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This story takes place three weeks after the episode THE XENA SCROLLS.

Is There A Doctor On The Dig?

By

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1997

Chapter 1: Student Bodies

“Dr. Covington, how many sites have uncovered physical evidence of Xena the Warrior Princess?”

Janice Covington smiled patiently. The eager anthropology and archeology students were in no short supply since the discovery of the Xena Scrolls. Word traveled quickly, and only two weeks back in the states already saw the now famed archeologist guest lecturing in the very halls that had once defiled the name of her father.

She paced a moment, forcing herself to appear relaxed in gray pumps that were anything but relaxing. “Seven sites have revealed hard evidence thus far, it is possible I may uncover more.” Before turning to the next upraised hand, Janice paused a moment to enjoy the lovely blue eyes of the petite blond that had asked the question. “Thank you for your question.” She added softly, noting the bashful blush of the young co-ed as she sat down.

“And where are these artifacts now?” A young man asked, before being called upon. Janice turned to him, irritated, just as the class bell sounded.

“I’m sorry that is all the good doctor has time for now,” said Professor Solon as he quickly scribbled on the black board. “Chapters four through six for next time, have your questions ready.” As the students filed out, many paused to shake Dr. Covington’s hand and congratulate her on her discovery.

Janice accepted the attention graciously, all the while counting the minutes until she could get home and change out of the uncomfortable skirt and pantyhose. Still, this was a part of archeology too; the schmoozing and connection making that funded research projects in a manner more appropriate than Harry Covington’s.

“It was a wonderful talk Doctor,” the pretty blond said, when she reached the front of the line.

“Thank you...”

“Flora, my name’s Flora Gates.” The woman gushed, forgetting to let go of Janice’s hand.

Janice didn’t mind, and let her hold it. “Well then, thank you Flora Gates.”

Other people behind the student were beginning to push so she continued in a rush. “If you ever take research students on your digs... well... here’s my number, I’d be interested.” The last was said with an inflection Janice knew was unmistakable.

“We’ll see about that.” She replied accepting the phone number with a gleam in her eye.

Janice crossed the campus parking lot quickly, easily locating her beat up Ford pickup truck. “How ya doin’ Argo?” She called to the large dog sitting behind the wheel. Argo stuck her head out the door, greeting Dr. Covington with a sloppy kiss. “Okay, okay girl.” Janice laughed. “Now move over, you know you can’t drive.”

“Dr. Covington!” A familiar voice shouted from nearby.

Janice grimaced as she turned around, she knew that voice. “What is it Sal?” She asked, forcing herself to remain patient.

Salvador Monious gasped for air, the short run across parking lot having taxed his limited physical resources. The museum curator, Sal Monious was a necessary friend, even if he was incorrigible, unreliable and completely self serving. “There’s a problem,” he gasped, “the scrolls that Jack Kleinman was returning from New Jersey,” he gasped again, this time

leaning on Janice's truck. "They've been intercepted. Someone matching the description of Dr. Callisandra Leesto picked them up..."

"Cal..." Janice muttered under her breath, furious. "Wait a minute. I told you to get those scrolls picked up personally. Are you saying you had Jack, the idiot *mail* them?!"

Sal clearly looked nervous and uncomfortable. "Well it's cheaper that way. With the money we saved we could do a much nicer display in the museum."

"If you get your display at all." Janice retorted.

"Well I was hoping you'd help us get them back." He looked around to see if anyone was listening. "I was hoping the museum wouldn't have to hear about the mix up. I'd be willing to personally finance the recovery of the scrolls, if you'd keep it quiet."

Janice smiled, "Oh you'll finance it alright, and don't worry about keeping it quiet. I don't want to let anyone know I trusted *you* to get something important done right."

"I'd be willing to pay as much as..." As if on cue an ominous growl issued from Argo's throat. Ninety five pounds of canine hostility were a bit much for the befuddled curator. "Whatever it costs, of course." Instantly the dog went back to contented panting.

Nodding, Janice opened the door to her truck. "Good. I'll call you tonight with what I need. I'll leave first thing in the morning." Fumbling in her pocket, Janice extracted three items. Her keys, which she put into the ignition and started up the truck. As she backed up, out of sight of the curator she handed Argo a dog biscuit. "Good work girl."

The third item, the phone number of Flora Gates, Janice held briefly. With a sigh she put it back in her pocket. "Maybe another time Flora," she whispered under her breath. Argo cocked her head quizzically, but remained silent.

No sooner had Janice returned home and deposited her mail, when a knock sounded on her front door. Kicking off her pumps she quickly poured herself a scotch, and headed to the door. "Just a minute...Mel, what are you doing here?" There she was, standing at her front door, Melinda Pappas: Descendent of Xena. Janice downed her whiskey in one gulp. "At the airport in Macedonia you said you had to go, things to do." Janice hoped that the supreme hurt she felt was not apparent in her voice.

"And that's just what I did. I rushed straight home, put my affairs in order, got the next plane out of South Carolina, and well," she shrugged in a manner Janice found totally disarming, "here I am."

Stunned, Janice turned around and headed for the living room intent on another drink. Taking that as a signal to make herself at home Mel entered the tiny house, returning for two trips to get all of her luggage. Janice' mind was swimming. At first repulsed by the wealthy southern aristocrat, then intrigued by the descendant of Xena, Melinda Pappas had occupied the archeologist's thoughts frequently since they parted company. Frequently, to Janice' surprise, while she was in bed. Janice didn't usually find herself attracted to dark haired women taller than herself, but there was no denying Melinda Pappas was magnificently attractive.

"And I must say, why Janice I've never seen you looking so fem... Oh, my!" Mel gasped, as Argo padded out of the kitchen, "what on earth is that?"

"That," Janice explained as she made her single whiskey a double, "is a *she* and *her* name is Argo."

"Oh, I get it," Mel smiled, "after Xena's horse. So what kind of dog is she?"

"She's Golden Retriever and Alsatian."

"Funny," Mel commented, "looks like Retriever and German Shepherd to me."

With that a low rumble erupted from the dog's throat and her hackles went up. She began to advance menacingly on the visitor. Mel quickly ducked behind Janice who quieted the dog with a hand signal. "Argo prefers the term Alsatian, which is the same thing as German Shepherd. She's as upset about the war as anyone else."

“My mistake,” Mel said with a slight curtsy to the dog who wagged her tail forgivingly.

“You said Xena’s horse was named Argo. How do you know that?” Janice asked, handing Mel a glass of ginger ale.

“Why I’m sure we saw it in one of the scrolls...” Mel started to look off into the distance.

“It was not on any of the scrolls that we got the opportunity to read.” Janice was still furious that her stupid mix up had wrecked this much havoc in the world of priceless antiquities. She well knew what Dr. Cal Leesto would do to them. They would be auctioned off to the highest bidder and sent to all four corners of the globe, never to see the light of research.

“Well you know Janice, I’ve been having the oddest dreams since that thing happened out there in Macedonia. Almost like I’m reliving Xena’s dreams, it’s so strange.” Melinda watched Janice’s sad nod and was instantly sorry she brought it up. She remembered what Xena had said to the archeologist while in possession of her body, and the tremors of emotion she had felt at the sight of Gabrielle’s descendant. Still, Janice Covington seemed to cling to the belief that the bard was excess baggage in the lore of Xena and less than worthy of historical note. Melinda wasn’t sure how she would do it, but she had to do something to change the doctor’s mind.

“So, what’s our first adventure?” She asked in an attempt to change the subject.

“Tomorrow I’m leaving to go after the scrolls, they’ve been stolen by a doctor unethical enough to make my dad look saintly. You, should head back home.”

“Now you stop right there, Dr. Janice Covington, I took care of my business back home so we could be partners. Don’t think for a moment that I’ll calmly sit here and let y’all walk off... now iffin you’re going after the scrolls, then I’m a-goin’ with you.” To make her point she sat down on the couch, crossed her legs, took a sip of soda and glared at Janice with a look intended to make clear that she’d just made herself quite at home. To complete the picture Argo walked over and laid down on the floor, resting her head on Mel’s foot.

“Oh, I get it.” Janice observed, “two against one. Fine. Stay. If you don’t mind I’m going to take a bath and go to bed.” With that, Janice took off her jacket, casually tossed it across the arm of the living room chair and stalked off towards the bathroom.

“Okay, so her manners need work.” Mel muttered to Argo as she scratched the dog behind her big floppy ears. But she has potential.” Sipping her drink Melinda began a casual survey of the doctor’s living room. The furnishings were sparse, antique but well cared for. The main living room was dominated by book shelves that went from floor to ceiling. Book after book about history, archeology, science and mythology were everywhere. Several stacks of books rested on the huge oak desk near the fire place and several more stacks were on the floor nearby.

Something on the desk caught Mel’s eye. Almost transfixed she reached out and picked up a piece of tattered leather. A torn section of forearm bracer, bronze metal work still nailed to the outer surface. “My bracer...” Mel whispered slipping the cuff on and noting the perfect fit despite the age of the cracked garment. Also on the table was a worn notebook, several strips of leather thong and a metal hair clasp. Melinda sat down quickly as the rush of memory made her head swim. In a flash of memory she could see the metal clasp in Gabrielle’s hand as the bard fixed her hair. Then she saw the leather thong in her own hand as she clumsily tried to return the favor the bard, her love. A whining brought her out of her reverie and she looked down into soft brown eyes, looking back, worried. “It’s okay Argo, I’m alright.”

Still unsure, the dog nudged Melinda out of the chair, away from the artifacts. “You’re right, I should just get some sleep.” Absently she touched the notebook and hair things. Then embarrassed, she blushed as she thought about the dreams she hoped she would encounter.

Dreams she'd had every night since leaving Macedonia.

Picking up her lightest bag, Mel looked for the guest bedroom. Finding a door she thought was correct, she tested the handle. It was unlocked so she opened it. There, looking more than a little annoyed, was Dr. Janice Covington naked in a bathtub, smoking.

"Do you mind?" Janice asked, making no attempt to cover her quite exposed body.

"Um... well. I'm so sorry Janice. Y'all didn't tell me where your spare bedroom is."

Mel did her best to look anywhere but at the naked, muscular form of the relining archeologist.

"There is no spare bedroom sweetheart, take the bed or the couch. It makes no difference to me."

"Pardon me." Mel said, backing out of the bathroom. She paused for a moment down the hall to get her bearings. She felt warm and flustered after her encounter. "Must be the dreams." She muttered to herself.

Deciding to take the couch she headed back into the living room. The couch however was now occupied by Argo, who did not look like she was in any mood to move. In fact, with her head down the dog would only follow Mel's "get down" gestures with her eyes, declining to even lift her head. "Well I'll just let Janice deal with you then." Mel decided, turning her back on the dog and heading to the bedroom. Again she felt dizzy as soon as she walked into the room. Mel closed her eyes a moment trying to figure out what it was. There was a very comforting smell to this room. She looked at the dresser and saw a bowl of lavender buds. There was also a faint scent of leather to the room as well. On a nightstand by one side of the bed was an old tiffany lamp with a dragon fly design and several books. Melinda paused to read the spines. "*The Past Life Experience, Genetic Memory, Know Your Other Selves, Lifetimes From Beyond The Grave, and Regression Therapy.* Pretty out there stuff Dr. Covington." Feeling a bit like an intruder she got into bed on the opposite side.

Settled in between the sheets, she was ready to drift off to sleep when Janice strolled in. Dressed in nothing but a man's long sleeved shirt, Mel was startled by the racing of her pulse. She tried looking at the floor but bare feet led to strong calves attached to muscular thighs and shirt tails that rode up to a delicate hip. "Well you said it didn't matter where, and the dog was on the couch," she stammered as Janice walked around to the other side of the bed. Melinda was sure she'd faint as she pulled the covers back.

"Mel, this is my house. I'm not about to sleep on the couch. You're fine here. I don't bite." Then, with a wicked grin added, "unless you ask really nicely."

"Why that is right neighborly of you Doctor Covington." Mel shot back with equal sarcasm, "G'night."

"G'night Miss Pappas." Janice replied with a wry grin.

...From the moment Gabrielle put the ambrosia to my lips and I regained consciousness I don't think I'd ever felt such joy. I'm sure I smiled more in those next few hours than I had in my entire adult life up to that point. I suppose I should have felt some sadness. After all, the changes I'd made in my life were not enough to keep me out of Tartarus, but I didn't care. The thought that I may never see the Elysian Fields mattered little. In life I was reunited with Gabrielle and next to that, the Elysian Fields paled in comparison.

"*When you think of the dead, the dead can bear your thoughts.*" While I can attest to the accuracy of that statement, it does not in any way imply the impact of hearing the thoughts of the living from the other side. Even in her profound sadness Gabrielle was a source of comfort and support for me. Her unwillingness to give me up added fuel to the fire of my resolve. While there was nothing I could do from the other side to return the kindness, reunited with my body I could and would rectify that situation.

After saying our goodbyes to Autolycus we retired for the night to the Amazon village. We did not know of Velaska's condition and celebrated that our troubles were, for the

moment, over. Ephiny insisted that Gabrielle and I stay in her home while she stayed at a friend's with her son. Her hut was away from the main body of the village and for that I was grateful. I tried to meet the curious stares of the other amazon's with good grace but I was still unused the sensations of life from death and tired quickly. Gabrielle stayed in the main lodge a while longer than I. Knowing her she thanked every one who supported her for their loyalty, further endearing herself in their hearts.

I wandered around Ephiny's house for a bit feeling oddly nervous. Something had happened between me and Gabrielle and every fiber in my being hoped that things would go forward, not back. In Autolycus's body I responded to the sound of the bard's voice with a passion that could not be curbed. I had to speak to her, reassure her. Since my death, her thoughts of love and devotion had wrapped around my soul like a warm blanket. I knew well the things she wanted to tell me but couldn't and her thoughts mirrored the beating of my own heart. I suppose that was why I kissed her. Something I had dreamt about doing in life but lacked the courage to follow through. Knowing now how she felt, I couldn't stop myself. And her lips, her lips were every bit as soft and responsive as I'd remembered. I did not think I could ever feel that close to anyone, that was until I entered her body.

Although that experience was brief, and consumed by the fight with Valaska, I felt a connection to Gabrielle I doubted I'd ever be able to duplicate. Doubted, but I was determined to try. So there I stood, leaning against a window listening to the sounds of night, watching the moon and feeling every bit as nervous as a newlywed on her wedding night.

I felt Gabrielle's presence by the door before I heard her. "Sorry that took so long," she said as she entered carrying a cluttered tray.

"Answer a lot of questions?" I asked as she put the tray down on the table. I couldn't keep from smiling at her, my heart brimming with the joy of seeing her with my own eyes.

"Not a lot of questions, just the same ones repeatedly." She replied handing me a steaming mug. I inhaled the steam, relaxing in the fragrance of the special amazon mead, spiced with cinnamon and cloves. Gabrielle took a sip from her own mug and then came to stand near me by the window.

"I missed you so much Xena," she said quietly. I put my mug down and wrapped my arms around her, holding her close. Since my return it was all I could do not to touch her constantly. I think she felt the same, since until the moment I retired for the night she hadn't left my side since I woke up.

"Me too." I said tightly, trying for the hundredth time that night not to cry.

She tipped her head up and looked at me. Slowly, I lowered my head and gently covered her lips with my own. Sadly that sweet kiss was broken by the huge grin that spread across my face. I opened my eyes to see Gabrielle smiling too.

"Much better without the moustache." She commented, immeasurably alleviating my nervousness.

"I'm glad you think so too." I murmured.

She stepped away from me and her cheeks began to flush pink. "What is it?" I asked. She chuckled and answered. "I'd like to get this stuff off," she said indicating her amazon outfit, "but I'm not the one that put it on..."

"Say no more my princess, I'm here to serve." I replied, moving to help her with the armor.

"Ah, that's 'Queen' Xena. I'm Queen now," she countered with mild reproach.

"That's right." I agreed, slipping the bracers from her arms. "You outrank me now."

She giggled at that as I stooped to take off her boots. "Your oversight can be forgiven," she replied regally, "as long as it doesn't happen again." I felt her hand on the top of my head gently caressing my hair as I worked on the laces. I sighed in pleasure as I gently caressed her thigh and calf before pulling off the boot.

"I will endeavor to remember," I said as I removed the other boot. Stepping behind Gabrielle I unhooked the clasps that held her top in place. Before I could touch her however she slipped on a sleeping shift and eased out of her skirt. I didn't mind, for us it was no longer a matter of *if* but *when*. We embraced again then she slipped behind me and began to undo my armor. "I didn't think Amazon Queens had to do that." I said.

"This queen is not about to let anyone else do it. Face it, you're stuck with me Xena." The words were like a sirens song to my ears. Gabrielle's voice became more serious when she asked how I was feeling. I seriously considered the question for a moment.

"I don't know how one is supposed to feel after a resurrection, but I feel fine. A little stiff maybe, but who wouldn't be after spending time in a sarcophagus?"

"I thought as much." She replied after helping me out of my leathers. "Ephiny gave me some mint oil to sooth the soreness. Lay down on the bed and I'll rub it in." After getting my boots off I laid down as instructed. I heard Gabrielle take something off the tray as she moved to the bed. I smiled anew as I felt her comforting weight settle on my backside. I could feel her doing something then heard the sounds as she rubbed her hands together. Next I felt the delicious sensation of warmth and softness as she rubbed the oil into the skin of my back.

For long minutes she massaged my upper back and arms then began to work her way downward providing each area of my body with thorough attention. I was in a state of supreme bliss as I felt her shift and work on my lower back and backside. In time she began to move lower and massage my legs and feet. "Gabrielle, that feels wonderful," I murmured.

"Yes, yes it does." She replied, "roll over and let's do the other side." I complied and looked up into shining green eyes as she straddled my hips. "I meant what I said about never dying again," she said conversationally as she poured a small amount of oil into her hands.

"Good. I meant what I said about not dying," I replied as she rubbed her hands together. I watched her as she lowered her hands to my chest gently massaged my shoulders and arms before moving to my breasts. While her touch was not overtly sexual it was intensely sensual and I felt myself begin to melt under her strong hands. She continued to work, focusing on my body, working the healing oil into the skin of my stomach and legs. When she was done her touch became softer, simply exploring the contours of my body. I watched her for a time, looked at her as she looked at me. It was when I felt the wetness from her body as she moved against me that I had to act.

I didn't consider asking if it was alright, if it was what she wanted. We had shared enough since my death to know exactly how we felt and that this was what had to be, for both of us. I began to run my hands over the tops of her thighs, lightly trailing my fingers down the inside as she continued to explore my body with her hands. She gasped in pleasure then looked down at me, green eyes hungry.

I began to trace the contours of her body from the outside of her shift. Delighting in the slide of the smooth cloth against her skin, happy at her response. Slowly she lowered herself to my waiting mouth and we shared a kiss that deepened as our smoldering desire ignited into an inferno. Her tongue was like velvet as she sought out the secrets of my mouth. I held nothing back from her, how could I? She shared her body and mind with me without reservation. I wanted her to know me as intimately as I knew her.

I feathered kisses down the length of her throat, delighting in the feel of a heartbeat that I knew so well. "Yes." she panted and I could feel the vibrations through her throat against my lips. It was wonderful. Holding her tightly, I rolled over. Supporting my weight with my arms I looked down into what was easily the most radiant face I'd ever seen. Eyes beaming, she smiled up at me and traced a gentle finger down my cheek. Slowly I lowered myself until my lips were just inches from Gabrielle's. With a smile we both uttered the words "I love you" at the same time. We shared a laugh at that, then desire claiming us once more continued the utterances of love without using words. The reality of making love to Gabrielle far surpassed even my wildest fantasies. To me, she was perfect in every way. With a slow

deliberate touch I eased the sleeping shift over her head, sighing happily as I felt her warm skin against my own.

With strong hands she held my head over her breast as my tongue wreaked havoc with her nipple, even as her body writhed beneath mine. I noticed a small area of skin, so white it was almost translucent. "What's this?" I asked.

"Where the ambrosia landed" she replied through heavy breaths as I slowly moved against her. When I kissed that white patch of skin she cried out in pleasure, fingertips grazing across my back. I could feel the dampness increase on my thigh as it rested between her legs. Feeling her excitement building, I eased my body down, her thighs spreading wide to accommodate my broad shoulders. Her hands trailed lightly over my back, coming to rest again against my head. She removed them briefly as she watched me lower my lips to her center then threw her head back into the pillow with a groan of "yesssss" as I began to feast. She was so soft, warm and wet and I could feel every movement I made reverberate through her entire body. I lapped at her softly and gently until she began to buck against my face driving me deeper and harder. As my tongue caressed then consumed her swollen bud I heard her cry of rapture. The trust and connection I felt at her loss of control was indeed akin to the connection I felt inside her body.

Gabrielle and I would be forever connected and we both knew it, and rejoiced in that knowledge. That night she opened up feelings in me I didn't know I had. I suppose she'd been doing it all along. First she taught me the true meaning of friendship, then a deeper understanding of love. There was nothing I wouldn't do for Gabrielle, nothing we wouldn't do for each other. And that night, that perfect night with the moon shining in the window we did everything...

Chapter 2: The Fear of Flying

"Come on Mel, wake up!" A not so gentle hand shook Melinda Pappas' shoulder.

"Wha... what?" she asked, groggy.

"The big adventure, remember? If you want to help me get the scrolls back, be ready to go in one hour." Janice was about to return to her packing then looked at Melinda critically. "Are you okay? You look kind of disoriented." Janice stood across the bed from Mel, dressed in her khaki pants and an undershirt over her bra. Mel gazed at her relaxed muscular form then glanced down at the bed covers, embarrassed.

"I... I was having a dream." Melinda replied with a blush.

"Sounded like a good one." Janice smiled as she began to rummage through her drawer for a shirt.

"Yes, um, well. So, where are we off to?"

Janice shrugged into a khaki shirt, tucking it into the waist of her pants then extracted a revolver from her sock drawer. After checking to make sure it was loaded, she spun it skillfully once then dropped it into its holster. "The airport. I called Sal Monious, a friend from the museum last night. He's arranged air passage for us to take us part way to Cal's island retreat. I'm sure that where she's taken the scrolls. We'll take a boat the rest of the way." Rummaging through her closet Janice tossed a small bag onto the bed, as well as an unusual looking pack. Next came the bullwhip and a box of extra bullets.

"You could wait until I get up, couldn't you?" Mel asked, a tad irritated as things from the closet began to rain down on her.

"I'm sorry sweetheart, but we don't have much time," Janice replied with a grin.

"What were you planning to wear?"

"Well I've got this lovely lavender skirt and a cream blouse..." Her words died at the unflinchingly critical look she received from the archeologist. "I take it you think that is inappropriate?"

“Very.” Janice replied, her voice softening. “We’re probably going to be on the run. You’ll need something a bit more... practical.” Then a gleam came to her eye that Mel knew was unmistakably like her ancestor Gabrielle. Returning to her closet she said, “I’ve got just what you need.”

“I don’t know Janice, I feel sort of funny. It isn’t very flattering.” Mel looked at herself dubiously in the archaeologists full length mirror behind her bedroom door. She wore Harry Covington’s boots, khaki pants, one of Janice’s shirts with her own lace camisole underneath and Harry’s jacket. Her hair was down, in a loose ponytail like Janice’s and looking at her reflection Mel felt a bit freakish.

“You look fine Mel, the camisole is a bit overdone but trust me, where we’re going no one is going to pay the least bit of attention to our looks. I’m glad you’re the same size as pop. Besides, you remember what happened to your suit the last time.”

“Yes I do.” Mel agreed remembering how Xena had ruined her thirty-five dollar skirt. “But I don’t intend to be possessed by Xena again.”

“You never know.” Janice smiled.

“Oh, all right you win. What next.”

Janice whistled and Argo bounded up onto the bed. She then slung the unusual pack over the dog’s head and tightened the straps. The dog now wore two small saddle bags. Janice packed them with some ammunition and a few other items. “Anything you need to take of value- let Argo carry it. She is the only thing I can guarantee will make it back in one piece. Otherwise I’ll carry any stuff you need in my pack. But if it isn’t on you or Argo, be prepared to lose it. I’m going to get my notebook.” When Janice left the room Mel quickly opened her small bag. Before changing her mind she extracted a small velvet pouch and a scroll case and put the two items into the bottom of one of Argo’s bags.

“It’s a secret Argo,” Mel whispered, “don’t let Janice see them, not yet.” When Janice returned she handed Mel a few other items to pack into the dog’s pouch. Then she put her notebook, more bullets and a few other things into her own satchel. Getting a backpack out of the closet she packed some blankets, a few tins of food and several containers of water. A spare canteen she put in the one on the other side of the dog’s pack and one more in her satchel. It took a few minutes of arguing but Janice reluctantly agreed to carry Melinda’s makeup and a few other items.

“I guess we’re ready to go.” Janice said as she checked Argo’s packs to make sure the weight was distributed evenly.

“Not quite.” Melinda disagreed leaving the room a moment. She returned a moment later with the jacket Janice had discarded the night before. “You forgot to hang this up. It’s bad luck to leave home with clothes lying about.” She tossed it to her friend noticing something flutter out of the pocket.

“Who is Flora Gates?” Mel asked as Janice hung up the jacket next to the matching skirt.

“Give me that.” Janice replied hotly, taking the piece of notebook paper from Melinda. Outside Mel continued, “Well...”

“She’s a student, she wants to go one of my digs, okay?” Janice muttered as she loaded their gear into the back of the truck.

“Funny,” Mel commented, as a frowning Janice held the passenger door “I’ve never seen the ‘o’ in Flora written as a heart before.”

“It’s none of your business.” Janice argued as she drove to the nearby base of the Army Air Corp.

“Don’t be silly,” Mel smiled and lightly touched Janice’s thigh (a gesture not lost on the archeologist), “a little harmless girl talk won’t kill you.”

"I suck at girl talk."

"Which is why you should practice. What are we doing here?" Mel asked as they slowed to a stop at the guard gate. An attractive sentry leaned over smiling at the two of them.

"Glad to see you've made some friends that don't have fleas, Dr. Covington. Sergeant Ore is expecting you."

"Thanks Private Maleus." Janice nodded as she drove past the gate.

"Where did you cultivate military connections?" Mel asked as they approached a large transport plane on the tarmac.

"Friday night poker." Janice explained. "I join a group of guys when I'm in town and we play. We don't bet money though. Usually it's favors."

"Oh, my!" Mel said, shocked.

"Not those types of favors." Janice assured her with a chuckle. "Greg is the chief mechanic so I'll make him fix my truck, or I'll have to help his kids with their homework. That kind of thing. So anyway, he loses real big to me about three years ago. I needed a flight to a dig sight. It's not easy to find a carrier that'll take the dog, so anyway it turns out his crew has to drop some supplies not too far from where I'm going- so it works out."

"And the government doesn't mind?" Melinda asked intrigued, as the three of them strolled over to the giant cargo plane.

"I thought when the war started there would be trouble for sure." Janice nodded, "First trip we made during the war was real hush-hush. But it turned out that the previous troops sent out had sustained heavy losses, but every one from our trip was fine. Now they're convinced Argo is good luck and we don't have any problems. Not a single soldier that has ridden on a plane with Argo has been killed in battle."

"That is lucky." Mel agreed.

"Nope." Janice lit a cigar. "It's no more luck than curses."

A group of several GI's hurried over to join them. One of the men circled Janice in a rough embrace. "Good to see you Jan."

"Greg, this is Melinda Pappas. Melinda, this is Sergeant Greg Ore, the only man alive who can call me Jan and keep all of his teeth."

"It's a pleasure Sergeant." Melinda said, shaking the man's hand warmly.

"No ma'am, the pleasure's all mine. It's so rare that I get to meet a... friend of Janice's." With a smile frozen on her face Janice sharply elbowed the big man in the ribs. When he looked at her in alarm she glared at him.

"What?" he asked defensively, "I thought..."

"I think we should be boarding." Janice cut him off and headed up the ramp.

Inside the cavernous plane a number of army troops were already seated and ready for takeoff. Argo quickly made her rounds, licking faces and receiving the warm words and attentions of the G.I.s. A short distance away, between several large mounds of cargo, another seating area had been cleared. Sergeant Ore ushered them to the area nodding to Mel. "This is the first class section."

"Why are we separated from the troops?" Mel whispered to Janice.

The Sergeant chuckled. "They've work to do ma'am, and there is no denying that you and Janice would be a bit of a distraction." Melinda blushed, flattered.

"Besides, it's quieter back here." Janice added. "Okay Greg," she continued, handing him her keys. "You can use the truck, just make sure it ends up in one piece at my house, and there is some candy in the glove box for Gabriel."

After shaking Mel's hand one last time he gave Janice an official salute and crisply spun on his heel, leaving them. Almost immediately the low rumble of the C46 engines could be heard. Janice whistled and Argo bounded over, curling up at Mel's feet.

"Why didn't I see her in Macedonia?" Mel shouted to be heard over the growing roar of the plane.

