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#### LOVE/SEX WARNING/DISCLAIMER:

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

#### GROSS FACTOR/CLIFFHANGER DISCLAIMER:

If you've got a weak stomach and can't handle bugs, bats, blood or broken bones you might not want to read this story. While I don't think it's too terribly violent there are a few places where the "ick factor" takes center stage. Also, if you hate cliff-hangers don't read the epilogue. Stop at the end of chapter nine and you'll be very happy. Otherwise you're welcome to endure a preview of the final story in what has become a trilogy. Welcome to UberMadness...

#### JUST IN CASE I MISSED ANYTHING DISCLAIMER:

Do NOT open back panel; no user serviceable parts inside. Use in a well ventilated area. Pencils, scrap paper, and batteries not included. Can not be read by magnetic strip readers. If surface dulls, dust with a damp cloth and allow to dry; do NOT use abrasive cleaners. If nausea persists blame it on Pestilence and consult your doctor or contact your local poison control center. Some assembly required. No dolphins were injured in the creation of this document and the contents are 100% biodegradable. Reader of this document assumes all property/personal damage inflicted upon themselves and/or other individuals/objects in the past/present/future. Please move completely across each row, filling in each and every available seat to make room for everyone. Do not look directly at the sun, as this may cause permanent retinal damage. FCC compliance is required before operating this unit, please consult the User's Manual for further instructions. Complies with TM-071074, and 18D-PMTRE-DR. The moving platform is traveling at the same speed as your vehicle. No smoking please...please stand clear of the doors...The Audience Is Listening...THX. Life shouldn't be taken too seriously- you're not getting out alive.

*Author's Note:* This story takes place six months after IS THERE A DOCTOR ON THE DIG which took place three weeks after the episode THE XENA SCROLLS. My thanks to everyone who asked...um... demanded that I write its sequel. A very special thanks is extended to several people who really went beyond the call of duty and friendship to help me out on this. I'd like to thank PirateSka the editor with the belying pin (and pen) who feels no qualms about stringing me up to the mizzenmast. I'd also like to thank Lisa Stevens who helped with the editing and more than that, gave this Yankee a crash course on Southernisms. She also provided some insight that made me take this story a bit more seriously. The Lab Crew (aka, the world's first honorary MacBatties) Lisa, Louis, Jenn, Robin and Stan as well as Lisa's roommate Laura provided a wealth of information on all things Southern. All regional gripes can be directed to them. On a final note-- the original airing of THE XENA SCROLLS opened with the date 1942. Obviously the Xenastaff had the opportunity to realize (as I did) that the area was occupied by Germany at the time. For the rerun of THE XENA SCROLLS they changed the date to 1940. While that is nifty and all, and would certainly make my life easier-- I've decided to stick with the original date (1942) and not rewrite everything.



The Search For Amphipolis  
(or The Continuing Adventures of Janice Covington and Melinda Pappas)  
By  
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1997

Chapter 1: Final Exams

Janice glanced one more time from the neat stack of papers on her desk to the rows of students anxiously awaiting her comments. She smiled, taking in the variety of expressions ranging from eager to nervous. The classroom was comfortably warm in spite of the cold weather outside. Hard to believe it was winter already. Her first term as a professor of archeology was almost over.

“All in all, I’d have to say I’m impressed,” she began, resting her hip on the corner of the wooden desk. “I might have had my doubts at the beginning of the term, but all of you have worked hard and shown a lot of promise. Every one of you has a shot at a career in archeology, if indeed that is what you decide to do.

“As you all know, these term papers are one third of your grades. I’m happy to report that no one sank below ‘C’ level.” She smiled at the sigh of relief that swept through the room. “Several papers in particular were outstanding. Miss Sandsmark’s ambitious plan for restoration of the Sphinx was superbly executed and engagingly written. If I were a financial backer you could certainly count on my support. Mr. Mulder’s outlandish dissertation on Stonehenge and alien abduction is well supported by actual findings that, with minimal mental gymnastics and a couple glasses of brandy,” she paused until the snickering silenced, “even began to make sense. Finally, Miss Silver’s paper on archeology and ethics was top notch. Those were the ‘A’s’ this time around...”

A murmur spread through the class as the students filed toward Janice’s desk to retrieve their papers. When everyone had returned to their seats, the chatter continued punctuated by several snickers. “Something amusing, Mr. Raimi?” Janice asked evenly. She had done little but spar with the obnoxious student since the first week. Janice glanced down at her desk. One paper remained: his.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I just find it interesting that you gave an ‘A’ to a paper on ethics,” he said.

Janice picked up his paper and smiled. She’d been waiting all semester for this discussion. While she’d hoped a brighter student would broach the subject, it was a topic that was long overdue. “Interesting because...?” Janice prompted as she casually walked to the young man’s desk in the back row.

“Interesting in light of who your father was, Dr. Covington,” he replied confidently. Several students whispered angrily to the young man, telling him to keep quiet, but Janice waved her hand silencing them.

“It’s alright. I expected someone to ask sooner or later. I just thought it might have been mentioned by someone a little more engaged in the subject matter,” she said as she put the rejected term paper on his desk. “Don’t look so surprised, Mr. Raimi. The paper you plagiarized was actually written by a classmate of mine years ago who had in fact copied *my* paper. The least you could have done was include some updated information in light of recent discoveries. Surely you didn’t expect to cheat on the topic of Xena and actually get away with it? Did you?” She arched her eyebrow at the young man now blushing bright crimson.

“But you said no one got below a ‘C’.”

“That’s because I’m not grading it. At this point, even if you pass the final, your grade for this course will be an incomplete until you write a term paper on your own. I strongly suggest you stick with your chosen subject material. If you switch now I’ll be *quite* disappointed. I hope you’ll teach me something about Xena that I do not already know.” She smiled as her words sank into the brash student. He’d gambled and lost. That happened in archeology. “But I believe you were interested in my father...?”

“No, ma’am,” he muttered, staring at his desk.

“Oh, show a little backbone, Mr. Raimi. You tried something stupid, you got caught, now

move on. It isn't the end of the world."

"Was that Harry Covington's philosophy?" another male voice asked tentatively.

She nodded. "In a way it was, Mr. Wellman. My father took his chances. He risked prison and far worse for what he believed in." She let her gaze travel around the lecture hall. "I won't say that what he did was right, or proper. I think we all know it was not. But for a moment consider this. You've just made the find of your career. A hunch has paid off, you uncover a partial scroll and some unrelated jewelry and pottery shards. Museums are not interested. In fact, no one seems to be interested. The pottery and jewelry are of little consequence but private collectors are willing to pay top dollar. So you sell. Now you've got money to continue your research for another year." She strolled back to the front of the class, all eyes riveted on her as she spoke. "That was how it began. My father always went to the establishment first, giving the museums first crack before selling to private collectors. Until, that is, his reputation became so dark that no respectable academician would be caught dead talking to him. 'Harry the Grave Robber' was not an unfair description of my father. While it does not excuse his actions, I think his motivation deserves mention. He was obsessed with Xena. No two ways about it. He wanted more than anything to see where the trail of the scrolls ended. Not for personal gain, mind you, but to complete an unwritten chapter in archeology. Sometimes we don't notice when our search for facts and evidence blinds us to other aspects of the science. My father lived most of his life over that edge and I'll admit that he passed his obsession on to me. I have been most fortunate in being able to further his work without having to resort to his methods." She shrugged. "Are there any more questions on this subject before we move on?" she asked, scanning the attentive faces. "Yes, Miss Sandsmark?"

"The items that your father sold-- were all the artifacts inconsequential? Or are there some that you feel are a great loss to the scientific world?"

Janice smiled sadly, considering the question. "Three items my father sold to collectors are devastating losses to the scientific community. One was a ceremonial mask belonging to Queen Ephiny of the Amazons, another is the Dagger of Helios and finally, what I believe is a gauntlet of Hercules. I'm currently working on... yes, Mr. Raimi? You look like you're about to bust a gut."

"That's impossible," the brash student sputtered. "Hercules is just a myth..."

"This time last year Xena was just a myth, too," another student shot back at him.

"Well said, Miss Ennis," Janice added before glancing up at the wall clock. She checked the time against her pocket watch then addressed her students once more. "Since this is our last formal session, I'll let you leave now if there are no more questions. Remember, I have extended office hours for the rest of the week, be prompt for the final and for God's sake, don't forget that it isn't in here, but at the lecture hall across campus in the English building. Don't try anything stupid, my assistant Linda will be monitoring the exam and she knows *all* the tricks. Good luck to everyone." The students murmured words of appreciation and thanks as they made their way out of the lecture hall. Several students lagged behind, asking questions and quietly chatting with Janice until students from the next class began to enter.

A half hour later, Janice Covington made her way up the stairs of the archeology building to her office. After only a few months, the small sanctuary had become a second home and a refuge from the university establishment. She and Fiona Cyrene had worked well together, not that Janice had ever had any doubts that they would. They shared a passion for archeology and were kindred spirits on many levels, but there were complementary differences too. Fiona was a seasoned pro at teaching and found Janice's brash honesty amusing. Willing to share her teaching expertise, she helped the younger woman plan her lectures and assignments. In turn, she found some degree of protection from her association with Janice, or rather, Janice's lover, Melinda Pappas. The university, in the grand tradition of other institutions, was run by a network of men less than accepting of female equals. The archeology department was not the only 'boy's club' on campus, but the men of the department were more outspoken than most. As the only two female professors, Janice and Fiona were under constant scrutiny and frequently challenged. The men remained essentially cautious, however, and most of the jibes were subtle.

Doctors Covington and Cyrene were qualified, talented and more importantly, assets to the

department. Being the newest addition Janice was on the lowest rung, but she also had the most powerful friends. The archeology department had fared quite well over the years, especially in light of the war effort. The reason was no mystery. More than a powerful patron, Melinda Pappas was one woman whom every member of the archeology staff either respected or adored. There was one reason, and one reason only that the archeology building was not officially called the Pappas School of Archeology. Melinda had said 'no'.

Everyone knew where the money for the renovations had come, and the new name had been on the plans during the three years of construction and remodeling. But with the finishing touches completed just as Janice Covington had joined the faculty, Melinda had decided not to put her father's name on the building. Fiona had understood her reasoning. Janice might not have cared what people thought about her situation with the Southerner, but Melinda did. It had already been assumed by most people who didn't know Janice that she had gotten the job because of Melinda, and many had suspected her of taking advantage of the wealthy heiress. While she had been very proud of her father, Melinda refused to make things additionally difficult for her lover. She had said 'no' and it had been final.

For her part, Janice had adjusted to her unique position in the academic food chain for the most part. As long as it hadn't affected her relationship with her students, she had taken the innuendo and rumor in stride. From the outset, she had proven her desire to teach had been her primary reason for being there. She had made it clear that her popularity had been of little concern as long as detractors had stayed out of her way. Then slowly, with a determination that was second nature, and using the force of her personality as well as ability, she had won over most of the archeology department.

"Hey, Mic," Janice said cheerfully as she stepped into the cozy office while trying to juggle the maps, book and papers that she carried. Giving up, she dumped them unceremoniously on the desk.

"Good day to you, too, Yank," Fiona replied with a smile, her thick Irish brogue unchanged despite her years in the States. "Isn't it grand that you survived your last class 'thout getting lynched or burned at the stake, now. I've not seen you looking this happy since your glorious scrolls headed back to New Jersey."

"Good analogy." Janice grinned back. "I didn't want to keep them on exhibit for so long in the first place. I swear it was like an open invitation to Leesto to pay a visit." She shook her head, relieved once again that the original scrolls were safely out of reach of her rival. "As for the class, they finally brought up 'Harry the Grave Robber.' Took 'em long enough to get to it, though."

Fiona put down the paper she'd been reading. "The bairns are just being polite because you're new, luv. Give it a few more terms and they'll be grilling you about your Da the first week." She paused a moment then shrugged. "Though 'tis surprised I am no one's asked you about the fair Melinda. Lord knows it's the favorite topic in the faculty pub."

"So that's why there's always a weird hush whenever I walk in." Janice chuckled. "Damn, Mel's my favorite topic of conversation too. Sorry I'm missing out. About the students though, do you think they would... talk about me and Mel?"

"To your face?" Fiona asked. "Not if they know what's good for them. Seriously though, Dean Palmer his own self made it clear to the faculty that the private life of the department's most revered deity is strictly personal and not for the casual consumption of the students... regardless of how poor her taste in women surely is."

"Oh, that's rich," Janice said laughing out loud. "The same could be said for your research assistant."

Fiona frowned briefly at the jibe. "And since we're speaking of assistants, that rascal Linda was here abducting your beast."

Janice glanced at the couch between both women's desks where Argo usually slept. "Took her for a walk? Or to the house?"

Fiona laughed, "Depends. Is Mel home and does she have your car keys?"

Janice opened her desk drawer. "Keys are here, Argo must be, too."

"I'd be a mite more worried about Linda absconding with Mel than Argo, luv."

"Nah," Janice grinned, "Linda still finds me intimidating. Mel on the other hand..."

"Oh, so you've noticed her fondness for your assistant, have you now?" Fiona asked, mildly surprised.

"Really, Fi, I'm not as thick as everyone says I am. Hell, she's at the house often enough, grading papers. I see her and Mel stealing glances."

"And you're not worried, then?" Fiona asked as she returned to the papers she was grading.

"Nope," Janice replied, leaning back in her chair and studying her office mate. "Everyone is crazy about Mel, she can't help it. Hell, Fi, I've seen you staring glassy-eyed at her more than once. Don't think I haven't noticed Mel looking at you either." With her freckles disappearing beneath the blush of her cheeks, Fiona was speechless. "Oh for chrissakes, Fi, don't worry about it. It happens. Besides, I know there's more to you than a surging mass of hormones. With Linda that's debatable. I mean, she has the hots for Flora, too. Frankly I don't know when she finds time to do research."

The red-haired archeologist's eyes shot up, brilliant grey blazing, "Linda and Flora, you say?"

Janice shrugged. "I wouldn't worry about it. Flora is crazy about you, you know that. Linda is harmless, she's just crazy about... well, women. Pandora doesn't call her 'little wolf' for nothing."

Fiona's reply was cut short by the large dog bounding into the office, followed by an out of breath young woman. Argo nudged the Irish woman in passing then went to her mistress, showering her in wet sloppy greetings.

"I swear... I don't know where... that dog gets her... energy." The newcomer panted, taking a seat on the couch.

"Ah, she's gotten soft this term," Janice countered, "like Mommie -- ain't that right, girl?" she added to the dog, scratching her affectionately behind the ears.

"Y'all must be looking forward to getting back out on the road," Linda observed with a smooth Southern accent when her breathing returned to normal.

"Anything to be escaping this climate," Fiona muttered as she continued to grade her paper, occasionally looking at the newcomer with icy detachment.

"Oh, like you're in for a treat," Janice chuckled to her colleague. "Ireland is going to be as cold and miserable as it is here this time of year."

"Aye, perhaps," Fiona agreed, "but at least I'll be understood when I speak."

All three women shared a laugh punctuated by the thump of the big dog's tail pounding on the side of Janice's sturdy desk. "So where did you take her?" she asked her assistant.

Linda shrugged, noting that Janice's office mate was looking at her with a decidedly cold expression. "I finished grading the multiple-guess tests from the Archaeology of Archaic Greece class. They're ready for you. Argo was restless so we took a stroll over to the south building. Apparently, the home economics department is also getting in on the bet and they're all for you..."

"Bet?" Fiona asked.

Janice nodded. "Yeah, I can't believe you haven't heard. Apparently there is some debate as to whether I'll be asked to teach next term. Half of Archeology wants me out..."

"Sure'n I know which half," Fiona muttered.

"... most of Phys. Ed. would like to see me gone..."

"Well, luv, Argo does have a fine habit of stealing balls on the tennis courts, now..."

"So now Home Economics has entered the fray?" Janice asked her assistant.

She nodded, smiling. "Part of it is the war effort, part is having another female professor in archeology. Not takin' anything away from you, Dr. Cyrene, but everyone assumed that because you were Irish, and obviously brilliant, that's why you're here. With Dr. Covington it's different. She's a Yankee. It takes a long time before you realize that she is indeed smart. And let's face it, she doesn't have the most cordial disposition. Many women are thinkin' that if *she* can make her way doing what she wants, then so can they."

Fiona laughed heartily at the other woman's remark, her prior aloofness lifting like a fog. "Ah, but you're right then, Janice. Linda is most intimidated by you."

Janice took out a small note pad and scribbled a few words. "I'm making a note to see that

you *never* get a raise,” she said gruffly to her assistant. “Furthermore, I’m going to tell Mel to stop flirting with you and Fi knows you’ve got the hots for Flora. Cordial disposition, my ass.”

“Linda, luv, you just saw our own Janice writing. Run tell the English department that she is in truth literate and maybe they’ll come on board for her, too,” Fiona quipped, starting another laughing fest until a sour-looking man entered the office. Argo padded over to greet him by efficiently poking him in the crotch with her nose. His expression shifted from sour to sour and uncomfortable. Janice called Argo over, giving the dour man a break. “Good to see you, Dean Palmer. Argo thinks so, too.”

“Dr. Covington, Dr. Cyrene, Miss Robertson,” he replied nodding to all three. His eyes lingered a moment on the young assistant who quickly got the message and stood.

“Ah, excuse me, y’all. I’ve got... things to do. I’ll see you later, Dr. Covington.” She paused as she headed for the door. “Afternoon, Dr. Cyrene.”

“You don’t need Argo to leave as well, do you, Dean?” Janice teased when her assistant was gone.

“Charming to the last, Dr. Covington,” he said without smiling. “I regret that this is not strictly a social call. An archeologist of some note, Dr. Jones, is visiting the university. There is a dinner tonight at my home to welcome him. It is the wish of this department that you and Miss Pappas attend.”

