasmos. A few years at the most and I'll lose him."

“Tomorrow is not promised to any of us,” Theri reminded his friend, “but if you truly cannot bear the thought of it, there are ways to arrange it with honor once this year is out.”

“For myself, yes,” Rast agreed, knowing that while he could still fight for some years if he chose, his service was long enough to allow him to retire with honor and enough wealth to establish a household, “but Erasmus has only just begun his career. To ask him to give that up now would be selfish.”

“To force him to give it up would be selfish,” Theri contradicted. “But it would be equally selfish to give him no choice at all.” He hesitated only a moment before revealing the secret he had kept close to his chest since the night of Erasmus’s initiation. “Aphrodite made Her blessing known the night you bound yourself to Erasmus, not only in the fact that he rose from the altar to come to you. Before we withdrew, moonlight shown down upon you both.”

“The temple roof is built so that it can,” Rast reminded him.

“The moon had already set when we went outside.”

The implication of those words had rocked him to the core of his being, his very belief in a benevolent Goddess who looked out for the soldiers on the island of Her birth. If he doubted such an obvious sign, if he challenged his fate, he challenged everything he had spent his life fighting to protect.

So he bided his time, head bowed in repentance for his stubbornness, hoping he had not spoiled his chances with the partner Aphrodite herself had chosen for him. Would Erasmus accept him, his declarations, now after he had spent months pushing the younger man away? He had given in last night, given his paraibatai what he asked for, taking him in a moment of great lust but no emotion. If his partner would give him the chance, he would reverse that tonight, giving free rein to his emotion while keeping his passions firmly in check until Erasmus had no choice but to believe his sincerity.

If only Erasmus gave him the chance.



Hearing familiar footsteps outside, he sent one last beseeching prayer winging toward the heavens before rising to his feet and opening the flap to welcome Erasmos inside. He took the ewer from the younger man, his fingers brushing softly across the back of one bloodied hand.

“Sit,” Rast encouraged gently. “Let me see to your injuries.”

“Should I not see to yours first?” Erasmos questioned, all too aware of his subservient position.

“I am well,” Rast shrugged easily, “though a bath will not go amiss when I have finished taking care of you.”

Erasmos marveled at the sudden change in his *heniochoi*, but he didn’t question further. If Adrastos wanted to do this, he wouldn’t stop him, not when it resulted in the man’s hands upon him again. And maybe, when he was finished, he would let Erasmos help him bathe.

With caring hands, Rast washed away the blood marring his *paraibatai*’s smooth skin, relieved to see that most of it seemed to have no ready source, making it the blood of their foes. Those rents and slices he found, he sluiced clean before applying a healing ointment. Fortunately, none seemed serious enough to warrant further binding, though the one across the younger man’s shoulder would probably leave a scar. “Your first mark of honor,” he observed as he anointed it a second time, making sure it was completely coated.

When he was finished, Rast set the cloth aside, drinking in the sight of the young man in all his glory. Taking both hands in his, he drew Erasmos to the bedroll they had shared the night before. “I did you a disservice last night,” he began, tightening his grip when Erasmos started to pull away. “I let you believe I felt nothing for you but the lust all men feel in the buildup to battle.”

Erasmos’s heart leapt at the words. “Does that mean...?” he began, trailing off uncertainly, not wanting to read too much into Adrastos’s statement.

“It means I want you for my lover in truth,” Rast finished. “It means I want you in my bed and in my life. You have already claimed your place in my heart. You dragged me back to the living, kicking and screaming the whole way. You restored me to myself and I find that I can’t bear the thought now of going on without you.”

“I don’t want you to go on without me,” Erasmos declared, his fingers turning within Adrastos’s so that they could tangle together. “As for the rest, I wanted you the moment I laid eyes on you, and nothing could ever change that.”

Rast’s smile lit his face from within. “Let me love you properly,” he requested, “the way you deserve.”

Erasmos laughed in delight. “If I agree, you will think I didn’t appreciate your attentions last night, when I most certainly did.”

Rast shook his head. “Let me show you how much more there is,” he urged. He knew Erasmos was not inexperienced – no man came to adulthood completely unschooled in the arts of love – but he suspected it had always been about physical pleasure and never about the emotions coursing through them now. “Let me show you what it is to give and receive such pleasure with love.”

Erasmos trembled at the provocative words, everything in him going liquid hot at the thought of being touched again, this time in love. He had heard the songs, the poems, the tales the poets told of love. He worshipped the Goddess of love, but he knew now, looking into the eyes of love, that he had never truly understood its power.

Until now.

In Adrastos’s eyes, he read the promise of forever, a devotion to last the rest of their days, a devotion that echoed in his heart. Slowly, he nodded, lying back on the bedroll, legs parted in offering.