“She wasn’t there. Greg’s kid, Gabriel, was sick with phenomena. Gabriel adores Argo so I left her with him while he recovered. It worked too, in no time he was talking her for walks.” It wasn’t hard to see the growing panic on Melinda’s face as the plane positioned itself for takeoff. “You don’t like planes, do you?”

“I’m terrified of them.” Mel confessed in a squeak.

Janice reached out and took Mel's hand squeezing it reassuringly. “Well, you’re being very brave.”

“Ohmigod!” Mel gasped as the plane began to pick up speed. Letting go of Janice’s hand she grabbed the smaller woman’s arm, burrowing her head in the archeologist’s shoulder to keep from screaming.

“It’s okay Mel, we’re almost airborne.” Janice murmured into the taller woman’s ear, as she put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

Almost as soon as it started the plane leveled out, the noise level went down dramatically and the ride softened. They were on their way. Mel didn’t let go of Janice right away, nor did the smaller woman release her comforting hold. Eventually however, Melinda Pappas regained her composure and with cheeks crimson from embarrassment, pulled away. “I’m sorry about that,” she muttered, wishing she were wearing a skirt to straighten.

“It’s okay Mel, really. We’ve all got things we’re insecure about.” Janice rummaged into her pack and pulled out two blankets. One she handed to Mel, the other she rolled out on the floor of the cargo plane. “We’ve got a few hours until lunch, I suggest you try to sleep.”

“But I only just woke up.”

“From here on out Melinda Pappas take my advice, you’ll sleep whenever you can, you eat whenever you can.”

“Does the same go for relieving myself?” She asked sarcastically.

“Actually, yes. I can’t guarantee the next meal, or the next night of uneventful sleep. Dr. Leesto is dangerous, and her thugs are dangerous. Smythe was a pansy compared to her.” Janice stretched out on her blanket, Argo laying down next to her and resting her large head on the archeologist’s abdomen.

Mel stretched out on her blanket as well, but before Janice could tip her hat over her eyes, asked another question. “It sounds like you know this Dr. Leesto pretty well?”

Janice absently stroked Argo’s back and looked at the ceiling of the cargo plane. “We went to school together. A long time ago we were even friends. But then she discovered that life for her was much easier if she stayed on the side lines, then try to steal my discoveries and research as I made them. We’ve been battling over Xena sites for years.”

“When did you see her last?” Mel asked, leaning up on an elbow.

“A year ago,” Janice sighed, seething, “when she shot Argo.” Mel looked with alarm to the dog dozing lazily on her mistress. “She lost a lot of blood, she almost didn’t make it, but two Air Corps Surgeons volunteered their time after coming off of twelve hour shifts to assist the vet who was treating her. She pulled through.” Janice smiled warmly at the dog, “I had discovered some artifacts from Xena’s days as a warlord.”

“And Dr. Leesto got the artifacts?” Mel asked gently.

Janice nodded. “Yes, but I managed to get Argo out.”

“But what if she tries to hurt Argo again?”

Janice studied Mel’s face for a moment before answering, then lowered her hat over her face, “I’ll kill her first.”

...Armor can be a lot of things. It’s a protective skin, but can become a cage if it isn’t designed properly. It can inspire fear, terror or hope depending upon who wears it. Ultimately it isn’t the clothes though, but the deeds that defines the individual. “So who designed your armor?” Gabrielle asked one day, seemingly out of nowhere. We hadn’t been traveling together for very long, so I suppose I was a little surprised by the frankness of the question.

“I did,” I answered, “why?”

Gabrielle continued to walk alongside Argo and glanced up at me from time to time. We were riding through territory my army had captured years before so I guess I was already on edge.

“It’s just that it suits you so well. I mean, you look incredible in it.” Gabrielle continued to walk along, as if she’d just said it was a nice day. At that point I hadn’t fully realized that was just how she was: completely honest about just about everything.

“I see. So you’re saying I look incredible?”

When she looked up the next time I noticed a blush to her cheeks. Gods it was hard to keep a straight face. “What I mean,” Gabrielle tried to explain, “is that... well, black is definitely your color. I mean your hair, it brings out your eyes, the leather. It all goes together to create a striking image. Then the bronze of your breast plate, it sets off your skin quite nicely. It’s good for storytelling. The only real point of color on you is your eyes, it’s very dramatic.”

“So you’ve spent a lot of time looking at me?” I asked plainly enough.

“I, ah. Well... um. Bards have to be observant. It’s a point of professional pride, so of course I’ve had to look at you.”

“Mmmhmmm.”

“So did you wear the same type of thing when you were a war lord or was it different?”

I stopped Argo and had a look around. I knew the terrain, knew where we were, not far from a cave I’d used in the past. “Well Gabrielle, if you’re that interested I could show you.” We were heading to the next town in no particular hurry, and perhaps I was feeling overindulgent. I extended my hand, and after a half hearted refusal, Gabrielle joined me on Argo’s back. I smiled as her arms circled my waist, and felt the weight of her head as she leaned against my back. When Gabrielle rode with me, unable to see my face from her vantage point, I allowed myself a self satisfied smirk as I felt her arms tighten when Argo took off.

It was a pleasant distraction. With Gabrielle against me, chattering away about the country side, it was more difficult to see the surrounding landscape as I had the last time I was here; riding at the head of an army, leaving the land burnt and bleeding in my wake. I found the cave without any trouble and helped Gabrielle down before dismounting. I lit a torch and headed into the cave. It was as I remembered, some equipment still littered the cave floor, swords, spears; nothing worth anything. My men that had died had been remembered according to custom so there were no bodies. Making my way to a secluded tunnel I found the alcove where I’d hidden the trunk. Gabrielle held the torch while I pulled it out.

“What’s this?” She asked, looking at the nondescript trunk.

“Some supplies I stowed here when my army came through. As I remember, I had a spare set of armor in this trunk.”

“Really?” She asked moving close as I opened the lid. Smiling indulgently I tossed the lid aside and sure enough, everything was as I’d left it. Things from my past that were no longer mine, belongings of a person I no longer was.

“Oh,” Gabrielle breathed as she reverently lifted out the wire frame of my breast plate. Compared to what I now wore, it was terribly ineffective.

Gabrielle looked at me shyly, I knew that look. She was debating whether she should ask me something. “What?” I offered.

“Would you put it on?” I hadn’t expected that. I must have frowned because she moved away a little and looked uncertain. “I’m sorry,” she gushed. “If it brings back bad memories or something, I understand...”

Now I felt bad, I guess coming from her the question made sense, and I had showed her this in the first place. “It’s alright,” I assured her, “they’re just clothes- right?”

She nodded and sat down on a rock, ready to watch. I sighed. I'd gotten myself into this mess, might as well make the most of it. I stole glances out of the corner of my eye as I undressed. Gabrielle's attention was riveted. I don't think she blinked as I slipped my bracers off, unhooked my armor and shrugged out of my leathers. Her eyes roamed over my body, she studied my arms, legs, watched my hands. I wondered what she thought. Did she look upon me as infamous? An oddity? Or as a woman hungry for another? I had to keep my wits about me. It would have been so easy to turn this simple stunt into a seduction, but that was not who I was. At least not anymore.

It was strange putting the old armor on. It felt heavy, bulky, oppressive. When I turned around to face Gabrielle, she jumped. "That's... ah, different." She finally said.

"That's vague." I replied.

"It doesn't suit you Xena." She explained. "It's dark, and trust me I didn't think your wardrobe could get any darker. The cape and everything, it takes away from the beauty of your body, it's strength. And those shoulder thingies... I guess what I mean is that you don't need to wear something to be fearful. You don't need to wear something powerful to be strong. And you don't need to wear something flashy," she nodded at the chain mail on my hands, "to be breathtakingly beautiful. It's like your armor now let's the real you come to the surface, while this suit, um... buries it."

I suppose it was way back then that I first felt the tremors of something very special for Gabrielle...

Chapter 3: Campfire Girls

Mel woke with a start, then sighed. A bit of air turbulence had drawn her from the land of Xena, back into her own life. She looked over at Janice who was breathing steadily, her hand resting on Argo's head. Not knowing what time it was, she had no idea how long she'd been asleep. She heard a footstep nearby and instantly Janice was sitting, hat perched back on her head, wide awake.

"Lunch time Dr. Covington." A young man said as he carefully approached.

"Thanks." Janice replied accepting the sandwiches and bottles of pop from the Corporal.

He inclined his head in a silent question and Janice smiled. "Sure, go ahead. Argo, say thanks for lunch. He dropped to his knees and played with the dog for a few moments.

"There's an extra sandwich for Argo." He said shyly, "roast beef."

"What's your name soldier?" Janice asked.

"Purdy." The man replied.

"Then thank you Corporal Purdy. That's very kind of you." He stood and brushed himself off before heading back to his unit.

"Thank *you* Doctor Covington, Argo *is* good luck, I can feel it."

Mel ate in silence for a few moments while Janice fed Argo her sandwich. "Why don't you believe in luck?" She finally asked.

"I'm a scientist Melinda, there's no room for luck in science."

"My daddy was a scientist too Janice, but he kept a rabbit's foot in his pocket until the day he died."

"I don't think that rabbit was very lucky." Janice replied with a wry grin.

"But look at Xena," Mel decided to try a different tactic, "she was mighty lucky the day Gabrielle strolled into her life."

Janice shrugged. "She made the most of an bad situation if you ask me. And Gabrielle didn't exactly 'stroll' into Xena's life. Xena rescued her then Gabrielle wouldn't leave her alone."

Mel crossed her arms, defiant. "Are you saying that Xena: Destroyer of Nations

couldn't get rid of a single bard if she'd wanted to? If Joxer had been the one Xena rescued I'd wager that she wouldn't have let him follow her."

"So what's your point?" Janice asked around a mouthful of sandwich.

"I'm just curious as to why you're not the least bit curious about the author of the Xena scrolls. Understanding how Gabrielle fit into Xena's life would shed a lot of insight into exactly who Xena was. Xena can't be solely defined by her deeds..."

"Maybe so. But we don't know for sure that Gabrielle was in fact the bard who wrote the scrolls." Janice ate half of her sandwich, putting the rest in her satchel for later.

"I do." Mel replied quietly.

Janice did not appear to have heard the comment. Instead she unfolded a well worn map on the cargo floor in front of them. "This is where we're going." She said pointing to an area on the island shore. "We then hike over to this cove." She pointed to another spot, a number of miles from the military base.

"Why don't we just get picked up at the base?"

"Because smugglers are not welcome on military bases." Janice replied quietly.

"We're traveling with pirates..." Janice quickly covered Mel's mouth with her hand.

"Not so loud okay?" Releasing Mel she added, with a nod toward the other passengers, "they don't ask, and I don't tell."

Mel looked dumbfounded, "you have an interesting group of friends Dr. Covington."

"I wouldn't exactly call them friends. They work for hire, and I make sure they are paid well enough to make me a resource worth keeping around. I've known the captain for a couple of years, but as for the rest," Janice shrugged her shoulders, "complete ruffians. I wouldn't turn your back on them if I were you."

Mel nodded, understanding. "So when do we rendezvous with them?"

"Assuming they got my message, the day after tomorrow. It'll be dusk when we land, we'll hike a few miles away from the base in the dark, then set up camp. We'll hike the rest of the way tomorrow and hopefully see Aires tomorrow night or the next morning."

"Is his name really Ares?" Mel asked dubiously.

"No it's his sign. He's really into astrology." After thinking a moment Janice asked Mel what her sign was.

"Well if your friend is really into astrology, won't he be able to tell?" Mel teased, azure eyes sparkling. "Besides, I don't think astrology is terribly scientific, I'm surprised you even know your sign."

Janice grinned back. "This poorly aspected Cancer with Gemini rising doesn't follow it but I dated someone who did. I'm afraid I picked up more than I care to admit."

Mel was intrigued, "What was his name?" She asked.

Green eyes flashed under the brim of the archaeologists hat, "Jane Celesta." Inwardly Janice smiled. Mel was clearly surprised by her admission but fought valiantly to keep the surprise from her features. The slight movement of the eyes and the dilation of pupils set in brilliant blue the only visible signs.

"And what sign was Jane Celesta?" Mel asked calmly.

"Leo." Janice replied, "Friendliest sign of the zodiac."

Mel was a little taken aback. "And Jane was friendly?"

Janice shrugged, "for awhile, but the fact that she had Aquarius rising I think messed things up. Either that or the fact that I walked in on her with one of my colleagues."

"I see."

"Do you Mel?" Janice asked almost shyly.

Now it was Me's turn to smile, with what she hoped was reassurance, "Of course. Leo's aren't your cup of tea."

Janice grinned back not completely convinced, "you don't find it..." she searched for the right word, "deviant?"

Mel leaned over and clasped the archeologist's hand warmly, "it's true that I don't know you very well Janice, but nothing about you strikes me as deviant. Hostile, stubborn and insecure maybe. And while I find it remarkable that you found anyone to put up with you romantically... I am sorry it didn't work out."

Janice beamed. Complimented, insulted and reassured all at once. Melinda Pappas was quickly becoming too good to be true. "Mel," she laughed warmly, "you're a class act, I grant you that..."

"Why thank you." Mel replied primly.

"But don't misunderstand, I have *no* problems finding romantic companionship." A prideful gleam crept into the archaeologist's eyes.

"And why is that?" Mel asked with feigned indifference.

"Because I *know* how to show a lady a good time."

Mel couldn't have kept the blush that crept to her cheeks away if she'd tried. She wasn't sure if Janice was just bragging or giving her an invitation. More importantly she was undecided as to which she wanted. More and more she felt the line between herself and her ancient ancestor blurring, and it was difficult to keep her own feelings and those of Xena separate. Unsure why, she suspected that in time the power of the warrior's dreams would subside and she'd be able to put them into perspective in her own life. Perhaps because the alternative, her own personality being consumed by that of a centuries dead warrior was too frightening to accept.

In time Janice put her maps away and again reclined to sleep. Mel decided not to follow suit. Another visit from Xena was not what she needed at the moment. Gently removing the notebook from where it lay at the archaeologist's side she read through the well worn pages. Most of the passages were about Xena. Notes written in the doctor's careful hand about discoveries, theories and speculation about the warrior princess' life. There were some sketches, dig sites mostly but a few drawings of how Janice guessed the warrior princess looked. She smiled at the notes from the recent events in Macedonia. She found a brief description of herself as well as Janice's first impressions. She frowned at the notation *spoiled southern belle* written in the margin. "*We'll see about that,*" she thought. Then, turning the next page her breath caught in her throat at the sketch of her. Rather it was a sketch of Xena wearing her face. Hair down, eyes sparkling and confident, it could never be a drawing of her. That quiet grace was something Melinda Pappas only dreamed about, back when her dreams were her own.

Mel found the landing of the C46 even more traumatic than take off. Argo leaned against her, providing what comfort she could, and Janice was surprisingly understanding. She waited patiently at the hatch of the plane until Mel was recovered enough leave. A short ride later they were at the edge of the base making their way down a narrow trail on the sparsely populated island.

"I don't see why we aren't using flash lights or torches or something. We're just blindly walking off into a dark forest." Mel complained as she realized that Janice was indeed about to head out into the dark.

"It's a full moon Mel, there is plenty of light to see. Besides," Janice stressed as she shouldered her heavy pack, "when you use a flash light, you tend not to notice anything out of the light's illumination. I don't think the island is quite that safe. Just follow me," she urged, "you'll be fine."

With a sigh Mel started out on the trail after the doctor and her dog. In time her eyes did indeed adjust to the moonlit surroundings. The tropical plants were bathed in a pale blue light. Janice silently followed Argo, machete out and occasionally hacking obtrusive flora out of her way. In time they were at the edge of a cliff overlooking the indigo ocean. Carefully navigating the switchbacks that headed down to the beach, Janice occasionally offered a hand

to Mel, helping her over the most treacherous parts. Argo seemed unaware of any danger, staying about twenty five feet in front of her mistress, occasionally stopping and waiting for her to catch up. Once down on the beach they quickly made their way to a secluded spot in the cliffs, shielded by rock on three sides.

"This feels like another world." Mel said quietly as Janice shrugged out of her pack.

"It is." Janice replied as she set to making up camp. "We're safe from the tide, there's usually plenty of fire wood over there, and we can risk a small fire."

"What about animals?" Mel asked as she considered heading over to collect some wood.

Janice smiled, reading her thoughts. "Take Argo with you, there probably isn't much on this island bigger than her and she won't let anything sneak up on you. If we're lucky she'll even catch dinner." Mel nodded, none too sure of herself, headed out into the woods. Janice gazed after her as she left letting her eyes drift over the raven haired woman's graceful form. "Stop it Janice!" she scolded herself as her thoughts began to wander.

By the time Mel returned, arms full of fire wood, Janice had made a small stone circle for the fire and laid out their blankets, one on each side of the circle. In no time she had a small fire blazing its light casting a warm glow on the camp site. "What, no rabbits?" Janice asked Argo as the big dog curled up on the sand in the space between the blankets. "Lazy!"

"Does she really hunt for you?" Mel asked, suspecting the archeologist of playing with her.

"Sometimes." Janice replied and rummaged in her bag for a tin of food. "Do you like sardines?" She asked peeling back the lid on a tin of the small fish. The grimace on Mel's face was all the answer she needed. With a sigh she extracted the other half of her sandwich from her satchel and tossed it to Mel. "I've also got some crackers or canned hash if you want." She also took out of tin of dog food and opened it for Argo. After hurriedly eating her meager dinner Janice stood and motioned for Argo and Mel to stay put. "I'm just going to have a look around- stay here." Mel ate her sandwich in silence, trying to put together all the mis-matched pieces of Janice Covington that she'd seen thus far into a cohesive image. She wasn't having much luck.

About twenty minutes later Janice quietly reemerged by the edge of the firelight. She held a ripe pineapple in her arm, and wore a look of smug satisfaction. "I love pineapple" Mel laughed, happy at the surprise. In moments both women were feasting on the juicy fruit. A quick walk to the break water after and they were washing the sticky juice from their arms and faces. Mel stood, stretching her back and gazed out at the horizon. The full moon overhead shone down brightly, illuminating the ocean with a soft glow. The sky was clear and stars shown brightly on the other side of the sky. Simply put, it was one of the most beautiful sights Melinda Pappas had ever seen.

"Is this what life is like for you Janice Covington? Moving from one adventure to the next, living in a world of surreal beauty?"

Janice followed Mel's gaze out over the ocean. "Sometimes," she replied thoughtfully, "but I've spend nights on this island, with rain pouring down in buckets, nothing but mud and wet sand. Nights on end with no fire, no food and no guarantee I'd ever get home again."

"Yet you continue..." Mel smiled down at her friend as they walked back to camp.

"As my pop said, Covington's are too dumb to quit. A find or a clue and the rush from a discovery make all the cold wet nights worth it."

Mel and Janice sat down together on Mel's blanket as Janice fed more wood into the fire. Enjoying the sounds of the night and each other's company, Mel began to feel as if she were in another world. "So the misery is worth it?" She finally asked. "But what about the loneliness? No Flora Gates or Jane Celesta to share the misery."

Janice cocked her head quizzically at the question. "Not while I'm working," she replied honestly. "Well not very often," she added with a grin. "I like to think I inherited my

father's appreciation of women. But I haven't had any better luck than he had at keeping one around. He did love my mother though." She added softly, then brightening asked, "so what about you Mel? I take it you're not married?"

Mel gazed into the fire and shook her head. "Oh no, not even close. There was a story my daddy used to tell me. About how long ago people had four legs and two heads, then the gods threw down thunderbolts separating them so they had two legs and one head. He used to tell me to search out the other half of my soul, not to settle for less. And the truth is, I never have. I always liked that story, he said his grandmother told it to him. To think that out there, some where is someone with two legs and one head: the other half of my soul."

Janice smiled as she gazed into the fire, her own thoughts years distant. "Your father told me that story too." She shook her head with a laugh, "I was hung over, Diana had broken my heart in seventeen places. God I was young then. Anyway your dad was visiting the campus and had agreed to go over some of my research at lunch. I must have looked like hell because he instantly knew what was wrong. An unusual man your father, he said to me 'she's not worth it' and proceeded to tell me that story. Didn't even phase him that I was hung over because of a woman. I always liked him, and respected him."

Mel smiled at the memory of her father, pleased that he had gotten along so well with her new friend. "Have you always been attracted to women?" She asked quietly, gazing at the orange hue Janice's hair had taken on in the fire light.

Janice fidgeted with the fire. Mel thought she might not have heard the question when she finally answered, "I don't know. I guess so. I mean, I never really thought about it. My dad did the best he could as a parent. But I've been told that moving from dig to dig was an unusual way for a young girl to grow up. Dad taught me how to handle a revolver when I was ten, and I started to learn to use the bullwhip then too. I pitched in as a digger, smuggled goods from one country to the next... I guess I grew up as one of the guys. I had a hard time adjusting to collage, the routine, the safety of it. It was all so foreign to me. I really had no interest in dating any of the men, they all seemed so... I don't know... uninteresting. Diana was in my anthropology class and well..." She blushed slightly.

"Life got interesting?" Mel offered.

"You could say that." Janice agreed, turning back to look at Mel, shy smile on her face. She was not prepared for the brilliance of the blue eyes gazing gently at her. The expression on Mel's face was unreadable, there was a strength and hunger in her gaze that Janice wouldn't have associated with Melinda Pappas. Feeling the color rise to her cheeks as her pulse doubled she glanced around the camp site, looking anywhere but at her companion. "Well, um, it's getting late Mel. Why don't you get some sleep. We've got another eight miles to hike in the morning." Taken aback by the sudden change in Janice's mood, Mel was instantly sorry she'd pried into the archaeologists personal life.

"Janice." Mel said putting a restraining hand on Janice's arm as she tried to get up from the blanket. "If I've said anything that has upset you, I'm truly sorry."

"You're fine Mel." Janice said, forcing a cocky grin to her face. "But we do need to get some sleep." Mel let go but continued to look critically at her rugged companion as she stretched out on her own blanket and readied herself for sleep.

"I don't believe you, you know." Mel said, as Janice tipped her hat over her face.

"That's your prerogative." Janice replied, and in moments was feigning sleep.

...I suppose it was only fitting that days after Perdicus' death the rains started. I don't remember when Gabrielle and I had been so completely miserable. I was still grappling with all the ramifications of her marriage and Gabrielle was in mourning. I guess I was mourning too, only I'd been at it longer. Darkness had settled itself around me like a shroud from the moment I saw him propose to her. The highs and lows of the next few days were as exhausting as any battle I'd ever fought. Hopeful that she'd say no, then guilty that I wanted

her to say no so badly. I gave her my support in an attempt to remain neutral. I didn't her want to stay with me for my sake alone. And the joy I felt when she told me she was going to tell him no- I almost confessed my love right then. But then she said yes. She said yes right in the middle of a battle when the ox had thrown down his sword, a move that could have killed them both.

I was tired. This was not the first time that Gabrielle had surprised me so suddenly, in a matter of seconds making me wonder if I truly knew her at all. She'd left me twice before, once to go home, once to go to Athens. Each time I told myself that I was better for it. I knew I was lying, but it was the only consolation I could find on a path that had suddenly become very empty. Then she came back, each time a stronger person; a more devoted person. With each of those events I felt more reassured about the depth of her feelings for me. Against my better judgement, hope grew that one day her feelings might run as deep as mine. All of that was shattered with her marriage. She wouldn't be coming back.

She originally left him to follow me, to be with me, and she didn't even know me then. He abruptly left her at Troy. Perhaps he thought I might not give her up without a fight. But something changed, coming to her as a pathetic wretch, appealing to the generosity of Gabrielle's nature. That was not something I could do battle with, and without a fight he won. Then he died and I murdered his murderer.

As soon as the rain started she wanted to leave Poteidaia. I thought she might be better off staying in her family's house, feeling their support, but she would have none of it. She wanted distance from the pain, and while I was as spent as she was, only I could take her away. I can only guess as to what went on in her mind as we walked mile after mile in the soggy silence. She was still struggling with her anger and hatred for Callisto, now obsolete since I'd killed her. I'm sure she was angry about having Perdicus for so short a time and I've no doubt she missed him as well. Perhaps she was angry with me, for being able to save her but not her love. If she blamed me for his death she never said so. I suppose at the time I was too consumed with my own pain to provide the comfort and support she wanted. Maybe that made her angry too. All I know is that night, when the cold and the wet made us ache to our core, she was ready to explode.

I had found a small cave after a full day of walking. I was ready to stop, I didn't care if she was ready or not. There was room for Argo by the entrance, she'd have shelter from the worst of the storm. There was room inside for a small fire, I could stand up without hitting my head on the ceiling but it was close. I took my sword off immediately since there would not have been room to draw it from my back.

"I don't want to stop." Gabrielle said flatly from the entrance to the cave.

I shrugged. "Argo and I are tired, we *all* need to rest."

"The Warrior Princess tired?" She shot back. "I find that hard to believe."

"It happens," I replied not trying to hide the exhaustion in my voice. "Gabrielle, you could walk a thousand miles tonight and you'd be hurting just as much. Please come here, dry off and get some rest." Mutely she complied.

It was cold in the cave. Fortunately Argo's saddle bag had kept our shifts dry. I took off my armor, setting it near the fire to dry as Gabrielle watched me silently, her eyes burning like embers. I put my blanket against a smooth angled rock and sat down. There wasn't room for both of us to sleep stretched out, but the rock would do. "You should get out of those wet clothes Gabrielle." I suggested gently.

"I can take care of myself!" She shouted, furious, "Why are you always trying to mother me?"

I was on my feet in an instant. Tired and spent as I was I did not have the energy to endure her tirade just because she was hurting. "I'm not trying to mother you Gabrielle. I'm your friend and I'm telling you that being miserable is not going to make your grief any more pure. I'm not saying anything you wouldn't say to me if our places were switched."

With that she flew at me, crying. Fists rained down on my arms and chest as she shouted incoherently. I stood there and took it for a few moments until I'd had enough. I could feel my own anger building; she was hitting me hard. I grabbed her arms and pulled her roughly to my chest tightening my grip as she struggled. Finally she stopped trying to hit me and just cried, her cold arms encircling me. She didn't protest as I eased her to the cave floor by the fire. She didn't say a word as I positioned myself against the rock wall and straddled her with my legs. There were no objections as I removed her sodden clothes and helped her into a dry shift. Then I wrapped the other blanket around her icy body and pulled her close. She continued to cry rough sobs against my chest as I held her. Finally she quieted, her hand absently touching my arm.

"Thank you Xena." She breathed into my skin.

I squeezed her reassuringly. "I'm here for you Gabrielle." I said quietly into her hair.

"I know." She sighed, "and that's part of my problem. You've never let me down Xena. And I know that isn't true of me."

What could I say? She was telling the truth. I don't know what was going through her mind. Tonight was so different for her than a couple of nights ago. Instead of laying in a soft bed full of warmth and passion she was huddled in a cold cave with a reformed warlord. I was surprised by the feel of her hand moving up my arm to my neck. I looked down, startled by the smoky desire in the eyes looking back at me. I felt devastated. Here was a look I'd longed for so long to see, and now I was seeing it for all the wrong reasons. Gabrielle was hurting, hurting so badly that she was desperate for a distraction, any distraction. Gently she touched my face with her cold fingers, tracing the line of my cheek and jaw.

"I'm sorry for the times I've let you down Xena." She said as she brushed my lips with her fingers. "I don't deserve you." She whispered as her hand moved to the back of my neck, drawing my head down. She was cold in my arms but her lips were warm as they sought out mine. I was helpless to refuse her desire for comfort, but when her tongue brushed against my teeth seeking greater intimacy I gently pulled back. Another second and I knew I would be taking advantage of one person I had ever truly loved. I tightened my arms around her once again willing her to feel warm and safe. Resting my cheek on the top of her head I softly told her to sleep. In time she did. I stayed up that night knowing that I might not ever have the opportunity to hold her this way again. It might have been the exhaustion, but for me at that time it was enough and during those few hours, surrounded by soggy misery, I was happy...

Chapter 4: Beyond The Sea

Janice rolled her head for the hundredth time to gaze at Mel. She found the raven haired beauty utterly captivating and felt certain she'd never tire of watching her sleep. Her eyes darted back and forth in dream, her features relaxed. Argo was curled up next to her, and for that Janice was grateful. Argo had kept her warm on many a cold night and she'd been worried about Mel's tolerance for the chill night air. "*Still,*" she reasoned to herself, "*it was her decision to come.*" She wondered again why the obviously pampered woman would choose such a hard path. With a shrug she reminded herself that it was none of her business, everyone lived and learned by their own mistakes. Being charming, gentle and magnificently beautiful was no protection against that. As the thunder of waves crashing on the beach subsided, Janice decided it was time to get up.