“Dr. Henry Jones, Jr. is it?” Fiona asked aloud.

“Yes. The entire archeology department is expected to be there. You are invited as well, Dr. Cyrene,” he said with formality.

“Tis kind of you to remember me,” she muttered sarcastically.

“Indy,” Janice said to herself. “I’ll be damned.”

Dean Palmer cleared his throat until he had Janice’s attention once more. “It would be appreciated if... Miss Argo... had other plans for the evening.”

“Of course. Look, Dean, I’m still sick about that vase...” Janice glanced bashfully at the companion who sat obediently at her feet.

“Quite alright, Dr. Covington, I’ll see you tonight. Dinner is at seven, drinks are served at six, please be prompt.” He nodded respectfully at both women then departed.

“I was hoping his visit would be in response to last weeks dynamite demonstration,” Fiona said with a sigh.

Janice rolled her eyes. “I don’t think he’s heard about that yet. Besides, learning the proper handling of explosives is essential in archeology.”

“IF’in ya say so, Janice. In truth, I never had to attend these things until you showed up, luv,” Fiona continued.

“Well, I hate to suffer alone,” Janice replied. “I guess I’d better get home and warn Mel. I’ll see you tonight.”

Janice frowned as she pulled up the familiar road to her home. Small patches of soggy snow still clung fiercely to the ground. She reminded herself once again about the warmer temperatures and sunshine that promised to meet her on the other side of the planet. She fully considered the wet weather -- be it humid and hot, or soggy and cold -- the hardest adjustment she’d had to make in the past six months. As she neared the white mansion, an unfamiliar car drove away. It passed her as she slowed her truck to give room and she saw a vaguely familiar woman behind the wheel. Shrugging her shoulders, she let it pass and parked her truck next to Mel’s Auburn.

Smiling as the warmth and familiarity of her home washed over her, she took off her coat and heels, putting both in the closet just inside the entry way. Sounds of activity greeted her ears, as well as the delightful smells of Pandora’s cooking so she headed to the kitchen. As she suspected, the large room was bustling with activity. Three of Pandora’s children were engaged in some sort of game and immediately stopped when Argo padded into their midst. Squealing with delight, the children, with dog in tow, headed for the back porch. Linda stood near Mel, sipping coffee from a delicate cup as Janice approached. “How did you beat me home?”

“Got a ride from Professor Rainey.” Linda shrugged.

“I hear we’ve got plans for the evening?” Mel asked, greeting Janice with a brief kiss. The archeologist was momentarily mesmerized by her lover’s warm presence and startling beauty. Even after six months her pulse doubled every time she got anywhere near the statuesque woman.

Melinda Pappas was tall, certainly, over six feet in heels. Still at times she carried herself with a clumsy vulnerability that made Janice feel like a giant. Her dark raven tresses were neatly packed into a bun she wore on the back of her head. Dressed in a smart blue dress that set off the bright azure of her eyes, she looked like she’d been out shopping. Janice allowed herself a silent chuckle at the thought. While to all the world Melinda Pappas appeared to be ornament material, destined to decorate the arm of some wealthy businessman, she was highly intelligent as well and surprisingly stubborn. She’d been out shopping all right, but for expedition equipment, not jewelry. Wanting nothing more than to get lost in the brilliant blue of Mel’s eyes, Janice tore her gaze away with effort as she regarded her assistant once more.

“You were listening outside the door,” Janice said to Linda as she accepted a steaming cup of coffee from her lover. Suddenly her eyes went wide, the pieces falling into place. “Prof. Rainey -- the geologist?” she asked, incredulous. That was the name she needed to go with the face of the woman she’d passed on her drive in.

“Charming woman. I don’t know why I haven’t met her before.” Mel observed.

“Is there a single woman on campus you’re not chasing?” Janice asked, staring at Linda in disbelief.

“Little Wolf learned it from Big Wolf if you ask me,” Pandora muttered as she pulled a fresh pecan pie from the oven.

“I don’t recall asking,” Janice grumbled, distracted by the pie.

“You never do.” Pandora quipped, “Consider it a bonus.”

“Mel, you really should see about the help...” Janice grumbled, feigning offense.

“You reap what you sow, Janice Covington. Treat people like family and that’s just what y’all are going to get. A family.” Mel smiled, happy with the family that had been forged in the past six months. “So, what is this dinner I keep hearing about?”

Janice shrugged, taking the steaming piece of pecan pie Pandora offered her. “Indiana Jones is visiting the campus for some reason. Dean Palmer is throwing a dinner party in his honor tonight,” she continued, blowing briefly on the forkful of pie before popping it into her mouth. “He wants us to attend,” she enunciated clearly around the mouthful of food.

“Dinner?” Pandora asked, taking Janice’s pie plate away. “You shouldn’t spoil your appetite then.”

“No!” Janice protested as Pandora put the plate back on the counter.

“It’ll be here for you when you get back, if Little Wolf doesn’t eat it,” Pandora mused, herding the others out of the kitchen. “You two go on and get ready for your dinner. Little Wolf, you make yourself at home, dinner will be ready shortly.”

“She has a home, Pandora. Archaeological Method and Theory II doesn’t have their final until Thursday, so until then she’s off the hook workwise,” Janice protested.

“Now, Janice, be nice,” Mel countered. “She is tutoring the children tonight. It isn’t university work and if Dora wants to fix her dinner, you leave her be. Now let’s go upstairs and get ready for that dinner party.”

Janice considered another protest until she realized the woman of her dreams had just invited her upstairs to their bedroom. Pandora smiled as she watched them head for the stairs. Her knowing eyes glittered as she turned back to Janice’s assistant. “Take a lesson, Little Wolf,” she said softly. “When you find your soulmate everything changes. Big Wolf has an angry streak, but anywhere near Melinda and she’s as tame as a sleepin’ puppy.”

“What time is it?” Janice asked as she turned the 1938 Auburn up the driveway to the dean’s house.

Mel smiled as she reached into Janice's pocket, extracting Harry Covington's pocket watch. "It's twenty to seven. We're not as late as I thought we'd be."

Janice grinned wickedly. "That's because I'm not finished with you yet."

Blushing, Mel got out of the car and together the two climbed the steps to the dean's home.

Once inside, it took only moments before they were greeted by the dean. "Miss Pappas, how good to see you. Come, meet Dr. Jones." Melinda smiled warmly at the stodgy dean as he whisked her into the academic throng.

"I'll get us drinks," Janice muttered to the space vacated by her lover.

"At least I rated a 'hello'," Fiona quipped from behind Janice's shoulder. "Come on, luv, let's get something to drink." Janice spent several minutes in Fiona's company, exchanging pleasantries with her colleagues before going to look for Melinda.

"I'm sure you'll be quite impressed with Dr. Jones, Miss Pappas. Ah, here he is now." Mel was gently led into the living room near a fireplace that dominated the room with its crackling warmth. "Dr. Jones, I'd like to introduce you to Miss Melinda Pappas, Dr. Melvin Pappas' daughter. Miss Pappas, Dr. Henry Jones, Jr."

The tall man turned his gaze from the fire to the blazing blue eyes of Melinda Pappas. He smiled, a smile charming in its lopsidedness, flashing brilliant white teeth. "Miss Pappas, it's a pleasure," he said briefly, bringing her hand to his lips and kissing her knuckles softly.

"Why, the pleasure's all mine, Dr. Jones. I've heard a lot about you." Melinda smiled as Henry Jones gracefully released her hand.

"If y'all will excuse me," the dean butted in, "I've got to see to the other guests." With a curt nod, he quietly withdrew from the room.

"Do y'all get the impression Dean Palmer is fixin' to play match-maker?" Melinda wondered out loud. She studied the dashing archeologist with interest. He was certainly handsome, a small scar on his chin only adding to his rugged appeal. He wore glasses and although suave, there was a shyness about this man that was almost palpable.

"Perhaps," he agreed. "I don't suppose you're available?"

"She isn't." A voice said evenly from the doorway.

Indiana Jones turned and his eyes narrowed slightly as he forced a smile. "Janice. Or I suppose it's Dr. Covington now. Dean Palmer told me I could expect the pleasure of your company."

Janice smiled as she crossed the living room. It was dimly lit, most of the light coming from the fire place. It was warm, but her hands trembled slightly as she handed one of the two glasses she carried to her lover. "Your drink, Melinda," she said softly with a smile then turned to face Indiana Jones. "You mean the good Dean warned you I'd be here?"

Jones looked down at her coldly. Mel could see from the exchange that there was an intense bitterness between them. A bitterness that suggested more history between the two than she'd been told. "Look, Janice, I've got no quarrel with you. What happened between you and Marion is ancient history as far as I'm concerned..."

"That's big of you," Janice quipped.

"...in fact, you're the reason I'm here in the first place," he continued, ignoring the jibe. "I've got something for you from my father," he finished quietly, glancing towards the door, wary of eavesdroppers.

"Your father?" she asked, her voice instantly warming. "Is he still doing Grail research?"

Indy shrugged uncomfortably. "Not as much as he used to. But he found something he wanted me to give you. I don't have it with me, I'm sure that..." He nodded pointedly to the open doorway.

"I know," Janice nodded understanding. "I'm sure Leesto has bought off some of the staff, but I don't know which ones. What about tomorrow night?" she asked. He nodded, agreeing.

"Splendid." Mel beamed. "Then you simply must come over for dinner then."

He looked at Mel, his expression perplexed. "Both of us?" he asked, nodding at Janice.

Dean Palmer entered the living room, joined by several professors. "I hate to interrupt," he said, "but dinner is served."

"Great, I'm starved," Janice replied and headed for the doorway.

"Please, Dr. Covington, allow me." An earnest young man said, rushing up to Janice and offering his arm. Janice forced a smile to her face which drew a giggle from Melinda. "Thank you Dr. Byron," Janice said as she took his arm and allowed herself to be escorted to the dining room.

"Dinner at your house?" Indy asked as he extended his arm to Mel.

"Janice and I are partners. I specialize in the syntax of ancient languages," Mel explained, gracefully linking her arm in his. She saw his nod of understanding, then she added, "and we live together."

At that his eyes widened in comprehension and amazement. They had reached the dining table so there was little he could say or do but whisper as he pulled out the heiress' chair, "I don't know how she does it."

"It's just as well, Dr. Jones," Mel replied, smiling, as she took her seat.

Dean Palmer was seated at the head of the table, Jones on his right with Melinda next to him. Janice sat next to Melinda, pleased that the placecards with their names were, for once, side by side. Not that it mattered much. The majority of the dinner conversation took place between the dean, Indy, Mel and the two professors that sat across from them. Janice was seated next to Prof. Higgins, her most vocal detractor in the department. Fiona was on the other side of the table, towards the end, too far away to contribute much in the way of assistance to Janice in her conversation with the stodgy Professor. To make her evening complete, the hopelessly infatuated William Byron sat across from her, staring at her with unabashed adoration.

Determined to have something to show for the evening, Janice drank steadily once she noticed Higgins matching her glass for glass. If nothing else, she could guarantee him a headache in the morning. She ate her food, pleased that stuffed grape leaves had been included in the meal. While Janice had a healthy appreciation for pork roast, blackeyed peas, fried okra and sweet potato pie, lately neither she nor Mel could get their fill of Greek food. Doing her best to ignore Higgins, she listened with interest to the conversation at the head of the table.

"I met your father when he became Dean of the University of South Carolina," Dr. Jones was saying. "I must admit I'm surprised you settled here in North Carolina."

"After Daddy died it was hard for me to stay in that house. There was so much of him everywhere. So much of his decline," Mel said, drawing a measure of comfort from Janice's gentle hand caressing her thigh under the table. "I finally decided to go to Macedonia and help Dr. Covington with her research. When that finished, it seemed practical to move up here. I've always loved the house on Franklin Street. It has a lot of good memories. I'd often visit Mother here when I had breaks while I was attending Vanderbilt."

"Dr. Pappas spent a great deal of time at our university as well," Dean Palmer continued. "In fact the new archeology building..." Before he could catch himself he saw annoyance flash across Melinda's eyes, "...is *affectionately* known as Pappas Hall." He smiled weakly at Melinda, hoping his recovery had met with her approval.

Indiana smiled. He'd heard enough about campus politics to realize what had just happened. "I know Melvin Pappas wouldn't want a building named after him-- a discovery maybe, but not a building. If students call it that on their own, I'm sure that would suit him fine."

"I couldn't agree more, Dr. Jones," Melinda said.

"So, Miss Pappas, what are your plans for the winter break?" Prof. Montgomery asked from his position across from Dr. Jones.

Mel glanced sidelong at Janice before answering, not caring if the other professors picked up on the unconscious gesture or not. It wasn't as if everyone didn't already know that she shared her house with the archeologist. As for the rest, to some degree she enjoyed the speculation. "I think some traveling is in order," she said casually. "I'm looking forward to Christmas in a warmer climate."

"Visiting your Mother, perhaps?" Mrs. Montgomery asked.

Melinda smiled. Eunice Montgomery had almost overpowering maternal instincts. “Well, I doubt it. Mother is in New York and that most definitely is not a warmer climate. Not to mention being *New York*.” Several guests laughed at that, giving Janice a break from the ramblings of her conversation partner, Edward Higgins.

“... mark my words, Dr. Covington,” Higgins droned on in his most patronizing tone of voice, ignoring the laughter at Mel’s comment, “women will tire of the workplace soon enough. It isn’t easy earning a living. They will realize this and be grateful of the position in society they left.”

“Bullshit,” Janice retorted, then blushed when several others at the table snapped their heads in her direction at her outburst. “Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but I’m telling you, give it twenty or thirty years and you’re going to have a full scale sexual revolution on your hands. You can’t expect to ask women to play ‘Rosie the Riveter,’ working their asses off in factories, then go back to their former lives as if nothing ever happened...”

“It’s worked for thousands of years, why argue with success?” the old man said beaming. Higgins looked around the table. Eunice Montgomery was flushed and fanning herself at the eruption of Janice’s colorful language. Melinda Pappas was shaking her head sadly and the archeologist’s other ally Fiona Cyrene was trying hard not to laugh outloud. Even the love struck Byron looked embarrassed.

“Actually, Edward, old boy, I think Dr. Covington’s research has proved that we simply don’t know enough about the role of women in antiquity to make that kind of statement.” Janice smiled at Prof. Simpson who sat next to Prof. Byron. Simpson was a dapper man, his white hair crisply cut, his clothes impeccable. He was one of the most senior men in the department and a staunch ally as well. “Personally, Janice, I owe you and Xena a debt of gratitude. The requests are tallied, and enrollment for Archeology Laboratory has more than doubled.”

“Xena has nothing to do with the enrollment of your classes, Thomas,” Higgins sneered.

“Doesn’t she though? Archeology Laboratory is a pre-requisite to Janice’s Archaeological Method and Theory class. From what I hear, your Archaeology of Archaic Greece class is already full and you’ve been asked to teach Archaeological Field Techniques.” He lifted his wine glass and toasted his colleague as the others around the table followed suit.

“I hope the students supply their own dynamite,” Fiona quipped under her breath.

Dean Palmer frowned at the Irishwoman as he picked up his own glass. “Yes, Dr. Covington, congratulations. I had wanted to discuss it with you privately of course.” He paused to glare at Prof. Simpson, who just smiled mischievously. “But if you’re interested, the classes are yours to teach.”

Not trusting herself to speak in her somewhat inebriated condition, Janice smiled and nodded, her grin intensifying as she felt Mel’s affectionate squeeze on her thigh.

“That’s wonderful, Dr. Covington,” William Byron added. “My Egyptology class is taught right across the hall from the Archeology Lab.”

“That’s great.” Janice replied without enthusiasm, visions of mysterious flowers adorning her desk filling her head. Something about Byron bugged her, beyond his fervid crush.

“As I understand it,” Prof. Simpson continued, clearly enjoying Byron’s enthusiasm and Higgins’ discomfort, “enrollment for the department has set record highs. Students majoring in English, engineering, biology, physical education and even home economics are taking the general anthropology and archeology classes. It wouldn’t surprise me a bit if we started to see campus wide defections...”

“Thomas, please!” Prof. Higgins protested. “Don’t encourage her. One show of flashy scrolls and women all over campus get a romanticized idea about archeology. It takes a discipline and dedication that women just aren’t suited for. I don’t care how they teach it up North, we shouldn’t encourage our young ladies to study subjects where they will always be woefully inadequate. The fairer sex is physically not up to it.”

“Not over the Reconstruction yet, are we?” Janice asked acidly. “Well, up North spending a day in 110 degree heat is a cake walk compared to child birth. And Lord knows raising children doesn’t take any discipline or dedication,” she added sarcastically.

“My point exactly,” Higgins smiled triumphantly apparently immune to sarcasm./ “Child-rearing is what women are suited for and it betters society as a whole if they stick with it.”

“Are you saying you want *me* to raise the next generation, Prof. Higgins?” Janice asked sweetly as she finished off another glass of wine.

He gazed back, his inebriation evident on his features. “Well, I don’t think we have to worry about you getting married and having children, now do we?”

Without the smile fading from her face Janice replied, “Who said anything about getting married?” From there the dinner conversation went steadily downhill.

Janice and Mel rode back to their house on Franklin Street in silence. Mel insisted on driving due to the sheer volume of alcohol Janice had consumed. Prof. Higgins, unconscious, had to be dragged to his car by Indiana Jones and William Byron. The stodgy man had matched Janice drink for drink. That fact alone was enough reason in Mel’s mind to fish the car keys from the pocket of her lover’s coat when they readied themselves to leave. The fact that Janice was still conscious was nothing short of amazing.

“You’ve gotten really good at driving,” Janice commented as they pulled up to the white mansion. “Bout time you were able to enjoy your Auburn.”