Rast shook his head again. “Not yet,” he chided gently, taking Erasmos’s hand and pulling him back up to sitting. “There are so many other things I want to do first.”

The husky tone in his lover's voice sent shivers down Erasmus's back. He thought he knew the ways of pleasure, but the promise in Adrastos's eyes made him wonder if he knew anything at all.

Rast leaned forward and brushed his lips tenderly over the bow-shaped mouth that had haunted his dreams these many months despite his constant denial of the attraction. The tender flesh parted immediately, beckoning to him. It would have been so easy to give in, to ravish the warm mouth as he had ravished Erasmus's willing body the night before, but this was no longer about ravishment, but about consecrating the bond they had sworn months before.

Keeping his kisses whisper soft, Rast lifted his hands to Erasmus's beloved face, feeling the rasp of stubble beneath his fingertips as he stroked tenderly across his lover's jaw and up to his cheeks. "Close your eyes and just feel," he instructed softly, letting his fingers trail across the slanted lids, encouraging them to follow his direction.

Erasmus's eyes drifted shut, the sudden darkness heightening his other senses as he anticipated the next tender caress. "Adrastos," he sighed.

"Rast," the older man corrected.

"Rast," Erasmus repeated reverently, the diminutive more intimate than all that had passed between them to date.

Rast trembled in turn at hearing his name on his lover's lips. It had been eight months since he'd heard his name whispered so passionately, eight months since a lover had gazed at him adoringly, as if he could do no wrong. Perhaps in this sphere, he couldn't. Erasmus had already made it clear that he had enjoyed even the emotionless romp the night before. How could their lovemaking today, imbued with the emotion they had finally admitted, be any less? Sliding his fingers down the long neck and across the once delicate shoulders, he admired the line of muscle and bone, stronger now, broader and more pronounced, a tribute to two months of hard training. Erasmus was

beautiful. There was no other way to describe him, and he said so as he bent his head and nipped at the younger man's collarbone.

Erasmus's denial died on his lips as Rast licked and nipped at the smooth skin of his chest. If one of them was beautiful, it was the older man, sculpted body hard from years of soldiering, skin dark from a life lived outdoors, everything about him chiseled to perfection, and beneath that solidity a heart strong enough to stay faithful and tender enough to love again.

Unable to resist the temptation to touch any longer, Erasmus slid his fingers into his lover's short-cropped dark hair, not to guide but simply to express his appreciation for the man before him and for the attentions Rast was lavishing on his eager flesh. Lying back, he urged Rast to move over him, the rough fabric of his fighting tunic rubbing deliciously against overly sensitive skin.

Wanting to touch more than just his lover's hair, Erasmus burrowed his fingers between their bodies, searching for the ties that held the tunic in place. Finding them, he stripped the offending cloth away quickly, baring his lover from the waist up. Eagerly, he explored the revealed skin. He knew it by sight, having studied his heniochoi from the first night, learning every inch of skin, every dip and curve of muscle, every scar, but only now did he have the right to touch.

Rast caught his hands. "I'm a bloody mess," he temporized, not trusting himself to hold back if Erasmus began touching him in earnest. It had been so long since he'd felt a loving caress. His heart was as desperate as his body, and while he had learned self-mastery on a physical plane some years ago, he had never been proof against his heart.

"That can be remedied," Erasmus husked, rolling to his side and reaching for the abandoned ewer and cloth. "Let me tend to you as you tended to me."

Rast knew before Erasmus's hands ever touched him that this would bring his plans to naught, but he couldn't deny his lover anything, he discovered, so he set himself to endure, telling himself to

think of the fighting that day, of the carnage that had surrounded them before the Athenians finally retreated, of anything that would take his mind off the temptation of his paraibatai's fingers caressing him as they wielded the cloth to maximum effect. He told himself to think of other things, but he quickly realized such a task was hopeless. No amount of self-discipline was proof against the temptation of his lover's hands. He held on as long as he could, but when he felt his control slipping, he grabbed the cloth. "Enough," he growled. "If you keep that up, I'll be no good to you later."

Erasmus's grin challenged that statement. "I'd just have to make you ready again," he teased, his hand snaking toward Rast's groin. To his disappointment, his lover stopped him with a firm shake of his head and firmer grip on his wrist.

"Another time."

Erasmus relented at the reminder that he didn't have to squeeze every experience into this one encounter. They were bonded in the eyes of the Gods and men, and soon they would be one in truth as well. He could wait until later to bring Rast undone with his hands or lips or any other way that struck his fancy.