As soon as she moved the dog's eyes opened, watching her mistress intently. "It's okay girl, stay with Mel. I'll be right back." Janice whispered and gave the dog the visual command to stay, then headed a short distance beyond the rocks to relieve herself.

Mel awoke to the smell of coffee filling her senses. She opened her eyes to stars still hanging in the sky above her, with Janice Covington sitting on the other side of a rekindled fire sipping from a steaming mug. "What time is it?" Mel asked, very groggy.

Janice looked at the sky briefly before answering. "It's still a couple of hours before dawn. We've got a long hike ahead of us this morning."

"But the moon is gone- how will we see?" Mel asked, forcing herself to sit up. She gratefully accepted the enameled mug that Janice offered her, noting how warm the archaeologists hands felt against her own cold fingers.

"We'll be walking along the beach. By the time we have to climb to the next cove the sun will be up."

Janice was impressed that Mel refrained from complaining as they got ready to go. The archeologist's daughter seemed to be made of sterner stuff than she had first suspected. They made good time walking the length of the shoreline several miles to the next huge rock outcrop. An enormous basalt formation jutted some distance out into the water, there was no way around it- they'd have to go over.

"Now what?" Mel asked as they reached the base of the basalt formation. It was not strictly vertical, but still very steep.

Janice called Argo and extracted something from one of her packs. After making the dog sit down in front of her she proceeded to put leather booties on the dog's feet, securing them with strips of leather thong. "We climb." Janice replied matter of factly. From her own pack she extracted two pairs of leather gloves and handed one to Mel. "The basalt is sharp. Argo cut her foot on it last time. Watch where you put your hands, and try not to bump you knees and you'll be fine."

Mel eyed the rock cliff dubiously. "How can Argo...?"

Janice smiled, "Argo. Up!" She pointed to the crest of the rock. The dog ran back and forth a couple of times looking for the best place to begin. Then she began to bound up the rock face. There was enough slope for the dog to climb by scrambling over the rock in a zig-zagging pattern "We follow the dog." Janice explained. She headed up the rock next with Mel following her. Several times she paused in her ascent to make sure Melinda Pappas was making progress. Argo reached the top in about ten minutes, it took the humans over twice as long.

Janice shrugged out of her pack and offered a canteen of water to Mel as soon as she joined her at the top. "Let me take a look at that." Janice said, and Mel was not sure what she was talking about. Then following the archaeologist's line of sight looked down to her leg, a small patch of blood seeping through the knee of her pants.

"I didn't realize I even cut myself." Mel said now feeling the pain from her knee.

"This rock is sharp, there is a lot of obsidian in it." Janice explained as she untucked Mel's pantleg from her boot and eased the material over her knee. The scrape was shallow but long. After pulling a battered first aid kit from her pack, Janice cleaned the wound with some water then wrapped a length of gauze around it. Mel was surprised by the archaeologist gentle hands. She suspected that if Janice had the same scrape on her own leg, she'd ignore it. Finally she said as much.

Janice rocked back on her heels and smiled. "This isn't strictly for your benefit sweetheart. These smugglers are really touchy. They see blood and they think you're injured and helpless. I can control Aires to some extent but I don't know how unbalanced his crew this time out is. Last time I showed up on his ship with a bleeding cut on my shoulder- I had to eventually break a guys arm to get him to leave me alone. We'll have a cabin on board, when we get there I suggest you stay put until we get to Cal's island. It'll be a boring two days, but believe me that's a lot nicer than excitement on that ship." Finishing with Mel's injury she put the first aid kit back in her pack and prepared to descend the other side of the rock wall. Unsure why, Mel was a little let down by the doctor's explanation. Janice noticed the sullen silence and smiled to herself as she followed Argo down the cliff.

They had not been on the sandy beach for long when a small boat appeared around the side of the cove. Argo noticed it immediately and barked. "Right on time." Janice smiled and

motioned for Mel to join her as she walked over to meet the boat. Once in the shallow surf, one of the two men in the boat hopped out and guided the boat to shore. Janice grasped the man's offered hand. "Aires, good to see you," she glanced to the man still in the boat, "you too Toby." The boatman smiled and waved in greeting as Aires approached Mel.

"I got word you'd have a guest, Doctor Covington. I didn't know she'd be so radiant." With that he smoothly brought Mel's hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles softly.

Janice rolled her eyes skyward and stepped in between Mel and the Captain. "Don't even think about it," she warned. Mel took a moment to study the captain. He was handsome black man, with dark rugged features and well defined muscles. Very athletic. His companion in the boat, however, was anything but. Simply put, he was the largest man Mel had ever seen. He had a bald head covered by an ornate tattoo, handlebar moustache and bright blue eyes. He also had a friendly smile and reminded Mel of an enormous teddy bear.

"I am Captain Aires," Aires said ignoring Janice's warning. "And in the boat is Tobias Eule, but we call him Toby. He can't talk so don't think him anti-social."

"Nice to meet you." Mel replied from behind Janice's shoulder with a nod to the captain and the man in the boat.

"Glad to see Argo recovered." Aires said, finally looking at Janice.

"Better than new." Janice confirmed, as she shouldered her pack and headed for the boat. Reaching the boat, Janice extracted a pouch and handed it to Aires. He counted the money carefully then nodded. After helping Mel into the boat Janice whistled for Argo who easily leapt into the small wooden craft. Janice climbed in next after stowing her gear to the back of the boat, behind Mel.

The boat ride to *The Gauntlet* was uneventful. Mel listened quietly as Janice and Aires caught up on each other's lives, noting with interest how she interacted with the man. The warm friendliness Janice had exhibited with Greg Ore was missing. Everything about her was no nonsense and formidable. Finally Aires leaned over and Mel could just barely hear him ask, "What's the deal with you and the beauty? Are you and she..."

Janice whispered back, "You'll live longer if you assume as much." He laughed openly at that.

"Always one for understatement Doc. Okay, I'll tell the men to keep away from your... companion." He smiled at Mel and winked. Returning his attention to Janice he was serious once more, "Silvus is still on board, I'd give him wide berth if I were you. He still hasn't forgiven you for destroying his arm the way you did."

Janice nodded, "I'll make every effort to avoid him. I hope he's smart and does the same."

It didn't take long for the small row boat to reach the cargo ship. After a confirming hand signal from the Captain, the small craft and its occupants were brought on board. A number of men hung over the side of the ship, hooting and calling to the new arrivals as the boat was hoisted up. However, Mel noted with satisfaction, as soon as the boat was secured and the occupants standing on the main deck of the ship, the whistles and cat-calls silenced. In fact, most of the men quickly found something else to occupy their attention.

Mel followed Argo and Janice below decks to their cabin. Once inside, Janice propped her pack against the wall and surveyed the room. Argo bounded up on to the bed, the piece of furniture that dominated the small cabin, and stood patiently as Janice removed her pack. There was a crate that served as a table or dresser with a large enameled bowl resting on top. An old mirror hung on the wall, and several pegs were present near by for hanging clothes. On the floor next to the crate was a large container of water with a lid. Sitting on the bed next to Argo, Janice began to unlace her boots. "The water is clean," Janice said conversationally as she removed a boot and wiggled her toes, "Aires knows better than to put me in a room without clean sheets and clean water. I can't vouch for anything else though."

"I get the impression you don't really like the captain?" Mel asked as she studied her reflection in the mirror. She didn't think she'd ever seen herself so... ruffled looking.

"Oh, I like him fine." Janice replied, watching with interest as Mel studied her reflection, "I just don't trust him. Hell, I know enough about his business to know that you don't survive by making loyalty a high priority." Mel nodded, distracted, and Janice shook her head. "See something interesting Mel?"

Mel turned with a start to see brilliant green eyes watching her. "I... well... I was just thinking that this attire is more comfortable than I would have expected. Except for the boots that is, my feet are killing me."

Janice was on her feet and getting the first aid kit out again. "You've done a lot of walking today, you might have blisters." She motioned for Argo to get off the bed, when the dog complied she motioned for Mel to take a seat. Sitting on the floor of the cabin, Janice began to unlace her right boot. Mel watched as Janice's skillful fingers made quick work of the boot lace. She began to feel her pulse speed up as the room seemed to shrink.

"You don't have to do that Janice." Mel shyly protested as the first boot was eased off her foot. The gentle attention of her friend was making Mel's heart race, that was disquieting enough, but the other sensations that joined in were downright distracting.

"Don't be silly." Janice replied, intent on her task. "If you've got blisters you can't walk," she smiled up into clear blue eyes, "and don't think for a moment that I'm going to carry you." Almost as an afterthought Janice looked up, "you're not particularly shy about your feet are you?"

Mel wanted to run. "Ah... not especially..."

Janice nodded. "Good, 'cause there is little room in archeology for modesty."

Mel looked up at the ceiling, startled to see another mirror attached there. It was long and ran the same direction as the bed. Gazing up, she could see Janice's reflection as she removed her sock and began to gently massage her foot, looking for hot-spots or blisters. It felt wonderful, almost too good. "Janice, why is there a mirror on the ceiling?" She finally asked to distract herself as the second boot was unlaced.

"This is Aires' cabin. I stay in it when I'm onboard. And no, not with him." Janice was silent once more, as if the owner of the cabin was explanation enough for the mirror.

"He said something on the row boat, about you and me..."

Janice looked up from her task and shrugged. "I'm sorry you had to hear that, repulsive as you might find it. You'll be safer if they think you're sleeping with me. If nothing else, they respect Argo, so it'd be stupid for either of us to be in a room without her." After seeing the other woman's mollified expression she added, "Don't worry, I think I'll be able to restrain myself. You'll be safe here."

"What do you mean by that?" Mel asked, annoyed at the comment.

"I'm just saying I won't try anything." Janice replied innocently.

"I'm not good enough? Is that what you're saying?!" Mel shot back hotly getting more miffed at the archaeologists assumptions the more she thought about it.

"Are you saying you want me to try something Mel Pappas?" Janice asked softly.

"I'm asking why I should assume that you wouldn't..." Mel retorted, removing her foot from Janice's grasp. Mel wasn't sure what bothered her more. That Janice assumed she thought sexual intimacies with her would be repulsive or that the archeologist wasn't the least bit interested in her.

Janice smiled at the forcefulness of the question. "Well for starters Mel, you aren't my type. Anymore than I'm yours I suspect. I mean business partner, maybe, but lover? Nah." Not entirely convinced about what she was saying, even as she said it, Janice was determined to keep her attraction from the spoiled southerner. She didn't want to face the inevitable rejection or make Mel uncomfortable with her. It had happened too often in the past.

Genuinely stung by the archeologist's dismissal, Mel turned away. "I'm gratified to

hear it. That must say something for my degree of sophistication and maturity," she shot back hotly. "And just so you know, you're not my type either."

"I know, I'm not a man." Janice shrugged.

"It goes way beyond gender." Mel said icily.

"What do you mean by that?" Janice demanded.

She never got her answer. A loud knock sounded on the door. "What is it?!" Janice shouted, angry.

"Cap'n wants to see you on deck. Another ship is headed to intercept us." Said the voice on the other side of the door.

"Great, just great." Janice said as she began to put her own boots back on. Moments later she was heading out the door glaring at Mel and Argo sternly. "You two stay here."

As soon as Janice left Argo began to pace back and forth in front of the door. Finally sitting down she looked at Mel and began to paw at the closed door. "She said to stay here." Mel reminded the dog. The whining became louder and the pawing more forceful. Making up her mind Mel put her own boots back on. "I'm telling her it's your fault." She said opening the door and followed the dog.

Janice stood deep in conversation with Captain Aires, looking out to sea with a pair of battered binoculars when they arrived on deck. "Is it Leesto?" Aires asked after Janice had studied the approaching ship for several long minutes.

"Nope." Janice replied when she was sure. "They're smugglers plain and simple. What're you hauling?"

"That is not for you to know Covington." Aires replied with a smile.

Janice shrugged. "Well I don't think you're going to be able to out run them."

"Then we will fight them."

"Oh, wonderful." Janice muttered. "Might as well shut down your engines now. Make 'em think twice about approaching." Just then Janice felt a familiar wet nose nudge her hand, "I thought I told you..."

"Argo insisted." Mel supplied crisply when Janice leveled a glare in her direction.

Several men snickered near by. "What's so funny?" Janice demanded advancing on the snickering sailor.

"No hard feelings Doc," the young man said with a smile, catching his breath, "I can't control my wife either." Several more men laughed at the comment.

"Very funny." Janice agreed grinning.

"Who's the whore this week Jan?" Another voice asked, void of humor. "Does she come when you eat her?"

Janice spun at the sound, instantly finding the source of the comment. "How's the arm Silvus?" She asked, taking a cigar out of her pocket and lighting it.

His only response was a growl as he began to descend the stairs that led to the deck. Instinctively the men began to back up, giving the adversaries plenty of room. Janice stood her ground, calmly inhaling the smoke from her cigar, thin trails of gray curling from her nose and mouth. Casually she took the cigar out of her mouth and puffed several perfect smoke rings, chewing on the cigar once again when Silvus reached the deck.

Silvus was a mountain of a man, not so much muscled as thick. He had no neck to speak of and was dressed in filthy clothes that hung off of him like greasy rags. Janice checked on the proximity of the approaching ship, an idea forming in her mind. She turned her back to Silvus and began to take off her jacket. She walked over to Mel who was standing next to Aires and handed it to her.

"I'll take care of these smugglers for you." She whispered to Aires as she began to unhitch her gunbelt, "but you'll have to protect Mel and Argo from Silvus."

Aires nodded as Mel accepted the archaeologist gun belt. "What are you fixin' to do?" she asked.

Janice smiled taking out her cigar. "I'm going to pick a fight with him and loose." She turned back to Aires, "When I go overboard, start a brawl, will ya?" Absently she reached down and scratched Argo behind the ears. "You stay out of this." She whispered fiercely to the dog. Taking Mel's hand she put it around the dog's collar. "Keep her out of this," she said to Mel, "and when the fighting really starts, get below decks and lock the door." After a quick wink she turned back to face Silvus.

He stood on the deck ten feet from Janice, one hand holding a baseball bat with an iron spike in it. His other arm hung loosely at an odd angle from his body. It appeared to have been broken in several places and set incorrectly. While the fist still clenched reflexively, the arm looked almost useless. The two began to circle each other when to Mel's horror the sailor's began to place bets on the outcome. Most bets were in the archaeologist favor. After all she'd bested the big man last time.

With a roar he swung at Janice who sidestepped the blow easily. Her knee came up into his gut her fists down on the back of his neck. He didn't appear to have felt it. Twisting back around he took another swing, this time missing Janice by only a whisper. In a flash her whip was out and the tip coiled around the base of the bat. With a hard yank she pulled it from his grasp and sent the weapon sailing overboard. Silvus charged, his meaty fist jabbing at Janice's head. She ducked and slipped behind the big man. "So," he asked turning to face her, "do you come when she sticks her fingers in your hot, wet...uh" Janice's leg connected with his knee and he went down to the deck with a thud. Just as fast he was back up again and forcing Janice to the ships railing.

"As a matter of fact, I do... repeatedly." She grinned after taking another puff from her cigar. This time however she did not move when a badly thrown fist sailed at her mid section. She took the force of the blow, acting like it hurt more than it did. She could hear voices on the other ship now, as the other smuggling crew bet on the outcome of the fight. Another minute and they'd be close enough.

Mel was startled by Argo's growl when Silvus' fist connected with her mistress' belly. "No, girl." Mel said, struggling to keep the big dog from joining the fight. She struggled again as another punch from Silvus had Janice landing on deck, hard. With a triumphant roar he kicked the prone woman in the ribs then picked up her struggling body and threw it overboard. Janice's worn hat fluttered to the deck as her body sailed overboard and into the sea below.

"That dumb ass." Aires muttered as he shoved Mel. "If you know what's smart, you'll get going now!" With a yell of his own he struck the nearest crewman. In minutes the entire deck of the ship was engulfed in a brawl.

Janice hit the water and swam down, as far and as fast as she could. When she finally surfaced for air she was right next to the hull of the approaching ship. She looked up to see the faces of the smugglers either looking at the brawl on the *Gauntlet* or scanning the water for signs of her body. Fortunately they were scanning the water where her body had landed, not where she was. Cautiously she moved to the side of the ship away from the *The Gauntlet* and flicking her bullwhip onto a deck rail, began to climb up the side of the ship. She stayed quiet and careful, easing her dripping body onto the cargo ship.

As she hoped, all of the crew on deck were at the rail watching the brawl. As silently as her wet clothes allowed, she slipped below decks. Janice had recognized the ship as *Remember Nothing* from on board the *The Gauntlet*, and while it wasn't something Aires needed to know, Janice had a score to settle. The independent thugs that operated the pirate vessel had stolen a prize find from her in the past. Now it was payback time. She startled one crewman on the stairs leading into the belly of the ship. He was silenced with a wet boot landing solidly on his nose. Not bothering to step over the body, she continued down the stairs to the deck below.

Cautiously she checked the open cabins until she found that of the Captain. He was studying himself in a mirror, shaving.

"You know, some day your vanity is going to get you in a heap of trouble." Janice said quietly as she leaned on his table. Her hand and wrist relaxed, holding her bullwhip.

He spun around at her words, his eyes flashing. "Jan? Why, how good to see you. I don't suppose you've brought me another present?" He shrugged, answering his own question, "Dr. Leesto was so happy with the last one. Xena's breastplate wasn't it?"

"You remembered Captain Crunch, I'm flattered."

"If you don't mind Jan, it's Krykus, Captain Krykus." He looked closely at the dripping archeologist, "What, no mutt? Oh, did she not make it?" He asked with feigned sincerity.

In a flash the bullwhip was out and wrapped around the throat of the captain. Janice yanked down hard and with a thud his chin connected with the table top. "That's for Argo." Jan hissed as she shoved his unconscious body to the floor. Quickly rummaging through his room. It didn't take long for her to find what she was looking for. "So predictable," she muttered, retrieving her whip as she left.

Almost as soon as it began the fighting began to subside. Aires noted with concern that the other smuggling ship was getting painfully close. Much longer and they'd be able to board. Already they had cut their engines and were drifting toward the *The Gauntlet*. Soon he'd give the signal to gun the engines and try to move away, whether Janice Covington was on board his ship or not. He dabbed at his bloodied nose gently as he approached Mel Pappas, who was looking forlornly at the ocean where Janice had landed. "Any sign of her?" He asked gently.

Startled out of her thoughts she replied quickly, "no, not yet." Mel gingerly fingered the brim of Janice's hat, that Argo had retrieved from the deck as soon as the fighting started. Both woman and dog seemed only vaguely aware of what went on around them, both human and canine eyes riveted to the ocean below.

He joined in her visual search of the waters. "Well I can give her another five minutes, but if there isn't a sign of her by then, we'll have to go. I can't risk being boarded."

Mel nodded absently, there wasn't much she could say to argue with the captain. If she didn't even know how to articulate her own feelings for the complicated archeologist, how could she explain them to another?

As if sensing her confusion Aires changed the subject. "As long as we're waiting, why not tell me when you were born?"

Janice quickly positioned the sticks of dynamite in the main hold of the cargo ship, shaking her head at what ever priceless antiquities she was about to destroy. "Not so fast Covington" a seething voice rasped from the doorway.

Krykus stood leaning against the doorway, his revolver pointed at Janice, his neck red and blistered from the burn of the bullwhip. "Nice nap?" Janice asked, gaging the distance between Krykus and the door.

"It's over Jan. You've been good for business in the past but it's over. I'll have to make sure that barge that brought you out here pays for dealing with your kind of scum."

"That's no way to talk about a lady." Janice smirked.

"You're no lady."

Janice shrugged, he was right after all, and dove for the door. A shaky hand followed her movement and the revolver fired. Janice yelped in pain as she rolled to her feet and kicked up at Krykus. A commotion sounded above them on deck as excited voices responded to the gun shot. The momentary distraction was enough to divert Krykus' eyes for the second Janice needed to land another kick, this time hitting her mark. The gun sailed from the captain's hand and skittered across the deck. She brought her foot back again, this time

landing a blow to the captain's groin. He doubled over and instantly she was on her feet winching in pain as she stood.

She cast a quick glance down to her arm. A swelling stain of red was quickly seeping through her shirt, she'd been shot in the left bicep. Her eyes narrowed in fury. As Krykus surged across the floor in search of his gun, Janice sprang over his prone body reaching the gun first. Quickly cocking the gun she aimed at his arm and fired. Voices now filled the stairs leading into the hold. Passing the gun to her left hand she roughly hauled Krykus into a sitting position and kept the gun barrel at the base of his skull. Several men entered the room and froze at the sight of their bleeding captain, held at gun point by a very angry woman, dripping blood and water.

"Not so fast boys," Janice growled.

"Listen to her," Krykus pleaded.

"You threw the gun to Leesto that she used to shoot my dog. Tell me why I shouldn't kill you where you sit." She seethed.

"You can have the cargo, take it." The men in the doorway nodded their agreement.

"Oh, like I believe you." Janice shook her head. She jabbed the gun barrel into his neck for emphasis. "Light a cigarette." She commanded, keeping her eyes on his men.

With shaky fingers Krykus removed a battered pack of cigarettes from his pocket and with trembling hands brought one to his lips. He had some trouble with the matches, but got it lit.

"Now give it to me." Janice said evenly after he took a tentative puff. Not able to see what Janice intended, he handed the cigarette to her. Next he noticed the eyes of his crew men go wide as they turned and ran from the cargo hold as fast as they could. "Wha...?" He snapped his head around at the sizzling sound that came from near his ear. Janice stood, a stick of dynamite in her hand, the fuse burning.

"You're insane!" He screamed as he struggled to his feet and ran for the door.

"No, just pissed." She replied as she followed after. Partway up the stairs she paused for a moment, letting the fuse burn down further before throwing it into the cargo hold. She didn't see anyone in the stairwell, and suspected that there was a flurry of activity on deck namely getting the lifeboats lowered. She had just reached open deck when she felt rather than heard the first tremors of the explosion. With a mad dash for the railing she leaped from the deck of *Remember Nothing*, hitting the water with the added force of the explosion.

"What was that?" Mel Pappas asked when she heard the first shot ring out from the approaching ship.

Aires studied the approaching vessel. He shouted to a near by crew man. "Ready the engines. We get out of here, now. Full speed, on my mark." The man nodded, and began to shout orders to other people. Soon the *The Gauntlet* was buzzing with organized activity. Then another shout sounded and Aires hit the rail impatiently. "What could she be doing over there?" He ordered the engines fired when he saw people streaming over the other ships deck, jumping into the water and frantically lowering lifeboats. When the answering roar of the *The Gauntlet's* engines did not sound in his ears, he hurried down into the bowels of his ship to rectify the situation.

Mel was not sure what was happening, but she did know that something had happened on the other ship. She didn't get much of a chance to ponder the thought because an explosion from deep within the approaching smuggling vessel erupted, sending debris smoke everywhere. It was several more minutes before the *The Gauntlet's* engines roared and the boat began to pull away from the wreckage of the other ship.

It was at that moment that Mel realized that no one intended to wait for Janice, if in fact she'd survived the plunge she'd taken. Her eyes began to well with tears as she looked down forlornly. As she did however, she noticed a dark figure clinging to the hull of the *The*

Gauntlet like a fly on a wall. Mel's tears of sorrow turned to joy as she saw Janice struggle to climb up the ship, her tenuous hold on her bullwhip the only thing keeping her out of the water.

Mel grabbed at a passing crewman, relieved to see that it was Toby, the silent man she'd sat near in the rowboat. "Janice, she's down there!" Mel said, pointing. He looked over the rail, as he craned his neck Mel noticed several scars on his neck. Pulling back, he motioned for Mel to stay where she was and pointed to Argo as well. Instinctively she put her hand on the dog's collar. He grabbed a nearby life ring and tossed it down to Janice, hitting her in the head with it. Tobias' eyes darted around the ship as he hauled Janice up. The look of worry on her face reminded Mel about what Janice had said earlier. That, coupled with the image of an enraged Silvus made Mel very nervous. "I hope she's okay." She muttered to which the big man nodded. "If she's hurt, we can't let any one know, can we?" Toby spared a glance for the striking woman and shook his head emphatically. Mel nodded. "that's what I was afraid of," she murmured to herself.

Toby heard a grumble and managed to turn, still holding the rope but appearing to lean casually over the railing as Silvus stepped into view. He sported a black eye and several cuts, but seemed in bright spirits. His eyes narrowed when he saw Mel. "So, you're Jan's bitch. You a good ride?"

Mel's mouth opened, stunned. "Not for you." She finally sputtered. Argo growled, her hackles rising menacingly.

"C'mere puppy- time you joined the lezzie overboard." Silvus advanced slowly. Argo bared her teeth, long and sharp, stopping the thug where he stood. With one hand still holding the rope behind his back, Toby protectively draped the other around Mel's shoulders. He also bared his teeth.

Silvus thought twice about continuing his advance. "Sorry buddy, I didn't know you had dibs. Let me have her when you're done..." He continued on his way, not looking back as he moved on. As soon as he was out of sight, Toby returned to the task of hauling Janice up. Dumped onto the deck of the ship, Janice coughed water out of her lungs with what little energy she had left. Mel and Toby managed to get her standing by leaning her back against the outside of the ship's cabin.

"Goodness gracious, she's bleeding." Mel stammered. Tobias quickly put his finger over his mouth silencing her. After another quick shake of his head Mel nodded. Just then another crewman came around the deck from the direction Silvus departed. Not knowing what else to do Mel quickly covered Janice's body with her own, obscuring the bloody arm from view and kissed the woman soundly. She turned her head at the appreciative whistle.

"She's so sexy after a swim." Mel muttered, not needing to feign embarrassment.

"Well give us a break and take it below decks will ya?" The seaman muttered, continuing on his way.

Mel glanced up to see Tobias looking at her, blushing profusely. With a grin he helped Mel get the barely conscious woman to their cabin. "Will you tell the captain that we got her back?" Mel asked as Toby prepared to leave. He nodded and patted her hand gently. On impulse she kissed the big man on the cheek. "That's a thank you from Janice... and me." She said as he departed.

"Sexy after a swim?" Janice said in a strained voice from where she leaned against the wall.

"Well I had to think of something." Mel replied helping the archeologist out of her wet clothes. "What happened to your arm?"

Shivering Janice looked down at the blood still oozing from the puncture wound. "I got shot. Bullet's still in there. You're going to have to dig it out."

"You've got to be kidding! I'll get the Captain, or Toby..."

"No! Janice said fiercely. I meant what I said earlier. Toby has already done enough.

Either you do it or I do, and I don't think I'd do a very good job of it right now." Janice sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, trying to keep her dripping to a minimum.

"First of all let's dry you off." Mel said taking charge. "No use having you go into shock." Rummaging through the crate by the mirror, she extracted a large blanket and set to drying off the archeologist's shivering body with it. Careful of the injured arm, she got most of the cold sea water off of Janice. Her color began to improve.

Janice could feel the heat rising to her cheeks. As much as her arm hurt, there was no denying the signals sent to her brain from everywhere Mel touched with the blanket. It was all she could do to keep a satisfied smile off her face. The sensation ended however when she accidentally bumped her arm. The bullet lodged in her flesh made itself known, painfully. "Get the first aid kit out of my pack, and the bottle of whiskey. And that bowl." She nodded to the enameled bowl on the crate.

Mel complied and hurriedly brought all the items to the bed. The first thing Janice did was open the bottle of whiskey and take a healthy swig. She was about to pour some over her wound when a light knock sounded at the door. "That's Toby's knock," Janice said, taking another swig of whiskey, "go ahead and answer it."

As soon as the door was opened a crack, the big man quickly handed Mel a bundle of bandages, some alcohol and other first aid supplies. Before she could say a word, he deposited the items and was gone. "Okay, what do I do?" Mel asked as she positioned herself on the edge of the crate, by the bed.

Janice grimaced as she positioned her arm for the other woman's inspection. After another swig of the whiskey she was ready to speak. "Take those tweezers and try to find the bullet." She probed the sides of her wound, gasping with pain as she did. "I think it's near the surface, shouldn't be too hard to find. After you get it out, clean it with the alcohol then sew it up. I'll talk you through it if I'm still conscious. If not, just wing it. You look like the type that can sew."

"I appreciate your faith in me Janice Covington." Mel said smiling through her sarcasm as she took a deep breath and went to work.

Aires shook his head in disbelief, Tobias simply shrugged. "So she made it back to the ship and now they're..." He left his words hanging as Tobias supplied a crass hand gesture leaving little to the imagination. "So she's fine then?" Aires asked, to which the big man nodded his head emphatically. "Funny," Aires wondered aloud, "I thought for sure she'd be a goner on that ship."

His silent musings were abruptly shattered by the loud gasp and whimper that came from the cabin next door. He looked at Toby who had the good grace to blush, "I can see you weren't mistaken." He said to his silent companion. Another cry followed with some loud sobbing when Aires shook his ruefully. "Christ," he muttered, "she's louder than last time."