“I’m surprised you’re able to tell, Janice,” Mel replied, amusement tugging at the edges of her voice.

“I’m drunk, Mel, not dead,” Janice said grinning. “And not *too* drunk if that’s worrying you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mel replied primly as she opened her door and walked around the car to help Janice out.

“You don’t?” Janice said, feigning surprise. “You mean if I told you that I wanted you naked in my arms, writhing in ecstasy and doing things to you that Higgins swears I’ll burn in hell for, you’d be surprised?”

“No, Janice,” Mel said smiling, “I’d be amazed. You drank at least two bottles of wine by yourself, not to mention the Irish whiskey and brandy. I think Higgins is in a coma.”

“Higgins maybe, but I learned how to hold my liquor at a young age. Only one person I’ve ever met can drink me under the table,” Janice said as she stumbled through the front door.

“Besides, I can think of little else after what you pulled tonight.”

“What did I do?” Mel asked, genuinely surprised.

“Sitting there, being beautiful, intelligent. Your voice making my pulse race. Touching me under the table. Leaning close when you asked me to pass you the asparagus. Reaching to get the butter. I saw you sipping your wine, Melinda, and I was jealous. The blood from those grapes clinging to your succulent mouth. I thought of little else all evening except getting you back here.”

Mel leaned against the side of the coat closet. Janice’s words pulsed through her, making her own body react. It took a moment to remember why she was there. Glancing down she saw her coat in one hand and a hanger in another. “You are a charmer,” she said, trying to sound as casual as possible as she hung her coat.

“Well, you did say I’m charming when inebri... inbrie... drunk. But I mean it, Melinda. I’ve never felt things... good things, wonderful things the way I do when I’m with you. In your arms, Melinda Pappas, all my rage and fury quiets down until there is nothing left but a sense of completeness. Would it be too forward to say I’m madly in love with you? God, I hope you’re not married.”

“As a matter of fact I do have an understanding with a certain dashing young archeologist. Rather impetuous and obstinate, and a Yankee no less, but completely lovable...” Mel said laughing as she climbed the stairs. It was all she could do to keep from taking Janice right there in the entryway. When she reached the top, she looked back down at Janice who was still navigating the first three steps. “Janice, if you can climb those stairs by yourself, I’ll be the one to do things to you that will guarantee me an eternity in hell.”

At her words, Janice’s head snapped up and with a determined glint to her vibrant green eyes

proceeded to march up the stairs. With a light laugh, Mel grabbed Janice as she reached the top step, and sweeping her up into her arms, carried her into the bedroom.

“Am I the only one who knows how strong you really are?” Janice asked as she was carried to bed.

“Yes, and you’re not going to tell anyone,” Mel replied, her voice husky, eyes smoldering with passion. She covered Janice’s lips with her own, rendering conversation irrelevant.

Pandora glanced up from the dishes she was washing as she heard Janice and Mel come home. Unable to avoid their conversation in the absolute quiet of the house she smiled as she heard Janice march up the grand staircase. “If you two wind up in hell,” she muttered, “there’s going to be a mess of disappointed folks in heaven.”

Janice held Mel tenderly as their breathing slowly returned to normal. As much as she loved it when Mel held her, this was her favorite position: Mel’s body stretched out on top of hers, an elegant leg draped between her own, a crown of silky chestnut hair tucked under her chin. She loved the feel of Mel’s heartbeat through her skin as their warm bodies rested together. Mel let her feel everything: powerful, tender, giving and especially, loving. Particularly now, as she continued to grapple with university politics, with Mel she felt grounded. Janice smiled to herself. She suspected Mel felt the same way. No longer just a pampered socialite, since Janice moved in Mel had not only learned to drive but began to shoulder many of the responsibilities of planning their upcoming expedition. However their outward duties might change and evolve, together, like this, they were blissfully equal, and wildly passionate in their mutual devotion.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Mel whispered softly into Janice’s chest, her warm breath sending a chill across perspiration-slick skin.

“Do what?” Janice mumbled dreamily.

“You drink like a fish, enough to send a man twice your size home unconscious, then love me with the passion of an Amazon and the tenderness of a bard.”

“Hey!” Janice laughed. “Leave my ancestors out of this.” Mel propped herself up on her elbows and gazed down at her lover. “Nooo,” Janice groaned and gathered Mel in her arms, pulling her close once again. “I need you close, love,” she murmured into soft dark locks. “Mel, it’s like... with you, I’ve finally gotten it right. You touch me, or hell, just look at me and I’m helpless to do anything but respond.”

Mel nodded against Janice’s chest. She understood. “And that helplessness, it doesn’t scare you?”

Janice was quiet, so quiet in fact that Mel thought she’d fallen asleep. When she spoke it was softly, and as clearly as her inebriated state would allow. “Not any more. In an odd way it makes me feel powerful. All I can feel is you, your touch, your kiss, and how much I love you. Everything else shrinks, becomes invisible, until all that is left is shimmering clarity. The only thing that scares me, Melinda, is the thought of you not being in my life. I’ll never be able to stop loving you, Mel. I know that. Please don’t go anywhere.”

Mel smiled at Janice’s open honesty, which forced several tears that were brimming in her eyes to fall and splash on her lover’s skin.

“What’s wrong?” Janice asked, pulling Mel’s face up to look at her.

“I love you so much, Janice,” Mel sobbed, “and you say the sweetest things.”

“Yeah, well,” Janice grinned, “I am related to one hell of a bard.”

...Loving Xena may have been effortless, but living with her wasn’t. It is not easy to be the companion of someone who carries the weight of her past upon her shoulders. Make no mistake, Xena was a violent person and had been responsible for unspeakable deeds. I’ll admit that at first I had a rather romanticized idea of who exactly ‘Xena: Warrior Princess’ was. That didn’t last long, however. Darkness clung to her like a shroud and in the beginning she had little rest from the battles she fought with her inner demons. In the weeks and months that followed, she grew. And while it

might have not been obvious to the casual observer, she changed. At first I sensed these changes as they happened. The changes in Xena seemed so clear to me. What I couldn't see then were the changes in myself, but Xena did. Later, when I could feel myself grow and change, I was unable to see the changes in Xena as clearly.

The road Xena traveled was a hard one. Not only was it physically dangerous, it was emotionally demanding as well. Murderous thugs, thieves and bandits were the rule, not the exception. When we weren't fighting those, Xena continued to do battle with a host of enemies known only to her. She demanded so much of herself, and allowed herself little room to make the mistakes that as human beings we all make every day. Sometimes I simply couldn't keep up.

I left her once to attend try-outs at the Academy of Performing Bards in Athens. At the time I thought I just wanted to see if I could make it into the Academy. Looking back, I think I needed to know that I could succeed at something without Xena. While I loved her more than life itself, it was difficult to remain in her company and not feel woefully inadequate. The second time I left her was because of those very feelings. I'd frozen during an ambush and realized I could have gotten us killed. I felt like more of a liability than an asset to Xena and figured I'd leave her for her own good. I didn't know that she was already in love with me at that point. That experience taught me that Xena was my home. I missed her so much it was palpable. If only I'd remembered that lesson.

I left Xena again when I married Perdicus. Years later we spent many an hour around the campfire discussing that one. I did love Perdicus, he was my closest childhood friend, and he needed me. While it is difficult to travel with someone with an army of inner demons, it is even more difficult when they've honed self-sufficiently to a razor's edge. I never doubted Xena cared for me, even loved me. But she never really did anything to let me know she *needed* me. Granted, there was that incident in the temple at Thessaly, but I was dead at the time and didn't hear about Xena's outburst until years later when we were reunited with Hippocrates. So, I left to marry Perdicus.

Xena did her share of leaving, too, although she would be quick to point out that it was not the same thing. In the early days, she frequently left me at any near by village while she went off to atone for her past mis-deeds. It made sense. In the early days I wouldn't have been able to handle myself in battle (not that it made getting left behind any less painful). Later, she would occasionally leave me when she simply needed to travel faster than I could on foot, or with both of us on Argo.

Then, of course, there was her death. I remember the healer's house. She simply gave up and a small part of me was angry about that for quite some time. But she returned and I was convinced that would be the most painful episode I'd ever need to endure with my warrior. Gods, was I wrong. The single most painful trial I ever endured with Xena could be summed up in one word: Ulysses. How I wanted to strangle Homer for writing about that man. I suppose that's unfair, but at the time that's how I felt. The incident with Ulysses was really only the beginning of a series of events that would test the strength of the love that bound Xena and myself together.

We hadn't been lovers all that long when we met the King of Ithaca. Handsome, strong, confident, disarmingly charming. A part of me hated him instantly. One look at him and I knew we'd be competing for a prize I thought I'd already won. Discovering my disdain for sea travel didn't help matters. While I was used to any variety of male company falling for my lover in a big way, seeing Xena respond was new. This wasn't Marcus whom she'd known long before she'd ever met me, or Hercules who helped her take the first step toward redemption. This was a man she met after we'd embarked on our life together. While there had never been any grand proclamation about our relationship, she knew the depth of my feelings. At least I thought she did. Granted, she ultimately pushed Ulysses away but I was never sure if she did it primarily for my benefit or Penelope's. A haunting uncertainty remained as we sailed from Ithaca. I couldn't stop wondering that if Penelope had been dead, would she have expected the three of us to work out some sort of arrangement? I was not about to share her with Ulysses, regardless if he'd been willing to share her with me.

I tried to talk to her about it, but the timing for us at that time was just plain bad. So little time had passed from when we got back to Greece to when we encountered the Horde. That only served to add to my hurt and confusion. As much as I loved Xena with every fiber of my being, I

did not like the Warrior Princess when it came time to interact with her for an extended amount of time. Certainly the 'warrior' had shown up often enough. Every time some drunk sot in a tavern put a hand on me, or we faced the warlord of the week -- any number of conditions would bring out flashes of Xena's former self. This, however, was different. The coldness in her eyes and distance of her heart were almost more than I could handle. After much soul searching and consideration I decided that the time had come for me to take some time away from my love.

Needless to say, Xena didn't take it well. Her reasons hurt all the more. It wasn't because she needed me, would miss me, couldn't live without me. Xena's practical mind did not speak of such thoughts, even if she felt them. Instead it was where would I go and how would I get there safely and when would I return. What I couldn't know at the time was that I was stepping into a carefully laid trap by one whose feelings for Xena ran almost as deep as my own. Forcing myself not to cry, I told Xena that I loved her but was going home.

"You're leaving me *again*?" she asked incredulously.

That stung. "No, Xena," I explained. "I'm spending some time away from you. I need to think, sort things out. I'll only be gone a month at the most. I don't think that's the same as leaving you."

"Why can't you sort things out with me?" she asked.

There was no attempt made to hide the irritation she felt. The fact that a part of my heart was breaking while she was only annoyed hurt all the more. "Because I love you Xena, but life with you allows little introspection. I can't sort things out between one crisis and the next. A few weeks is all I ask. You'll never know I'm gone." She nodded unconsciously in agreement and at that moment my anger got the better of me. "Think you can keep from falling in love that long?" I asked.

"Are you still on that?" she demanded. "I never said I loved him." She looked away from me then glanced back. The Warrior Princess had returned. "Perhaps this will be good for us," she said coldly. "Maybe you can grow up a little."

"You mean sleep around?!" I demanded, furious.

"Might do you some good," she answered casually.

"Well, maybe I'll just do that," I said, my voice surprisingly calm. "I'll meet you in Thebes at the next full moon. Basilio's Inn."

"I can hardly wait," I heard her reply as I turned to go.

Since my home was Xena and I'd chosen to leave, I went to my home away from home: the Amazons. I'd thought of going to Poteidaia, but knew I needed to be surrounded by people that would understand the depth of my pain, even if I didn't understand it myself. The Amazons would. My birth-family wouldn't.

As I'd hoped, Ephiny and the others sympathized and comforted me in my anguish. Solari especially gave me the distraction I needed to get Xena out of my blood, if only for a short time. We became lovers. She knew that I did not, could not, love her, but she didn't need me to. As a friend, and as someone who loved her queen, she offered me the physical distraction that kept me from languishing in a pit of sorrow. I never forgot that kindness and we remained close friends for years. She understood my need to get back at Xena, perhaps better than I did. In fact, the Amazons in general seemed to better understand what was happening between Xena and myself, than I. While no one said anything negative about the Warrior Princess in front of me, it became quite clear that there was something about Xena that put these women on edge.

I tried to put that out of my mind as I learned the ways of my adopted people and assisted Ephiny in her duties as queen. It was a lot to learn, and that kept me busy. I also got acquainted with my centaur nephew, Xenan Gabris Phantes. The following weeks passed quickly, but the emptiness I felt without Xena did not diminish in the slightest.

One morning, as Ephiny, Xenan, Solari and I ate breakfast, a scout came running into camp. Bleeding from a crossbow bolt that had pierced her shoulder, she reported that Xena rode at the head of a small army under the banner of Ares, sacking everything in her path. The look I saw on Ephiny's face was plain, unadulterated fear. I was too shocked to believe anything at first. Furiously I tried to think what could have happened to Xena to bring the Warrior Princess back to the surface

so soon. She reverted to her old self in that surrounded garrison out of desperation. Something serious must have happened to bring the savage back. She was approaching from the north which meant she was coming from the direction of Poteidaia. I wondered if she'd been trying to find me.

The rest of the day was spent planning. I couldn't help but overhear the occasional murmurings of frightened Amazons as they set about their appointed tasks. Some acted like it was the end of the world. How could I have known at the time that was in fact what they feared. I wracked my brain trying to figure out what must have happened to put Xena back in the service of Ares. Nothing made sense, but that didn't change the facts. 'Xena: Destroyer of Nations' was headed our way. That night Ephiny and I stayed up talking. She knew the situation was next to hopeless, but her determination and bravery never faltered. "We have to issue a challenge," I said. "Me against her, one on one."

"You're crazy, Gabrielle," Ephiny laughed. "This is Xena we're talking about."

"I know," I replied. "Xena who loves me..."

"But she's riding for Ares now."

"She's still Xena. If she weren't, Ares wouldn't want her."

"That's out of the question," Ephiny replied then brought her fist down on the table, hard. "Gods, I should have seen this coming."

"Seen what? That maybe Xena and I are not as perfect for each other as everyone thinks we are?" I stood and paced the small hut, furious. I couldn't help but feel that I'd failed Xena in some way. If I'd had the strength to work through my problems at her side, then this never would have happened.

"No, Gabrielle," Ephiny said in a voice surprisingly gentle. "If anything, this *proves* how much you two belong together. You've been a mess since you've been here, and Xena obviously has gone crazy without you. Maybe seeing you across a battlefield is just what she needs to knock some sense into that thick head of hers."

I turned at that, unable to keep the hope from my features. Somehow it had to work-- I could feel it. "I think it's the right thing to do," I said softly. Ephiny just smiled at me sadly, and nodded.

The challenge was issued and sure enough, she accepted. All but a few Amazons were scattered to the trees. I trusted Xena to show up, but suspected an ambush as well. We'd readied a clearing for the contest, well away from the Amazon village. "You're a fool, Ephiny," Xena said dryly as she gracefully dismounted Argo.

"Is it foolish to save lives, Xena?" Ephiny replied. "You beat the Amazon queen and you will find no resistance here. By our laws, as an Amazon yourself, you will be the new queen."

Xena's eyes narrowed in fury. "Don't ever call me Amazon again," she hissed. "Pick your weapon."

Ephiny shook her head. "It isn't my place to choose. The Amazon queen will fight you, and she will choose the weapons."

Xena's look of confusion was replaced by understanding and fury as I stepped out from behind a large tree with my staff. "Gabrielle?" she whispered, several emotions warring for dominance in her features. She was shocked, relieved and angry all at once.

"It's me, Xena," I said. "What are you doing?"

In moments, the confusion was gone and cold fury gained dominance in her eyes and voice. "I'm taking prime hunting ground, that's what I'm doing. Give up now, Gabrielle, and I'll let you live."

"This isn't you, Xena," I pleaded as I readied my staff.

"I'm as much Xena as you are Gabrielle," she replied as she took the staff Ephiny offered her.

"What happened to you?" I asked, then realized it was the wrong way to start the conversation. Even against the Horde, her eyes were not this cold. Something other than the woman I loved was in possession of Xena's mind. She lunged at me and I was barely able to parry the blow. The crack of wood striking wood was deafening as the vibrations reverberated through my hands

and arms. The force of that one blow alone was almost enough to make me drop my staff. I parried a couple more times then swung at her in desperation. I don't know who was more surprised, her or me when my staff reached it's mark. I had hit her solidly in the ribs. She smiled, the feral smile I'd seen her give to numerous opponents, usually just before they lost consciousness or worse.

"Nice shot, bard."

"Xena, stop it," I tried again. "Something happened. Tell me." She came at me with such fury I could only react, thinking was out of the question. I vaguely felt the wood of her staff hitting my shoulder, dislocating my arm then knocking the staff from my hands before she struck me in my gut, driving the air from my lungs and me to my knees. I looked up at her and tried one last time.

"Xena talk to me," I gasped. "I love you. Don't kill me like this..."

## Chapter 2: Guess Who's Coming To Dinner

Janice awoke with a start, waking Mel, who rested peacefully on her chest. "What is it?" Mel asked. "Bad dream?"

Janice looked confused for a moment, then gingerly touched her head. It was a hangover all right. "Ah, bad dream, and how. Do you know anything about Xena trying to kill Gabrielle with a quarterstaff?"

"Xena... trying to kill Gabrielle... with a staff?" Mel asked dubiously.

"It was so real, in my dream," Janice muttered, almost as if she was talking to herself.

"Something happened... after Ulysses... Gabrielle went to the Amazons and Xena rode at the head of Ares' army."