"Lie back," Rast urged, hands moving over Erasmus's body again, seeking sensitive places to add to his lover's arousal. The coppery disks beckoned, and Rast gave in to their enticement eagerly, surprising a heavy gasp of pleasure from his partner. He wondered briefly if he could make Erasmus climax simply from lavishing attention on the wide nipples. It was a tempting thought, but he put it aside for later. His own body would never stand for that kind of torture now.

Given the way Erasmus twisted and pleaded beneath him, Rast suspected the other man wouldn't be able to take much more either. He had thought to draw out their first lovemaking, spending hours showing Erasmus how much he was loved, but the fear earlier in the day and the lingering adrenaline seemed to have other plans for both of them. Reaching for the oil, Rast coated his fingers quickly, his palm ghosting across Erasmus's erection on the way to other treasures.

He took great delight in Erasmos's responsiveness, lingering over the pendant sac, rolling it in his hand gently as his lover's hips bucked up into his hand.

"Gods," Erasmos moaned, head thrashing back and forth on the bedroll, "what are you waiting for?"

Rast smiled and leaned forward, kissing his lover lightly. "For you to lose your mind."

Erasmos was pretty sure it had disappeared the moment Rast first touched him, and he said so, much to his lover's apparent glee. Erasmos wondered if it was such a good idea, letting the heniochoi know how completely he stole the younger man's wits, but he decided it wasn't any real secret anyway, not given his body's reactions.

Rast moved his hand lower, finding the entrance he sought. Erasmos spread his legs wider in welcome, every gasp and moan a goad to Rast's desires. As quickly as care would allow, he prepared the tight ingress, stretching it thoroughly. He wanted no pain to interfere with their mating. Finding the bundle of nerves within the snug passage, he teased it mercilessly, until Erasmos was begging incoherently.

Judging that his lover had indeed lost his mind, Rast slid his fingers out and aligned the head of his cock with the loosened portal. "Now we worship Aphrodite in truth," he murmured, all too aware of his failure in that respect the last two months.

"Make me yours."

It was a plea Rast couldn't have resisted even if he'd wanted to. Since granting it fulfilled his own greatest desire, he pressed forward, joining their bodies, their hearts, and their lives with one long, inexorable stroke. Erasmos arched beneath him, but a quick glance at his face revealed only passion and pleasure. Reassured, Rast paused only a moment to assure his own control before taking up a determined rhythm of thrust and withdrawal intended to bring them both bliss.

It didn't take long for either of them to give themselves over to the passion controlling them, sending them spiraling into ecstasy, limbs as entwined as their hearts. Lying together still in the aftermath, the rustling of the tent flaps drew Rast's attention. The wind stilled, leaving the fabric parted slightly, allowing a single shaft of moonlight to enter and bathe them in its cool beam. Rast shivered slightly.

"You can't possibly be cold," Erasmos murmured groggily from his place against his lover's chest.

"No," Rast agreed, "just grateful Aphrodite takes as much care of us as Ares does."

GENTLY, reverently, Rast unfastened the torque around Erasmos's neck. His initial year of training was over, his life now his own, though it would be some years before any general would consider him experienced enough to take a paraibatai of his own. He slipped the gold band into the satchel he carried, not wanting anything to happen to it. That period in their lives was finished, but Rast would treasure the memories – and the symbol – of it for the rest of his life.

"I'll miss it," Erasmos said quietly as he watched Rast's careful gestures

"The army or the torque?" Rast asked, looking up in surprise. They'd discussed this course of action repeatedly over the last ten months. Everything was in place to open the school for boys whose families could not afford private military training. They had the support of the generals who understood that the Athenians would not simply give up and go away, but would keep returning in greater and greater numbers. Three hundred would not be enough for long, and while the generals hadn't wanted to lose two experienced soldiers, at least this way, they would still have their expertise if not their swords.

The lovers had debated their decision through many long nights, but while they would face any danger willingly, even going into battle still if the time came when the army alone could not defend the island,

they wanted a chance at a life together, something the structure of the army simply could not give them.

“The torque.”

“Just because it isn’t proclaimed around your neck any more doesn’t make you less mine,” Rast reminded him. “It just means we make our next vows as equals.”

“I’m ready.”

Rast took the younger man’s hand and together they walked the final few steps into the sacred grove that sheltered the tomb of Iolaus, beloved companion of the greatest of all Greek warriors. Kneeling before the marble sepulcher, they clasped right arms in the manner of fellow warriors and left hands in the manner of lovers. The vows they spoke were simple, binding their lives and hearts to one another not simply as warrior brothers, but as lovers, partners in all that life would bring them.