Mel studied her handiwork critically. The stitches were neat and the wound cleaned to the best of her ability. Carefully she wrapped the archeologist's arm in clean bandages, occasionally glancing to the bowl that housed the bloody slug. Janice smiled at her weakly, looking up through heavily lidded eyes. "See, I knew you could sew," she muttered, completely inebriated.

"Nice to know you haven't lost your sense of humor." Mel observed.

"Nope. Just blood."

Mel cringed at that. There was a pile of bloodied compresses on the floor. Janice had lost a fair amount of blood. After gently prying the whisky bottle from Janice's good arm, she set it on the table and began to clean up the mess. After washing the last traces of blood from her fingers she turned to see Janice studying her, a small smile on her relaxed face. Argo had hopped onto the bed and lay curled at the archeologist's side, injured hand resting lightly on

the big dog's head.

"See something interesting?" Mel asked when Janice failed to redirect her gaze.

"Just a beautiful woman." Janice replied honestly.

"Janice Covington you're drunk!" Mel laughed as she moved to check on the bandage.

Janice nodded, "Yes, completely. But fortunately for me that does not change the fact that you are incredibly beautiful." She gently covered Mel's hand with her own and gazed into impossibly blue eyes.

"Are you always this flirtatious when you're drunk?" Mel asked, unable to pull herself away from the green eyes that looked so intently into her own.

Janice shrugged, "I don't know. If I'm going to be really drunk, I try to do it in private. I'm much better company when I'm sober." The last was said with a suggestive leer than broke the spell and made Mel laugh.

"Oh, I don't know about that." Mel said, putting the archeologist's hand back on the big dog's head. "Sober you've been positively infuriating, drunk I find you oddly charming." Casually she began to glance around the small room. It was late, she was exhausted and there didn't seem to be any other place to stretch out other than the bed.

Now even Janice laughed. "Too bad I don't drink very often." With a shrug she changed the subject as she noticed Mel's eyes wandering.

"You might as well get into bed with Argo and me. I'm in no condition to indulge in anything more aggressive than idle fantasy."

Mel smiled as she began to undress. "Nice to know I'm having some impact." She muttered as she slipped into bed on the side of Janice's good arm. Oddly, she felt more comfortable with the inebriated flirtatious Janice than the hothead of earlier. She looked over to see if her comment met with any response to see Janice's eyes closed, sound asleep. With a smile she relaxed into the bed, smiling to herself as she too drifted off to sleep.

...I learned an important lesson after Thessaly. Never underestimate the determination of a bard. Well, at least one bard, that's for certain. I suppose I was overprotective, but how could I not be? As momentary as it was, the loss of Gabrielle hit me so deeply I don't think the pain of it ever affected me less regardless of how many years later the memory surfaced.

When she was ready to travel we left the Temple of Asclepius and continued on our way toward Athens. I insisted she ride, surprised that she didn't argue the point. She wasn't strong enough to talk, well not at her usual capacity, so a significant part of our journey was in silence. In hindsight I guess it was not ideal for either of us. I was left to brooding on the dark thoughts of what might have been. Gabrielle, who knew me better than any one alive could tell. With each step Argo took I got closer to learning something important about Gabrielle as well as myself, and that lesson would not be easy to take.

When we camped for the night I saw to it that she moved as little as possible. The stitches were not yet ready to come out, and there was no sense in aggravating the wounds. Gabrielle was strangely moody and by the time I'd cleaned up after dinner she appeared despondent, gazing absently into the fire.

"Are you okay?" I asked, worried that a full day's travel had been too much for her.

"You're joking, right?" She replied sullenly, her eyes clouded over with something unreadable.

"Can you tell me what's bothering you?" I asked taking a seat next to her on her bedroll.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I could, but I doubt it would do any good."

I blinked in surprise at the frankness of her answer. "I'd like you to try," I said, "I might surprise you."

She took a few moments to compose her thoughts then turned a steady gaze to me. "Xena, I'm sorry about what happened at the temple," she began, "but the way you're dealing

with it isn't healthy for either of us."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're scared. I don't know if you've admitted it to yourself yet or not, but you are. I can see you doubting my abilities, going overboard trying to take care of me and smothering me in the process." The tone of her voice gave little away. She didn't sound angry, or hurt, just numb.

"That's a little harsh, don't you think?" I replied, "I mean you don't even have your stitches out."

She smiled a thin smile that did not reach her eyes, "I don't think it would matter if I had gray hair Xena. You need to come to grips with this and until you do, you're not going to let me out of your sight." She sighed. "You feel too much responsibility for my life Xena and it isn't doing you or me any good."

I was starting to get angry but tried not to show it. Sometimes I hate it when she's right. "You could tell all of this by one day's travel?" I asked, my own voice icy.

She nodded. "You're a complex person Xena." she said, "but sometimes you're not very hard to read."

"Well thanks for the complex part." I muttered.

"Am I wrong?" She asked.

I shook my head, "I guess not. But Gabrielle, you've got to understand that I *am* responsible for what happens to you..."

"No you're not!" She said forcefully, grabbing my hand for emphasis. "Until you realize that I am responsible for my own life this will continue to be a problem." She shook her head, frustrated. "Xena, I travel with you because I choose to. I know who you are and who you were. I am well aware that every war lord from here to Sparta would love to have your head on a pike outside their front gate. But Xena, I am an adult. Knowing what the risks are, I have made my choice, and it is to be with you. You're my home and I'm your family. I can't explain how we got this way but I just know that we are. You're going to have to let go..."

"Gabrielle," I butted in, "you *died*. This is not a matter of a sprained ankle or the ungracious behavior of a warlord."

She nodded. "That's true. But every day I have to live with the reality that you might die. That some assassin might get lucky, that down some dark corridor there may be the numbers to overwhelm you. Yes, Xena you have to live with the same risks that I do." She shook her head sadly, "I have faith in you to come to my rescue when things get too much for me. I wish you had faith in me to know it won't happen very often."

I didn't know what to say to that. Looking back to the few other painful conversations we'd had I tried to do what she had told me then. Put myself in her place. But there was a big difference between Gabrielle and myself. She wasn't as strong or proficient in any weapons save for the staff. But, I countered myself, she had talked herself into and out of some amazing predicaments in the past. With a sigh I realized that she was much more versatile than I and ultimately could avoid more confrontations. Fortunately for me I had learned as a warlord that there was little to be gained by not taking good advice when it was presented on a silver platter.

"What would you have me do?" I asked quietly.

"What?" She asked, stunned.

I shrugged, "I think you're right Gabrielle. I'd like to try to fix this if I can."

"You think I'm right?" She asked in wonderment.

"Is something wrong with your hearing?" I inquired dryly.

"Oh no," she hurried on. "I'm just surprised that's all. I thought it would take at least another hour to talk some sense into you."

"Well I'm glad I can surprise you from time to time." I replied. "Unlike some people, I

try not to have a problem admitting it when I'm wrong."

"Ah, yeah." She nodded getting my point. "So what to do..."

I think we talked most of the night that night. At times it was painful and exhausting but at other times it was warm and comforting. She shared a lot about growing up in Potedia. Little things she hadn't yet told me about how she was treated by her family and how I had been such a contrast to that. Knowing why she was so sensitive to being babied gave me the insight I needed to keep from doing it- that is unless it was necessary. I managed to avoid talking about my past but I did tell her, through graphic examples, of the painful demise of warriors who had let pride get in the way of their commonsense.

As we turned to our bedrolls she spoke one more time. "Thanks Xena," she said, "for talking this out. You were really much better at this than I expected."

I couldn't suppress a grin at that statement. I'd changed so much in the past year. "Just don't expect this level of conversation every time you have a complaint." I muttered as I laid down to sleep. She laughed and that lyrical sound and the radiant smile that went with it I carried with me as I traveled past the land of dreams...

Chapter 5: Private Parties

Mel awoke with a start. She was warm, comfortably so, and something soft was pressing against her side. She looked down to see the mass of strawberry blond hair resting in the crook of her shoulder, and a bandaged arm draped across her chest. She could feel one of Janice's legs draped across her own and then she saw the reason. Argo had stretched out on the bed, effectively shoving Janice on top of Mel. Both dog and owner were breathing the slow relaxed breaths of peaceful slumber.

Mel stayed that way for awhile, absently stroking Janice's back with her arm, feeling protective, needed. It was when she realized that she needed to use the bathroom that she decided to wake Janice.

"Doctor Covington?" Mel asked softly, gently shaking the archeologist's shoulders.

"Murphhh na lau." Janice mumbled into Mel's breast.

"Janice, wake up. Please." Mel tried again.

"Not now, I'm busy." Janice mumbled, only slightly more coherent.

"Busy doing what?" Mel asked, blue eyes blazing into green as Janice slowly lifted her head.

"Wha...?" Janice asked trying to focus. It took only a moment before she glanced down at her own nude form, then to Mel who was dressed in only a slip. "What happened?" Janice demanded wincing in pain when she tried to move her arm. Then again once she realized the pounding she heard was coming from inside her own head.

"What happened when?" Mel asked calmly.

"Did I...?" Janice's mind raced trying to put the pieces together. She didn't know what would be worse, having taken advantage of Melinda Pappas or not being able to remember doing it.

Mel laughed, the sensation of moving breasts not lost on Janice who still leaned against them. "No Janice, you didn't do anything. You implied that you wanted to however, but you fell asleep." With a nod she indicated Argo. "I think your dog shoved you onto me in your sleep." Janice nodded, cheeks flaming red, almost as red as her blood shot eyes. "So how is the arm?" Mel asked deciding to be merciful and change the subject.

"Arm?" Another wince. "Oh *that* arm." She considered a moment then nodded, "it's okay. Just stiff." Janice paused for a moment. "And hungover. Ah, excuse me." She added as she shifted more of her weight onto Mel in order to turn and shove the dog. "Argo down!" After a couple of shoves the dog woke and complied. As gracefully as she could, Janice extracted herself from Mel's embrace and headed for her clothes.

Mel had finished dressing when she turned around to see Janice unwrapping her arm. "What are you doing?" She asked.

"Relax sweetheart, I'm just checking on your handiwork, okay?" Taking out a new set of dressings Mel waited patiently for Janice to finish her inspection. She got a shrug and a smile of approval. "Nice work Mel."

"Why thank you doctor. Ah, do you think we should switch shirts?" Mel asked. "I washed the blood out of your's but there is a hole in it, and your bandage will show through."

Janice nodded, wondering why the thought hadn't occurred to her. "That's a good idea, thanks. Does anyone know I'm hurt?" She asked trading shirts with the southerner.

"Just Toby, there was no around it."

"I'll keep out of sight until we get to Leesto's. It shouldn't be much longer."

Mel and Argo proceeded on deck. Janice had assured Mel that she would be fine and was ravenously hungry. In the quest for food that did not come in a can, Mel endured the appreciative glances of the crew as she looked for Aires. Grateful Janice's shirt had a chance to fully dry, she was comforted by the scent of the archeologist that clung to the khaki fabric.

"Could you keep her a little more quiet next time?" Aires said in way of greeting when he met up with Mel on deck. She stared at him blankly for a moment until she got his meaning.

"I'll try," she murmured demurely. "But I don't think she can really help it."

"Yes, well I'm not the only one envious of her helplessness." Aires replied with a grin. "Have you had anything to eat? Er, I mean food that is."

Mel rolled her eyes at the joke, not completely certain what the eating thing was about. It was the second time it was mentioned and she honestly didn't have a clue. She did have enough of an idea that she did not want to ask Janice. A quick trip to the ships mess rewarded her and Argo with better food than she'd expected on a smuggling ship.

She returned to the cabin, arms laden with bread, cheese, roast beef and fruit. Once she had the door closed behind her she unloaded her spoils on the bed. She handed Janice a steaming mug, that meeting with the most approval.

"I'm surprised you can eat with a hangover." Mel observed as she watched the food between them vanish.

"I can always eat." Janice replied. "Sick, hangover doesn't matter. Dad said it ran in the family."

"You can say that again." Mel quipped before she could stop herself.

Janice looked at her strangely. "How would you know?" Mel looked down, embarrassed. "A memory thing?" Janice asked, her voice surprisingly soft.

Mel nodded. "I'm sorry Janice. Things just pop into my head. It's like things I've known or just remembered. I can't explain it."

"So you're saying I'm a lot like Gabrielle?" Mel laughed, and was instantly sorry she did. Janice looked positively furious.

"Well actually no, you and Gabrielle are... very different." Mel shrugged helplessly. "Gabrielle had a much nicer disposition."

"How nice for Xena." Janice replied, and had no idea as to why she said it. She shook her head trying to clear the cobwebs forged in the stupor of inebriation.

Toby's knock sounded at the door. After pointing to Janice then up towards the deck, the two women followed the big man. Aires stood leaning over the rail of the ship, intent on the sight through his binoculars: A small island looming on the horizon. He winked at Janice when she approached.

"Sorry to disturb you, but I thought you might want to see this." He said, handing over the glasses.

Janice peered into lenses, adjusting the focus slightly. A large ship was anchored just

off the island with minimal activity on deck.

"Have they seen us?" Janice asked.

Aires nodded, "I wouldn't worry about it though. Leesto is used to cargo traffic, we can pass by without arousing suspicion then double back. What do you make of that big ship there?" he asked.

"Looks like a pleasure cruiser to me." Janice shrugged. "Cal has visitors, wealthy from the looks of them. Wonder what she's up to?"

Mel grabbed Janice's good arm with a start. "The scrolls," she whispered fiercely, "something to do with the scrolls."

Janice nodded, her hangover returning in full force. "Knowing Cal, it's an auction."

"Are you sure about this?" Mel asked hours later as she rowed the small boat toward the giant cruise ship.

"I'm not really sure of anything." Janice replied, "I just wing it and hope for the best. Maybe the ship's crew will be too busy taking care of their wealthy guests to pay much attention to us."

The reception that met them however was a bit more than the archeologist had hoped. Seven crisply uniformed men with guns waited at the base of a ladder when the tiny boat pulled up. Before Janice could speak Mel stood and regarded the most decorated of the uniformed men coldly, "I will speak with the captain immediately."

"Who are you?" The man asked, surprised by the regal tone.

"I am Kathryn Von Melosa, this ship was supposed to wait for my arrival before departing. As it was, I had to take inadequate transport to get here. Don't think for a second I will let this sort of affront pass."

"Von Melosa?" The man sputtered. "We did not have any Von Melosa on our manifest."

"Then I will have a word with your captain over that as well."

As fast as the men could move Melinda, Janice and Argo were brought on board. The men were beside themselves with fear. The Von Melosas were as infamous as the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers. After several apologies by the men, Janice suggested since they were on board, and that was all that really mattered, why bother the captain when the helpful men would certainly be held responsible for the oversight. They were in favor of forgetting the whole thing and escorted the trio to a vacant suite.

"Von Melosa?" Janice asked with a raised eyebrow when the door closed securely behind her.

"Mother's maiden name." She explained. "Comes in useful from time to time."

"Your mother is Kathryn Von Melosa?!" Janice was stunned.

"Well, pappy called her Katie."

"You're an heiress?" Janice was still stunned.

Mel shrugged unhappily. "Well, sort of." Getting annoyed, Mel firmly put her hands on her hips. "Shut your mouth Janice, or you're going to catch flies. Yes, momma is rich, but I haven't seen her in years. Your daddy wasn't the only one with trouble keeping a wife, momma left us too." She shook her head, trying to scatter unpleasant memories, "So, Doctor Covington, I got us on this ship but it won't take much checking to discover that momma isn't supposed to be a passenger. What now?"

Janice shrugged. "Let's have a look around."

After breaking into the room across the hall, Janice found an embossed invitation on the dressing table. "It's an auction all right," she noted, reading the elegant parchment. "Xena scrolls and other related artifacts to be auctioned off tonight, starting at 8pm sharp. Bids will be taken until midnight. Only after the final bid is taken will the artifacts be distributed. I guess she figures only unlocking the vault once will be safer for her and her clients," Janice

guessed. "Which means we have until midnight to figure out a way to get to them first."

"Or I could just buy them." Mel muttered. She shrugged at Janice's shocked expression. "It isn't like I don't have the money, wouldn't that be easier?"

Janice looked at her, a wicked gleam in her vibrant green eyes. "But not nearly as fun. Think about it Mel, what would Xena do?"

It only took a moment to think about what had been done. The theft of her things, of Gabrielle's things. It wasn't the items that mattered so much as the fact that they were being sold to the highest bidder and taken away from her family. "We take what's ours," she replied. Janice had to do a double take. Mel had spoken without her accent.

Janice checked the time on her pocket watch, thankful that it was in the pocket of her jacket and not ruined by her fall overboard. "We don't have much time Mel." She urged as the heiress put the last few items into the large suitcase.

Mel nodded. "I've got everything, lets go."

"Are those clothes going to fit?" Janice asked as they retrieved Argo from their room.

"Sure," Mel replied, "I've always been the same size as the Vanderbilts."

They carefully lowered the suitcase onto their dingy, keeping an eye out for crew. With Mel and the luggage in the boat, Janice carefully removed the dog's pack and tossed it down to Mel.

"Okay girl," Janice said to the dog. "You're going to hate this, but I need a diversion. That end of the ship. Then come back here and jump overboard. Mommie will get ya." The dog looked nervous, apparently understanding the word *overboard*, and was not happy. Janice tried again, enthusiastically whispering the words "big mess" and pointing. With a pant, the big dog trotted off.

"Mommie?" Mel asked with a grin as Janice seated herself in the boat.

Janice frowned. "Forget it Mel, and start rowing." Moments later screams could be heard on board as havoc broke out. They were halfway to shore when Janice pointed at the water. "Stop rowing. There she is, let her catch up." Mel lifted the oars out of the water as Janice struggled to lift the dog into the boat. She winced with pain at the exertion of her wounded arm, but all was forgotten when the soaked canine showered her with sloppy kisses.

Mel didn't try to hide the amusement from her face at Janice as she hugged her dog and praised her with kisses for a job well done. Shouting could still be heard from the cruise ship as their tiny boat found a secluded cove on the island. On firm footing, Argo took the opportunity to shake the water from her coat, managing to drench Mel with most of it.

"That's mommie's good girl." Janice snickered with satisfaction.

After some scouting, Argo discovered an empty boathouse near the main complex of Calissandra Leesto's island retreat. An elaborate walkway was decorated, clearly the entry way for the evening's event.

"We have four hours until show time." Janice said looking at her watch. "Get some sleep, I'll keep an eye out for anyone. Once the guests start to arrive, we get dressed. If your disguises work we should be able to slip in with the rest of 'em. When we find the stuff, we get back to the boat as soon as possible. Aires said he'd wait 24 hours on the other side of the island. After that we're going to have to hijack a cruise ship if we want to get home."

Mel watched Janice carefully. It was clear that the younger woman was in pain. She was using her injured arm as little as possible, but trying to favor it casually. She needed to be still, to rest if they were going to be successful in their attempt at recovering the scrolls. Janice sat on the floor of the boat house, back propped up against the wall as she glanced out the window across from her and listened to the sounds of the island. Mel lay down using Janice's jacket as a blanket, and her thigh as a pillow. Janice started in surprise at first, but Mel smiled as she felt the archeologist relax under the contact.

"Comfortable?" Janice asked, as she draped her good arm over Mel's shoulders and played with her hair absently.

"Very." Mel replied warmly. "Don't forget to wake me with plenty of time to get dressed. It's going to take awhile for your hair and make up."

"I can hardly wait." Was the last thing Mel heard her say before drifting off to sleep.

...I don't know who was more surprised by the announcement of Iolaus' wedding, me or Gabrielle. We'd kept in touch with him and Hercules over the years, keeping each other updated on our adventures, and occasionally coming to each others aid. The announcement of Iolaus' betrothal, however, came as a complete surprise. What was even more surprising than simply being invited to the wedding, was the request that I sing at the ceremony. Iolaus was like family, and there was simply no way I could refuse. Gabrielle and I arrived into town a full two days before the nuptials were scheduled to take place. Hercules arrived shortly after us. Gabrielle had been unusually quiet since we'd gotten into town and I'd hoped that catching up on old times with Herc might remedy whatever it was that was bothering her.

We sat at an outside table watching the village prepare for the wedding of a celebrity. Herc had made certain that Gabrielle and I stay in the castle of his brother. He seemed very pleased that for once the attention was not focused entirely on him. To a lesser degree I knew how he felt. Gabrielle continued to keep to herself, contributing only rarely to the conversation. The arrival of Jason, Hercules' step-father only made things worse.

"Beautiful time of year for a wedding." Jason commented, to which Hercules, Gabrielle and I mumbled our agreement.

"Selene is crazy about Iolaus. Of course, being crazy helps if you're going to marry him." Hercules commented.

"Can't say she was the one everyone expected to marry Iolaus." Jason countered.

"Really?" I asked. "Who was he expected to marry?"

Jason smiled across the table. "Why Gabrielle, of course."

The fact that Gabrielle choked on her wine let me know that she was indeed following the conversation. Her comment of "How silly," was apparently not what Jason expected.

"Why do you say that, Gabrielle?" He asked.

"Well," she replied, "we've never been more than friends, and it isn't as if I'm available anyway."

I could see Herc try to suppress a snicker as he looked intently into his goblet. I kept my expression neutral as I waited for Gabrielle to explain this one.

"Well you've done a very good job of hiding him Gabrielle." Jason replied with a chuckle. "In fact, the only company I ever hear of you keeping is Xe..."

A judiciously raised eyebrow at Jason brought his musings to an abrupt end. "I guess people can forget the double wedding between you and Hercules and Gabrielle and Iolaus." Jason muttered as he excused himself from our table, supposedly to find his wife.

"Apparently so." I agreed after his departure.

Hercules laughed heartily. "That was priceless." He grinned when he could finally speak.

"I don't find it funny at all." Gabrielle shot back and abruptly left the table. I assured Hercules that it was not his sense of humor that had driven off my bard. She'd been acting odd for awhile now and it was high time I found out why.

"What's the matter?" I asked when I finally tracked her down to the stall where Argo was stabled.

"It's nothing," she replied sullenly, "I guess I just don't like weddings."

I walked up behind her, easing my arms around her shoulders and resting my chin on the top of her head. "I think there is more to it than that." I murmured. "Is it Perdicus?" I asked wondering if the preparations for Iolaus' wedding brought back memories of so long ago.

She shook her head. "Not exactly."

She turned in my embrace and looked up at me with those enchanting green eyes. "I really don't like weddings. I can't dance. I'll be expected to, and I'm not looking forward to..."

"To what?" I asked when it became clear she had no intention of finishing her sentence.

"It's nothing. Really, let's just forget it." She said, casting her eyes downward. A stable hand came in to attend another horse. Instinctively Gabrielle took a step away from me, her cheeks flushing red.

"If it's bothering you, it *is* something, and I want to know about it." I assured her, ignoring the boy and taking a step towards her to wrap her in my arms again.

"Xena." She put her arms up to block mine and looked pointedly at the stable boy whose back was turned. For me the gesture was like a torch lighting up in a dark cave.

"Let's go to our room," I said quietly. "It's not what you think." I added when she shot me a knowing glance. "Well, not *just* what you think."

Safely behind a closed door I was hoping Gabrielle might be a little more forthcoming with what was really bothering her.

"Is it this wedding in particular that's bothering you?" I asked, taking off my sword and chakram.

"I suppose," she agreed. "But not because it's Iolaus. The people in this village know you, or know of you at least. I'm not thrilled that every noble within riding distance is going to descend tomorrow and be all over you like flies on..." I looked at her expecting a dig but she only smiled as she said, "honey."

"What makes you think they will?"

She turned, exasperated from the window where she had been standing. "Because people don't know that you *aren't* available." She finally blurted.

"I can't say I've ever really acted *available*" I observed.

"No, I don't suppose you do. But there isn't anything or anyone to suggest you aren't. Or, they'll just think you're with Hercules." She finished.

I couldn't help but smile as I approached her. "Then we shall endeavor to inform them otherwise," I replied stealing a gentle kiss.

"We can't do that." Gabrielle replied when our kiss finally broke.

I shrugged, "I thought as Warrior Princess I got to do pretty much whatever I want. You're telling me there are limits to my power?" As I'd hoped, my reply was rewarded with a small chuckle.

"You're the one worried about me being a target." She said. "Besides we both know how some people would feel... about us."

I had to think about that for a moment. It was true I had been concerned about people trying to get to me through Gabrielle, but in reality that had been happening the whole time we'd known each other. As for the others, people were saying any number of things about me behind my back, and occasionally to my face, but rarely more than once. "Gabrielle," I began as I gently clasped her shoulders, "anyone who knows us knows how we feel about each other. I mean, Callisto knew, and that was before either of us did. I'm not about to endure an entire wedding reception without my beloved at my side. If it disappoints the fantasies of people like Jason, well I'm afraid that can't be helped."

She smiled at me, the first time I'd seen that glorious sight in days. The smile however shifted to terror when I added, "So I think it's time for your first dancing lesson."

"...no Gabrielle, your left foot goes behind the right, then you kick with the left. I kick with my right." I explained patiently, showing her again.

"I just don't get it." She complained, eyeing me intently as I began to take off my breastplate. I caught her eye and got an idea.

I shook my head. "Nope, the breastplate stays on until you get this. Try it again."

In a few minutes she had the dance and my breastplate. After that, Gabrielle picked up the steps quickly. With each dance she mastered she got a piece of my clothing. In no time she'd mastered seven different dances and I found myself busy congratulating her on her progress.

When she slept, the exhausted, contented sleep of blissfully sated, I bathed, dressed and headed back into the village square.

"Nice dress." Hercules commented when I ran into him outside. "Where have you been?"

"Oh, just teaching Gabrielle to dance." I replied. I'd left my armor in the room. I was going to be wearing a dress for the wedding and decided getting used to walking around in one wouldn't kill me.

"I'm sorry about Jason." Hercules said in a rush.

"Don't be." I assured him. "Really, he prompted a conversation Gabrielle and I had been needing to have."

"About marriage?" He asked.

"No, about dancing." I replied with a smile. "But as long as we're on the subject of marriage, know any good jewelers?"

I practiced the song Iolaus had asked me to sing as Gabrielle and I dressed for the wedding. Her mood was greatly improved and that pleased me to no end. "Well what do you think?" She asked and I turned around to see what she meant.

I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful vision. The dress she wore, a low cut masterpiece in green and gold was positively striking. I think I even needed to grab the back of a nearby chair for support, so struck was I with her brilliance.

"You are the most beautiful creature I've ever seen." I whispered. "But something's missing," I added when I could force myself to think.

"What?" She asked, crestfallen.

I turned to hide my smile and then reached in to the saddle bag that hung on a peg by the door. I eased the necklace from the velvet that housed it and reached for Gabrielle.

"What's this?" She asked, catching the pendant that hung from the delicate chain in her fingers.

"For you," I replied, "from me."

She studied the detail in the gold medallion with interest. "It's exquisite. But there is only half of it here- is it broken?" She asked.

"Sort of." I replied, taking another necklace from the pouch and handing it to her. "It's called a celtic knot, it's from beyond the sea, where M'lia was from. I cut this into two, this is the other half." She touched the two halves of the medallion, smiling at the completed picture. "As you are my other half." I added quietly.

She looked at me, eyes brimming with joy. "I love you, Xena."

"I know." I replied, smiling at the playful punch I received at that. She put the other necklace around my neck and we headed to the wedding arm in arm ready for anything.

As weddings go I suppose it was lovely. To be honest I don't remember much about that day except for Gabrielle. I managed to get through the song without my voice breaking. It was hard though, seeing Gabrielle's eyes on me from where she was sitting, had me on the verge of joyous laughter. Selene and Iolaus were very happy, and we wished them well. At the reception Gabrielle did manage to put her new found mastery of dancing to good use. She danced with Iolaus, Hercules and even Jason but every other dance was for me, much to the supreme disappointment of a variety of local nobles. I was not the only one who appreciated the vision in green and gold.

Looking back, I suppose I'm a little surprised at just how at ease we were. We held hands, kissed and danced like any other married couple. I could feel a few stares, but in all

honesty it wasn't any different from the stares I'd get from my armor. I suppose Gabrielle and I had become used to being looked at, speculated about. Only now the stares were for Xena and Gabrielle; two women in love, not just Warrior and Bard: Potential trouble for our village. For the chance to spend a day as just Gabrielle and Xena, we didn't mind a bit.

After a well spent night of little sleep in a comfortable room we returned to the road after breakfast the next morning. I stole frequent glances of Gabrielle. She fingered her necklace absently as we walked. She was surprised and pleased that I had not taken mine off. After all, there was no reason to.

"So Xena," Gabrielle asked as we rounded the bend that would have taken the village from our sight, "when do you think we'll get married?"

"I thought you didn't like weddings." I teased.

"Oh, I think I've developed an appreciation. The dancing definitely helps." She smiled at me as she continued. "but by the time we get married, I might need a refresher course."