Mel smiled and gently touched her lover's cheek. "Remember, love, you drank two bottles of wine, ate six stuffed grape leaves, had some whiskey and brandy. Not to mention a conversation with one Dr. Jones whom I suspect you don't like very much. And had to fend off the flirtatious advances of one Dr. Byron all evening. Frankly, I'm surprised you didn't dream that Xena was a bard and Gabrielle wandered the countryside sacking villages."

Nodding, Janice hoped that Mel was right, that her dream had been a work of fiction, not a memory. "Did we see a mention of an Amazon named Solari in any of the scrolls?" she asked, easing from underneath the quilt of their bed.

Melinda thought a moment then nodded. "Yes. I think she was Ephiny's second in command. She supported Gabrielle against Valaska. Why?"

"Any mention of her and Gabrielle as lovers?" Janice pressed.

Melinda's eyes narrowed slightly, "Are you saying as in an *affair*, Janice Covington?" Getting out of bed, Mel stormed off in the direction of the bathroom. Pausing at the bathroom door, she turned to glare at her lover. "Think about it, Janice, if you cheated on Xena, would you write about it?" With that she withdrew, slamming the bathroom door behind her.

Janice shut her eyes tightly as the sound of the slamming door continued to reverberate in her aching head. Argo hopped up on the bed and nudged her a couple of times, clearly concerned. Petting her absently, Janice rested her head against the soft fur of the dog's face. "This is not going to be a good day," she whispered.

"Blast it," Fiona said in greeting as Janice entered their office, squinting against the sunlight coming in from the window.

"Nice to see you, too," she growled, collapsing in her chair.

"I just lost a five dollar bet with Simpson. Higgins didn't make it in today. I figured neither would you," Fiona explained.

"Yeah, well, I hope he feels every bit as wonderful as I do right now."

"I'm sure he does. Where did you learn to drink like that, luv?" Fiona asked, mercifully adjusting the window blinds to cut down on the sunlight streaming into the office.

"An old flame," Janice replied. "But, Fi, I've gone all morning without throwing up, and if we talk about her, I will."

Fiona laughed. “Not to worry, my friend. I’ve got a class to teach, and you have desperate students to console. See you later.”

Like clockwork, the students showed up for their appointments. For the most part the questions were genuine and sincere, not just fishing for test questions. By late afternoon, she even began to feel human. It didn’t last long.

“Hello, Dr. Covington,” Prof. Byron said cheerily from her doorway. Janice looked up and with a resolve she didn’t know she had, forced herself to smile. Sure enough, he was holding flowers.

“Dr. Byron,” she replied. “Going to a funeral?”

He laughed, an empty sound that paled in comparison to Mel’s laughter. “Er, no. These are for you.” Janice’s smile didn’t budge.

“Ah, thanks,” she said, accepting the flowers. Sadly she realized that William Byron was probably the only member of the department that did not know she lived with Melinda Pappas. She suspected it was because he was so annoying, no one would talk to him. Finally settling on an empty glass for the flowers, she poured some water from Argo’s drinking bowl, then deposited the bouquet. Argo watched the scene with interest, never moving from her place on the couch. When she finally yawned, displaying an array of sharp white teeth, Prof. Byron flinched nervously.

“I think Argo likes me,” he said.

Janice glanced over at the big dog. Argo looked as bored with Byron’s company as she was. “Maybe, it’s hard to tell. If she doesn’t attack you, it’s a good sign.”

“I was wondering if you’d be interested in joining me for a cup of coffee. We could continue the fascinating discussion we started last night.” He stood there smiling, occasionally blinking, waiting for Janice’s answer.

It took a moment for Janice to realize that he’d stopped speaking. “Right. Coffee.” She bided her time as she checked her appointment list. Unfortunately, she was finished for the day and didn’t have any reason not to accept the young man’s offer. She raised her head, preparing to accept her fate when she saw a familiar face in the doorway, just behind Prof. Byron.

“Mr. Raimi, can I help you?” Janice asked, hoping she’d kept most of the relief from her voice.

“I’ve got my term paper, if you want it,” he replied sullenly, easing past the now irritated Prof.

“Of course. Dr. Byron, I’m sorry. It’ll take me a while to go over this with Mr. Raimi. I wouldn’t want to keep you waiting.” She smiled, confident that she’d avoided his company for another day.

“No problem,” he replied. “I’ll wait outside. We’ll leave when you’re ready.” With that he turned and closed the office door behind him.

Janice shook her head in frustration then turned her head to her student. “Have a seat, Mr. Raimi. I’m glad you decided to take me up on my offer.”

The young man sat next to Argo on the couch, absently petting the big dog a few times. “I was wondering, if... ah... you wouldn’t mind reading it now.”

Janice glanced toward the door. She wanted more than anything to avoid Dr. Byron as long as possible, still she wouldn’t do it at the expense of a student. “You know ethically I can’t grade this in front of you, Mr. Raimi. The department chair would have my head...”

“Oh, I’m not suggesting an official grade ma’am. Just an idea... a suggestion.” Smiling Janice found it hard to believe that this polite young man was the brash combative student who’d glared at her from the back row all semester. What the hell, she thought. It was a stupid rule anyway. Besides, she decided, gambling was a part of archeology-- ‘bout time this boy took a chance and won. “Very well,” she said taking a red pencil from her drawer. “Nothing official, I’m just giving this a once over. I’ll go over it again with the others when I assign final grades.”

Janice studied her student out of the corner of her eye as she read his work. She jotted a few notes down on the paper, as well as several comments in a notebook of her own. “You’ve been up all night, Mr. Raimi,” she commented as she read. “Care to tell me why?”

He fidgeted a few moments before answering. "I have to fly back to California right after finals. Daddy was transferred. I don't know if I'll be back next term."

Janice put the paper down and looked at him squarely. "Transferring to another university?" she asked.

"No ma'am." He shook his head. "Enlisting."

"If that's true, then why bother with this paper at all?" Janice asked, eyeing him critically.

He looked at his shoes for a few moments before answering. "You were right, Dr. Covington. What I did was stupid. Stupid and unnecessary. I actually love archeology. The research I did for my paper is the sort of thing I do for fun anyway."

"Then why the plagiarism?" Janice asked as she returned to the man's term paper.

He cleared his throat before answering. "I... I resented you as a teacher," he said quietly.

"Because I'm a woman?" Janice inquired.

The young man nodded, his cheeks blushing crimson. "My Daddy has some rather strong opinions about women, especially ones that teach. He swore up and down that you were only here because some other professor must be sweet on you. He said I shouldn't worry about your class, that you wouldn't know enough about the subject to grade us anyway." Janice studied him for a few more moments before returning to her reading. "Dr. Covington, I didn't know you wrote that paper," he continued. "I chose it because it was written better than any of the others I'd read. You really do know what you're talking about."

"Nice of you to notice," Janice said as she put the paper down and leaned back in her chair. Crossing her arms, she studied the young man again, taking note of his tie, his freshly shaved face, and clean clothes. "Do you mind if I smoke?" she asked, opening her desk drawer. Startled, he shook his head. "Thanks," she said, reaching behind her and opening the window. "Mr. Raimi," she continued as she lit the small cigar and blew a few smoke rings, "half of the population of this planet is women. If you were on a dig site, would you ignore fifty percent of your discoveries? Of course you wouldn't. You'd make the most of whatever you found. I don't know what your father's problem is, but I'd hate to see it passed down to you. Women are a fact of life, Mr. Raimi. There isn't any place you can hide to avoid them. They won't always do what you want or be what you expect. Believe me, I *know* what I'm talking about."

He smiled. "You're not like the other women who teach here, Dr. Covington."

"How so?" she asked as she made a few more notations on his paper.

He shrugged. "You're very honest and direct. Not very Southern." He thought a few moments more. "And fearless. I think that's why a lot of women look up to you."

Janice laughed at that. "Actually, Fred, I'm hungover. Granted, it looks a lot like fearless, but there are subtle differences." She paused, making up her mind. "I'll give you some free advice. There is a simple reason that so many women are enrolling in my classes." Several thoughts flashed through her mind but she managed to keep the smile from her lips as she spoke. "I don't treat them any differently than the men. I expect as much, not less, from them and I'm demanding, not patronizing. If you've any interest in being popular with the women on campus, don't treat them like 'women', treat them like human beings. You'll get razzed by your friends, but you'll have dates on Saturday nights."

He blushed again. Dating advice was the last thing he expected when he'd come to turn in his paper. In fact, everything about this encounter was not what he'd expected. "Why did you go into archeology?" he asked quietly. "Was it your father?"

Taking a long drag from her cigar, she held the smoke in her mouth for a moment before slowly exhaling. "Yes and no. My father taught me about the seedy side of archeology. He was driven, obsessed even, with finding out the truth about Xena." She shook her head. "Archeology isn't about truth, philosophy is. Archeology is about facts. Originally I entered the profession because it was what I knew, what I loved, what I felt a part of. Lately it's because I've developed a respect for the past. A genuine affection for people centuries dead, a passion for events that happened long ago. I want facts Fred, *and* the truth."

"But you just said archeology wasn't about truth," her student asked, perplexed.

"I also come from an unconventional line of archeologists," Janice replied. "Pop wanted the truth, not necessarily facts. I want both. Understanding the facts gives one a picture of the truth, just be ready for that truth to change from time to time." She smiled and blew a small puff of smoke towards his face. He blinked, startled, then noticed he'd been holding his breath. "Here, Fred, have a cigar." She fished one out of her drawer and lit it as he tentatively puffed. "You did a hell of a job on this paper. I'd say it's in the 'B' range. Let's face it, you did rush it. Work on it over the break and send it back to me. Let's see if we can get it up to an A. If you come back next term, it couldn't hurt. Right?"

He beamed as he stood, extending his hand. "Thank you, Dr. Covington," he said, shaking her hand firmly.

"Any time, Mr. Raimi," she replied, smiling as he departed. Thoughtfully, she put out her cigar and glanced at her pocket watch. She'd taken a while with her student, hopefully long enough to bore Prof. Byron into leaving. With a chuckle at the flowers perched in the drinking glass, she grabbed her keys and headed for the door. "Let's go, Argo."

"Not trying to sneak away are you?" Byron's voice echoed across the near deserted hallway from where he'd been gazing out the third story window. There was something mildly taunting in his voice that set Janice on edge.

She sighed, resigned to her fate. "Not at all, Dr. Byron, coffee it is."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd call me William," he encouraged quietly as they headed down the stairs. "As long as there aren't any students around."

"Fine," Janice replied, her opinion of the eager young man sinking another notch. "*Pretentious and boring*," she thought as they walked across campus. There was little about the man that held her interest and she failed to see why he'd chosen her for this misplaced crush. He was only slightly taller than her, with pale blond hair and light brown eyes. His build was slim, and she doubted he'd done much field work. He did not look the sort of man who could handle days on end at 110 degree heat. His speech was crisp and clipped, betraying his New England upbringing. Maybe it was the Yankee thing she decided. Like Fiona Cyrene, they were outsiders in the land of Dixie. Surely, she reasoned, he could find more suitable company from the faculty of the Home Economics department.

As they entered the small cafe Janice noticed several female heads turn in their direction. Looking objectively at her companion she supposed he was handsome. Not that she would have found him particularly attractive even if she were remotely interested in men. No, she found the dark sculpted features of Melinda Pappas much more captivating. In comparison, William Byron was rather vague.

"Do you mind if I call you Jan?" he asked as they were seated at a small table by the window.

"Yes," Janice answered flatly without thinking. He blinked at her in surprise. "I hate being called Jan," she explained when it appeared a simple answer was too much for the young professor. Idly she wondered if he was trying to bait her, or just thick.

"Pity," he replied, smiling, as he gazed at Janice, "Jan is such a lovely name."

"If you say so, Bill," she said as she glanced out the window, noting his frown out of the corner of her eye.

After a moment's reflection he laughed. "Touche."

Something on the floor caught Janice's eye. She gazed down noting a discarded newspaper. It had taken all of her effort to simply make it to the university in one piece. She'd not picked up a paper. She leaned over in her chair and picked it up off of the floor. The headline, as usual, was about the war. British forces had just defeated the German troops at el Alamein in Egypt. The Suez Canal was still under Allied control for now. It was another article however that caught her eye. *Theft in Athens*, the headline read. Authorities were puzzled by the modest heist.

"Pity about the drawings," William commented, taking note of where her eyes rested on the paper.

"What happened?" she asked.

He shrugged, watching her carefully as he answered. "I read that article this morning.

Apparently someone broke in to the Acropolis museum in Athens and made off with a number of large drawings. The drawings were ancient renderings of a number of friezes, statues, that sort of thing. Not a total loss though.”

“Why do you say that?” Janice asked, folding the paper and setting it aside. She’d read the article when she got home.

“Several of the drawings were of antiquities currently housed in museums all over the world. I didn’t pay it much notice. It had little to do with Egypt after all.”

Janice nodded, making a mental note to research the topic further. It might be a coincidence, then again it might not. When the waitress arrived, William ordered coffee for them both. After a conscious effort, Janice found herself warming to her companion. He was trying so hard to impress her, it was difficult not to be flattered. The waitress returned shortly thereafter and smiled warmly at Janice as she poured her coffee.

“So what are your plans for winter break?” William asked, drawing Janice’s eyes away from the departing form of their waitress.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she replied casually. “Might do some traveling. I miss California, maybe I’ll spend some time in Hollywood. It would be nice to get out of the cold.”

“Ah, a warm climate Yankee,” he said smiling, sipping his coffee. “I’m surprised you’re not going on some expedition or other.” He nodded pointedly at the folded paper she had adopted. “Perhaps something in Greece? Several members of the department are doing just that, research during break.”

“That’s true,” Janice agreed. “I know Fi is heading to Ireland and I think Dr. Scully is heading to New Mexico. Chaco Canyon, I believe.” She chose her next words carefully, wondering briefly if this eager young man could be a plant of Leesto’s. “While Greece is lovely this time of year, it is occupied by Germany at the moment. Contrary to my reputation, I don’t travel into war zones lightly.”

“Well, you were in Macedonia six months ago,” he countered, studying her intently.

“And I wasn’t happy about it,” she replied. “Had I not been on the verge of discovering the scrolls, I’d have been well away from there. Now that their discovery is ready for the history books, the leg work completed, I’ve earned some time off to write to my heart’s content. Now, my good man, is the time to publish.” She toasted him with her coffee and hoped she’d been believable. Then again he seemed too young and idealistic to be of much use to Leesto. The pup would probably have fallen for her too. “So, William. What are your plans for break?” she asked.

“I plan to pay a surprise visit to an old friend,” he answered smiling, as he launched into a detailed description of all he wanted to do and see during his time off. With a little luck, she decided, he’d carry the entire conversation by himself.

Indiana Jones pulled up to the white mansion on Franklin Street, grateful the dean had insisted he use his car while in town. His eyes widened in appreciation of the immaculate black Auburn in the parkway next to a new truck. It was easy to envision the two women who lived inside as living representations of their cars. Melinda Pappas could very easily be a 1938 Auburn while Janice Covington was every bit a pick-up truck. He was greeted at the door by Pandora, a large black woman with smiling eyes. She took his hat and coat and led him through the entryway to the living room where Melinda stood waiting. “So good of you to come, Dr. Jones. I’m sorry but Janice isn’t home yet. May I get you a drink?”

He nodded, looking around the elegantly furnished living room. “Sure, but please, call me Indy. I hear the word ‘doctor’ and think of my dad. I’m not old enough to be him yet. I’d like bourbon if you’ve got it.”

Melinda laughed. “I think you saw from Janice’s little display last night that there isn’t an alcoholic beverage known to man that we don’t have on hand. I don’t know what’s keeping her, she must have gotten tied up at the university.”

Indy walked to the small bar where Melinda prepared their drinks: a tall glass of sweet iced

tea for herself in addition to his bourbon. "It happens to me all the time. This is her first term teaching, isn't it?"

"Yes. I don't think she's ready to admit it, but she loves it. She's so passionate about it. But you know Janice; she's passionate about everything."

"I suppose," he agreed. "How long have you known her?"

Mel smiled, a slight blush coloring her cheeks. "A little over six months. But, truly, it feels like I've known her for a lifetime."

He nodded and walked over to the fireplace. Janice Covington and her passionate nature were not his favorite topics of discussion. Still, there was no reason to vent his personal bias about Janice to her lover, so he tried a new topic instead. "Are these Xena's?" he asked, studying the breastplate and staff that were mounted over the fireplace.

"The breastplate belonged to Xena, the staff belonged to a bard named Gabrielle."

"I'm surprised they aren't in the university's museum. Aren't you worried about someone trying to steal them?" he asked, noting the secure mountings that held the artifacts to the wall.

Melinda shook her head, handing her guest his drink. "We were paid a visit this summer by a thug of Leesto's. Argo bit off three of the man's fingers and took a chunk out of his thigh. No one's tried since. Pandora, that'd be Pandora Booth my housekeeper, and her family stay here when we're gone. Janice thinks they're safer here than they would be in a museum." She stood next to her guest admiring the ancient artifacts.

"They're unlike anything I've ever seen," he commented. "What time frame do you place them in?" he asked peering closely at the detail work of Xena's breast plate.

Mel smiled as she sipped her drink. Indiana Jones certainly had the 'bug' as she called it. An absolute fascination with anything older than their country. "Well, we've run into a bit of trouble placing Xena's exact time frame. We'll need some more evidence to be sure, but if the scrolls are accurate, a lot of other scholars are going to have to rewrite their history books." Her attention was diverted by voices at the front door. Inwardly she gave a sigh of relief. Janice was home at last.

"Hello, Indy." A icy voice called from the doorway to the living room. Melinda started, seeing a woman she didn't recognize. The woman was short, Janice's size with dark hair that curled at the ends. She was pretty, and judging from the expression on her face, furious.