Ariel Tachna lives in southwestern Ohio with her husband, her daughter and son, and their cat. A native of the region, she has nonetheless lived all over the world, having fallen in love with both France, where she found her career and her husband, and India, where she dreams of retiring some day. She started writing when she was 12 and hasn't looked back since. A connoisseur of wine and horses, she's as comfortable on a farm as she is in the big cities of the world.



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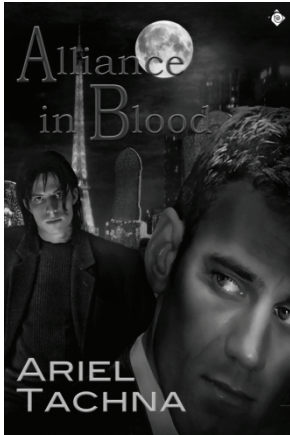
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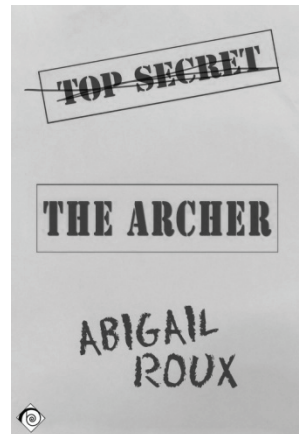
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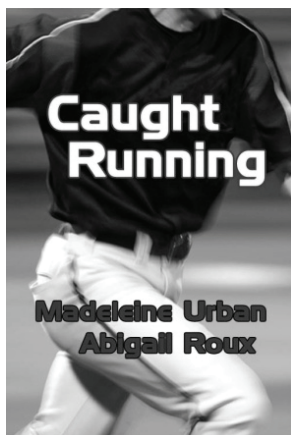
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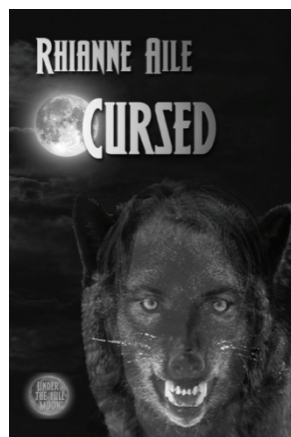
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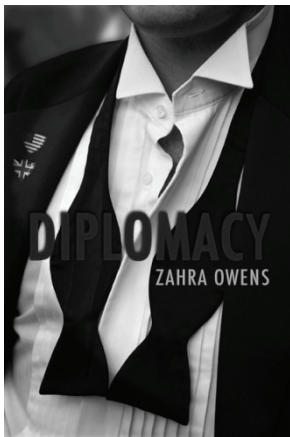
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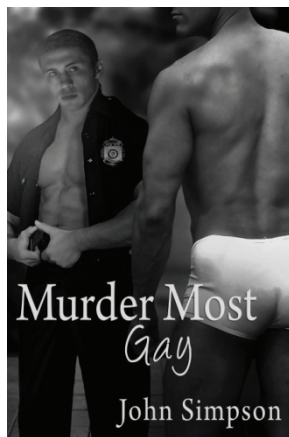
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Overseer Nicolas Wells had been coming to Mount Desert Island for ten summers to help build cottages for the rich and powerful. Despite his secrets, he had grown comfortable in the peaceful little island town, getting to know its inhabitants and even to consider some of them friends. The eleventh year, however, he arrived to startling news: the island's peace had been shattered by a murder. At the request of the sheriff, Shawn Parnell, Nicolas agreed to hire Philip Hall, the local blacksmith and the probable next victim, in the hope that the secure construction site would be safer than his house in the village. He never expected the decision to lead to danger. Or to love.

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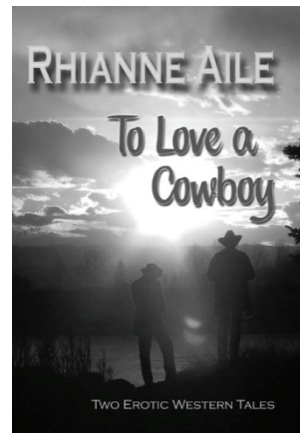
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Seven years ago, Roan Bucklin left the family ranch for college, leaving foreman Patrick Lassiter with a mix of sweltering emotions: relief, regret, and nearly overwhelming desire. Afraid that Roan would regret giving himself to an older man, Patrick let him go without a word about his true feelings. But Roan took Patrick's heart with him.

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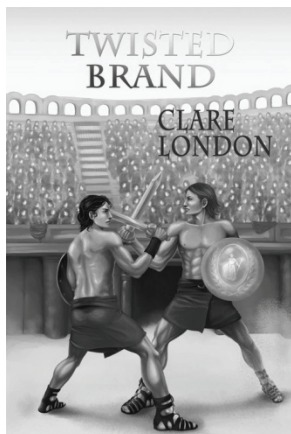
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