"I think that can be arranged." I replied, glancing down at my own necklace, silently agreeing with Gabrielle that it did look rather fitting...

Chapter 6: Trouble, More or Leesto

"Wake up Mel, it's show time." Janice nudged Mel gently, wishing she didn't have to disturb the woman sleeping peacefully on her lap. Mel blinked in confusion, at first puzzled by the contrast of her dream and her present surroundings. "Leesto's party, we've got to get dressed." Janice supplied as she helped shift Mel to a sitting position. "I noticed some activity on the dock, we'd best get dressed and get out of here."

Mel nodded, clearing the cobwebs from her mind and opening the suitcase containing the items they'd stolen from the ship. She took out a white shirt and put it aside as she began to unbutton her own blouse.

"I thought I was wearing that." Janice blurted when she noticed what Mel intended to wear.

"You?" Mel laughed. "Don't be silly. Y'all will never be able to pass yourself off as a man, y'all will wear the dress."

"Like hell I will." Janice shot back, "what about all that, I'm the same size at the Vanderbilts?" Still smiling, Mel removed the luggage tag from the suitcase and handed it to her friend. "Marmax Vanderbilt," Janice read the tag out loud. "Great. Look Mel, I don't know how to put this, but there is no way you'll be able to cover... er disguise your... um... what about your hair anyway?" She finally finished, forcing her eyes above Mel's ample bustline.

Mel took a styled wig from the suitcase. "A little trim on this should do the trick, and don't worry I swiped some sewing scissors too. You get out of those clothes and put the dress on."

Argo lifted her head as she watched her mistress disrobe. "Not one word out of you." Janice warned the dog, who put her head back down.

Janice shrugged into the black satin dress, futzed with her stockings and shoes and slipped on the long gloves. She kept her back turned to Mel, not wanting the older woman to see how unaccustomed she was to dressing in such finery. From behind she could hear Mel dress, her mind painting pictures of how the statuesque woman would look in a tuxedo. When she finally stood up, her face to the boat house wall she felt a warm body move behind her and adjust the fasteners at the back of the dress. "You look very nice Janice." Mel commented as she adjusted the lace at the archeologist's shoulder. Janice could feel her skin tingle from the whisper of Mel's breath as it caressed the side of her neck. Lifting her head she caught a reflection of the two of them in the window. Janice's eyes widened with wonder at the vision standing behind her. Mel was dressed; the tuxedo complete except for the untied bowtie that

was draped loosely around her neck. Her hair was still down; black tresses blending into the black jacket over a white shirt and vest, her blue eyes shining like lapis. Something caught her eye and she shifted her gaze to her own reflection. She cocked her head curiously at the stranger looking back at her. The dress was low cut and elegant, a masterpiece in lace and satin. She followed the black lace line at her shoulder to where it met the black cuffed wrist of Mel's hand.

Mesmerized she watched Mel's hands lift from her shoulder and move to the back of her head where they gently pulled her hair free of its bindings. Mel brushed her hair with long luxurious strokes and pulled two combs from the pocket of her jacket to pin it gracefully behind her ears. Janice didn't recognize herself.

Gently those delicate hands turned her around and she was face to face with her friend. "You look incredible." Janice whispered.

"If you say so," Mel replied, breaking the spell. "I can't tie a tie though."

Janice nodded, not trusting herself to say any more. With shaking hands she reached for the tie, and as she had for her father many times, tied the complicated knot, forcing herself to concentrate. Feeling her pulse race, she willed herself to stay calm. Still, the thoughts persisted, her eyes persisting in showing her things and she couldn't help but respond. When she finished straightening the tie she moved her hands to Mel's shoulders, examining her work. She could feel the suspenders under the material of the jacket and vest, the material cool and smooth against her burning hands. Unable to stop herself, she leaned up and softly covered Mel's mouth with her own. Her hand slid across soft fabric to the even softer skin at the back of Mel's neck. After a few seconds of exquisite contact she realized that the other woman was neither helping nor hindering her efforts. Like a deer in headlights, Mel was frozen.

"Shit Mel, I'm sorry." Janice blurted embarrassed beyond words after abruptly breaking the kiss, "I don't know what came over me, I don't know why I... look, I... I'm sorry."

Mel continued to look at Janice for minutes more, not moving. She finally shook her head and mumbled, "It's okay Janice, let's get ready. We've got work to do."

Janice nodded blushing to the roots of her hair. Mel reached for the makeup, her own hands shaking. Her lips still throbbed from where Janice had touched them. She closed her eyes, unsure if the racing of her pulse was from fear or arousal. Sorting through the contents of the makeup pouch, Mel extracted a powder compact and turned back to Janice, aching for the embarrassment that still haunted her vibrant green eyes. "This won't hurt a bit," she reassured with a smile as she began to apply the makeup. Janice closed her eyes, torn between wishing she could undo the last five minutes and wanting to relive them.

"I need you to look at me," Mel instructed gently when she'd finished most of the makeup. Taking out the caked mascara, she spit into the container as discreetly as she could. Then, after moistening the applicator, gently held Janice's head still as she applied the tiny brush to delicate eyelashes. Janice marveled at the gentleness of the hands that held her face, skillfully transforming her.

"Almost done." Mel reassured as she reached for the lipstick. As she worked Mel stared in wonder at the soft full lips that had so recently touched her own. She felt a slight twinge of pain then noticed she'd bitten her own lower lip in distraction. "There, what'd ya think?" She asked turning Janice back around to the window, the closest thing they had to a mirror.

"I look like a freak." Janice quipped, barely able to recognize herself.

"Now you know how I feel in your daddy's clothes." Mel chided her friend.

Janice smiled in spite of herself. "Get to work on that wig, I'll have a look around. Argo, lets go." She said as she quietly stepped out of the boathouse. Mel sighed in relief, it was instantly easier to concentrate with the gruff archeologist gone. "*What's happening to me?*" She

wondered as she set to work on the expensive black wig.

Janice returned shortly. Mel instantly noticed that the younger woman's hands were filthy with oil. "What have you done?!" She quietly demanded.

"Relax sweetheart, I took the gloves off didn't I? There were several of Leesto's boats tied to the dock. I did a number on all of them. When we make a break for it try to get the boat on the end, it's the easiest to fix. The others are in pretty bad shape." Janice looked around for something to wipe herself off with and unable to find anything suitable, she settled on her discarded shirt. She busied herself with checking her gun and putting her satchel in Argo's pack. When Mel finished adjusting the wig she turned around.

Janice nodded in appreciation. "Well I'll be. I still think you're too pretty to be a man, but I've heard that the Vanderbilt boys run that way. You know, pretty. Just one thing is missing." Carefully Janice took her father's pocket watch from her jacket and tucked it into the watch pocket of Mel's vest. After carefully stringing the chain through the button hole she tucked the watch fob into its place. "There, now you almost look like a real man. How did you manage to flatten... ah... your..."

"Never mind." Mel cut her off. "But it isn't very comfortable, so the sooner I get back into my beige camisole the better."

Nodding Janice handed her the revolver. "Can you put this in your pants somewhere?"

"I'm not taking a gun. What if it goes off?"

"It only does that when you pull the trigger. C'mere, let me try putting it in back by your suspenders." Janice shook her head in appreciation as the black tails of Mel's jacket shifted as she moved. The heiress' attire was having a profound effect on the archeologist and she found it troublesome. Easing her hands inside of the jacket she could feel the firm muscles and warm flesh beneath as she positioned the gun. Successfully wedging it inbetween the woman's shirt and suspenders, she positioned it so the waistband of the black pants held it in place. It was secure, and while it might be less than comfortable, it was safe. "Well, I guess we're ready. This invitation says it's to Mr. and Mrs. M. Vanderbilt, if you're Marmax who am I?"

"My wife, Effie." Mel smiled at the other woman's grimace. "And sweetheart," she added taking the archeologist's gruff tone, "let me do the talking. Ephiny Vanderbilt is shy and demure. We should be okay as long as y'all don't open your mouth."

"Yes *dear*," Janice replied, dripping with sarcasm as they left the boat building.

They hid their gear among the lush trees by the water's edge, then proceeded to where small groups of elegantly dressed people were arriving by the way of rowboat. "Argo, c'mere." Janice whispered gently to the dog when they were still out of earshot of the arriving guests. She rummaged in the dog's pack and pulled out a fresh cigar.

"You're not going to smoke that, are you?" Mel asked, horrified.

Janice smiled in reply, "I'm not, but you are." With practiced efficiency, she made a small bite at the end of the cigar, then spat the excess tobacco on the ground. In moments it was lit and glowing. After a few luxurious puffs she handed it to Mel.

"Now, when you hold it in your hand, do it like this," Janice instructed. "When it's in your mouth, hold it between your teeth, and for gods sake, don't inhale." She warned.

Mel did as she was told, coughing at first and struggling to keep her eyes from watering. Finally she felt comfortable enough to proceed to where guests were admitted to Leesto's mansion. When they neared the ornate doors, Janice pointed to a rosemary hedge below a large bay window. "Argo, hide in there," she instructed. The dog complied and in moments was settled, out of sight in the shrubbery. "Stay," Janice commanded then handed their ticket to Mel as they approached the door.

They reached the double french doors just as a small group was admitted. Their invitation was checked against the guest list by a valet and they were admitted without further

comment. The doors opened into a large formal ballroom lined with elegantly set tables. On one wall, framed photos were displayed with notes describing the artifacts to be auctioned. Mel and Janice casually walked over in a group of several other guests.

Janice was relieved that the sheer opulence of Leesto's ballroom and interest in the artifacts kept everyone's attention riveted elsewhere. No one paid them a second glance. She blinked, startled when she felt a possessive arm snake around her shoulders. She glanced up at Mel who with her eyes pointed in the direction of other couples. She was mimicking them. "Trust me, I'm not complaining," she muttered.

When they got close enough to the photo's to read the descriptions, Janice's eyes narrowed in anger. "These are my goddamned notes!" she hissed.

Mel leaned close to the shorter woman's ear. "Watch your temper, dearheart, someone may have heard that." She finished her statement with a soft kiss on Janice's cheek, eyes quickly scanning the closest aristocrats. No one appeared to notice the exchange or the outburst preceding it. While there were several heads turned in her direction, it was clear that she and her *wife* held no special interest.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Janice asked when Mel withdrew.

"About as much as you are." Mel replied with a small smile. "Nice penmanship, by the way," she added, studying the doctor's notes. The first object pictured was the wire-frame breast plate over the tattered remains of a leather dress.

"Xena's armor." Janice whispered.

"Her warlord armor." Mel added. "You were right about that. She stopped wearing it when she broke alliances with Ares." Mel glanced around. No one was within earshot. "Quite uncomfortable, I might add."

Janice looked up and was about to reply when they were joined by another guest, so they moved on. The next item was a bullwhip in excellent condition. Glancing up, Janice noticed a slight tug at the corners of Mel's mouth. Almost as if she recalled the item, and it held fond memories. Her suspicions were confirmed when they reached the next photo. Instantly Mel's expression shifted from amusement to sorrow, and anger. Janice looked at the photograph even as she felt the tensing of the hand that rested so comfortably on her shoulder.

The artifact titled *Lot 3* was a pair of necklaces, each made from half of an intricate medallion. The two halves fit together, creating a pattern of celtic design. "What is it Mel?" Janice asked. "Was this Xena's? I didn't think..."

Still staring at the black and white photo Mel answered. "We were buried in those. From the day I put it on I *never* took it off. Neither did she."

Janice stared at Mel in wonder. "Come with me," she urged pulling Mel away from the pictures to a more secluded spot in the huge ballroom near large draperies. "Are you...?" Janice asked. "I mean your accent...where did it go?"

"What are you talking about?" Mel asked, her regular voice back once more.

Janice shook her head and lifted a champagne glass from the tray of a passing waiter. When he was out of sight, she downed the contents in one gulp. "Just now, when you saw those necklaces, you sounded like... well *you* know."

"Oh Janice," Mel whispered, "don't be silly. I'm fine."

Janice was about to argue the point when a hush settled in the ball room as an elegantly dressed woman stepped up to the mike at the front of a stage next to the wall of photos. Now it was Mel's turn to watch the archeologist's eyes harden at the sight of her nemesis.

"Greetings, and welcome." the woman addressed her guests in a smooth, clear voice. "I am doctor Calissandra Leesto, and I'd like to thank you all for accepting my invitation. I had hoped an old friend might decide to pay me a visit but it appears that she couldn't make it. So be it," she sighed, "we'll just have to start the auction without her."

“As you can see,” she continued, turning to include the photos in a sweeping gesture, “I’ve documented and photographed my entire Xena collection. Each lot will be auctioned off separately. To make a bid, write it on a card provided and put it in the box with the corresponding lot number. Each half hour the lots will be checked and the highest bid for that item posted above it’s photo. You will then have the opportunity to re-bid. Winning bids and bid-holders will be announced at midnight, unless anonymity is requested.”

“Will we be able to see the artifacts?” One guest called out in a clear baritone voice.

Leesto smiled sweetly in his direction. “Because of the value of the artifacts, they won’t be brought down until eleven. You will have a chance to look at them before the last round of bidding.”

“That tells me what I need to know.” Janice said quietly from behind Mel’s back. She’d moved there to stay out of sight when Leesto took the stage. “The stuff’s upstairs, most likely in the study. Let’s go.”

As soon as Leesto stepped off the stage to mingle with her guests, Mel and Janice quickly passed by the remaining photographs they hadn’t seen to note which items the doctor still had in her possession. That finished, the two headed up the grand staircase to the second floor of Leesto’s palatial home.

“She bought all of this stuff off of money she made from your research?” Mel asked, noting the elegant house furnishings.

“I suppose that, and blackmail.” Janice replied, fighting for balance as she ascended the stairs in ill-fitting high heels.

They reached the second floor landing and Janice headed for the study. “I’m glad one of us knows our way around here.” Mel muttered as she followed her friend.

“The study was where Argo got shot last time.” Janice shook her head sadly. “We ran from her bedroom and hid...”

Mel laughed quietly in spite of herself. “I’m sorry doctor Covington, but the thought of you running from any beautiful woman’s bedroom is a little hard for me to believe.”

Janice frowned. “I’m glad you find my sexual preference amusing Melinda, but I do have standards. Besides, Cal is definitely not my type.”

“You don’t go for blonds?”

Janice stopped and looked at Mel a second. “I don’t go for twisted bitches. But since you’re so curious.” She added, gazing unflinchingly into Mel’s bright eyes, “I think I’m developing a passion for black hair and blue eyes.” Mel glanced away, embarrassed. Janice only smiled. “Careful Mel Pappas, I’m beginning to think you’re flirting with me.” She dropped her voice an octave lower, “and I *love* to be flirted with.”

She turned away from Mel, whose cheeks were flaming red, and looked down the hall. “There’s the study, with the two guards out front. Give me the gun.”

“You’re going to shoot them?” Mel hissed.

“Not unless I have to. Stay here.” With that, Janice took the revolver, and holding it behind her back, casually approached the two men.

“Scuse me, y’all know where the ladies room is?” The guards looked at Janice, or rather at her cleavage, and nodded down the hall. “Thank you ever so much. I seem to have a had a bit too much hard liquor.” She stumbled a couple of steps, one of the guards instantly at her side. The gun handle came up and hit him in the back of the head before he knew he was in any danger. Instantly Janice spun the gun in her hand and had it cocked and pointed at the other guard. “Don’t be stupid,” she growled. The guards brought his hands up and took a slow step away from the door. “Night-night,” Janice said before rendering him unconscious as well.

“Come on Mel, help me with these bodies.” Janice whispered as she tried the handle of the study door. The handle wouldn’t budge, it was locked. “Great, just what we need.”

“Let me try.” Mel said joining the archeologist.

“Mel, this isn’t a chakrum or...”

With strength she didn’t know she possessed, Mel forced the door handle, breaking the locking mechanism. “Close enough,” she muttered dragging the first body through the open door.

“You know Mel, I feel a lot more comfortable around you when you *have* that blasted accent.” Janice quipped following Mel inside.

Inside the study, with the guards safely locked in a small closet, Janice turned to Mel and asked in an uncertain voice, “It’s... you’re...? I mean, are you...?”

The tall woman diverted her attention from the artifacts strewn around the room to the archeologist looking at her. “Yeah. We meet again Janice. But don’t worry, Mel’s here too.”

“What is it with you?” Janice asked confused. “I mean that whole bit with Ares, okay. There was your chakram and that possession made sense, but this? Do you just pop into Mel’s head from time to time?”

Xena took a deep breath and forced herself to be patient with Gabrielle’s progeny. In a way, Janice was her descendent as well. “I can’t explain it any better than you can. But look around you, we’re surrounded by my things... by our things. We’ve got enough to worry about getting this stuff and us out of here safely than how I came to be here. It’s going to take all four of us to pull this off. Janice, I need you to trust me.”

Janice shook her head slowly, “Four of us. You’re talking about you and Mel, me and Argo... right?”

“Oh yeah, Argo. Make that five of us.” Xena nodded and continued her survey of the room.

“Oh no. You’re not telling me I’m about to be possessed by that... by the...” after a warning look from Xena, Janice chose her words carefully, “by a certain bard, am I?”

Xena shrugged her shoulders. “Look around. Don’t you feel a connection to this stuff?” The warrior’s eye caught something, and picked up a battered staff. Two of its three pieces were attached, the third hanging loosely, broken. “Here, do you recognize this?”

“Recognize it? Hell Xena, I dug that up. It’s a staff.” Janice replied taking the artifact that the other woman so reverently held.

“It’s your staff.” Xena replied evenly.

Janice felt light headed for a moment but shook it off. “Okay, Gabrielle’s staff. I get your point.” She looked around the room. Many of the artifacts she recognized from her digs, many of them having nothing to do with Xena. Finally, she located the scrolls and began to separate them from the other trinkets. “Look, let’s just gather up the stuff and go. We don’t have much time. I’m surprised Leesto is trying to pass some of this stuff off as Xena’s... oops sorry, yours. I mean, take this saddle for example...”

Xena glanced at the saddle indicated. “It was mine, well Argo’s, or Ego as she was called in her retirement.” Xena laughed at the memory. “Little Lyceus couldn’t pronounce her name.” She stopped laughing when she noticed Janice’s opened mouth stare.

“You had children?” She asked eyes wide. “With Gabrielle?”

“Well, we raised two. Obviously she had to give birth at some point, how do you think you got here?” Janice was about to respond when Xena shook her head. “You were right, we don’t have much time. Get the scrolls, that’s really what you came here for. There are a couple of things I want to take. Lets make it quick.”

Janice quickly bundled the scrolls together, watching as she did the warrior princess dressed in a tuxedo, rummage through the artifacts, her belongings. Xena put a couple of things into her pockets and pulled a heavy bronze breastplate from a display stand. She also picked up her bullwhip, then put it down in favor of Gabrielle’s staff. They were about to head for the door when it opened suddenly, revealing the blond scientist and several of her henchmen.

“Jan,” Leesto said with a sinister sneer, “so glad you could make it.” Her soft brown

eyes darted to Xena. "And who is the pretty man in the wig?" She asked, her voice taunting.

"Don't Mel." Janice warned as Xena's eyes narrowed. "Cal, this is Melinda Pappas," Xena reached up and took off the wig, shaking her long tresses loose. Leesto's eyes widened in appreciation at the imposing woman.

"It's a pleasure, Melinda Pappas." Leesto purred. "I'm sorry you keep such dreadful company." Janice shrugged, not disputing the jibe. Finally Leesto looked around the room. "What, no dog? Whatever will I do for target practice?"

It was reflexes forged in the heat of battle that launched Xena's body to intercept the archeologist before she could attack Leesto, preventing her from getting shot in the process. "You're not helping." Xena murmured to Janice as she relaxed her hold slightly.

"So Jan, is your friend an authority on Xena as well?" Leesto asked, waving her thugs into the room to subdue the doctor.

Janice smiled and winked at Xena before looking around the warrior's body to her nemesis. "She knows a lot more about Xena than I do. Sometimes I have to remind myself that she *isn't* the warrior princess. I'm sure the two of you will have lots to talk about. You *are* going to lock me up somewhere, aren't you?"

Leesto smiled briefly and nodded to the guards to haul Janice from the room. "Do be a good girl Jan and rot, won't you?" Her voice hard she addressed her guards, "take her to the kitchen and lock her in the walkin refrigerator. I want three guards posted, and keep an eye out for her mutt. If it's here, I want it killed."

"But Cal, it was a love bite, honest." Janice laughed as she was dragged down the hall. One guard remained with his gun trained on Leesto's lone visitor. "Wait outside Theoradore, if I need you, I'll call." He bowed briefly then retreated from the study closing the door behind him.

"Brave woman." Xena said as she studied Leesto.

"Not really." The blond woman countered, "the slightest scream from me will result in the death of your friend. My men are funny that way. Like Jan's flea-ridden cur, they can be trained. So Melinda, what can you tell me about Xena? That I don't already know that is."

"Well," Xena began thoughtfully as she gazed at Argo's saddle, "she had quite a temper and was fierce in battle. But you know, nothing brought about her hostile nature like a threat to her family."

Leesto cocked her head. "Why don't you prescribe to the theory that Xena was a twisted loner like most of those fools downstairs? Most of them don't think there ever was a Gabrielle."

Xena rested her hand on the ancient saddlehorn, "Because I know better," she said remembering the feel of the leather, the warmth of the animal she rode, and the love of the woman she rode with. "Gabrielle wrote the scrolls. All but one. But those bits of paper aren't the real treasure. It's how they lived and the family they raised. Still their possessions do deserve better than to be sold to the highest bidder. They belong to her family, my family."

"So you're a descendant of Xena?" Leesto asked, false disbelief evident in her features.

Xena leaned close, azure eyes burning into soft brown. "You tell me." She whispered.

"And I suppose you're going to tell me that Jan is related to Gabrielle..."

Xena shrugged, her hand grasping the familiar handle of her bullwhip. Suddenly a familiar fire burned in the eyes of the blond archeologist. "Well isn't this old home week." She said, her voice brimming with the timbre of Callisto's as she drew her gun. With a snap of her wrist the gun was out of her hand, but it discharged as it hit the study floor. Leesto would have dived for it had her face not contacted solidly with Xena's elbow. "Not this time Callisto." She muttered as the unconscious woman slid to the floor.

Janice didn't bother to struggle against the guards that roughly escorted her to the kitchen. She could feel the gun barrel just below her ribs and knew that Leesto's men would

have no qualms about killing her. Once inside the kitchen, however, she did struggle enough to knock some food on the floor and shouted as she was thrown into the large refrigerator. The door closed with a click, the latching lever having been removed from the inside of ten foot by ten foot frosty cell. She was trapped. It didn't take long for the chill to settle in and in moments she was shivering. She paced the tiny room glancing out of the reinforced glass window, noting the position of the two guards beyond. "*That leaves one more out in the kitchen*", she thought. "*Shit this sucks.*" Annoyed, she took off her gloves. The black satin was useless against the cold anyway. Not having a better plan for the moment, she began to look among the food stored with her for something to eat.

Xena walked past Callisto's inert body towards the door. She reached for the handle, then froze at the unmistakable sound of a cocked gun. "Not so fast Xena." Callisto said with a pistol leveled at the warrior. "And get away from that door." Xena complied, her eyes never leaving the gun pointed in her direction. She was fast, but not that fast. "Theoradore!" She called to the closed door. The beefy guard entered and waited patiently for his instructions. "Catch up to the others. If I'm not there in ten minutes with 'ol blue eyes," she said, indicating Xena, "have Covington shot." He nodded and withdrew from the room.

"So what do you think of my progeny's collection?" Callisto asked as she stood up.

Xena looked around the room once more. "Impressive, I suppose. Janice's research is thorough and scholarly." Xena cocked an eyebrow at the blond woman. "Alright Callisto, when did you find the time to procreate?"

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know Xena." Callisto replied dryly. "I was a god for awhile you know. Surely you don't think I was fighting with Valaska in a river of lava that whole time?" She continued in a light sing-song voice. "Nice thing about being a god, you can assume any form, make people think you're any one, even make them think they're dreaming. That's how little Arleia was born. Named after my murdered mother, by the way. Our mighty Hercules was reliving old times with you. Poor boy thought he was dreaming."

"You're sick." Xena said flatly.

"You ought to know." Callisto replied happily. "But really Xena, you should thank me." Xena only cocked an eyebrow, unwilling to play the age old game. "Were it not for me your precious little Lyceus would never have been born."

"You!" Xena's eyes flared in fury, "Erasmus raped Gabrielle..."

Callisto laughed. "Where do you think the dear boy got the idea?" Xena advanced menacingly toward her nemesis. "Not so fast, we've got a date to keep with the 'fridge. We don't show up and Janice takes a nap. A long nap.

"You know," she continued conversationally as she followed Xena down the back stairs to the kitchen, "I really owe Janice a lot. Her scholarly work is going to make me a fortune. Nothing like a war to make the rich salivate over priceless artifacts. I assure you the fact that I get to scatter your memory to the four winds is only a bonus."

"Why bother?" Xena asked, "burn the scrolls and I'll vanish from history."

"Oh no Xena, I could never do that." Callisto beamed as the refrigerator door was opened. "Why I'd vanish too, and that thought is simply too painful to bear."

Xena was roughly shoved inside as Janice finished off the last of her sandwich and washed it down with milk from a fresh carton. Callisto smiled at Janice from beyond the small window in the door. "I'm glad you're making yourself at home Jan. You're going to be here awhile. If you're still alive when the auction is over, I'll be sure to let you know how it turned out." With that she was gone.

"Who is it?" Janice asked, putting the milk carton back on the shelf. "Mel or Xena?"

"Oh, we're both here." Xena replied with the traces of an accent tugging at her voice. She looked around the small chamber.

"I've already checked." Janice commented. "The only way out of here is that door, the

one with the two guards outside and a third somewhere in the kitchen.”

Xena leaned against the cold wall troubled by Callisto’s recent revelation. Something tugged at the corners of her vision and with a start she noticed the frost coming from Janice’s mouth as she breathed. The archeologist looked quite cold. “What am I thinking?” the tall woman said, southern accent firmly in place. “Janice you must be freezing. Here, take my jacket.”

Janice laughed but accepted the jacket. “We’re trapped, our mission taking a terrible turn for the worse, my dog is going to be hunted and you’re worried about me being cold?” She shook her head, grateful for what little warmth it provided. “Nice to have you back, Mel.”

“How is the arm?” Mel asked examining the bandaged wound with more proficiency than she knew the southern belle possessed.

“It’s okay.” Janice said, “the long gloves covered the bandage fine, but they were of little use in here so I took them off.”

Mel nodded. “We’ve got to get out of here. Janice please, get in touch with whatever part of Gabrielle you’re carrying around with you and think of something.”

Janice sighed. The southerner made it sound so easy. Still she didn’t have the heart to tell her that was what she had been doing. Instead she just nodded and said, “I’ll try.”

Argo waited patiently, the fragrant scent of the rosemary filling her canine senses. She was used to the routine. They would go somewhere, she would wait or accompany her mistress waiting for the signals and commands that would complete the task. She jumped at the sound of a gunshot. She well knew that blast signaled painful injury, but it did not match the sound of her mistress’ gun. Momentarily torn between the order to stay and knowing the shot signaled danger, Argo sniffed the air and quietly stole from the cover of rosemary.

Her finely tuned nose told her that her mistress had moved. She crept around the building, sticking to shadows and staying out of sight until she stopped at the back of the mansion. She sat down behind a row of trash cans, momentarily distracted by the myriad of scents coming from the refuse. She sat still as a gun toting guard entered through the back door. Her mistress was near by, beyond the door. The increase in the familiar scent when the door opened told her so. The dog sat and watched, waiting.

“Think of anything?” Mel asked, for the fourth time.

Janice turned to glare up at her friend. “Do you really think asking me that every five minutes helps?” Sitting on the floor of the ‘fridge with her knees pulled up to her chin, she turned her attention back to the door. “Think about something else.” She muttered as she rested her chin on her knees.

Mel continued to pace back and forth in the small room. “But we need a plan!” She pleaded, her arms waving in expressive gestures.

“I’ll say this just once Mel.” Janice said evenly, trying to control her rising anger. “I don’t *think up* plans. They just happen to come to me when I’m thinking about something else. If you don’t stop talking about getting out of here, I won’t stop thinking about getting out of here and trust me- we won’t get out of here. If you want to help, for gods sake change the subject!”

“Well.” Mel said in a huff, “I can see why Xena tired of your company.” The doctor continued to look dejected and Mel regretted her reproach. She moved to the wall where Janice sat and sliding down, joined her on the floor. “I was just teasing.” She offered quietly.

Janice tried to smile and failed. “No you weren’t, but that’s okay. I know I’m not very nice.”

“Oh, you have your moments.” Mel continued, “you just have a lot of rough edges to go with them.” Mel gazed at Janice for a moment, a new topic of conversation forming in her mind. “In the boat house, why did you kiss me?” She asked quietly.