"Marion!" Indy exclaimed in surprise, "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I'll bet you're surprised to see me. 'Stay in DC,' you said. 'It'd be a boring trip.' I can see that you're quite bored..."

"Marion, please." Indy cut in, gesturing to Mel. "This is Melinda Pappas, and it isn't what you think."

"Going to see an old colleague?" Her voice rose in fury as she stormed into the room. "Funny, you've never mentioned this particular colleague before." She quickly looked Mel up and down. "She's beautiful. Can't imagine why you've kept her a secret." She shook her head as her voice tightened with emotion. "Indiana, I've told you how I feel about people who cheat. I've been there, on the receiving end of it, and I'm not going there again..."

"Ah, hi. Marion is it?" Melinda said rushing over with her hand extended, "I'm afraid this has been a terrible misunderstanding..."

"Hello, Marion," a new voice said from the entryway.

Marion spun at the sound to face the source of the voice. "Janice Covington," she said, smiling without a trace of amusement in her voice. "It's been a long time."

Janice shrugged. "Not long enough for you I'd expect."

"You got that right. But still, there's something I've wanted to say to you for some time..." She walked over to where Janice stood, waiting. In an instant her fist came up, striking Janice across the jaw with a solid right cross. Spinning from the impact, Janice landed face down on the hardwood floor. Mel rushed to Janice's side as Indy shook his head and rolled his eyes. It was going to be one of *those* evenings.

"I take it you're still mad?" Janice asked quietly when she rolled over to a seated position, gingerly touching her bleeding lip.

“*Still mad?*” Marion seethed. “You have no idea how long it took me to *get* mad in the first place. For months, Janice, I believed you, believed your reasons and your cowardice. I was so ready to take the blame for it all. I invested two years of my life with you, two years that you disregarded in an instant...”

With Mel’s help, Janice stood and glared back at Marion. “I never expected you to take the blame for anything,” she said. “I did, however, expect you to shoulder some of the responsibility for why it didn’t work. And I did not disregard our two years together in an instant...”

“Like hell you didn’t!” Marion shouted. “You waited until you were fully entrenched with Tiffany before cutting me loose. You were cheating on me for months!”

“It wasn’t as if we had any kind of understanding, Marion. You didn’t want that, remember?” Janice shook her head sadly. This had probably been one of the worst days of her life. “I’m not proud of what I did. You’re right, it was wrong. I was selfish and treated you unfairly, I’m sorry.”

Mel rushed back to the bar to get a napkin to staunch the flow of blood from her lover’s lip. Her eyes narrowed in anger at the sound of Marion’s next words: “I regret nothing like the day I met you, Janice Covington. You were the worst thing to ever happen in my life.”

“I thought your Uncle Albert had that distinction,” Janice asked, apparently unaffected by the coldness of her former lover’s words.

“It’s one thing to be hurt by someone you hate,” Marion shot back livid, “quite another to be destroyed by someone you love.”

“Destroyed, my ass,” Janice replied, taking the napkin that Mel offered. “If it means that much to you, go ahead, take another swing.”

Marion’s fist was halfway to Janice’s face when Mel caught her arm in a vise-like grip. “Those lips are mine.” Mel said quietly, her eyes like ice, “and you’ve damaged them enough for one evening.” Marion’s eyes widened in surprise at the quiet threat threaded through the taller woman’s voice. The fight left Marion Ravenwood and was replaced by fear as Melinda Pappas released her grip.

Pandora rushed into the room with a wet towel and delicately dabbed at Janice’s bleeding face. “Dinner is ready,” she announced to the awkward foursome. “I’ve set another place.” She nodded in Marion’s direction. “Take your seats, just give me a minute with Miz Covington.” When no one moved Pandora spoke again, “Mr. Jones, you have business here. Miz Ravenwood, the car that brought you drove off. Unless you want to walk back to town in the cold, you’ll stay and have some pot roast.” Too shocked to do otherwise, Indy and Marion headed through the indicated doorway. Mel headed toward Janice, but the black woman shook her head. “Seat your guests Melinda. I’ll bring Miz Wolf in shortly.” Mel nodded and followed her guests.

“Waf ub at ab out?” Janice asked around a mouthful of towel.

“Hush, child. They needs to settle down. There’s too much anger with you and Miz Marion in the same room. Let her make peace with Melinda.” Janice nodded, looking glum, getting a chuckle from Pandora.

“Waf?” Janice asked accusingly.

Pandora threw an affectionate arm around her charge and led her to the dining room. “You sure have a way with women, Janice Covington.”

Seated at the table, Marion glanced at Indy and Melinda. “I’m sorry, Miss Pappas,” she said formally. “I didn’t realize, you and Janice... I owe you an apology too, Indy.”

“I’m not the one you should apologize to,” Mel said primly taking her seat across from Indy. Janice and Marion would be sitting across from each other. “*Out of striking distance,*” Mel hoped.

“Marion,” Indy said, his voice gentle. “My dad had some papers he wanted me to give to Janice. I knew it’d only upset you, which is why I didn’t mention it. How did you find me anyway?”

Marion glanced at him with a wry smile. “You left your itinerary at my place, you big oaf. I knew you were at the university so I just called the dean. He was very helpful.” The smile left her

face and the laughter faded from her voice as Janice entered the dining room, towel still held next to her face. With a neutral glance at Marion, she took the seat between Mel and Indy.

“Now that you’re here, Indy, what was it you wanted me to see?” she said as clearly as she could, wincing from the pain of using her mouth.

“Right,” he said nodding as he reached into the pocket of his trousers. “This.” He handed Janice a folded piece of paper. She unfolded it as Indy explained, “This is a rubbing from a sarcophagus belonging to Sir Glenford of Nottingham. He fought in the First Crusade and traveled through Greece. He eventually made his way to the Scottish Highlands where he died. A contact of my father’s included this in some other information he requested involving the Grail.”

Janice studied the paper as Mel looked over her shoulder. “Do you mind, Janice?” Mel asked gently.

“Sure,” Janice agreed, handing the paper over. “You read it.”

Mel adjusted her glasses and in a rich voice read the text. “And the Knight, though he shone with the virtues of Christendom, did not wear his beliefs like a badge or a shroud. Instead he delighted the Clan with tales of their own history that he had heard long ago on his travels. Telling stories of the Children of Solari he endeared himself to them and was considered a MacGab of their own blood. So rich was his vision of the Warrior Princess and Bard it seemed to all impossible that the gentle Knight was not of their blood as well. The MacGabbers cared for his injuries which were many, laying him to rest when the Lord called him home, in the honored tomb of their family.” Mel blinked when she was finished. “That’s what it says all right, only it doesn’t make much sense. And that’s the second time today I’ve heard mention of Solari,” she said frowning at Janice.

Janice shook her head, puzzled. “First Crusade,” she murmured, thinking. “That would be 1096 to 1099. It was proclaimed by Urban II to aid the Greeks against the Seljuk Turks in Asia Minor, among other things.”

“Right,” Indy agreed. “Nicaea in Anatolia was captured in June of 1097. Antioch in Syria was captured in June 1098, Jerusalem in July 1099.”

“So this knight was in Greece and heard the stories of the Children of Solari. Any idea what that means?” she asked.

Indy pulled another folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Janice. “My father wondered about that as well. At first he thought it might be related to the Grail. These are his notes,” he said handing the papers over.

“What about the Clan MacGab?” she asked as she began to read the elder Jones’ notes.

Indiana shook his head. “Dad didn’t find out much about them. It’s a family name centered around a remote part of the Scottish Highlands. There is a crest and specific tartans associated with the Clan but he didn’t find out much more. I guess they kept pretty much to themselves.”

“Perhaps eventual descendants of Xena and Gabrielle’s family?” Melinda wondered.

Janice nodded as she glanced through the notes quickly. The elder Jones’ writing was clean and readable. “It says here that ‘Children of Solari’ was a name given to a specific Amazon tribe. I would guess it’s the tribe that Gabrielle belonged to. I suppose it would make sense. That tribe knew the stories of their Bard-Queen. If Solari had a number of children and they were especially good story tellers and passed the stories down, they could pick up a name like that.” She read further, her eyes widening in surprise, “It also says here that the Children of Solari are pictured on a temple frieze. Your father made a note to contact the curator at the Acropolis museum at Athens.”

Indiana Jones nodded. “He did. Apparently the actual frieze has long since been destroyed, but the original plans for that particular frieze still exist. They are at the museum.”

“Plans,” Janice repeated. “You mean as in *drawings*?”

Hours later Janice Covington sat at her desk in the cozy study brooding. She held two halves of a Celtic medallion in her hand. Absently she studied the intricate detail then gazed off into space.

“Am I interrupting anything?” Melinda asked from the doorway.

Janice glanced up, her breath catching in her throat. Melinda stood, framed by the doorway in nothing save for a black slip. One thing was for certain, Janice Covington never got used to the

sheer beauty of Melinda Pappas. Every time she laid eyes on her statuesque lover she had to remind herself that she was not, in fact, dreaming.

“No, Mel. Come on in, I was just thinking,” Janice replied with a smile.

Mel gracefully walked into the room, and rested her hip on Janice’s desk.

“Janice, you’re not thinking. You’re brooding.” She glanced at the newspaper folded to a specific article on the desk. “What are you brooding about?”

Janice snorted, shaking her head sadly. “I don’t know, Mel. Xena, me, the shitty things I’ve done and the mistakes I’ve made. And wondering what in blazes happened to Xena and Gabrielle after they died, and how their descendants ended up in Scotland.”

Melinda was quiet for several long moments before drawing a gentle finger along her lover’s cheek. “Janice,” she whispered. “I’ve drawn you a bath. Would you please come and take it? The newspaper article will be here in the morning. The rubbing and Dr. Jones’ notes will be here, and Xena and Gabrielle will still have a mystery for you to solve. For tonight I want to talk with the woman I love and see if I can get some sense into her think head without causing bodily harm.” She reached for Janice’s hand to lead the woman from the study. “Tonight, when you got home, Argo wasn’t with you. Where was she?”

Taking Mel’s hand in hers, Janice brought it to her lips and kissed the palm softly, wincing at the throbbing of her painfully swollen lip. “I sent her out back with Pandora.”

Mel’s eyes widened in understanding. “You heard Marion’s voice from the front door, and knew she was here, didn’t you? You knew she’d attack you.”

Janice shook her head. “I didn’t know that for sure, but I knew if Marion did she’d be justified.”

“I don’t see it that way,” Mel replied flatly.

Janice cast her eyes to the floor, unable to look at her lover. “Everything she said was true, Mel, all of it.”

Mel smiled as she drew Janice’s face up with a gentle hand under her chin. “You can tell me about it while you’re in the tub.”

Following Mel to the bathroom Janice felt utterly spent. Sensing her exhaustion, Mel helped her lover out of her clothes, talking a few moments to massage her knotted shoulders. “All in all, I reckon dinner went rather well,” Mel commented as Janice lowered herself into the steaming bath water.

“If ‘rather well’ means that no one was killed, I suppose so. The pot roast was good though.” She sat motionless as Melinda soaped up a wash cloth and used it to caress her back.

“When was the last time you saw Marion?” Mel asked quietly.

“About six years ago,” Janice replied. An involuntary sigh escaped her lips as Mel rinsed the soap from her back. Her body began to relax, urging her mind to follow suit. “Marion and I met when we were teenagers. Our fathers were on the same dig in Egypt. Abner Ravenwood was independent enough that associating with Harry the Grave Robber didn’t bother him too much. He and my dad were kindred spirits. Pop looking for the Scrolls, Abner searching for the Ark of the Covenant. Marion and I became good friends. A couple of years later we got reacquainted in California, at Berkley. Abner was teaching, pop was selling some artifacts. I enrolled in collage with Marion.”

“But I thought Diana was your first.” Mel asked as she gently washed Janice’s arms.

Janice nodded, saying, “She was. Marion um... consoled me when that fell apart. We spent a lot of time together as friends, and well, things changed. We were together for two years until that too fell apart.”

“What about her Uncle Albert?” Mel asked, tenderly caressing Janice’s breasts with the soapy washcloth.

“Abner’s brother, Albert,” Janice said with a grimace. “He was a violent man. Drank too much and got into fights. He’d never hit Marion if Abner was around, but Abner wasn’t always around. He was there in Egypt for a time. The bastard even took a swing at me.”

“So that’s why Marion solves her problems with her fists?”

Janice shook her head. "Our break-up was rather long and drawn out. What can I say, it was messy. It didn't have to be. Certainly not as messy as it was, and that was my fault. I was more interested in protecting myself and Tiffany and left her hanging out to dry. Marion has every reason to hate me."

"Perhaps," Mel agreed as she shifted to wash Janice's neck. "But we all make mistakes. It's not as if you were a crazed warlord burning the countryside."

Janice shook her head. "It's not as if I've done the good Xena has done either, Melinda."

"You're good for me, Janice," Mel said moving into her lover's field of vision so she could look directly into her vibrant green eyes. "Don't underestimate that. I know you, Janice. I suspect that when things fell apart with Tiffany, you didn't repeat your mistakes. I'll wager that you've still not repeated them. Janice, you're the sort of person who learns from her mis-steps sometimes. Okay, so you haven't discovered the connection between drinking and hangovers, but in other areas I see you go forward, not back. Let this guilt go. As you can see, Marion survived. True, she's still got strong feelings for you but that's just the way you are. I've yet to meet someone who doesn't adore you or... ah... strongly dislike you."

"Thanks, Mel, you say the sweetest things," Janice said as she made a small splash in her lover's direction. "But give me a break, I've only been drunk twice in the time I've known you. Last night and when you took the bullet out of my arm." Janice splashed again, this time getting Mel wet.

"Don't even think about it," Melinda warned. "What I don't understand is how you ever ended up with anyone named Tiffany..."

"What? Who me?" Janice asked innocently as she splashed again, more forcefully this time.

In seconds, howls of laughter and splashing echoed through the big house. Pandora paused from where she stood letting herself out at the front door. "I'm glad I just washed towels," she murmured as she closed the door softly behind her.

...Xena stared down at me, her eyes cold, her expression unreadable. She put the end of her staff onto the ground near where I sat helpless on my hands and knees. Taking a step back from me she spoke to one of her captains. "Organize a hunting party. We'll need dried meat for the campaign. And get some men to build an enclosure. These Amazons are going to be our guests for a while. I want them to have suitable accommodations."

"Why don't we just take them back to the village?" one man asked.

"Holding Amazons in their own village? Don't be stupid." She cast her gaze to Ephiny and slowly sauntered over. "Don't be foolish yourself, Ephiny. I've ordered my men to shoot the first Amazon that makes a bird call," she drawled. "Anything happens to any of my men and it'll be two Amazons who suffer for each of my men injured. You cooperate with me and I might not burn the village on my way out of town."

Xena walked by me again, without saying a word. She did look at me though, I honestly don't think she could help it. She barked several more orders to her men: telling them where to make camp, how to set up the watches. She explained that the Amazons travel through the trees and ordered effective defensive measures. There was no doubt about it, this was Xena the warlord.

"Ares said to kill the bard right away," one of her men commented.

"Are you questioning my orders, Piros?" Xena asked in a deceptively light voice. "You don't think food for the men and a secure enclosure for the prisoners are good ideas?"

After meeting those cold blue eyes he shook his head emphatically. "Yes, Princess, they are good ideas. No, Princess, I am not questioning your orders."

"That's good, Piros," Xena purred. "Because nothing upsets me quite like disobedience. And nothing angers Amazons quite like killing their queen. It wouldn't do to throw away our most powerful bargaining chip, now would it?" The terrified soldier bowed deeply then hurried to join his detachment.

I sat tied up with the other Amazons for the rest of the day. The pain from my dislocated shoulder was agonizing, even after Ephiny had set it. She slammed her open palm against my back with surprising speed and force. Before I could react the shoulder joint was back where it belonged

and I was on the ground, sobbing. My legs were tied to the line of other Amazons but I scarcely noticed. With surprising speed a large cage was constructed before our very eyes. When it was finished, we were unceremoniously ushered inside. After that, the makings of a war camp materialized around the wooded glen where we were held captive. Tents were erected, fires built, training exercises took place. It was clear that Xena intended to stay for a few days, training her troops, gathering supplies for her army. Whenever she was in my line of vision, I watched her. I put everything I had into those unflinching stares, trying to glimpse the woman I loved. Sometimes she returned the eye contact, sometimes not. When she looked at me, I felt cold to my very core. The face was Xena's, but those eyes weren't. She had the eyes of a cold blooded killer.

The hunters were successful and began pulling a variety of game from the rich Amazon hunting grounds. These men were competent and skilled. They behaved with disciplined efficiency, splitting tasks among themselves and working together. I shuddered to think how they would perform in battle. By nightfall they'd divided into teams of watches, patrolling the perimeter of the camp, watching those of us in the cage and scanning the treetops for signs of other Amazons. Things looked pretty bleak.

"Any ideas?" Ephiny asked me quietly.

I shook my head. I had none. "I don't know what's happened to her. If I could talk to her, maybe I could do something."

"I think she knows it," Ephiny agreed. "You've seen how she's been avoiding you. Not really looking at you. It's as if she's trying to pretend that you're not here. I'm sorry, Gabrielle, but if she plans to attack, the Amazons and Centaurs will fight her."

"I know," I whispered. "Somehow I've got to get through to her before she makes that mistake."

Around midnight I stood looking out beyond the bars of my cage to the mostly still camp beyond. There was no moon, the only light came from fires scattered around the camp. As a precaution we'd decided to keep watches of our own, not trusting Xena or her guards. Everyone else was asleep, and the guards posted around the cage were silent in their duties. I looked around at my companions, they were all ready to die in battle against the woman who held my heart. How I didn't hear her approach I don't know, but when I looked up, there she was.