"What kind of a question is that?" Janice asked, surprised.

"An honest one."

"Look Mel, I said I was sorry. It won't happen again, if that's what you're worried about." Janice glanced sidelong at her companion, hoping she wasn't blushing as much as she thought she was.

"You mean you regret you did it?" Mel asked, sounding hurt.

Janice shrugged, there was not getting out of this conversation. "Yes and no. I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable or scared you. But no, I don't regret the experience. I'm only human after all." Inwardly the archeologist groaned. "*What a lame thing to say,*" she thought furiously.

"Why are you so certain I find the thought of being kissed by you repulsive?" Mel asked gently, watching the other woman carefully.

"Call it woman's intuition," she shrugged, "I don't think I'm your type. Are you saying otherwise?" Janice asked. "Besides, you didn't act as if you enjoyed it."

Now it was Mel's turn to blush. She quickly tore her eyes from her companion and stared at the door opposite them. Through the window she saw the face of one guard, watching, and the back of the other's head as he faced the kitchen.

"Maybe I was surprised?" Mel offered. "Maybe no one has ever kissed me like that before?"

"You're kidding." Janice said as her jaw dropped.

"I'm glad you find my lack of experience amusing Doctor Covington." Mel said primly, as she turned away from the doctor.

Janice grimaced as her own words were thrown back at her. She glanced up, also noticing the guard watching them intently. "But on the boat, when I was hauled out of the water you..."

"That was just to keep someone from seeing your arm. You were almost unconscious, and I just winged it." Mel's voice was tight, hurt, and Janice felt like a fool.

"Mel, you're incredibly beautiful, and smart. I just assumed that you'd have a list of suitors a mile long." Janice murmured, laying a gentle hand on the other woman's shoulder.

"You didn't mention rich." Mel added.

"Okay, so your list of suitors is two miles long. Surely someone has tried to... um... well... kiss you." Janice finished lamely, not knowing exactly what she was trying to say.

Mel turned around, indignant. "As a matter of fact the answer is no. I haven't met anyone I found interesting enough to pursue a meaningful relationship with, physical or otherwise, so I spent my time helping daddy with his work."

Janice's eyes continued to widen in surprise. "Look, Mel I'm really sorry then. Shit, I must have really scared you."

Mel shook her head. "What would you say if I told you I wanted you to kiss me again?"

Janice opened and closed her mouth several times, searching for words that would not come. "Ah... I guess I'd ask you if you were... er... sure about it." She finally stammered.

"I think so." Mel whispered, not knowing what to expect from the archeologist.

Janice's eyes softened, and a gentle smile eased across her features. She brought her hand to the side of Mel's face, cold fingers resting against warm skin. Slowly she drew their faces together, bringing her mouth to rest against Mel's once more.

Mel closed her eyes, savoring the touch that sent a charge through her nervous system. Without thinking, she brought her hands to Janice's shoulders, drawing the smaller woman even closer. As their mouths shifted, Mel delighted in the movement of soft lips against her own. Janice moved again, deepening the kiss as she felt Mel's body relax against hers. The kiss lasted for long moments, Janice encouraging Mel with her lips, letting the other explore at will. When it ended, with both women hungry for air, Mel looked at Janice in wonder.

"That was *really* nice." She whispered.

Janice smiled. "You won't believe this, but I've got an idea."

"Yeah, so do I." Mel replied.

"I mean for getting us out of here." Janice corrected her.

"Oh." Mel sounded a little disappointed, which only made Janice's smile broader.

"Don't worry, it involves more kissing." She chuckled as Mel began to blush. "Tell me, is that guard in the window watching us?" Mel glanced over the archeologist's shoulder at the small window. Two faces were pressed against the thick glass.

Nodding, Mel whispered. "Both."

"Good," Janice murmured, leaning in close to Mel's ear. "If you don't mind, I'd like to try and distract them."

Mel closed her eyes as one hundred and one pleasurable sensations rippled through her. She felt warm lips at the base of her ear lightly trail down the line of her jaw before coming to rest on her lips once more. With growing confidence she responded to the gentle mouth moving against her own. She wanted more, more of everything Janice had to offer. She started at the sensation of a tender tongue moving against her lower lip, taking delight at a new rush of sensation. Responding in kind, she searched out the velvety depths of Janice's mouth. She caressed the archeologist's lips and teeth, taking special delight as Janice's tongue wrestled with hers. Reveling in the sensations of warmth and softness, Mel felt a growing hunger beginning to burn deep within. Moaning in delight, she felt Janice's tongue enter her mouth, caressing her in ways she never knew possible. She continued to return the ardent kisses with growing passion, as she felt the archeologist's hands at her neck, undoing the bowtie. That done, Janice shifted her mouth to Mel's neck, kissing her way down the elegant line of her throat.

"Gods you're beautiful." Janice murmured against the soft skin of Mel's throat, her tongue dancing in counterpoint to the rapid beating of the other woman's heart. Mel threw her head back, her breathing ragged, every nerve ending alive and hungry. Janice nuzzled lower, her lips resting on the top button of the tuxedo shirt. With a quick nip, she quickly removed the button. "Get ready for the guards," Janice whispered, just before her tongue dipped into the indent at the base of Mel's throat, just above the clavicle. Mel whimpered with need, trying desperately to keep some small part of her mind clear. Finally, Janice moved down to the next button, biting it off in the same fashion as the first. This time however, Janice pulled back with a surprised look on her face, both hands going to her own throat. Silently she tried to gasp for air.

"My god, she's choking!" Mel exclaimed, easing Janice to the floor. She turned to shout at the guards. "Get in here and help her, unless you want to explain to Leesto why her precious prisoner is dead!"

Argo moved closer to the kitchen door. The dog noted that as people entered or left the door was slow to close. When another guard left to make a security sweep of the grounds, Argo slipped in, unnoticed as the door eased shut. She padded silently down the hallway, stopping in an unused supply area at the sound of foot falls. She could smell food as well as her mistress and headed in that direction. The big dog's ears perked at the sound of the other female voice. It was muffled, coming from behind the silver door a short distance in front of her. Two guards stood transfixed at the door, peering in the small window. A third approached from the kitchen, his gun drawn. When the silver door opened and Argo detected the comforting scent of her mistress, she acted. With a sinister snarl she launched herself at the third guard with the drawn gun. She'd learned her lesson and knew that the arms holding the dangerous weapons must be rendered useless.

With theatrics she didn't know she possessed, Janice flailed on the floor like a woman

scared to death of death. After a moments indecision the door opened, both guards entering. In a heartbeat she was attacking one, Mel going after the other. Both women heard the angry snarl of Argo, then the brief but terrified scream of the third guard. In seconds all three guards were rendered unconscious. Two in the 'fridge from blows to the head, the third from fear as well as loss of blood; both arms sporting severe dog bites. Argo sat patiently outside the silver door, hoping she would not be reprimanded for leaving her post. She wagged her tail happily as she was greeted with affectionate rubs and whispers of "Good dog." Finally, looking around the empty kitchen, Janice pondered what to do next.

"Was that all a ploy to get the door opened?" Mel asked tentatively.

Janice turned and smiled at her companion. "Mel I'm soaked from being turned on. Did that feel like a ploy to you?" The archeologist glanced down the hall, back to the stairs that lead to the upper floor. "When we get back to the ship, I have every intention of proving my sincerity." Then, with a shy glance at Mel added, "That is, if you'll let me."

"Let you?" Mel asked her eyes burning with desire, "I'll make you."

Janice grinned as she headed past a supply room. Not knowing why, she paused and grabbed the large utility broom. It took a couple of moments to unscrew the broom head, and with only the sturdy handle, she headed for the stairs.

"I was wondering when you'd get here." Xena commented from behind as Gabrielle headed up the stairs, as fast as her tight dress would allow.

Gabrielle glanced at her lover with a smile. "You try breaking through the conscious mind of someone not entirely convinced you aren't useless. She's got your stubborn streak."

"Hey, don't blame me, she's *your* offspring." Xena replied, reaching the second floor and leading the way to Leesto's study. "But I thought I recognized your theatrics. Was the kissing thing your idea too?"

The bard giggled. "No, and what she's thinking makes even *me* blush."

Xena rolled her eyes, "now I *know* she takes after you."

"Xena, I think our kids were so much like both of us, it's really a moot point as to who belonged to whom." Gabrielle replied with an affectionate smile.

Xena nodded as Gabrielle spun the broom handle in her hands, getting a feel for it's balance. Argo looked at the two women, confusion evident in her canine features. Pointing to a bend in the hallway, the bard looked at the dog and commanded, "Stay." Argo appeared to ignore her at first, then watching the big stick for a moment, obeyed.

"I believe we've got a little score to settle with Callisto," Xena quipped, reaching for the handle.

"Just like old times." Gabrielle muttered from behind the warrior as she removed the satchel from Argo's pack.

"I hate to break up this reunion," Janice said sincerely, "But do you know what time it is?"

Xena shrugged her shoulders, and the archeologist shook her head, smiling. "Here, let me..." Janice said as she extracted the battered pocket watch from the tuxedo's vest pocket and smiled. "Perfect. Leesto or Callisto, or who ever the hell she is probably downstairs. She'll find us missing soon enough. Xena, or Mel" she shook her head, it was starting to hurt, "or both, slip inside the study and put the scrolls in this. Dump the stuff out her window if you have to, it'll land on the plants outside." She handed Xena her satchel. "I'll slow the bitch down. Argo and I will meet you outside under the window."

Xena shook her head, "I think I should go after..."

Janice cut her off. "Not this time. Gabrielle, Argo and I all have scores to settle with that irritating blond. It's payback time." She leaned up and kissed her passionately but quickly. "I'll see you soon."

"Be careful." Xena called out quietly as the other woman left. She absently touched her lips. They tingled with the memory of Gabrielle and something more. Shaking it off with a

smile she opened the door to the study and slipped inside.

Gabrielle descended the stairs quietly, dispatching the two guards she encountered with several quick blows of her staff. Janice had to admit that the bard was an expert with the weapon. Still, that knowledge did not stop her from taking the gun each guard carried. "My weapon," she muttered to herself as she tucked them into the pocket of the tuxedo jacket she still wore.

She and Argo reached the opulent ballroom and peered around the corner of a grand Doric column. As expected Leesto was mingling with guests, answering questions and discussing the artifacts as the bidding continued. Ducking back into the shadows, she headed back to the kitchen, noting that all three guards had left. "Probably running for their lives," Janice muttered. Pointing to the bloody floor and inside the walk-in, she asked the dog, "Where are they?"

Argo sniffed around and in moments she was heading for the door. The guards had fled outside. Janice smiled, "Good work." Inwardly she sensed Gabrielle's grin. "*All Argo's should be that size.*" Alone in the kitchen, Janice looked around. It was payback time indeed.

Xena looked around the now familiar study and quickly headed for the scrolls. She put them in the satchel then added Gabrielle's staff, after taking it apart, and her bullwhip. Not ideal treatment for priceless antiquities, but the rugged artifacts would survive. Next she grabbed her breastplate, it's familiar weight bringing a smile to the warrior's lips. She'd already put the necklaces in the jacket pocket of the tuxedo, when she was in the study previously so the only item remaining that she had any attachment to was Argo's saddle. With a shrug she grabbed it. She didn't want strangers to have that either. She carried her booty to the window and peered out. The only question remaining was how to get it to the garden below. Dropping the stuff out the window was out of the question. The artifacts were fragile and being treated roughly as it was.

"Curtain!" Xena plainly heard Mel's voice in her head.

"This is no time for interior decorating." Xena muttered looking around the room.

"No, you oaf, the curtain pull, the *rope*, use it to..." Mel shot back.

"Alright, alright, I get it, why didn't you say rope in the first place?" Xena's eyes landed on a battered dagger. She recognized it as Callisto's. "That should do the trick," she said as she drew the dagger and cut the ropes that operated the curtain pull. Securing the saddle in a crude rope harness, she lowered it to the ground below. With a second rope she lowered her breastplate. When that touched the grass below the window she positioned herself on the edge of the window sill. She put Callisto's dagger into the satchel around her neck and smiled. "Hang on Mel." She whispered as she pushed off. With a tight tuck and an aerial spin she landed lightly on her feet. Picking up the other two items, she headed toward the kitchen.

Leesto smiled at her guests as she made her way toward the kitchen. Theoradore rushed up to meet her. "Dr. Leesto," he said in his thick accent, "several of the guards are missing."

"Shit, Jan must have gotten out somehow. Give me your gun. I'll check to make sure she isn't still here. Have some men check my study, make sure the artifacts are there. After that, round up as many as you can find and meet me at the dock. She'll try to get out by boat." The burly man nodded and disappeared into the crowd.

Leesto cautiously entered the kitchen. It was dimly lit, the only sounds coming from the ballroom behind her. For a moment she regretted her decision to not serve dinner for her guests. She shrugged, deciding they didn't come to eat, they came to buy stolen artifacts. Besides the extra staff required for dinner would have only put those artifacts in greater danger. Drinks were enough, and that requirement was being handled from the service area at

the other end of the ballroom.

Cocking the gun she headed toward the walk-in refrigerator. Just outside, she glanced down noticing a patch of blood on the white tile. She didn't bother to look in the 'fridge window. Janice and Mel were not there. "Looking for me?" A pleasant voice called from behind.

Leesto spun at the sound to face Janice, leaning casually on a broom handle, a service revolver pointed at her head. "A staff and a gun?" Leesto teased. "Make up your mind Jan, are you a useless bard or a hopeless failure?"

Janice smiled warmly. "Just because you have fewer options: bitch or bitch, don't blame me."

"Oh, you're good." The blond woman purred, a soft sinister quality threading her voice. "But you won't be able to beat me. You've *never* been able to beat me."

"You don't keep score real well, do you?" Janice replied smoothly, enjoying the confrontation. "Put the gun down on the counter and slide it toward me. And if you're going to get cute, remember I still owe you for Argo."

Callisto complied, slowly stepping toward the counter. "So what's it like Gabrielle?" she asked, "sharing your psyche with an abject failure. Oh, but I'd guess you'd know about that, wouldn't you?" Gabrielle kept her gaze steady. She would not be taunted by the madwoman, not again. "As long as I've got the chance I should thank you Gabrielle." Callisto added in a sincere voice as she slid the gun across the counter.

"For what?" Gabrielle asked sarcastically, as she pocketed the weapon.

"For being such an exquisite fuck." Callisto smiled, and laughed lightly.

"What are you saying?" Gabrielle growled, furious at the other woman's ability to bait her.

"Erasmus dear Gabrielle, I'm talking about Erasmus. You know, your brother-in-law? Funny though, I would have you expected to put up some sort of fight. I've always wondered about that. You see, I was in his body at the time. I raped you Gabrielle, and you didn't even struggle. Perhaps you enjoyed it?" Callisto's eyes narrowed with hate. "Maybe there are things our precious Xena couldn't do for you after all?" Callisto crossed her arms, confident that she wouldn't be shot in cold blood.

Gabrielle's pulse raced with rage. Of course the madwoman had somehow been behind it. It made so much sense. "Look," Janice's voice cut into her thoughts, "if this is all past history to you, why not let me handle it? She's trying to make you mad and careless. It's what I would do if I were her."

"*What are you going to do?*" Gabrielle thought to Janice.

"Turn the tables on her." Janice replied. "Trust me."

The bard shifted her stance and laughed. "So that explains it!" She said, her eyes bright.

"Explains what?" Callisto asked.

"Why he was so... inept." Janice shrugged. "I mean, I'd done it with him once or twice before, I didn't understand why he was so clumsy. If I'd known I was with a virgin, I could have been more... instructive."

Callisto's eyes narrowed in fury as she quickly drew a carving knife from the drawer. Ducking behind the metal counter she threw the knife at the archeologist's head then ran. Gabrielle knocked the weapon from its trajectory with her staff, pocketing the gun as she calmly followed the fleeing woman down the hall.

The kitchen hallway that lead to the back door was wide. Designed to accommodate shipments of food and other supplies, Janice could hold her broom handle in a horizontal position and not touch either wall. As Callisto fled, she skidded to a halt twenty feet from the back door. Argo stood, hackles raised, teeth bared and snarling. She spun back the way she'd come. On reflexes alone she caught the mop handle that was thrown to her by the bard.

Gabrielle intended to fight her. Callisto smiled. Things didn't seem so bad after all.

"Oh isn't this quaint," the madwoman purred as she struck out at the bard. Gabrielle deflected the blow easily, and parried twice more fending off the other woman's assaults. She chose her targets carefully, hampered in her movements by her tight dress. With efficient mastery she tested Callisto's defenses, making it clear by her blows that she was playing with the other woman. All of her blows were parried, but the concentration required was evident on the other woman's face. It made sense, she admitted to herself. She'd gotten better with the staff than Xena.

"*Don't get cocky.*" Janice warned in her mind's voice. The archeologist's words were prophetic. Callisto changed the direction of her strike and slammed the mop handle into the archeologist's injured arm. Gabrielle yelped in pain and let go of the staff. Now relying on only one hand for control, her defenses slipped and many of the other woman's blows found their mark. Gabrielle ducked from a blow aimed at her head and hit Callisto solidly in the gut with the end of her staff.

"That's for Janice." She said as Callisto slumped from the impact. She reversed her grip bringing the stick across her jaw, "and that's for me." Callisto screeched and landed another blow to the injured arm. This time Gabrielle had no choice but to drop her weapon. Before another blow could land, however, her hand had come up holding a cocked gun drawn from her jacket pocket. "But we still haven't settled Argo's score." Janice said quietly.

Callisto froze. It was over, she'd lost, she left. Leesto stood for a moment, dazed at the feeling of emptiness that overcame her. "Drop it." Janice commanded, nodding at the staff. Still dazed, she acted as if she didn't hear. In quick succession, the archeologist fired off two shots, each finding its mark in the mop handle, eliminating a foot of wood from each side. "I said," Janice warned as Leesto dropped the stick. "Open the 'fridge," she commanded, and utterly defeated, the scientist complied. Before she could enter however, Janice took a step forward and struck a solid blow across the other woman's jaw. Leesto fell to her knees from the impact, drops of her blood now joining that of her guard on the white tile floor. "That's for Argo." Janice said simply as she slammed the 'fridge door shut.

"We've got to get out of here." Janice said, heading for the door.

"You mean *you've* got to." Gabrielle replied, inside her mind.

"You're... I mean..." Janice muttered, feeling self-conscious and realizing for the first time who it was she was talking to.

"Leaving. Yes Janice, I'm going." Gabrielle's voice was kind and gentle.

"But... I mean, you just got here." Janice shook her head. It was now or never. "What I mean is, there is something I'd like to say to you."

"Yes?" The voice asked patiently.

"I... I owe you an apology. You're not at all what I thought... you're... well, all the things Xena said you are." Janice was hating herself. Since finding out who in the Xena scrolls was her ancestor, she'd considered giving up archeology all together. She felt like a first class idiot realizing just how wrong she'd been.

"You don't have to apologize to me." Gabrielle said, her voice soft. I lived the life I wanted. How I'm remembered couldn't interest me less. But there is something I think you should know." Janice stopped walking and cocked her head, listening. "I am very proud of you. You have the qualities that made Xena and I proud of our own children. I'm happy to see the important things were passed down. You're strong, you know what to fight for and when to fight for it. You also stayed by your father when no one else would." Gabrielle sighed. The time had finally come when mere words failed.

"Thanks." Janice said quietly feeling inadequate. "But... um... Xena, she's outside, I think. Don't you want to stick around and see her?"

Gabrielle laughed, Janice smiling in spite of herself at the sound. "Xena and I are never apart. These bodies are for the living, not the centuries dead. I love you Janice, Xena

and I love you both. Be happy, and remember when you think of the dead..."

"The dead can hear your thoughts." Janice finished as Gabrielle's presence faded.

Exiting the back door and stepping into the cool night air, Janice allowed her eyes to adjust to the dark. Listening intently, she made certain no one was around before moving. She could hear the voices of guards still in the mansion and knew that time was running out. She signaled Argo, and quickly moved towards the other side of the building towards the study. She'd gotten about half way there when Argo nudged her.

"What is it girl?" She whispered.

The dog headed over to a large rosemary shrub, poking her head inside. "Argo, is that you?" came a voice from the bush.

"Mel?" Janice called softly. She suppressed a grin as Melinda Pappas wriggled her way out of the confines of the shrubbery. "What the hell were you doing there?"

Doing her best to look indignant, Mel put her hands on her hips. "Once we jumped out the window and got about here, Xena left. She just took off, just like last time. I'm sorry Janice, but the saddle and everything was just too much to carry and I could hear guards coming and..."

Janice nodded, "I get the point. Why on earth did you bring the saddle?"

"It wasn't *my* idea. But *she* want's us to take it." Mel whispered, dragging the relic from the bushes.

"Okay, I'll get it." Janice said, hoisting it over her shoulder with her good arm. "Can you get the rest?" When Mel nodded she headed back the way she'd come. "We've got to get to the boat. They'll find Leesto soon enough. I want a head start on them when they do."

They made their way to the dock avoiding the various guards that came within visual range. Just as they began to load their cargo a commotion erupted from the mansion, with shouts and booted footfalls coming their way.

"Shit!" Janice muttered as she frantically reconnected the wires she'd pulled loose from the boat engine. "We're going to have to leave the stuff near the boat house, there's no time to get it."

"Doesn't matter." Mel said, trying to stay out of what little light the moon overhead provided, "it was just clothes."

"Easy for you to say." Janice quipped finishing her work as the shouts grew louder, "my hat and my favorite shirt were back there."

"Why was that shirt your favorite?" Mel asked as Janice pulled the starter on the motor boat.

Janice winked. "It still smelled like you."

The boat pulled away from the dock just as Leesto and a group of guards reached the other boats. "Do you want to drive or shoot?" Janice asked, needing to yell to be heard above the roar of the motor.

"Are you crazy?" Mel yelled back. "I can't drive or shoot."

"Well, pick one." Janice shouted. "They'll be on our tails in no time. We've got to get clear around the other side of the island..."

Her words were cut off as a distant gun shot rang out. Argo barked in response, the fir on her neck raised in anger. Mel looked out the small wind shield on the power boat. The direction they were headed was marked by rough water. Already sea spray was splashing over the sides of the boat, drenching both women and dog. "You drive." Mel shouted as Janice handed her a gun. "What do I do?"

"Just point and shoot. There's extra bullets in Argo's pack. Try to make 'em think twice about following us." Janice shouted as she navigated the rough water.

Mel did as she was told and found that after the first couple of shots she could even fire the gun without closing her eyes. Three boats were following them, all firing as well. One bullet struck dangerously close, biting into the wood on the side of the boat. Janice changed

course several times, trying to shake those in pursuit. It also succeeded in nearly shaking her companion from the deck of the boat. "Careful!" Mel screamed.

"Duck!" Janice shouted, drawing one of the guard's weapons from the tuxedo jacket pocket. She fired over Mel's head and a dark figure fell overboard from the boat closest to them.

"I thought you said you were driving!" Mel shouted. She steadied her hand trying to aim carefully at the boat moving ever closer. An instant after she pulled the trigger, flames and smoke erupted from the pursuing boat's engine.

"Good shot!" Janice screamed as she was drenched by yet another breaking wave. The southern aristocrat's smile quickly faded from her face however as two more bullets struck dangerously close. Janice tried several more maneuvers, but the other two boats were gaining. "Get all the guns fully loaded!" She yelled, as she swung the boat in a wide arc. With the guns laid out, she picked up one after the other, firing in quick succession at the closest of the two remaining boats. The gun fire from the other craft ceased as its occupants dodged the fury of raining bullets. With her good arm Janice held tight to the wheel of their boat, navigating the rough water as best she could and shooting with the other. Finally, the driver of the gaining boat slumped over, the boat turning away from them, speeding toward shore.

They neared the far side of the island with only one boat left in pursuit. The shots kept getting closer; someone on that boat had exceptional aim. "It's Leesto!" Janice screamed above the boat noise and the splashing of water, "She was a champion marksman in college. Duck!" Janice turned the wheel hard to the left as the small boat sped back toward the island.

"What are you doing?" Mel shouted watching the island grow larger.

"Trust me," Janice shouted back, "and keep shooting."

Leesto's boat altered course, using the change in direction to add more to the ground they gained on the fleeing boat. Janice grabbed a gun and carefully took aim on the ever nearing boat. As soon as she fired she spun the wheel hard to right, heading back out to sea. As she'd hoped, her shot either hit the driver of the other boat or dangerously close enough. The boat did not alter course in time and ran aground into the soft white sand.

Mel and Janice laughed, overjoyed and relieved as their craft sped away from the island, no one left in pursuit. Moving just beyond the island's point they saw a large ship in the distance. "It's *The Gauntlet*." Janice yelled. "We made it Mel!"

In Aires' cabin on board the smuggling ship Janice combed her wet hair, a huge smile on her face. In the corner of the small cabin Xena's treasures were neatly stacked; the satchel full of scrolls resting on Argo's saddle. Her Argo lay nearby, chewing contentedly on a large beef bone. She lifted her eyes at the sound of the cabin door creaking open. Seeing it was only Mel, the dog returned to her snack.

"Toby kept guard outside while I bathed." Mel said, removing the towel that wrapped her hair. She was dressed once again in the tuxedo, her other clothes still on Leesto's island. Janice was dressed in her customary attire, having traded the expensive dress for something more suitable as soon as she came on board. "How did you arrange hot baths for us?" Mel asked. "Although I don't think that was really a tub- tea cup maybe, but tub? Not quite."

Janice laughed, "I traded the speed boat for it." Mel looked at her stunned. "Well, I *really* wanted a bath, and I don't *really* need a boat. Besides, I got a couple more favors thrown in for good measure." Janice looked at Mel. She was simply stunning. The way she wore the tuxedo was bad enough, but her eyes framed by tresses of long wet hair made the archeologist's heart skip frequent beats.

"I'll bet." Mel replied, beginning to feel self conscious and shy.

"Are you hungry?" Janice asked, "Can I get you something to eat?"

Mel shook her head. She felt ravenous, but it wasn't for food. Still, she didn't know how to articulate her feelings; as embarrassed as she was by them. She moved further into the

room, stopping when she stood at the foot of the bed. "Did Gabrielle... say anything to you before she... left?" She asked, not looking at her companion.

Janice shrugged, noting the distance in the other woman's body language. "We talked a little. I apologized for... well for being an asshole. She's a class act, like you. So, did Xena have any parting words of wisdom?"

Mel smiled and began to blush. Janice wasn't sure if it was the compliment or something more. "We talked a little. She's kind of intimidating though. Wouldn't answer any questions, said I'd find out for myself."

"What did you ask?" Janice asked as she got up from the bed where she'd been sitting. She led Mel to the bed then nudged her to sit down. Climbing on the bed behind the heiress, she began to comb out the wet raven tresses, delighting in the silky texture as it slid through the comb.

Shaking her head slightly, Mel's cheeks glowed crimson. "Oh, nothing. Just advice." Mel hoped her growing nervousness wasn't as obvious as she feared it was.

"Advice about...?" Janice asked quietly from near her right ear.

Mel stood up and took two steps away from the bed before turning around. "I don't know what to do Janice." She said, her voice tight with emotion. "I'm nervous, embarrassed and plenty of other things I can't name. I... I don't... know how to..."

Janice got up from the bed and slowly moved to where the other woman stood trembling. "Do you trust me Mel?" She asked softly.

The other woman responded with a nod. "It isn't a matter of trust. I feel so..."

"Shhhh." Janice whispered. "I'm as nervous as you are. It's to be expected when you're with anyone... for the first time. It passes. I want you to listen to me Melinda Pappas. I don't want to do anything you're not up for. If something makes you feel uncomfortable; if you change your mind and want to stop, just say so. I promise I will."

Mel nodded again, lost in green eyes that regarded her so kindly. Janice gently put her hands on the other woman's forearms, slowly sliding them up the black jacket. "Did you really think Xena was going to tell you what to do?" She asked, smiling as her hands moved across the taller woman's shoulders.

"Well, I thought she might tell me what to expect." Mel said, watching Janice move closer.

"What's the matter, you don't like surprises?" Janice teased, drawing her head down. Her tension dissipated as the archeologist covered her mouth with soft lips once again. Bringing her hands to the sides of Janice's face, she held her close, losing herself in the velvety softness.

"I love the way you kiss." Mel whispered when they finally broke for air.

"That goes double for me." Janice whispered back, slipping her hands under the black jacket, her lips drawn to the taller woman's throat. In a graceful movement, she eased the jacket from Mel's shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. With skillful fingers, she released the cufflinks and unbuttoned Mel's vest, all the while nipping and kissing at the tender skin of the taller woman's neck. When the vest fell to the floor, Mel started in surprise.

Janice drew back slowly. "Are you okay?" she asked, concern evident in her features.