"Xena!" I whispered.

"Gabrielle," she replied looking at me appraisingly. "How's the arm?"

The sound of my name rolling off her tongue, like a caress, did the same thing to me it always did. I felt my knees getting weak and pulse doubling. "It hurts. Ephiny set it," I replied unable to tear my eyes away from hers. I knew the love I felt for her was evident on my face, but there was nothing I could do about it. "You don't have to do this," I said pressing myself against the bars of my cage to get as close to my love as I could.

She shrugged. "Perhaps it's my destiny."

I shook my head defiantly, "It doesn't have to be. You've proven that time and again. Whatever pain you suffered at the hands of Ulysses, it doesn't have to make you... this."

She looked away for a moment before turning back to me. She put her hands on the bars of my cage and pulled her body close. Eyes of ice blue bore into mine as she spoke and I realized why she struck fear into the hearts of so many. "This isn't about Ulysses, Gabrielle. Or Ares for that matter. Rage is who I am. I can wear that rage on the outside and satisfy the fury, or I can keep it locked within, screaming until my mind is deaf from the din. I thought I could change my calling, Gabrielle. But I can't. But I guess you know that, now. So, what were you doing here? You said you were going home."

"Xena," I said, covering her hands with my own. "You were my home, you are my home. Since the day I met you. I could not stand around and watch you with Ulysses, anymore than you could watch me marry Perdicus. I know you sent him away for my benefit, but that didn't erase the hurt of you loving him."

Her hands flinched under mine but she didn't move them. "I did watch you marry Perdicus," she growled.

"Right," I agreed. "But you weren't planning to hang around and watch us raise a family, now were you? Xena, I was hurting, that's why I needed to leave. But that does not mean I stopped loving you, I'm not that strong. You have my heart, Xena, and you always will. If this is what you choose to do with it," I said indicating the cage, "I can't stop you. But it doesn't change how I feel. I really thought your feelings for me ran as deep."

Her beautiful blue eyes were so cold as they stared down at me. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Gabrielle," she said as she withdrew her hands from beneath mine. "You were most... diverting, make no mistake about that. But the time for diversions is past. If you push me to kill you, I will, and without hesitation. I suggest you remember that."

"Xena, find the courage to admit you've made a mistake," I pleaded as she turned and walked away.

"That didn't go well," Ephiny commented from behind me.

I nodded, trying to fight back tears.

"Get some sleep, Gabrielle." She said gently. "Solari and I will keep watch. I've seen movement in the trees. I think our sisters are going to try to get us some... help."

"It's too dangerous!" I whispered fiercely, drawing the attention of a guard.

"Just sleep, Gabrielle," Ephiny said, with a quick glance to the guard. Her tone was unmistakable. In my current state of mind I was a liability, not an asset. So, with my heart heavy I curled up on the forest floor and in time, slept.

### Chapter 3: Myth Directions

Janice opened her eyes, blinking a couple of times as they adjusted to the darkness of her bedroom. She lifted her head from the cradle of Mel's shoulder and quietly got out of bed. Stepping silently over Argo and stopping to put on a bathrobe against the early morning chill, she made her way to the study. After lighting a fire in the fire place she looked at the clock on the mantle. It read two-thirty. "*I'm never up at this hour,*" she thought. Deciding to make the most of it, she settled herself behind her desk. After reading the newspaper article once again, and taking some notes, she read the imprint from the ancient sarcophagus then the notes of Dr. Jones. A knight, Amazons, two desecrated graves, stolen drawings and vivid dreams. It wasn't much to go on.

Gazing at the fireplace, she watched entranced as orange and yellow flame danced on wood. Unbidden, an image of Marion came to mind and with it the bitter taste of guilt. Other images ebbed and flowed through her consciousness, loves she'd had and lost, hearts she'd broken and the broken hearts she'd suffered. Finally her wayward thoughts centered on the image of Melinda Pappas and she felt herself relax. A sense of calm overcame her as she thought about the tender woman sleeping soundly in her bed. Mel was right, she could hang on to Xena and Gabrielle's past for as long as she desired but it was time to let her own demons go. She'd made mistakes and survived, the only thing she could promise herself was not to make them again.

She knocked the fire down and separated the burning logs. Satisfied it was safe, she returned to her bedroom. Carefully stepping over the dog, she slipped back into bed.

"Where'd you go?" Mel asked sleepily.

"Another dream," she whispered, "I couldn't sleep so I did some work. I feel much better." Her voice was warm, inviting. Mel recognized the tone and smiled.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said as she reached up to touch Janice's face with gentle fingers.

Janice leaned in for a kiss but was stopped. "Your lip," Mel warned.

"I don't care," Janice replied, her voice needful, hungry.

"But I do," Mel said as she eased herself up on an elbow. With a gentle push she shoved Janice down onto the bed, gazing down with fiery blue eyes. "Just let me love you," she whispered as she slowly drew her fingers down the length of Janice's right arm, bringing the hand to her lips and kissing the palm. She turned Janice's hand over and proceeded to kiss the tips of her fingers

before trailing her tongue over sensitive fingertips. She smiled at Janice's sigh of pleasure as she drew the archeologist's arm over her head and held it pinned with her left hand. She repeated the gesture with Janice's left arm. Now holding both her lover's hands pinned just above her head, she tenderly touched the contours of Janice's face with her free hand. Light fingers traced the outline of her lover's eyebrows, down the sides of her nose to pause on the left side of Janice's mouth -- away from the swollen lip.

"I love you," Mel whispered as Janice's tongue lightly touched the resting fingers. It was less painful than pursing her lips for a kiss. Briefly Janice tried moving her arms, to enclose her lover in a tight embrace, but her hands were held firm. It was no use, Melinda was simply too strong. Her arms would remain where Mel held them until the raven haired beauty decided to let her go. "I love you," Mel repeated in a fierce whisper. "And I'm going to have my way with you."

"Yes," Janice panted as long elegant fingers made their way down her throat and traced the line of her collarbone. Mel lowered her head, her hair spilling over Janice's face, its softness tickling her skin.

"I'm going to touch you, watch you and taste you," Mel breathed into her lover's ear. As she pulled back, a devilish grin spread across her perfect features. "I might even bite you," she added.

"Are you serious?" Janice asked, mildly surprised. The aggressive woman on top of her was certainly a new side to Melinda Pappas. She struggled once again against the hand that held her arms firmly, stopping when she saw the wicked smile on Mel's face.

"You know I'm serious," Mel purred. "That's why you're struggling. You know what I can do, how I can make you feel and tonight it's making you nervous."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Janice gasped as she felt her heart rate quicken. "Melinda, what's gotten into you?" The blue of Mel's eyes shone violet in the dimly lit room. Janice had turned on a small reading light to find her way back to bed and avoid stepping on the dog. The small light cast faint shadows on the wall and dimly illuminated the classic planes of Mel's face. Her white teeth reflected the dim light, the expression in her eyes showing something primal... primitive.

"You'll see," Mel replied, her voice thick with the promise of things to come.

Soft hair spilled over Janice's chest as hungry lips descended on her throat and collar bone. "You're so good for me, Janice," Mel whispered fiercely between kisses. "You make me feel so protected... and powerful. No one has ever let me be strong, like you, before." Her hand began to trail down Janice's body, its touch light and feathery. "But you do. I want you, Janice. All of you. That isn't so much to ask, is it? To want your complete surrender? To see you as helpless before me as I am every time you look at me?" Mel's voice was low, husky, which excited Janice even as her anxiety increased at being trapped. She'd never seen her lover this aggressive and the thudding of her own heart in response scared her.

Responding of their own accord, Janice's muscles twitched and shuddered at Melinda's touch. Janice tried one last time to jerk her hands free, this time seeing Mel's bicep flex in response as more pressure was applied. With a sense of wonder she stared up at the woman above her, giving herself over completely to the sweet torture.

As Mel's questing mouth made its way to Janice's responsive breasts, her hand moved lower teasing the insides of quivering thighs. "God yes, Mel," Janice panted as her nipple responded inside the warm soft wetness of her lover's mouth. Her ears picked up the contented sounds Mel was making at the back of her throat and she was sure she'd climax before she could be touched anywhere else. As if sensing her urgency, the feather light touch of Mel's fingers increased in pressure as they slipped into warm wetness.

"You feel wonderful," Mel commented as she shifted her attention to Janice's other breast.

"You have no idea," Janice managed to say, but with great difficulty.

"So tell me," Mel demanded, kissing the valley between her lover's breasts and moving back up to her throat. Her hand picked up a slow easy rhythm as she enjoyed the feel of her lover's wetness.

"Uh... perfect," she finally managed as colors began to swim before her eyes.

"Perfect is good," Mel agreed as she began to nip at the side of Janice's neck even as her

hand quickened its pace.

“Yesssss... ah... god... yes!” Janice moaned as Mel sank her teeth into the sensitive flesh of her lover’s throat just as she slipped over the edge. Only when Janice’s breathing slowed somewhat did Mel withdraw her hand from her center and lips from her throat. She released the archeologist’s hands, massaging each arm as she brought it to rest at her lover’s side.

Mel studied Janice’s face, noting the expression of awe mixed with fear, noticing just how little iris was visible around dilated pupils. Janice’s arms reached up and gently touched her face and hair, making their way to her shoulders then coming to rest around her upper arms. “You make me feel so much,” Janice whispered, “almost too much.”

“I can do more for you than that, Janice,” Mel replied as she slowly lowered her face to Janice’s center. Repeatedly Janice’s world spun out of control as her senses reveled in the loving attentions of Melinda. Passionate, tender but also demanding. It soon became clear to Janice that Mel was satisfying a need of her own as much as she was pleasing her lover. That awareness shattered any last pretense of Janice’s self control. As the sounds of Mel’s contented feasting became louder, Janice’s responses increased in volume as well. Finally, when she felt the fingers caressing her to her heated core, she unconsciously bit down on her lip as the final wave of climax crashed through her body.

Mel was instantly aware of the pained shudder that shot through the archeologist’s body. After placing one final kiss on damp curls she lifted her head to gaze into green eyes, brimming with tears. “What happened?” she asked, concerned.

“I bid dy ip,” Janice replied as tears began to fall freely from her eyes.

“Oh, my. I’m so sorry Janice,” Mel whispered as she gathered the smaller woman into her arms.

“It’s okay, Mel. That’s not why I’m crying,” Janice replied through sobs when the throbbing of her lip lessened somewhat.

“What?” Mel asked, moving away a little so she could see her lover’s face.

“You make me feel so much, I can’t help it. God, Mel, I don’t deserve you.” Janice finally said when she could breathe enough between sobs to talk.

Mel held her close once again and breathed next to her ear, “Yes, you do, my heart. As much as I deserve you.”

Janice smiled, despite the pain of her lip, at her lover’s words. The smile remained on her face as Mel’s arms remained around her body, even after she drifted into a contented dreamless sleep.

“Well, don’t you look like the cat that ate the canary,” Pandora commented as she served Janice Covington breakfast. Melinda Pappas choked briefly on her orange juice at the comment, which drew another snort from the large black woman. “Or do I have my cats and canaries mixed up today?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Why I declare, Pandora, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mel replied primly then cast a sidelong glance to her lover. Adjusting her glasses, she peered at the archeologist more critically. “Ah, Janice, I think you’d better wear a scarf with that blouse.”

“What?” Janice asked puzzled. She thought she’d finally gotten the hang of dressing for the university. “What’s wrong with my outfit?”

“Nothin’, child,” Pandora assured her with a friendly pat on the arm. “‘Cept dem love bites y’all can see clear ‘cross campus.”

“Oh,” Janice replied meekly as her hand went to her throat. She flinched as her fingers encountered one of several deep bruises.

“Somethin’ ‘bout seeing your lady beat up last night make you want to attack her ya’self?” Pandora asked Mel innocently.

“Pandora, please,” Mel protested, having the good grace to blush. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

Janice shook her head smiling as she went back to eating. She finished off her eggs and biscuits, leering at her lover suggestively as she dribbled honey on the latter. Satisfied that the rosy blush to her Mel's cheeks was not disappearing any time soon, she sipped some coffee and opened her notebook. "Okay, we've got everything arranged for tomorrow?"

Mel nodded, finishing her juice. Janice stared transfixed as Melinda put her juice glass to the side then picking up a banana and a knife, efficiently peeled the fruit and sliced it into bite sized chunks over her bowl of cornflakes. "We've got transport lined up from Fort Bragg. We get supplies in Morocco, then head to Alexandria where we'll catch the ship that will take us in. If you want to stop in Athens, I can arrange it."

"I think we should," Janice agreed. "See if you can arrange a meeting with the curator Dr. Jones was talking to." She glanced at her notes. "Here it is, Mr. Lendos-- he's director of the Acropolis museum at Athens."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do. The diggers have been arranged, but they won't arrive on site until you decide where the digsite is actually going to be."

Janice nodded smiling as she watched Mel delicately dab the corners of her mouth with her napkin. That sight alone would keep her smiling all day. After checking her pocket watch, she quickly finished the rest of her coffee. She gave her lover a quick kiss, the throbbing of her heart making up for any discomfort her lip may have felt. "Let's go, Argo," she said to the dog as she headed for the door.

"Miz Wolf," Pandora called, stopping her in her tracks.

"Scarf, right." Janice remembered. She turned around to see Pandora holding a silk scarf that matched the gray and mauve of her outfit.

"I hope you don't mind, Miz Pappas," Pandora continued as she tied the scarf around Janice's neck. "I got one of yours since Miz Wolf don't own any."

"I don't mind at all," Mel replied smiling. "But I think we're going to have to do something about that. However, since it's your last day, I think you'll get a reprieve from shopping."

"Thank God," Janice said adjusting the scarf. "I'd rather wear yours anyway, they smell like you." With a wink she was out the door, dog in tow, headed for the university.

"I'm afraid I don't know what she's talking about," Mel replied primly to her broadly smiling housekeeper.

"Lord Almighty, what happened to you?" Fiona asked as soon as Janice entered their office.

"What?" Janice asked, hand moving reflexively to her neck.

"Your face. You look like you've been hit by a shileigh!"

Janice touched her lip gingerly. "Well, it was a right cross, but it felt like a shileigh, sure enough."

"Can't say Miss Melinda strikes me as the punchin' type," Fiona commented looking over the rim of her glasses at her officemate.

Janice shook her head. "Not her, Marion Ravenwood."

"Ah, the lass who was looking for Dr. Jones yesterday," Fiona's eyes brightened in understanding. "Don't tell me she's your..."

"Ancient history," Janice supplied.

"If in you say so." The Irishwoman peered closely at her friend from across her desk. "Saints preserve us, what happened to your neck?"

"Damn, did the scarf slip?" Janice asked as she adjusted the scarf.

"Here, let me fix it." Fiona offered gasping when the scarf was removed. "My goodness, did Miss Ravenwood do that?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Janice protested, "Mel did that. Look, Fi, I've only got a minute, I'm on my way to the library, but I wanted to ask you about something."

"One woman hates you, one loves you and they both leave you black and blue. You lead one interesting life, Janice Covington," Fi said as she finished with the scarf.

“Have you ever heard of the Clan MacGab?” Janice asked, ignoring the jibe.

“MacGab you say? Why of course I have. My cousin, Sara, married a MacGabbler. Angus MacGab. Now there was a bonnie lad who cut a fine picture in a kilt. How he loves to play the bagpipes, it would bring a wee tear t’ the eye.”

“That good?” Janice asked.

“No, luv, he’s horrible. Tone deaf without a musical bone in his body. But how he loves to play. Why d’you ask?”

“This,” Janice said as she handed her office mate the folded sarcophagus rubbing.

Fiona read it, eyes brightening as she did. “That’d be the MacGabbers alright. Lived in the Highlands, a days journey from Inverness. Last I heard Sara and Angus had seven wee ones. MacGabbers raise large families.” Fiona returned her gaze to the rubbing then continued. “Solari, now there’s a word I’ve not heard since I left home.”

“What does it mean?”

“It’s a Gaelic slang term for a feisty woman in a bad mood. Lads would say- ‘you’re not a-goin’ Solari on me now are ya?’ I believe the regional equivalent here is ‘het up’. Children of Solari, now? That’d be a new one on me. I could write to my cousin. See if she’ll ask Angus what he knows of his family. But don’t get your hopes up, luv. Angus has a heart of gold, but he isn’t very bright.”

“So why did your cousin marry him?” Janice asked.

“Aye, he does look fine in a kilt.” Fiona replied with a bright smile.

The Wilson Library interior was deathly still, not just quiet, but silent. Janice paused at the door, then looking back checked the hours. The library was indeed open. She held the door open for the dog and followed her inside. “*Oh, yeah, finals,*” she reminded herself. Tomorrow her Archeology of Archaic Greece students were going to be among the last to be taking their final exams. Most of the student body finished with their tests today, then left for winter break. She looked around several areas of the large building noting an occasional student studying silently, either at a small table or on the floor. Satisfied that the building wasn’t deserted, she headed for the rare book collection.

Mrs. Flax’s desk was just as Janice remembered it. Immaculate. While she’d been a regular fixture at the campus library for three weeks prior to her first term as faculty, she’d had few opportunities to visit since. Janice smiled. Mrs. Flax had always been open in her dislike for the *‘young female archeologist’* as she called Janice, but had been an invaluable resource nonetheless.

“Mrs. Flax?” Janice called out in a whisper that sounded harsh to her own ears in the still silence of the building. “Are you here?” Feeling the hairs on the back of her neck begin to stand on end, she spun around. No one was behind her, but she still felt as if she were being watched. Glancing down to Argo, who sat next to her feet, she noted that the dog’s ears were perked forward and alert. She heard the rustle of a paper and looked up.

Janice started in surprise at an elderly man. He sat at Mrs. Flax’s desk and was sorting through several books, making notations on a pad of paper. Janice was puzzled, she’d not heard the man come into the room, nor take a seat. And there hadn’t been any books on the desk when she’d first approached. “Hello,” Janice said quietly.

He looked up, his watery blue eyes magnified by his reading glasses. After squinting a moment, he smiled warmly at Janice, showing a mouthful of near perfect teeth slightly yellowed with age. “Dr. Covington? Dr. Janice Covington?” he asked in a friendly voice.

Janice nodded. “Yeah, that’s me. Ah, do I know you?” she asked, knowing full well she’d never seen the man before in her life.

He shook his head, extending a shaking hand. “Tildus, Walter Tildus. I saw the Scroll exhibition. Impressive work, young lady, quite impressive work.”

Smiling, Janice shook his hand warmly. His skin was thin and felt like parchment, but his grip was strong and sure. “Thank you. I was looking for Mrs. Flax. Is she here?”

Letting go of Janice’s hand, Tildus shook his head. “No, I’m afraid Mrs. Flax is out sick. I’m

filling in for her. I used to work here years ago, but while the heart is willing, my poor eyes are not. I fill in now for emergencies.” He continued to smile, which Janice found infectious.

“*What an adorable man,*” she thought to herself.

“And this must be your intrepid assistant, Argo,” he continued leaning over the desk to pat the dog on the head.

At the slightest hint of affection, Argo ambled over to his side of the desk and showered him with wet sloppy kisses as he giggled uncontrollably. “Argo, give the man a break,” she warned her dog.

“No, she’s alright,” Tildus said, smiling when Argo returned to her mistress’ side. “Wonderful creature,” he added still gasping between giggles. “Oh, my. I need to clean my glasses.” That started a whole new spasm of giggles as he cleaned the dog slobber from his thick spectacles.

“I appreciate your tolerance, Mr. Tildus,” Janice said warmly. “Mrs. Flax has fits every time she sees her.”

Tildus smiled knowingly, “Which I’m sure is why you insist on bringing her in. Oh, don’t worry,” he added, noting the blush to the archeologist’s cheeks, “I’m not terribly fond of Battle-Axe Flax either.” He giggled again. “Stop it, Walter,” he scolded himself, “that’s hardly professional.” After clearing his throat he looked back at Janice. “May I help you, Dr. Covington?”

Janice grinned at the mischief shining in Walter Tildus’ eyes. “*Probably going senile,*” she guessed, “*but I like his spunk.*” Shrugging she decided to try her luck. “I’m looking for reference material about the Children of Solari. I don’t suppose you’ve heard of them?”

“Solari, Solari,” he repeated, with one finger absently scratching his clean shaven chin. At once his eyes brightened. “The stories, of course. Children of Solari, the ancient Greek storytellers?”

Janice shook her head, “Why has everyone heard of them but me?” she wondered to herself. Argo nudged her knee sensing the distress in her voice.

Tildus chuckled and eased his thin frame out of Mrs. Flax’s chair. Grabbing the cane propped up next to the desk, he headed towards the bookshelves in the reference room. He shuffled as he walked and Janice was again amazed that she’d not heard him approach the desk before.

“Don’t feel bad, child,” he said as he peered at first one shelf, then another. “Children of Solari stories are about as obscure as they come. But my mother’s family is from Austin, Texas, you see.”

Janice stared at him blankly failing to see the connection. “Texas?” she asked.

He nodded, pulling a book from the shelf then putting it back. “Originally her family was from Scotland, but they settled in Texas when it was just a territory.”

“MacGab?” Janice asked which caused Tildus to look at her in surprise.

“Why how did you know?” he asked, then his eyes grew wide. “Any relation of yours? You look like a MacGaber, sure enough.”

Laughing, Janice didn’t know quite what to say. “Well, I suppose anything is possible, but I’d never even heard of the Clan MacGab until last night.” Acting on an impulse, she withdrew the sarcophagus rubbing from her pocket and handed it to the aged librarian. He unfolded it carefully then began to read the inscription. When he finished he carefully folded the paper and handed it back, his eyes quickly scanning the empty reference room.

“Tell me, Dr. Covington, are you a superstitious person?” he asked, his expression suddenly serious.

“No,” she replied without hesitation.

He smiled again, faintly this time, then returned to rummaging through the book shelves. “Well, then do an old man a favor and be careful anyway,” he said as he worked. “I don’t know much about the stories, but I know they’ve been obscure all these years for a reason.”

“What reason might that be?” she asked, amused.

He paused in his searching to look at her intently. “Because, ultimately they are more than myths and fables to entertain children,” he said. “At their very core they are about a struggle. One god against another, waiting for generations to see the final outcome of their contest. No matter how fantastic a tale, my dear, some will take that kind of power quite seriously... and stop at nothing to get it. Ah, here it is.” With frail fingers he withdrew a thin volume from its shelf. The leather

cover was a deep sapphire blue, a design inlaid in gold on the cover and the spine. She opened the book, carefully scanning over the pages yellowed with age, sounding quite brittle as she turned them.

"This is Latin," she commented, turning several pages carefully.

"I trust you read Latin?" Tildus asked, his voice teasing.

"Enough," she replied with a grin. Quickly she looked at her pocket watch. There was not enough time to sit and read much of the book in the reference room before she was due in her office to meet with her students. She was also aware of the university's strict policy about removing reference books from the secured reference area. Tildus touched her arm, drawing her from her thoughts.

"Take it," he said softly. "I trust you. I think you'd find the stories... illuminating. Bring it back after break, and we'll keep it our little secret."

"Thank you, Mr. Tildus," she said closing the book and holding on to it tightly.

"Quite alright, Dr. Covington," he said as he escorted her to the door of the reference room. Taking her hand once again he shook it warmly adding, "It's been a pleasure, Janice, do take care."

Janice smiled gazing into the warm bespectacled eyes even with her own. "I will," she assured the librarian. He stooped down to pet the dog one more time, instructing Argo to watch out for her mistress. With loving eyes he watched the two depart.

Tildus stared after her for several moments. "God speed to you, my child," he whispered. His ancient eyes scanned the reference room once more, frowning at a presence he could feel but not see. Shaking his head, he picked up his cane and left the library through the back door.

Light brown eyes continued to watch from the shadow of a book case long after Tildus left. Another piece in position of a game taking centuries to play out. Only when Mrs. Flax returned to her desk, puzzled by the books and note pad, did the figure ease along the dark wall to silently leave the reference room.

Returning to her office, Janice was happy to see Fiona at her desk, correcting papers as usual. "I didn't expect you to still be here, Fi. Don't you leave for Ireland tonight?"

"Aye, luv, that I do," she replied after taking a sip of her tea. "But the students wanted to say g'bye after their finals and who am I to refuse?"

"I don't suppose any would be dishing outrageous flattery to improve their grades, now would they?" Janice asked with a grin.

"We takes the perks where we gets them." Fiona winked back.

"I've got news for you," Janice said after checking her appointment book to see which student would be descending on her first. "The fill-in librarian, he's part of your family. A genuine MacGabber."

"What happened to Battle-Axe Flax?" Fiona asked, concerned.

"Guess she's out sick," Janice replied.

Fiona shook her head not believing a word of it. "Ye be daft, luv. That woman been sick nary a day in 'er life. Aye, despite two reported attempts t'posion 'er. I saw her early this morn' shushing people like a harpy wi' a headache. I'd say you're mistaken."

"Well I talked to Mr. Tildus, he said she was sick." Janice shook her head, puzzled.

"And who is this Mr. Tildus? A student?" Fi asked.

"No, he's the fill-in librarian."

"Fill-in librarian you say?" Fiona shrugged. "Prof. Puppit always filled in before. Ah well, I'll have to have a word with the mysterious Mr. Tildus and see where he hails from."

"Yeah, you should do that," Janice replied absently, their conversation giving her an unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Melinda Pappas brought the wooden spoon to her lips, hesitated a moment, letting it cool slightly, then tasted the soup. "What do you think, 'Dora?" she asked, passing the spoon to the

woman who served as housekeeper and cook.

Pandora tried the mixture, her eyes lighting as a grin eased across her face. “You done good, darlin’. You were right about the bay leaf, one was enough. Let this cook for an hour before you add all that seafood. I swear y’all are fixin’ enough for an army.”

Mel smiled glancing at the huge bowl that held chopped white fish, crab, scallops, shrimp, clams, lobster, mussels and baby octopus. “You cook for Janice and me every day, I see no reason why I can’t treat you to some leftovers while we’re gone. Besides, you told me yourself that Hyperion loves my Aegean Sea Chowder.”

“He sure do, Miz Pappas, he sure do,” Pandora agreed as she looked around the kitchen noting an assortment of bowls and exotic ingredients everywhere. Melinda Pappas didn’t cook often, but when she did, the clean up could take days. “What else are you fixin’ for Miz Wolf’s special dinner?”

Blushing slightly, Mel named her menu choices. “We’re starting with the chowder, then I’m serving stifado with barley and grape leaf dumplings. We’ll have choriatiiki salata, and stuffed grape leaves and baklava for dessert. Oh, and I made some rigani cheese bread to take with us tomorrow. What do you think?”

Pandora grinned, unable to resist the opportunity to tease the heiress. “I think, that if you’re wearing what you’ve laid out upstairs you’re not going to make it past the chowder. You know how Miz Wolf is about tuxedos.”

Despite her flaming cheeks, Mel took the comment in stride. “It’s the last day of her first term teaching. I think that warrants a celebration. Which reminds me, I need to get the champagne on ice. Besides, we leave first thing in the morning for Greece, and something tells me it’s going to be hard to get her mind off her work.”

“Um hum,” Pandora replied with a knowing nod. “I’ve never seen you at a loss for getting Miz Wolf’s attention. Should I get her tux ready, or would you like her in an evening gown?”

Smiling, Mel pretended to consider the question. “The tux I think. Dresses make her whine and she doesn’t know yet that she’s wearing one tomorrow. Is everything ready for your family to move in?” Mel asked as she added orange zest and pepper to the stifado.

“Yes ma’am. Hyperion and the children are looking forward to finally installing indoor plumbing at the house,” Pandora said as she diagonally slashed the loaves of cheese bread with a sharp knife, brushed them with olive oil, then returned them to the oven. “It’s awfully nice of you to let us stay while we do the work at the house.”

“Think nothing of it,” Mel replied. “Remember you’re doing us a favor by staying here while we’re gone. I don’t think anyone will try last summer’s stunt with Hyperion and the children keeping an eye out for us. I’ve put your money in the study, and you know you can get ahold of Linda should anything come up. Besides,” she looked at Pandora seriously, fighting a lump in her throat, “you’re family ‘Dora, and we trust you.”

Pandora smiled and quickly hugged the tall woman who was as dear to her as her own children. “I’m so very proud of you, Melinda. When your Daddy died I was fit to be tied I was so worried. You’d shut yourself off, and I didn’t know what would open you up again. Now look at you, you’re fixing a feast for your lady love and about to take off on another adventure. I don’t know what happened in Macedonia six months ago, but every night I thank th’Lord that you went and met Miz Covington.”

“Now, ‘Dora, stop before you make me cry,” Mel demanded softly, her arm draped around the shorter woman’s shoulders. “You take care of the house and we’ll be back in a few weeks.” Mel sniffled briefly then continued, “Now see to Janice’s clothes while I finish up in here. You’re going home early, tomorrow will be a busy day.”

Pandora headed to the grand staircase. “And someone’s going to have a busy night,” she chuckled.

Janice leaned back in her seat with a contented sigh as she waited for Fiona Cyrene’s last

student to depart. As anxious as she was to get home, she wasn't about to go without saying good-bye to her office mate. When the student finally departed the two professors greeted each other with a congratulatory hug. "Saints preserve us," Fiona laughed. "You survived."

"Aye," Janice replied in a mock brogue that she'd had a full term to master. "You take care, Fi. I want to see you in one piece when the next term starts."

"You be takin' care o' yourself, luv. I not be the one wi' the reputation for risking life and limb in the line o' work." Fiona selected a cookie from a plate of Christmas goodies she'd been left by a student and tossed it to Argo who caught it in midair. "You be takin' good care o' your mistress, ya bonnie mongrel."

After a final hug, Janice grabbed her books and rushed out the door -- right into the startled arms of William Byron. She gasped as the leather bound book tumbled to the floor, unconcerned about the other things she'd dropped. Instantly Byron stooped to pick it up, but froze when Argo moved between them, growling. "I'm just trying to help," he said meekly, as he stood back up.

"Don't worry about it, William, Argo gets touchy," she said as she stooped to pick up her things. The dog stood with one paw firmly planted on top of the thin volume. "Come on, girl," she coaxed the big dog, "let me have it." Argo removed her paw and licked her mistress' face a couple of times for good measure. "Yes, thank you," Janice said between kisses as she gathered her things. With her belongings gathered once again, she started down the hallway, Dr. Byron falling into step next to her. Janice noted that Argo insisted on walking in between them, which was unusual for the claustrophobic dog.

"How do you do it, Janice?" Byron asked as they descended the stairs.

He didn't look at Janice and she thought his voice held a note of defeat. "Do what?" she asked.

"Stay so unbelievably calm?" He paused on the landing of the second floor, shaking his head sadly. "I know I've been a pompous ass all term," he said laughing bitterly at himself. "You see, when I heard you'd been hired I thought finally here's someone I can show the ropes to, that I wouldn't be the green one on the teaching staff any more." Janice nodded, she knew it was Byron's second year teaching. "But you sail right in like a seasoned pro. I've been watching you all term, you know that, trying to figure out what it is that keeps you so calm. Frankly, Janice, I'm at a complete loss."

Janice smiled, almost feeling sorry for the eager young man. She leaned against the stairwell railing considering his question. "I'll be honest with you, William," she began, "You're afraid of your students and they can tell. Do you think they know something you don't?"

He grinned shyly, "I worry they might discover that I don't know as much as they think I do."

"There's your problem. You know more than they do and that's what counts..."

"Yes," he cut in, "but you seem so at ease with them. Even with the faculty, when it's clear you'd rather be elsewhere. You handle yourself like a woman who finds this all painfully easy."

Janice had to laugh. "It's an act, William. But considering some of the hazards of field work some of this stuff is painfully easy. I mean the students don't have guns. So what if you make a mistake. They're not going to shoot you."

His eyes went wide, then he smiled, deciding she was kidding. "Oh, come now, Janice, you've never been shot."

"Only once," she said seriously, "and I hope I never have to repeat the experience. The only thing more painful than a bullet going in, is one coming out." Smiling again, she continued, "Let me tell you a little story. When I was eleven, I was with my dad on a digsite. He'd gone off in the morning and I usually spent my days playing around camp or exploring. I knew to stay away from the actual dig, so I'd usually wander off from camp. Anyway, this one morning I stumbled into a cave. Literally, I mean. I fell right in, down fifteen feet and broke my leg. It hurt like hell, but I don't think I screamed, not then. I knew there'd be no one around to hear me. I had bounced off one of the walls on my way down and had landed a short distance away from the shaft. I was out of the sun, which was lucky but it was also scary. Caves are a consistent seventy-two degrees. I wanted that

sunlight so bad, I felt so cold and damp, but I knew better than to try to move. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I looked up and covering the cave ceiling were bats, thousands of them. I then I smelled it, something dreadful. Sure enough I'd landed in a pile of bat guano."

"My God," Byron interjected, "you must have been terrified."

Janice shook her head. "Not really. I recalled thinking that if this were the worst predicament I'd ever be in, it was handy getting it out of the way at age eleven. I thought the rest of my life would be much simpler. Little did I know... anyway I must have laid there for a good eight hours. Slowly I saw the shaft of light on the cave floor shrink as dusk approached. Then the bats began to move. Just a few at first, then more as they headed out the shaft to feed. Chattering and flying close together. I was mesmerized. I've had a fondness for bats ever since. They kept my mind off my leg, and the guano probably saved me from worse injuries because it broke my fall. The bats were what finally led Pop to finding the cave entrance. He'd been looking for me, but stopped when he saw thousands of bats pouring out of the earth into the night sky. He realized there must be an entrance nearby and sure enough, found me. He lowered himself down on a rope and splinted my leg before hauling me up."

"So you like bats," Byron commented, looking at her with interest. "How do you feel about caves?"

Janice's eyes went cold. "I *bate* them. Mine shafts, caves, tunnels, I avoid them when I can, but when I can't, I hate every moment of it. That's how I handle teaching. I tell myself, 'Janice, take your pick, teach this class, or imagine yourself alone in a cave for an hour. The students seem a lot less frightening when I look at it that way.'"

Byron grinned and headed down the stairs once again, asking, "Was your father angry with you?"

"No," Janice replied shaking her head. "He said on the way to the hospital that he doubted he'd ever have to remind me to be careful around caves again. He also told me he thought I was brave and that he was proud of that, and that bats would always bring me luck."

"Perhaps I need to re-examine my childhood. Perhaps there is some hidden trauma that will put adulthood into perspective." He held out his hand which Janice shook warmly. "Thank you Janice, and Merry Christmas to you."

"Same to you, William," she replied with a smile, "I'll see you next term."

Byron continued to smile. "Who knows, maybe you'll see me sooner than that. I've got some friends in California.

"You never know," Janice offered before he turned and walked away. "I'm not so sure about him," she mused when he was out of sight. Not surprisingly, Argo didn't reply.