"Oh I'm fine Janice." Mel teased. "It's just that you seem awfully good at this. Do all of your women dress like men?" She ran her fingers through Janice's still-damp hair, delighting in the soft texture of the strawberry blond tresses. The doctor's eyes smoldered with desire and she smiled. If Mel hadn't jumped she would not have really taken a good look at the woman standing before her. White shirt buttoned, save for the top two which were missing, tucked into black pants with black suspenders. Mel's black hair hanging past her shoulders created a dizzying vision of black and white. The only points of color, intense arctic blue, were her eyes. She was gorgeous.

"If you must know," Janice purred then turned her head to brush warm lips against

the palm of Mel's hand. "I'm usually the one in the suit. That's how I know things like cufflinks and shoes need to come off first. Have you ever tried to get your arm out of a sleeve with the fastened cufflinks? It's embarrassing." She leisurely began to trace her fingers over the white fabric of Mel's shirt. She slowly brushed her fingertips along the line of the suspenders, lightly touching the sides of Mel's breasts. Her smile broadened as she felt the other woman tremble, followed by a sharp intake of air. "Still, I don't think I've ever seen a more gorgeous vision in a tuxedo." Mel's eyes widened, riveted on the hunger clear in Janice's expression.

"Do you have any idea how incredibly sexy you look in that?" The archeologist asked, softly easing one suspender over a graceful shoulder. "What it's doing to me?" she continued, slowly reaching for the other suspender. "How much I want you?"

Janice's words were having a profound effect on the other woman, and she knew it. Her movements became more deliberate as Mel's breathing became more ragged. "You are so beautiful." She whispered as she lightly caressed Mel's breasts through the thin fabric of her shirt. Green eyes burned with passion as she felt nipples harden under her teasing palms.

Mel leaned in to claim Janice's mouth once more. Her body was on fire, nerve endings burning where ever the archeologist's hands touched her. Janice's soft tongue exploring the recesses of her mouth brought some degree of satisfaction to her need, but not enough. Not nearly enough. Mel couldn't imagine anything being enough. Before she realized what she was doing, her hands were at Janice's neck and she was unbuttoning the sturdy khaki shirt. "Uh, is this okay?" She asked, wondering if she was being too forward.

"Absolutely." Janice smiled, her own fingers at work slowly undoing the buttons of the white shirt. "Mel, I can't think of anything that wouldn't be okay." Janice said as she eased her hands under the white fabric, "as long as makeup isn't involved."

Mel laughed at that. "How do you do that Janice?" She asked.

"Do what?" She replied as her fingers lightly trailed across Mel's torso causing the muscles to tremble in their wake.

"Know just what to say to put me at ease." Mel shuddered again as light fingers moved across the bare skin of her back.

"At ease?" Janice arched an eyebrow as she slowly drew her hands up to cup ample breasts. Mel gasped, her knees feeling like water as skilled fingers caressed her nipples, teasing them to taunt points. "You mean like not nervous?" She asked innocently as she maneuvered Mel in the direction of the bed.

"Yeah, not nervous." Mel agreed as Janice eased her onto the bed. She opened the shirt slightly, but left it on.

"So that means you're feeling something else?" Janice asked as she lowered her lips to Mel's chest.

Finding concentration difficult, and coherent thought almost an impossibility, she struggled to find the words to utter between pants. "Yes," she breathed as soft lips kissed a path of fire across her exposed skin. "Take this off." She gasped tugging at the archeologist's shirt, then instantly regretted her outburst. Janice's mouth hovered just over her nipple. If she'd kept quiet, those magnificent lips would be kissing her there, not smiling and withdrawing from her body. "I mean..." Mel stammered, caught with indecision.

"Yes?" Janice asked as she slowly sat back on her knees.

"You don't have to stop what you were doing." Mel finished quietly.

Janice began to unbutton the rest of her shirt, watching Mel watch her. "So do you want me to take this off? Or kiss your perfect breasts?"

"Ah... both." Mel replied as Janice brought teasing fingers to her burning skin once more. Her mouth opened in disappointment as Janice shook her head. "What?" Mel asked.

"You take it off." Janice said softly, raising Mel's hands to her unbuttoned shirt. She swallowed, pulse racing, and pushed the material off of the archeologist's shoulders. "Verrrrrry

nice." Janice murmured at the first touch of Mel's hands on her body when the shirt fell to the bed. Mel gazed in fascination at the muscular body uncovered before her. She trailed her fingers over warm skin, smiling at the shudders and tremors rippling beneath the surface in their wake. Janice sighed and caught her lower lip between her teeth as Mel caressed her breasts, her desire heightening as she watched the southerner explore her body. Straddling Mel's hips, she let her own hands wander once more over her torso, adjusting the white shirt to expose more of the soft flesh beneath as she went.

"Oh, sweet Jesus." Mel gasped as soft lips circled her nipple, gentle suction pulling her deeper into warm depths. Teasing the aroused flesh with tongue and teeth sent wave after wave of desire coursing through her veins. "Yes, Janice, do that." Mel whispered fiercely, then felt the other woman's mouth smile against her flesh.

"Yes ma'am." Janice replied and trailed moist kisses across the Mel's chest to the other breast. As she reveled in the scent of warm skin, delighting in the softness contracting in her mouth, Janice reached out and found one of Mel's hands, guiding it to her own breast.

"That feels too good." Mel gasped, overwhelmed by the sensations rushing through her. Janice pulled back a little, kissing the valley between ample breasts and murmured into the soft skin.

"It gets even better." She promised.

Mel swallowed reflexively. She was not convinced she could handle 'much better'. With a gentle nudge she moved the archeologist forward. Propping herself up on her hands and elbows Janice looked down. "Yes?" She replied to Mel's silent command.

"My turn." Mel murmured, laying claim to one of the doctor's breasts.

"God, yes." Janice encouraged and shifting her hips slightly, she gently began grinding against the woman below her.

"Just like that." She breathed, as Mel swirled her tongue around the sensitive flesh. "Mel, that's won...derful," she panted, gazing at the face so intent on giving her pleasure.

"You feel so good," Mel murmured as she headed for the other breast, "so soft." Janice closed her eyes in ecstasy, the thrumming of Mel's voice against her skin making her dizzy. Janice let her continue for several minutes until her own desire became insistent. Shifting her weight she leaned back from Mel's mouth, helping the other woman sit up. When she did, she eased the white shirt off smooth shoulders gliding her hands over the planes of Mel's back as the shirt fell to the bed. Moving close once more, Mel smiled as the warm softness of Janice's breasts rested against her own.

"I had no idea." Mel whispered, smiling as she gazed into liquid green eyes.

"Neither did I." Janice whispered back, her voice tight with emotion.

Mel stared in wonder. "But you've..." She was silenced by gentle fingers against her mouth.

"Never like this." Janice whispered fiercely. "Never with the other half of my soul."

"How can you know that?" Mel asked quietly, voice brimming with emotion at the archeologist's words.

"I felt it the moment I saw you," Janice answered simply, "and fought against it. It scared me Mel, it still does. But I'm through fighting, fighting against it anyway. Fighting for it is another matter." Mel watched as Janice traced light fingers across her thigh.

"If I didn't know better Janice Covington, I'd think that was a proposal." Mel smiled, running her hands over the other woman's shoulders, fingering soft red-gold hair.

"Maybe it is." Janice smiled. "You wouldn't be flirting with me again, would you Mel?" She asked as she trailed her fingers along the inside of an elegant thigh. "Because I *really* like it when you do."

Mel smiled wickedly. "Would you show me how much you like it Janice?"

Janice's eyes gleamed as she leaned forward to claim Mel's lips once more, her knee resting in between the other woman's thighs, then applying firm pressure to her center. "Oh

Christ!" Mel gasped, causing Janice to jump back.

"What? Did I hurt you?" The archeologist asked, scared to death.

Mel shook her head, blushing. "No, I think I wet myself." Mel mumbled, then looked at Janice with surprise when the other woman laughed.

"I'm counting on it." Janice beamed, reaching for the fasteners of Mel's pants. Mel did likewise, and soon two pairs of pants joined the rest of the discarded clothing. "Now, wasn't I going to show you how much I appreciate your flirting?" Janice asked as she stretched out next to Mel on the bed.

"Something like that." Mel murmured in reply, drawing her hand slowly up the side of Janice's body. When she reached the bandaged arm she paused. "How is it?" She asked.

Janice removed her mouth from Mel's breast once more. "Absolutely perfect." She whispered.

"No Janice, your arm." Mel laughed at the gleam in the doctor's eye.

Shrugging, Janice replied, "Since my senses are otherwise engaged, I don't feel a thing: Not in my arm anyway. I'm feeling glorious things everywhere else."

Mel rolled over, tucking Janice beneath her. Propped up on her elbows she gazed down into penetrating green eyes. She didn't doubt the archeologist's words. Janice's touch had a staggering effect on her own body and knowing she could do the same for her left her with a sense of power that made her slightly dizzy. "What things?" She asked, her voice husky.

"For starters," Janice said quietly, gently tracing the outline of Mel's cheek and jaw, "your voice makes me melt. Your eyes set me on fire and I think the feel of your skin is positively addictive."

Throwing her head back at the exquisite feel of Janice's hands caressing her back Mel smiled. "It's clear to me which one of us descended from a bard."

Janice grinned and rolled Mel over noting that her feet only reached as far down as Mel's mid-calf. "Are you saying you have latent warlord tendencies Melinda Pappas?"

"Well you don't want to get on my bad side. Oh my!" Mel glanced up and for the first time since they returned to the boat, noticed the mirror positioned above the bed. Janice followed her gaze.

"Nice view." She chuckled, noting how wide her companion's eyes had grown. Mel gazed in rapt fascination at the sleek body entwined with hers. Strawberry blond tresses lay strewn across her torso as Janice kissed her way downward. The feel of moist, warm lips across her flesh was sublime. It was only after abstract these observations that she realized where Janice was headed.

"What...what are you doing?" She asked, surprised.

"Is there a problem, Mel?" Janice asked gently without the slightest trace of reproach in her voice.

"It looked like you were going to... uh... kiss me..." Mel shook her head embarrassed. Surely she was mistaken.

"There." Janice finished for her, drawing gentle fingers across Mel's soaked labia. "I was hoping to, but I won't if you don't want me to." Mel moaned at the contact as desire surged through her being. Still caressing with slow strokes, Janice drew herself up Mel's body to gaze into her eyes. "Mel," she whispered softly, "remember how my tongue felt inside your mouth?" Mel nodded quickly, her hips arching at the gentle strokes she continued to receive. "Well, imagine it here." To make her point, Janice shifted her finger to caress a slippery, hard bundle of nerves.

"Oh god." Mel groaned at the exquisite touch.

"I thought you'd see it my way." Janice smiled but added, "But if you want me to stop, just say so, okay?"

Mel nodded again, gazing one again up at the mirror, ready for anything. Mesmerized

by the sight of Janice's body moving so intimately against her own, she watched in rapt fascination as Janice gently stroked her thighs, urging them apart, then lowered her face to her center. Mel's head snapped to the side and she moaned into the pillow to muffle the sound. Janice raised her head and watched her partner for a moment. When Mel realized the delicious contact was gone she peered down at Janice.

"I'm fine," Mel said in a rush. "Oh god, please don't stop. It's incredible."

"I'm glad you think so." Janice smiled. "But you don't have to worry about keeping quiet. If you want to yell, then yell."

Frowning Mel shot back, "I hate to be the one to tell you, but we're on a crowded smuggling ship. This isn't the back forty."

Janice giggled and eased a hand up Mel's sleek body to fondle a grateful breast. "The other part of my trade. I made Aires get everyone above deck. They're having a *loud* party up there, and will be until sunrise. No one is below decks but us. I'm sorry, but it's all the privacy I could arrange."

Mel laughed and reached down to tousle the smaller woman's hair. "You traded a speed boat for two baths and some privacy." She stated.

"And the beef bone for Argo, it'll keep her busy for hours."

"Is there anything you didn't think of Janice Covington?"

Janice grinned wickedly. "Yes. How to keep one stunningly beautiful woman from talking so much. Are you sure you're not related to the one named 'Gabby'?" Janice placed a wet kiss on the inside of Mel's thigh, sending a shudder through the body beneath her. She paused to inhale the sweet, musky fragrance of her lover, imprinting every detail she could into her memory. Slowly she drew her hands back down, and gently parting soft folds lowered her lips once more.

Mel groaned again, freely this time, as a skillful tongue sought out her depths. In moments she felt as though she were flying, spinning out of control on wave after wave of heady ecstasy. Her body began to shudder, hips bucking of their own accord. She cried out, the wave of her climax crashing down on her. She couldn't speak, she couldn't move; she was unable to do anything but enjoy the sensations thrumming through her body and soul. When the tremors stopped, Janice slowly withdrew. Cupping a firm hand to Mel's center she moved to rest her head on a heaving breast.

As Mel fought to get her breathing under control, she wrapped her arms around the woman resting on her chest. Still gazing at the mirror above she noted how perfect the two of them looked lying together, legs entwined. "I don't know what to say." Mel finally said.

"You don't have to say anything Mel." Janice murmured, warm breath caressing Mel's chest.

"Is it always that incredible?" She wondered aloud. "I mean I can't believe I haven't heard something. Someone should have told me."

Janice laughed, propping herself up on an elbow as she slowly began to move her other hand. "I guess you haven't been hanging out with the right people," she said, as Mel closed her eyes in pleasure once more.

"Guess not." She sighed as Janice's fingers picked up a rhythm that matched the throbbing of her pulse. With a careful touch she caressed the base of her lover's opening, teasing the hungry flesh. "Yeeeeesss," she panted as Janice's fingers teased deeper.

"This might hurt a little." Janice warned, "I don't have..."

"Do it." Mel groaned, desperate to uncover every sublime sensation for herself.

Straddling Mel's thigh, Janice positioned herself so she could have the most control with her hand. Carefully, she began to push deeper, using her thumb to caress an engorged clitoris once more. As her partner's panting became louder her own self control began to slip. Driven by the urgency in Mel's voice she pressed harder, rewarded by ardent groans. With a final push she broke through the thin membrane as muscles convulsed around her fingers.

Another wave of orgasm surged through Mel's body. She was sure she'd never recover. No one could possibly feel that good and survive.

Blue eyes blinked open to see radiant green watching her with interest. "You are so beautiful." Janice whispered, tenderly moving a stray strand of hair from the corner of Mel's mouth.

"You are so magnificent." Mel whispered back. "Beautiful and magnificent." There was something there in Janice's expression. The vibrancy of her eyes, the flush to her cheeks. Once more, Mel was aware of the power they shared over each other. "Show me." She whispered.

Janice blinked. "Show you what?" She asked, genuinely confused.

Mel dropped her voice even lower. "Show me how to make you feel as exquisite as I'm feeling right now. I want to make love to you Janice Covington, teach me how."

Janice's eyes flared in passion, her lover's words surging into her heart like a bullet. Mel moved to give Janice room to lay down. As she did, she touched one of Mel's hands holding it in her own. After studying it for several moments she gazed into Mel's eyes as she put the hand to her breast, encouraging the exploration of her body. Mel smiled, watching the smaller hand guiding hers, the pads of Janice's fingers warm against her skin.

As Janice's eyes captured her image in the mirror above she sighed happily. The sight of the statuesque woman touching her, loving her, was almost enough to send her over the edge. The dark tresses that spilled against her skin tickled a trail down her abdomen as Mel moved lower. Janice was in heaven. The powerful throbbing of her own heart matched the aching need at her core as she guided Mel's hand to her center.

"Nice." Mel murmured to herself as her fingers slid into warm wetness. A tremor shuddered through Janice's body at the sound, a small precursor to the powerful wave that was building. "You're so soft." Mel whispered, and Janice closed her eyes, focusing all awareness on the arresting voice and sensations rushing through her. Another shudder and Janice realized that too soon it would all be over. The passion that had been building since first meeting Melinda Pappas was destined to be her undoing. Her eyes shot open at the sensation of a warm mouth and tongue joining seeking fingers, picking up the rhythm of her bucking hips, driving her forward.

"God, yes Mel." Janice panted, awed by the sight in the mirror of the dark crown of hair moving with each exquisite touch. She gazed down her body only to find azure eyes watching her, visible just above red gold curls. The sight, of Mel performing such an intimate act almost undid her. It was however, when Mel thrust two fingers deep inside Janice's opening and clasped her lips on the hard knot of nerves, drawing it into her mouth, that Janice's world spun out of control. "Mel...lin...DA" Janice groaned as wave after pleasurable wave of sensation crashed through her. Mel held her with her hand and lips until the passionate spasms subsided. Finally, she gently withdrew and curled up alongside Janice's body.

"God woman." Janice stammered when she could finally speak. "You're... you're..."

"A quick study?" Mel offered with a giggle.

"Among other things," Janice murmured into the raven hair resting on her chest.

"Is...everything okay?" She finally asked minutes later when her breathing returned to normal.

Mel looked up and smiled, blissful contentment evident in her features. "Very okay Janice Covington, and thank you for asking."

"Glad to hear it."

Mel traced random patterns on the abdomen in front of her, noting the thin sheen of sweat that covered Janice's body as well as her own. "How long is everyone going to be above deck?" She asked casually.

"Until dawn." Janice replied.

"I'm glad to hear it," Mel smiled. "It'd be a shame to trade something as valuable as a speed boat and not make the most of it."

"I couldn't agree more Melinda Pappas." Janice grinned, green eyes flashing with passion once more.

...The summer Gabrielle broke her leg was a pivotal one in our lives. We had been in the mountains of Parnasus, assisting a small village in their relocation when it became clear a nearby volcano was getting ready to erupt. We were almost done when an earthquake hit and destroyed what was left of the village. Gabrielle had been inside the main lodge at the time, her leg broken by a falling ceiling beam. We were fortunate that the break was a clean one. The two bones of her lower leg did not splinter, and I was able to set them in perfect alignment. We had been there for a couple of days recuperating when a messenger arrived.

Hercules had sent word from Thebes. The gods were at work, Ares gathering his forces preparing for a bloodbath. I was torn. I knew I had to go help, but every fiber of my being yearned to stay with Gabrielle. She was my heart, my soul and my life, and she knew it. It was her suggestion that since Poteidaia was on the way to Thebes I could drop her off there. I could continue on to help Herc and she could recover in the company of her family. At the time, it seemed like the perfect solution. Looking back I guess it still was, although there was a time when I'd have given anything to undo that decision. I know more now, and as Gabrielle has told me on numerous occasions, more good came from that decision than ill.

So it was that it was Argo's turn to carry Gabrielle in a travois as we slowly made our way down the mountain. We reached Potedia in three days. For once the fates seemed to be with us. There were no storms, no wandering marauders, no random thugs. It was a blissfully uneventful three days. I stayed the night with Gabrielle in her family home. Lila had taken over their childhood room, so I worked hard with everyone else to convert a large pantry into a suitable room for my bard. She was pleased with the results. To be honest, it was nicer than Lila's room, and that night we quietly made love, christening her new bed. "There, you see Xena." Gabrielle whispered as I rested my head on her thigh, "my leg doesn't hurt at all now."

"That's because all the blood has rushed from your brain." I replied as I gave her sweetness one more kiss before stretching out beside her.

"Possibly." She agreed trailing a finger down my sweat soaked neck. "How long do you think you will be?" she asked softly.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "Ares is unpredictable. I'll leave at first light and get back as soon as I possibly can."

Gabrielle smiled, giving me a sight I'd carry in my mind's eye all the way to Thebes. "I know you will Xena."

It actually took me a little less than two weeks to get back to Potedia. The ride to Thebes was quick, and within days Hercules and I were able to deduce Ares' plans and lay them to waste. Hercules is a smart man and a good one, but he just doesn't have the understanding of military strategy that I do. I was grateful that he realized it and sent for me as soon as he did. Hundreds of lives were saved; the suffering and pain of even more avoided. It wasn't hard to see through Ares' plans, it was the same goal as always: to get me back into his fold and torture his half-brother in the process. And once again it was Ares who went back to Mount Olympus empty handed.

I arrived back in Potedia around mid-morning. I noticed immediately that the eyes that greeted me were cold. No one said anything. I was puzzled by the attitude of the villagers and sought out Gabrielle's family. Gabrielle was alone in her room. Everyone else was gone. My voice caught in my throat when she looked at me. Something had happened, something terrible. I wanted to rush to her but she kept me at a distance with her gaze. "What happened?" I whispered.

She just shook her head. "Xena, I want to leave. Now." I nodded. Her expression

made it very clear that disagreement on that count would be a big mistake.

"But your leg?" I asked.

"Take me to Amphopolis," she said, "I'll finish recovering at your mother's." She looked at me shyly for a moment. "If you think she'll let me?"

"Of course she will Gabrielle." I said. "You know she thinks of you as another daughter anyway." Gabrielle nodded, and that was all that was said.

When we were ready to leave I felt a bit nervous. Her family hadn't shown up, and I felt bad leaving without saying goodbye. I said as much to Gabrielle.

"The others will tell them I'm gone." She replied, nodding to the curious looks aimed in our direction. "That's all they need to know. I've already said my goodbyes to my father. He's the only one who'd be interested anyway."

"Gabrielle, can you tell me what happened?" I finally asked, feeling helpless.

She shook her head, "Not here Xena. Give me some time when we get to Amphopolis, but not here."

I nodded, what else could I do?

The journey to Amphopolis was uneventful. As I suspected my mother was overjoyed to see Gabrielle. She was happy to see me too, but Gabrielle had found a special place in my mother's heart. I suspect it was a chance for my mother to envision a daughter untainted by violence and bloodshed. Since I was determined to stick around until Gabrielle's leg recovered, I made myself useful around the tavern. The roof needed mending, wood needed chopping, and an assortment of tables and chairs were in need of repair. When I changed Gabrielle's splint for the first time, I noticed some severe bruising. I asked her about it. She shook her head and said she'd fallen out of bed. I suspected she was lying, but didn't want to press the issue. The bones were still in alignment, and although it would be painful, and had set her back in her healing, she was essentially fine. I would press the issue later, when she was less fragile, if she neglected to tell me the truth before. My mother insisted on moving into my old room in the loft so Gabrielle and I could share her's downstairs. Gabrielle was still unable to manage stairs, and mother had made it clear to me that she was aware of the nature of our relationship.

"I'm glad you've settled down Xena." She said one morning over breakfast, while Gabrielle was bathing.

"Settled?" I asked, "I wouldn't exactly call my life settled."

Mother smiled, "I mean Gabrielle." She replied, "trust me, that's more settled than I ever hoped you be. Although a long time ago I fantasized about grandchildren..."

I forced a smile on my face. I had not told her about Solon, and didn't know if I'd ever have the courage to do so. What good was knowing about a grandson when he could never know his grandmother?

A couple of days later, I came in from chores to get some water. I noticed mother and Gabrielle at the table, talking. The tavern was closed; they were the only ones inside. As soon as I entered, mother squeezed Gabrielle's shoulder and left. "Xena," Gabrielle whispered, "we need to talk."

I nodded and sat down across from her. "Before I tell you Xena, you must promise me that you won't go crazy. I don't want you to do anything. I will handle this how I choose to handle this."

"Why don't you just tell me." I urged.

"No." She was adamant. "I want your word that you won't do anything, and I mean *anything* without talking it over with me first."

"Very well," I said, "you have my word."

She nodded. She was silent a few moments, clearly putting her thoughts in order, choosing her words. My apprehension grew; something very serious had happened.

"When we arrived in Poteidaia," she began, "most of the villagers were out on a hunt."

“Right,” I confirmed. “We saw a heard of deer not far from the village on our way in.”

She nodded. “The hunters returned two days after you left. It was a very successful hunt. It is a village tradition that when a big hunt is that successful, a lot of celebrating goes on.” I nodded. We had a similar custom in Amphipolis.

“Okay.” She said, shifting to another part of her story. “I don’t know if you know this, but Perdicus has a brother. A younger brother.” I shook my head, I didn’t know. “His name is Erasmus. Lila mentioned her betrothed...”

“Right. She said something about it while we were fixing up your room. She didn’t say his name, so can I assume it’s Erasmus?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle confirmed, tears starting to well up in her eyes. “The night of the hunt celebration Erasmus came to my room.” My blood went cold. “He,” she shrugged, “raped me.”

“What?!” I leapt to my feet, warlord fury coursing through my veins. Gabrielle stilled me with a look and reluctantly I sat back down.

“He was drunk, completely. He was so... so... angry. He blamed me for Perdicus’ death, and said some equally unkind things. My staff was by the door, he grabbed it and hit me with it once, at my broken leg. I’m sorry Xena,” she said, “there was no point in struggling or fighting. If I would have fought back I’d have had to kill him, hurting him would only have made him angrier. As for struggling... he was looking for an excuse to hurt me, any excuse. I’m sorry Xena, I chose not to fight.”

I stared at her wide-eyed. With what she just told me, she was worried how I’d feel? “He should die,” I finally said.

“No Xena.” She replied fiercely. “He was right. If I hadn’t married Perdicus, he would still be alive.”

“That’s not true Gabrielle.” I said quietly, “He threw down his sword in the middle of a battle. If you hadn’t married him, he’d be dead by some sword other than Callisto’s. Gabrielle,” I urged gently, “if you didn’t travel with me, if you weren’t my soul, Perdicus would still be alive. It was Callisto’s hate for me, it had very little to do with you.”

Gabrielle took a deep breath. “Regardless of why, Perdicus is dead and Erasmus hadn’t let go of his grief. He took it out on me, now it’s over and done with.”

“Did you tell someone?” I asked.

She laughed bitterly. “Yeah, I told my mother, my father and my sister. My father was the only one who believed me, finally convinced by the bruise on my leg when he changed the dressings of my splint. Mother and Lila accused me of trying to destroy Lila’s chances at happiness. They said some things even more unkind than Erasmus had.”

“About me?” I offered.

She shook her head, leveling blazing green eyes at me. “No Xena, about us. Xena, I love you above all others, I would go to Tarterus and back for you, and you know it. My family does not understand it. Your mother does, so does your brother. They are my family now.”

“I’m going back there.” I said, starting to get up again.

“You’ll do no such thing.” She said evenly, “Xena, think I’m pregnant. If I’m going to have a child I want you here, not rotting in some jail, arrested for murder.”

“Oh, Gabrielle, I’m so sorry.” I said, turning back around. “I might be able to...”

“No.” She said quietly. “I’ve been thinking about it. Trust me, the thought crossed my mind, but if I am pregnant, I will keep the baby. It isn’t the child’s fault how it got here, after all. Besides, I think we would make good parents.”

I sat back down. This was too much too fast. “Parents?” I mumbled, stunned.

Gabrielle smiled, “Funny, I think that was the expression my father wore when he found out about Lila.”

That was the first of several conversations on the subject. It took time, Gabrielle talking about her experience in varying degrees of detail, until it was finally out of her system.

The wound had been lanced and drained, now it just needed to heal. There would be a scar, and I always regretted that, but Gabrielle and I moved on. I waited until she was ready, until she approached me in bed before attempting to make love. When she did, I tried with every fiber of my being to erase the cruelty that she'd suffered. While nothing could really erase it, I think she appreciated my efforts.

As The Fates would have it, she was with child. My mother couldn't have been happier. Somehow, we all saw the pregnancy as a completely separate issue from how she got in that condition. It was necessary, in all fairness to the unborn child, to separate it from its conception. Gabrielle was genuinely happy during her pregnancy. I think because she got to order me around mercilessly. I was hard at work building an addition to the tavern that would serve as our home. Mother and I were adjusting to being around each other again, and thanks to Gabrielle, she truly liked the person I had become.

My nervousness grew as her time approached. Mother teased me often, telling me that I acted like a nervous father. I didn't have the heart to tell her my concern was from having gone through the experience myself. Still, I suspected bearing a child alone in the woods was a bit more stressful than surrounded by loved ones.

One morning, as Gabrielle and I lay in an exhausted heap together, I heard a commotion outside. A centaur had come to Amphipolis looking for me. Gabrielle and I talked to him alone, and my heart broke. A fire had broken out in their village. Solon, attempting to save others, had been trapped by burning debris and lay dying at his uncle's house. I had been sent for to say good-bye to my son. I spun at the sound of a anguished gasp. Mother had overheard the conversation from where she stood in the doorway. I explained the whole story to her, right there and then, about Solon's birth and my reunion with him ten years later. Gods, that was eight years ago. Solon was a man now.

"You have to go to him." Mother and Gabrielle said in unison.

"But the baby..." I protested.

"Gabrielle will be fine." Mother assured me. "Remember Xena, I've had three. We have a skilled healer nearby if there is any trouble. She will be fine."

"You have to do this Xena," Gabrielle implored. "You won't be able to live with yourself if you don't."

It was with a heavy heart that I set out for the centaur village. I pushed Argo as hard as I dared, respectful of her gaining years. It took me three days to arrive. I was escorted to the room where my son lay dying, my eyes welling with tears as I saw his pained face. He was indeed a man now. He'd grown tall and strong. He was handsome, and I suppose looked more like me than his father, although his hair had stayed light. But I knew his eyes, they were mine. He smiled when he saw me in the doorway. "I sent for you Xena," he whispered.

"I'm here." I said taking his hand as I sat on a chair by the bed. His back had been broken and his skin had been badly burned in places. Inwardly I screamed in frustration because there was nothing I could do to save my son.

"I have a favor to ask of you. The wall that fell on me, I tried to save my wife, but I was not able to. I did save our daughter though. I want her to go with you." He gasped, struggling against unseen forces, then continued. "I want you to raise her."

"What?" I objected. "She should be here with your family."

He shook his head. "She should be with *her* family. Her name is Xena, after her grandmother."

I could do nothing but stare in disbelief. Solon knew. He laughed at my expression. "Of course I knew," he said. "But uncle Kaleipus didn't tell me. Look at my eyes Xena. There is only one other person with eyes this color, well two now. I asked uncle when I suspected, and he doesn't lie very well. Still, he tried to protect you by protecting me from the truth."

"Solon, I'm so sorry." I began.

"I know mother. I know why you did what you did. I know who you were, and who

you became. What you did you did for me. And while I was very angry at first, now as a father I understand. Please mother, I'm dying. Promise me you'll raise Xena and love her so I can cross over in peace."

I nodded. "I'll love her as I've always loved my son," I whispered.

Solon sent for little Xena. It was then I did the one thing for him I could. I pinched several nerves on his neck. He was no longer in pain, but he didn't have much time. His body was giving up. I couldn't believe my eyes, Xena was indeed my descendant. The hair, the eyes, the defiant glare. At two years old, she looked like a much shorter version of me. Solon smiled as climbed up onto his chest, no longer in any pain. She listened with all the maturity she could muster as he explained he was going away to join her mother and that she needed to go with me. She cried, but when Solon did cross over and I opened my arms to her, she went to them willingly.

We left for home the next day. She'd already lost so much, I couldn't imagine how she'd ever pull through. But she did. I explained where we were going, who we would see, where she would live. She wasn't afraid of Argo, and for me that was a good sign. She rode well, and by the end of the week we were home.

Sure enough, Gabrielle had given birth. Xena and I entered our bedroom to see Gabrielle cradling a beautiful baby. "Xena," Gabrielle said, and we both turned our heads, "meet Lyceus." I cried at that, much to the confusion of little Xena, who answered to Xe more often than not. She called me Na and both of us were usually called our full name when we were in trouble.

My mother was positively beaming. I guess for her it was like watching Lyceus and me all over again, except that this time there was no Cortese, no warlord, no redemption. Toris was a good uncle, when he was around, and was fond of both children. Since Lyceus took to calling Gabrielle Mama, so did Xena. Since Xena called me Na or NaNa, Lyceus did too.

When they were old enough, they traveled with us. I slowly extracted myself from the 'hero business'. I could do more good raising healthy, bright children than I could traveling and handling petty disputes, so I stayed home more and more. When we did journey though, few negative comments were ever directed at my family. I certainly never heard anyone complain more than once, and they always apologized.

Gabrielle and I were very proud of our children. They were a source of constant joy for us, and there was never a dull moment. Lyceus was a charmer, able to talk his way out of almost anything. Xena was a hot head, and had inherited my tendency for direct confrontation. The village soon learned that they were an unstoppable team. They were also an anchor for us when life began to take it's toll. Argo was the first of our family to depart, followed many years later by mother.

By then, Xe and Ly had grown and moved on with families of their own. They visited often and in time we had our own grandchildren and great-grandchildren to spoil. They were there for Gabrielle after I died. I had broken my neck in a riding accident long after I should have known not to get on a horse. I think Gabrielle understood though. I would never have been able to wait for my body to slowly wither. Gabrielle and I were reunited sooner than I expected, our bodies resting side by side in the family crypt. Over the years, we were joined by several others before our children and their children had scattered to the winds weaving their lives in a rich tapestry. When all is said and done, I would not have changed a single thing...

Chapter 7: Playing House

Janice Covington smiled to herself as she drove the brand new pick up truck toward home. Argo sat in the passenger seat, head out the window, still amazed by all the new smells of the region. *Home*. Janice still had to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

Everything that had happened in the six weeks since her return from Leesto's island all seemed too good to be true. But there it was as she rounded a now familiar bend in the road. On Franklin street the imposing white mansion, itself a spared relic from the civil war, loomed into view. She parked the car outside the front door as Argo leapt from the passenger window and bounded up the steps to the front door.

Once inside, Janice quickly removed her high heels and pillbox shaped hat. The new dress code was the only nightmarish quality to the new direction her life had taken. The house was warm and inviting, most of the moving boxes having been unpacked. Aside from her books, Janice didn't own much in the way of material possessions. Some research equipment and artifacts from previous digs waited patiently for their unpacking. Until a room in the sprawling mansion was set aside as a study, they were best left in the moving crates. Janice gazed around the entryway. The grand works of art and furnishings were still taking some getting used to. It was not hard to believe Melinda Pappas grew up surrounded by such finery, but to be pampered and adventurous was an unusual combination. "Well, did you get it?" Mel called from the second floor as she hurried down the stairs to join her love.

"Of course I got it." Janice smiled back. "You are looking at the newest faculty member of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill."

"Oh, that's wonderful Janice!" Mel declared, kissing her soundly, then quickly breaking away to look around the room.

"Honestly Mel," Janice laughed, "kissing isn't something 'Dora hasn't seen us do before. Not by a long shot," she added under her breath, "I wouldn't worry about it."

"Yes, well," Mel replied primly as she headed for the stairs, "come upstairs. There is something I want to show you."

Janice followed, grinning from ear to ear. "Is it something I've seen before?" She asked hopefully.

Mel glanced back, her own eyes smiling with promise. "As a matter of fact, no." With a wink she added, "But later, yes. So what will you be teaching?"

"I love it when you say yes." Janice sighed and followed Mel up the stairs. "Starting in the fall I'll be teaching Pre-Myceanian Culture and Customs, Advanced Archeology and a special lecture series on Xena, once we've analyzed the scrolls that is. It's going to be a busy summer." They stopped at a door at the far end of the elegant hallway. "What, I actually get to enter the mysterious room that has been off limits since my arrival?"

"Off limits my eye." Mel objected. "You've been fixated with exploring every facet of the bedroom since you got here."

"Only when you're in it."

Mel ignored the comment and opened the heavy wooden door. Beyond was a large room, comfortably decorated in warm tones of mahogany and leather. A study with two great desks were positioned face to face at one end of the room. A fire place and comfortable couches dominating the other. Book cases recessed in the wall rose to the ceiling near the desks, filled with the books from Janice's former home. Several large windows were behind one of the desks, on the far side from the fire place looking behind the huge house in to the expansive fields beyond. Peach trees dotted the landscape with a spectacular view of the horizon. Bright flowers sat poised in an elegant vase on a small table in front of the fire place, adding color to the warm coziness of the room.

"It's incredible," Janice gasped, stepping inside. "Did you do this?" She breathed recognizing the familiar book spines instantly.

"Well, 'Dora helped, but I had to do something to keep my mind off my loneliness while you were interviewing at the University." Mel beamed. Janice was as pleasantly surprised as she hoped she'd be.

As Janice moved to the book case. Something caught her eye on the far desk. A hat rested over a coiled bullwhip. "What's this?" She asked, moving to the desk and picking up

the hat.

“Try it on.” Mel suggested, grinning from ear to ear. Janice complied, beaming as the hat covered her head with the feel of a custom fit. “I was hoping it’d fit,” Mel explained. “See, daddy ordered a couple of hats from this European hat maker. It was an extravagant gift when mama was still around. Anyway, of the three he received, one was too small. Daddy never threw anything away, so it’s been waiting for you in this study ever since.”

Janice grinned too overcome with happiness and emotion to speak. “And the whip?” she finally asked, picking up the expertly made bullwhip. It was well worn but in excellent condition.

“A gift from me and Xena to you. A little ‘welcome home’ something.”

“Mel, you are the best!” Janice exclaimed, her voice tight with emotion as she moved to take the statuesque woman in her arms once more.

“Well you did seem rather attached to your hat,” Mel said when their kiss broke.

Janice grinned. “Yeah, I won it in a poker game with a former colleague. It belonged to Henry Jones Junior; Indy, when I was able to call him a friend.”

“You’re no longer friends?” Mel asked.

Janice shook her head, still grinning. “Nope. He caught me with the daughter of his mentor.” She paused for a moment thinking, “Marion... Marion Ravenwood, that was her name. He was pretty pissed I’d... um.” Janice looked up to see Mel arching her eyebrow knowingly. “Well, you get the picture. He also taught me how to use a bullwhip.” She finished, hoping to redirect the conversation.

Mel just smiled. Janice’s passionate nature was one of the reasons she loved her. “You are incorrigible you know. Is there any end to the trouble you can get yourself into?”

“Well I’ve got a specific partner in crime these days...” Janice voice dropped off as Mel turned to gaze out the large window. “What is it? What did I say?” Janice asked, worried.

“It isn’t you Janice.” Mel smiled. “I’m just having some trouble adjusting to... this.” She finished.

“What about... this?” Janice asked, joining Mel by the window, standing close but not touching.

“I think I should say something to ‘Dora, explain our situation. But I’m not quite sure what to say.”

Janice paused a moment, her brow furrowed in thought. “Mel,” she began gently, “I’ve been here a total of three days. In that time ‘Dora has walked in on us making love a total of four times. While I think it surprised her the first two, I think she’s gotten over it and has realized that knocking on a door and entering without waiting for an answer first is not a good idea.”

Mel’s cheeks flushed crimson at the memory. It was true that Janice appeared much less embarrassed by the situation. Walking in on others, or being walked in on were not new experiences for her. In fact the archeologist had seemed perfectly content readjusting a sheet and answering whatever question ‘Dora had interrupted them to ask. “I hope you aren’t thinking of letting her go?” Janice asked. Since meeting the formidable black woman three days prior, an understanding had been forged between the two. Without words, they had agreed to be partners in the task of looking out for Mel and seeing that she was happy.

“I would never do that,” Mel replied. “Pandora started working for my father when I was just a baby, before mother left. She was little more than a child herself at the time. Still, she’s always been the closest thing I’ve had to a mother.” Mel turned, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. “Janice, I’m afraid she’s going to leave me. Leave us.”

Janice shook her head. “Don’t be silly Mel. Pandora isn’t stupid. She’s got a good thing, working for you. The housework is light; you never make a mess. She’s only has to cook for two, her children are welcome in your home, as are their friends after school, and

she's well paid. You told me yourself that her husband hasn't been able to work since that accident on the railroad. Why would she give all this up? Just because her employer has a female lover?"

"You've said yourself that people have a problem with it. What if 'Dora thinks her children shouldn't come 'round? How many times have you been called names or threatened? On that ship... Silvus..." Mel asked, searching the shorter woman's face.

"Forget Silvus, Mel." Janice countered. "The man is an idiot. As for 'Dora's kids... shit Mel, you are the sweetest, most generous person I've ever met. 'Sides, Pandora's youngest, Thea, is crazy about Argo. Wild horses won't keep her out of your orchard playing tag with Argo." Wrapping her arm's around Mel, she murmured into the taller woman's shoulder. "If you're that concerned, why don't you just talk to 'Dora. Let her tell you you're overreacting if you won't listen to me. I love you Mel. I don't want that to be something that makes you sad."

Returning Janice's warm embrace Mel was afraid she might start crying. "I love you too Janice, and it doesn't make me sad. It's just so complicated. I mean, what about the University?"

"What about them?" Janice asked, pressing her lips to an exposed collar bone.

"What will they think?"

"About me living in the home of Melinda Pappas?" Janice asked stepping away from Mel to look her in the face once more. "I suspect a number of eligible bachelors will be very disappointed, and possibly make some crass remarks. I also know that the board of directors will do everything possible to accommodate my abrasive personality because they want to impress you. They know it was you who paid off Sal Monious since he didn't get any artifacts for his museum. They are ecstatic to have Argo's saddle in their museum's collection. They are willing to finance future expeditions for us and will patiently wait for me to transcribe the Xena Scrolls and publish my findings. Mel, they are more than happy to overlook what I do in bed. They have too much at stake to pretend otherwise. Hell, they even said Argo was welcome on campus and asked if you'd consider joining me at the faculty mixer. They want your money Mel. I'm sorry, but get used to them bending over backwards to impress you, they're going to be at it for a long time."

Mel shrugged, it was nothing new. She'd learned to spot long ago when people were only interested in her finances. Suddenly a new fear crept to mind, "You don't think that's why they hired you?"

Janice shook her head. "I'm not that insecure about my work. I know my research is worth it's weight in gold. They want hard cash *and* credible research. I'm sure they just find the fact that I'm crazy in love with you, a bonus."

The discussion came to an abrupt end when a crisp knock sounded at the door. "Come in," both women replied in unison. Several more moments passed before the door slowly opened.

"I'm not interrupting anything?" Pandora asked, her eyes still averted as she entered the study.

"Honestly 'Dora, we're not going to do *it* in here." Janice quipped under her breath, "yet."

"Janice!" Mel protested, cheeks flaming once more.

Pandora laughed. The more she got to know the outspoken archeologist the more she liked her. "With a wolf like you Miz Covington, ya never know." She replied.

"Wolf?" Janice repeated, beaming, "I like the sound of that."

"You would." Mel added, then turned to face the newcomer. "'Dora, there is something I'd like to explain about Janice and myself. About the nature of our relationship..."

Pandora was a large woman, fifteen years older than Mel, although she didn't seem it. Her eyes shown with youthful mischief, her body having aged more from giving birth to six

children. She shook her head, smiling with her white teeth shining in bright contrast to her dark skin. "I'm not blind Miz Pappas. It's clear to me how y'all feel about each other."

Mel blushed. This was not getting any easier. "Yes, but I'm concerned you..." She floundered, not quite knowing what to say.

"What Mel is trying to say," Janice interjected, "is that she's concerned you might feel differently about her, knowing about me, well us."

The smile faded from Pandora's face as she studied the taller woman. "Is that what you think Miz Pappas?" she softly asked. Mel nodded. "Well then, I didn't teach you as well as I thought I did." She finished sadly.

"It isn't that 'Dora..." Mel tried to explain.

"Don't tell me what it is or it isn't Melinda Pappas. I've taken care of you since before I had any babies of my own, and I've treated y'all the same. Your daddy was a good man, he taught me a lot, things I've tried to teach all my babies. Your daddy never judged anyone by anything other than their deeds. He traveled the world over, and knew people of every stripe. He treated them all with equal respect no matter if they ate monkey for breakfast or wore a lamp shade on their head for a hat. Miz Pappas, honey, love is love. It ain't a bad thing, can't be. When all the hate is gone from the world, then maybe we can get picky about love, but not 'till then. Frankly, I don't care what the two of you do in bed, or the bathtub," she added wryly. "Although I wouldn't mind my husband being a fly on the wall, I reckon y'all could teach him a thing or two." She finished with a wink at Janice.

"Six kids 'Dora, I don't think he needs any help." Janice observed.

"I'm not complaining, mind you." 'Dora explained, "it's just that y'all carry on so it sound like y'all havin' such a good time."

"Does that mean you won't be leaving?" Mel asked hopefully.

"Leave? Never child, not as long as y'all have me. 'Sides, now with Miz Wolf in residence, I gots someone to pick up after."

Relieved, all three women shared a laugh. "What did you want to see us about?" Janice asked, "or was it just to see what we were up to?"

'Dora slapped playfully at Janice's arm, muttering "Damn wolf" under her breath. "I was cleaning the black tuxedo jacket, when I found these in the pocket." She held out her hand, and resting in her large palm were the matching necklaces from the auction.

"That's right." Janice exclaimed, "I saw Xena put them in her pocket when we were in Leesto's study. With everything that happened, I forgot all about them."

Mel took the necklaces from Pandora, studying the intricate detail. The housekeeper was about to leave when Mel looked up as she reached the door. "'Dora, have you seen Argo's pack?"

"Yes ma'am, it's in the barn with a few boxes still needin' to be unpacked."

"Could you get it for me?"

Pandora withdrew with a smile, and quietly closed the study door behind her.

"What was that about?" Janice asked, looking at the artifacts resting in her lover's elegant fingers.

"I brought a couple of things with me when I went to your house. I put them in Argo's pack and forgot all about them. I think it's time I showed you now though." She looked back at the necklaces. "What should we do with them?" She asked.

"Keep them? Wear them? I don't know," Janice shrugged.

"I don't think we should wear them unless it's a special occasion." Mel considered. "But, the staff and breastplate, I'm sure they'd want us to hold on to them. What about the scrolls, do you plan to keep them?"

Janice shook her head, "I'd like to send them back to Jack Kleinman in New Jersey, when we're done transcribing them. Leesto might still be interested, and I'm sure Jack will be clueless enough to stash them in an attic somewhere and forget about them. If they're in a

museum, Leesto will have a goal. If she can't find them..."

Pandora returned to the study carrying Argo's small pack. She handed it to Mel who rummaged through its contents, withdrawing a small pouch and a scroll case. "What's this?" Janice asked when she was handed the velvet pouch.

"A little something I had made when I parted ways with you in Macedonia. I said I had to get some things in order. I had these made while I was up to it."

Opening the pouch Janice spilled the contents into her hand. Two tiny circles, silver inlaid with gold, each on a thin chain rested in her palm. "Tiny chakrams!" Janice exclaimed.

Mel nodded, "yes one side of each has a pattern from Xena's chakram, the other side is smooth."

"Two halves of the whole." Janice observed as Mel smiled.

"Pick one." She said. Janice made a grand show of closing her eyes and blindly selecting one of the necklaces. Her fingers touched on the necklace with the square pattern as Mel nodded her approval. "Most fitting." She decided, slipping the chain around Janice's neck and hooking the delicate clasp. Janice returned the favor and in moments both women were sporting similar, but not identical, necklaces.

"And you had these made before..." Janice observed.

"I guess I had my hopes up on some level." Mel confided. "I'm glad it worked out this way."

"And what is this?" Janice asked as she picked up the scroll case.

"When Jack drove off in Macedonia, this scroll fell out of the bag. I've already translated it, it wasn't written by Gabrielle. I think this is the only scroll written by Xena."

"You are amazing Mel" Janice beamed. "This is going to be an incredible summer. Translating the scrolls, doing research for our next dig..."

Mel joined in her lover's happiness. *Our* next dig, I like the sound of that."

"Of course Mel, we're partners, in every way. I wouldn't dream of an expedition without you. You're as indispensable as Argo!" Mel smiled, knowing she was just paid the highest of compliments. "As long as we're upstairs," Janice continued, "wasn't there something else you wanted to show me?"

"Dora is right Janice, you are a wolf."

They headed back down the hall toward the bedroom when Pandora intercepted them. "Oh no you don't." She warned, "Miz Covington has a guest, y'all can 'take a nap' later." She said with a conspiratorial nod toward the bedroom.

"A guest?" Janice asked, surprised. "Who?"

"Dora smiled. "A woman. From the university, long red hair and mighty pretty. She talks funny though. Still, I'd keep an eye on my wolf if I was you Miz Pappas."

Janice laughed, "Pandora, a smart woman like you deserves a raise."

"I won't argue with that." She agreed. "Specially if I'm going to look after that horse you insist on calling a dog. Thank the lord she'll be with y'all at the university."

"Did you catch our guests name?" Mel asked.

Pandora nodded, "Said her name was Doctor Fiona Cyrene. I showed her into the living room. If y'all can postpone your 'nap' I'll bring some iced tea."

Janice quickly looked down at her bare feet and uncomfortable skirt. "Shit, I gotta change clothes. Can you keep her busy for a few minutes while I change?" she implored.

Mel smiled. "Red head?" she asked Pandora. "Sounds like my cup of tea. Take your time Janice," she teased as she headed down the elegant stairs.

"Christ, I've created a monster." Janice muttered as she dashed for the bedroom door.

"You've created something Miz Covington." Pandora agreed watching Mel descend the stairs.

Janice entered the living room a short time later, dressed in a casual pant suit. To her

surprise, it was vacant. Pandora arrived just after her, carrying a large glass of iced tea. "Miz Pappas and Doctor Cyrene are out back." 'Dora said, then added in a hushed voice, "I'd watch that one if I were you Miz Covington. She's got hungry eyes like you. Not quite as love struck when she looks as Melinda, but there is an interest there, same as you."

"Interest in Mel?" Janice wondered aloud, accepting the offered glass.

"In *all* women." Pandora replied.

"Another wolf?" Janice asked.

"Yes ma'am."

"I'd best get to guarding the sheep then hadn't I?" Janice smiled as she headed for the back.

Pandora shook her head. "She only has eyes for *her* wolf Miz Covington." She said before Janice was out of ear shot.

Janice quietly walked the length of the porch attached to the back of the huge house. Mel and their guest were engaged in conversation at the far end, looking off towards the peach trees. Argo sat with them until she saw her mistress approach, then quickly bounded over to receive some attention behind the ears. "Janice," Mel said warmly as she approached, "I'd like you to meet Doctor Fiona Cyrene, your new officemate."

Janice and Fiona shook hands warmly. "Doctor Cyrene, the Irish archeologist?" Janice asked.

"One and the same, Doctor Covington, but I'd thank you to call me Fi, all my friends do." Fiona smiled, which set her freckles dancing across her cheeks. She was the same height as Janice with slightly shorter hair. It was wavy and deep red which Janice noticed kept Mel's attention riveted. Appearing several years older than Mel, she spoke with a thick Irish brogue, her blue-gray eyes sparkling.

Janice smiled. "Only if you call me Janice."

"Very well Janice. Melinda was just showing me the orchard. You've a lovely home here." Fiona smiled at Mel as well as Janice as she spoke. Her words could be taken a number of ways, but Janice agreed with Pandora, this woman was a charmer.

"Yes, yes I do." Janice agreed, smiling at Mel. "Shall we go inside?" She suggested, leading the way to the living room.

"I heard you were interviewing at the university. I was on campus this morning and found out just after you'd left that you accepted the position." Fiona explained as they entered the grand living room. "It will be nice to have another 'foreigner' in the department."

Janice laughed. "You're right, I've been introduced as the 'yankee professor' more than once today."

"Yes, were your research on Xena not so outstanding, you'd find your office in the basement. As it is, you'll be rooming with the other archeologist no one can understand instead. Is this Xena's?" Fiona asked as she walked to the brick fireplace. Mounted above were the bronze breastplate and a restored fighting staff.

"Yes," Mel explained, joining the archeologist, "the breastplate was Xena's and the staff belonged to Gabrielle."

"Gabrielle the bard?" Fiona asked.

"You've heard of her." Janice's eyes widened in appreciation. She was impressed.

"Oh, yes. My... research assistant is quite the follower of your research Janice."

Janice watched the Irish woman's eyes quickly take in the chakram necklaces that she and Mel were wearing. "She said she spoke to you after your lecture at Stanford."

"Really." Janice replied, surprised and a little concerned as she watched Mel's eyes narrow.

Fiona nodded, "Yes, her name is Flora Gates."

"Really!" Mel said brightening.

"Yes," Fiona smiled at Mel, confident that they were speaking the same unspoken language. "She just got her degree. I was quite impressed by her thesis. She's been doing some research for me since she arrived six weeks ago."

"Does she live on campus?" Mel asked, quite delighted Flora Gates was out of circulation.

Fiona shook her head shyly, "We share a house near the University."

"Well then, you will have to bring her 'round for dinner some evening. Wouldn't that be nice Janice?"

Janice smiled, Mel was indeed getting the hang of it. "Yes that would be nice."

"So," Fiona asked as she took a seat on one of the comfortable living room couches, "now that you've recovered the scrolls, what's next?"

Shrugging Janice sipped her tea. "This summer we will be going through the scrolls, translating them. I think the next task would be to find the lost city of Amphipolis. I'd like to see for myself where Xena came from."

"Did she die there?" Fi asked, eyes sparkling with interest.

Mel nodded, "I think so. I believe one of the scrolls was written by Xena. It suggests as much."

"You're a Xena expert as well Melinda?" The Irish archeologist asked, intrigued.

Janice grinned, "Mel is quite the expert on ancient syntax. She also has some unique insight when it comes to interpreting artifacts. While it isn't the most scientific of methods, I don't think she's been wrong yet."

"So you're... partners then?" Fiona asked, worried she might have mistakenly read too much into their relationship, as she gazed at Mel once more.

"Oh yes!" Mel stated emphatically, smiling at Janice. "As a matter of fact I just found out that I'm as helpful on an expedition as the dog."

Janice blushed, "I meant that in a *nice* way Mel."

Fiona laughed as she stood up. "Well I really should be going. I had strict instructions not to overstay my welcome. It was very nice meeting you both. I look forward to that dinner, and will be seeing you on campus Janice."

Janice smiled shaking the older woman's hand warmly. "I look forward to it Fi."

Later that night Janice lay awake watching clouds move in front of the moon outside the bedroom window. Mel was curled up at her side, dark tresses spilling over her shoulder, warm breath against her breast. Argo lay on the floor next to the bed sleeping soundly. She thought briefly about her father, and how his life's work sat secure on two desks in their study. She didn't have to wonder if he would have been proud, she knew he was. She did wonder though if he knew or suspected, he was the descendant of Gabrielle. The Bard. It probably wouldn't have made much difference to him if he'd known, she decided. It did make a difference to her though. Xena's words at the auction about the necklaces haunted her. Even though the deed had been done centuries ago, someone had disturbed the final rest of the Warrior Princess and her love. That angered Janice, and she was determined to find out who and why. Not so she could set things right, but to at least understand what had happened.

Melinda sighed in her sleep shifting the course of the archeologist's thoughts. For so long her family had consisted of one dog and a few poker buddies, the dog being the only one she could trust. That had changed so dramatically in the space of a few weeks. The mere sight of Melinda made her heart sing, the presence of Pandora and her children were immeasurably comforting. She had a place she belonged to now, and while she still thought about the adventure of travel, the thought of home and hearth had even more appeal.

Janice looked down as she felt Mel's breathing shift and her lover's eyes open. Mel smiled as she drew a warm hand up Janice's nude torso, stopping as it cupped around a soft breast. "Can't sleep?" she inquired sleepily.

"I'm too happy." Janice admitted. "I don't want to miss a second of holding you." Janice snuggled Mel tighter, tracing lazy patterns across her lover's exquisite back with a gentle finger. "What woke you up?" she finally asked.

Mel shrugged, her own hands beginning casual exploration. "I don't know. It's odd though, I wasn't dreaming. Do you realize I haven't had any dreams about Xena since aboard the *The Gauntlet*?"

As Mel propped herself up on her elbows, Janice considered her words. She had heard about the vivid nature of her lover's dreams and having seen the possessions for herself, was hoping the details they provided would aid in her research. If she could prove her findings scientifically at a later date, how she got the ideas in the first place wouldn't be an issue. "Maybe Xena told you all you needed to know. Or perhaps she's taking a break."

Shaking her head, Mel smiled as Janice's body twitched, tickled by her long hair. "I don't think so. I think she's gone. Still, I don't mind. I mean, I'll miss her and all, but she deserves the rest."

"Mighty generous of you Mel." Janice quipped.

"I can be merciful." Mel smiled, "Still there is someone else I can think of who doesn't deserve any rest at all." Azure eyes burned with need as she leaned down for a soulful kiss. The kiss was followed by another, then more until the moon was no longer visible in the bedroom window.

Finally collapsing in happy exhaustion Janice rested her head against Mel's breast. She smiled as her lover's breathing slowed then deepened with blissful sleep. Knowing she was headed there herself, she was lulled to sleep by the now familiar heartbeat and breathing that thrummed in harmony with her own.

...I didn't take the task of documenting Xena's deeds lightly. I well knew that the world would have been happy to keep alive the memory of the old Xena, people are so fond of villains. But Xena changed, and like it or not, the world would have to change too. From that day a once-warlord saved a group of girls from Poteidaia I knew on some level it was my destiny to be with her. Later, I realized it was to preserve her deeds for posterity. Later still, I realized it was to be her friend. To teach her things she'd never had time or the luxury of adolescence to learn. With all she'd been through, all she'd done, Xena did not know how to love, really love without reservation. I taught her that. What I didn't expect though, was that she'd teach me the same lesson. It was after a well lived life with my warrior princess that I realized where our legacy really lay. The written word would take hold in local folk lore or it wouldn't. The only history I could be certain of passing down was to our children. Even so, I guess it didn't really matter. Xena never really cared what strangers thought of her. I knew the truth, as did everyone else who loved her, and was loved by her in return. When the time finally came for me to put down my pen for the last time, I looked forward with girlish giddiness to the reunion that would await me on the other side. I was not disappointed. How could I be. I knew I was her soul and she was mine, there is simply no end to love like that.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. It all started that day Draco's men arrived. I'd gone with Lila and the others to the stream to do laundry...

The end...