"I'm home!" Janice called as she pushed open the front door, letting Argo enter before stepping inside. She took off her hat and coat as she slipped out of her heels and walked to the entryway closet. Turning in surprise at the exquisite aroma wafting from the kitchen, her eyes landed on a single red rose resting at the foot of the grand staircase. She finished hanging her coat and kicked her shoes into the closet. She left her purse with her shoes on the closet floor but held on to her books and papers from the university as she crossed the hardwood floor to the stairs. As she stooped to pick up the rose she saw another one halfway up the elegant staircase. Standing she brought the rose to her face to inhale the smooth, sweet fragrance, seeing another rose at the top of the stairs. A huge grin spread across her face as she headed up the stairs, collecting the second and third roses before seeing the fourth just outside the bedroom door. Picking it up she pushed the door open and spotted rose number five on the floor halfway across the room, and number six on their bed.

Her tuxedo had been laid out on the bed, the rose resting on top. With a grin she put the collected roses in one pile, and the books and papers in another, and changed clothes. Grinning as she dressed, she remembered receiving the tux four months earlier when the term had started. She'd come home from her first orientation to find Pandora leaving for home. The normally talkative woman wouldn't say much to her except that she was in for a treat and that she should go upstairs,

change clothes and enjoy herself. Puzzled, Janice did as she was told. Entering her bedroom, she found a large box sitting on the bed. Opening the box, she gasped at the magnificent black tuxedo nestled in a bed of soft brown tissue paper. At first she was astonished at the perfect fit, then realized with a blush just how well Melinda Pappas knew her body. When she'd finished dressing and studied herself in the mirror, she was surprised and pleased. She had to admit that she looked *good*. She didn't cut the dramatic picture that Mel did, but her light hair stood out in vibrant contrast to the black jacket.

Janice had just finished brushing her hair when she heard the soft sounds of music from downstairs. She was at the bedroom door when Argo stopped her with a bark. Turning around she saw the dog sitting on her bed looking pointedly at the bouquet of roses. "Roses, right. Thanks, girl." Janice picked them up as Argo curled up on the bed, large head resting near the blue leather bound book and other papers. Briefly Janice considered taking the book downstairs to show Mel, but decided there would be time later to discuss it. At the moment, her lover was the only thing Janice wanted to think about. She gently stroked the dog's head a few times, smiling at the gentle brown eyes that looked at her with such open adoration, then headed back to the stairs. Argo didn't follow so she turned back once again. The dog had rolled to one side, hind legs stretched out in relaxation. "Suit yourself," Janice muttered as she left the bedroom.

At the top of the stairs, Janice looked down. The wonderful scents from the kitchen were stronger, and the music could clearly be heard coming from the living room. From her vantage point, she could make out a single rose resting near the entrance to the living room. "Number seven," she said as she descended the stairs. In the living room she found number eight on the coffee table near an ice bucket holding a vintage bottle of champagne. Number nine was on the mantle above the fire place, number ten resting on Gabrielle's staff above the mantle, and number eleven threaded through a hole in Xena's breastplate. As she withdrew it she heard soft footfalls behind her. She turned to see Melinda Pappas holding rose number twelve.

Melinda was resplendent in her tuxedo, the ensemble once having belonged to Marmax Vanderbilt. Since they'd returned from Leesto's Island, Pandora had made some alterations on the expensive tux. It now fit Melinda Pappas like a glove. She didn't wear it often, only for special occasions, and private ones at that. But when she did, Janice was always transported back to the boat house where she'd seen Mel in a tux for the first time.

"You are magnificent," Janice said as she crossed the room to take the rose and a kiss.

"Sometimes," Mel agreed, returning the passionate kiss then looking at Janice in surprise. "Your lip, what happened?"

"What do you mean? You know..." she brought her fingers to her mouth and was shocked that she didn't feel any pain. "I don't get it, my lip hurt like hell right before I went to the..." her eyes widened in disbelief, "library." She was surprised she hadn't noticed it when she brushed her hair in front of their bathroom mirror. Cautiously, she touched her fingers to her throat. The bruises there were gone as well. "I... I don't understand..." she stammered.

"I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth," Mel said as she moved in to claim healthy lips once again. "Congratulations on finishing your first term Dr. Covington," she whispered when their kiss broke.

"Is that what this is for?" Janice asked as she gazed up into captivating blue eyes, "I can see why people look forward to finals."

Mel smiled and took the flowers from Janice's hand, putting them in a vase of water she'd set on a low table for that purpose. "That, and I just love to see you in that tux. Where's Argo?" she asked as Janice opened the bottle of champagne.

"She's on the bed, didn't want to come downstairs," Janice said with a shrug, "I know better than to try and figure her out." Handing Mel a glass of champagne, she continued with a warm smile, "I love you, Melinda Pappas."

Mel touched Janice's glass with her own, her broad lopsided grin displaying sparkling white teeth. "I'm glad to hear it," she said, "because I love you, Janice Covington."

Janice took a sip of champagne then glanced shyly at her lover. "I got an interesting book at

the library today. Want to hear about it?" She studied Mel's face carefully, looking for signs of annoyance or boredom. She was excited about the book but didn't want to distract Mel from anything she might have planned for the evening.

"I'd love to hear about it," Mel replied warmly. "As long as you dance with me while you tell me all about it."

The two women put their glasses down and moved to the center of the room. They talked while they danced, their bodies moving in sensual rhythm to the slow music. Janice retold the events of the day, at times craning her neck to look up into Melinda's face, at other times simply resting her head against the taller woman's soft shoulder. She smiled to herself as she felt Mel's comforting chin resting on the top of her head. She loved this woman with all her heart and hoped somehow Mel understood.

"The Solari stories are in Latin," Mel commented as their dance ended, "interesting. Sounds like the translation is fairly modern."

"I don't know," Janice replied returning to the table to get their glasses, "I thought you might get a feel for that when you read it. Have you ever heard of Walter Tildus?" she asked.

Mel shook her head, "I'd have to agree with Fiona on that one. Never heard of him, and that's odd since I do know most of the faculty and staff, certainly from the science and research departments."

The grandfather clock chimed seven and Melinda smiled. "Dinner is served," she said regally as she offered Janice her arm. Accepting, Janice was led to their dining room, the mahogany table set with fine linen, bone china and sterling silver. A centerpiece of more roses dominated the table and the room had been lit by burning candles all around. Janice gasped at the intensely romantic setting.

"If you tell me you made baklava, I'm yours forever," Janice whispered, afraid raising her voice would somehow dilute the intimate moment.

"We'll see," Mel replied holding Janice's chair. When the archeologist was seated Mel disappeared to the kitchen to bring out the first course.

When she returned carrying the large tureen of soup, Janice shook her head in awe. "What did I ever do to deserve you?" she asked wistfully.

Mel took the seat next to her lover and blushed slightly. "Janice... I... I got carried away last night and..."

Instantly Janice leaned over in her chair and took both of Mel's hands in hers. "Don't even say this is about apologizing, Melinda," Janice whispered fiercely. "That would hurt too much. Mel, you've never done anything... especially in the bedroom that didn't set me on fire with desire. Okay so last night was... different. That doesn't mean I didn't thoroughly enjoy myself and I'm not more hopelessly in love with you today than I was yesterday. Tell me that all of this," she indicated the flowers and the candles, "is about finishing a term teaching and *just* that and I'll be the happiest woman in the world."

"You know, Janice," Mel replied her voice tight with emotion, "I think my better nature is rubbing off on you." Janice smiled, not looking entirely convinced. Mel offered her glass for one more toast, the hungry gleam in her eye making Janice's smile even broader. "Here's to finishing the term."

Contrary to Pandora's estimates, Janice was indeed able to restrain her passion through the entire meal, but just barely. With each course served, the flavors became more complex, and the dinner conversation became more flirtatious as Janice felt her pulse rate rise as the candles burned down. "I just can't decide," she finally admitted after swallowing another delicious bite of lamb, "which is more erotic, your eyes or your mouth."

"Decisions, decisions," Mel purred. "Did I mention that I've arranged a meeting with Mr. Lendos of the Acropolis museum?"

"Excellent," Janice replied looking intently from Mel's eyes to her lips. "I mean, both are expressive, both capable of doing so much. I'm sorry I just can't decide. More champagne, love?" She asked, filling Melinda's glass.

"So have you read this book you pilfered from the research library?" Mel asked after a sip of

champagne.

Janice shook her head. "I've looked it over but not in any detail. It appears to be a collection of stories. Some parts I recognized as Gabrielle's, other parts I didn't. Hephaestus was mentioned a few times, and Ares of course. Hopefully we'll be able to go over them all before we land in Morocco."

Mel smiled, brushing a stray hair from her lover's face. "Good. I'll need something to distract me from your irresistible charm. Not to mention the take off and landing of the plane."

"You'll be right between Argo and me, we're not going to let anything happen to you," Janice assured her lover. "Speaking of planes, any luck locating Leesto?"

It was Mel's turn to shake her head as she replied, "No. You were right, she disappeared right after the Scroll exhibit was dismantled. She's still not shown up at any of her usual haunts."

Janice sipped her champagne thoughtfully. "Well, Fi is the only one who knows we're going to Greece, and I trust her implicitly. No one else at the university has a clue. Byron has asked some questions but I don't think he works for Leesto. He's not slimy enough. I gave him the idea that I might be going to Hollywood to do some star gazing."

"I've booked passage for us to Los Angeles. My Mother has a friend I trust, and she's going to drop hints that I'm staying at her guest house. I told her I was visiting a friend, a married friend, in Canada."

"And what happens when this friend talks to your Mother?" Janice asked with a grin.

"Personally, I think Mother would be impressed, if the shock didn't kill her. She still hasn't forgiven me for declining the debutante circuit. To hear her go on, I don't think having an affair with a married Canadian would be quite as bad. But actually, Mother's friends never discuss each other's children. It's very bad form. If they engaged in that kind of gossip, they'd have nothing but heartache."

"Talking about you could never bring heartache, Mel," Janice said, her eyes tender. "You are the most wonderful person I've ever met."

"Janice Covington, you're flirting again," Mel replied, her voice mockingly indignant. "Besides, it's well documented that before you met me you associated with all sorts of riff raff. Still, I suppose it's safe to tell you I did make baklava for dessert. I believe that makes you mine?"

"Since the moment I first saw you," Janice replied.

The grandfather clock struck ten just as the seventy-eight record finished playing. Breaking their kiss, Janice and Mel looked at the clock, frowning. "We should be heading upstairs," Mel commented as she ran her hands over the tailored shoulders of Janice's jacket.

"I suppose so," Janice agreed, green eyes gleaming. "We're all packed for tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes," Mel replied as she extracted herself from the shorter woman's embrace. She didn't make eye contact as she responded, rather, crossed the room to the phonograph, and withdrew the needle from the heavy vinyl disc. "We're all ready to go."

"Good. I can't thank you enough for all you've done, Mel," Janice said as Melinda joined her at the bottom of the grand staircase. Ascending the stairs, arms comfortably wrapped around each other, Janice leaned in affectionately to the woman at her side. "I could never have gotten another expedition planned and taught this term without your help."

"We're partners, remember," Mel teased as they reached the top step. "Besides, I want to know what happened to Xena and Gabrielle as much as you do."

Janice smiled in agreement, a smile that faded when they stepped into their bedroom. "Now that's odd," she frowned, looking at their large bed. Argo had moved little from where Janice had left her, only now the dog's large head rested protectively on leather bound book.

"You never told me she could read," Mel observed with a wry smile.

"As far as I know, she can't," Janice replied with a shrug. "Maybe she just likes the smell of leather."

"Well, she is *your* dog," Mel quipped with a huge grin.

"Why I do declare, I'm afraid I don't know what y'all are talking about," Janice shot back in

her imitation of Melinda's indignant voice.

"Oh, I think you do," Mel replied, her voice warm against Janice's ear, strong hands easing the tuxedo jacket from her shoulders, her lips moving sensuously along Janice's throat.

A moment later both women turned to the unconscious dog and spoke in unison. "Argo, *down!*"

...I awoke the next morning from the throbbing of my shoulder, feeling every bit as lost as I had the night before. Not much had changed around camp. The men carried out their duties like the trained warriors they were. There didn't appear to be a slacker among them. It seemed we were invisible to the camp. Invisible that is, except to the men keeping guard over us. There were three of them, and they were very attentive. "How's the arm?" Ephiny asked as I stood, wincing at just how much I hurt all over.

"I'll live," I replied, wondering if I'd soon regret that fact.

"I'm glad to hear it," she replied with a smile. There was something different, new, in her expression. Using only my eyes, I asked her what it was. She glanced at the ground looking pointedly at several areas of our cage. I looked where her eyes directed me, but for the life of me, couldn't make anything out. With a nod to Solari, she brushed a few leaves from the ground near her feet. I saw the briefest flash of sunlight on metal before she covered it again with dirt. It was a sword.

"But how?" I whispered.

Ephiny casually tossed her head, like she was stretching her neck muscles. "We can be very quiet when we need to be. One for each of us, just in case." She didn't say any more because we heard the thudding hoofbeats of a horse approaching. There was no denying that Xena looked magnificent on a horse, and now was certainly not an exception. She came riding in at full gallop, stopping abruptly a short distance from our cage. Argo looked over at me and nickered in greeting. I had to smile. Who would have thought the horse would have stronger feelings for me than Xena?

A soldier quickly took the mare's reins and led her away. Xena glanced at us in the cage, then quickly walked away deep in conversation with two of her captains.

"What do you think is happening?" I whispered.

Ephiny shook her head. "I saw her leave a couple of hours ago. She's probably been scouting."

"By the river," Solari added looking pointedly at the ground where Argo had stood. There were several patches of red clay in her hoofprints, presumably from the river that marked the boundary between Centaur and Amazon lands. "My guess is she's getting ready to move her army. Ephiny, we don't have more than a day."

The acting Amazon queen nodded in agreement. It was clear that while I'd been trying to sleep off my sense of helplessness, they'd been trying to plan our escape. I felt even more useless than before. "We will have to be ready to use whatever opportunity presents itself. But they," she looked pointedly at the ground, "will not be drawn until the last possible moment." Slowly the conversation spread among the rest of the Amazons in the cage. There were fourteen of us total, thirteen trained Amazons and one bard against Xena's army.

There wasn't much to do but wait. Solari tried to lift my spirits. She asked me to tell some of her favorite stories. I complied but my heart just wasn't in it. I caught several glimpses of Argo, strangely missing the big horse's company.

Shortly past noon, we heard a commotion from the outside perimeter of camp as a raging warrior made his way to the cage. "You heard Xena," he shouted, "two of them for every one of us who gets injured." He staggered slightly as he walked, blood flowing freely from a gash near his left eye. Part of his left ear was missing. He clutched one arm in the other, trying to staunch the flow of blood from there as well.

Meklos, a man I'd learned was Xena's second in command, came out of his tent to handle the commotion. "What is it, Darbin?" he asked frowning at the man's battered appearance.

"An Amazon attacked me by the river," he sputtered, blood dripping from his nose and mouth, making his words hard to understand. Another warrior handed him a rag which he pressed

to his face. Quickly, it was soaked with blood.

Meklos glanced at us in the cage, as if he was deciding which two of us would pay for this man's injuries. His eyes lingered on me and Ephiny as he motioned to one of his men. He was about to speak when Xena walked up, her eyes frighteningly pleasant. "Tell me, Darbin," she asked lightly, "however did an Amazon get close enough to you to do all of that? As I understand it, they attack hidden from the tree tops. There are no trees by the river."

"I was on patrol," he replied, looking to Meklos for support.

"At the river..." Xena urged.

Darbin looked around, confused. "At the river, she was running, toward Centaur land," he added as if that explained everything. "She might have been warning them about us."

Xena walked behind the nervous warrior, an act that made him even more jumpy. "You don't think the Centaurs already know we're here?" she asked in a deceptively quiet voice.

"Princess," Meklos cut in, "does it matter? You left explicit instructions that if any of your men were harmed, two Amazons would be killed."

"Meklos, if Darbin here spooked his horse into throwing him and broke his neck, would you kill Amazons?" Xena asked walking over to her second in command.

"No, Princess," he replied, unflinching in her gaze. "That would be his error."

"And if Darbin, decided to climb a tree, fell and broke his arm, would you kill Amazons then?"

"No, Princess," he replied again, "that would be his mistake."

"I see." Xena smiled. "Why don't we bring this Amazon here and ask her why she attacked Darbin. At the very least she should see her sisters pay for her transgression."

"Ah, Princess..." Darbin stammered, "she's dead."

"Dead?" Xena asked in mock surprise. She turned to two men who stood near the horses. "Go to the river, find the Amazon's body, and bring it back here." The men nodded curtly and withdrew.

"Princess, is this really necessary?" Meklos asked.

"I'd like to see for myself this Amazon who did such damage to Darbin. I'd also like to see if this was an act of foolishness brought on by Darbin himself. You're a smart man, aren't you Darbin?" she asked quietly, walking over to stand in front of the big man.

"Yes, Princess," he replied.

"You wouldn't do something as foolish, as say, try to rape an Amazon, now would you?" He didn't answer, but the color draining from his face was all the answer those of us in the cage, or Xena for that matter needed. "So, you think two more need to die in addition to the one you killed?" she asked.

"But you said..." he replied, feebly.

"I know what I said, and I meant it. Any Amazon who hurts any of my army will see two sisters pay for it. But raping Amazons falls into the same category as walking off cliffs, or spooking horses, or falling out of trees. Should more pay for your stupidity, Darbin?"

"No, Princess," he said quietly.

"Then go get your wounds tended to and get back on patrol."

"What?!" Ephiny shouted in outrage. "You're going to let him go after raping and murdering an Amazon! You are an animal, Xena, and I will cut your heart out!"

Several men snickered as Xena sauntered over to our cage. "As diverting as that sounds, Ephiny," she purred, "I don't think that's going to happen any time soon. Whoever this Amazon was, she had every opportunity to kill Darbin..."

"And sacrifice two of us if she succeeded," I added.

Xena shrugged. "She made her choice."

Moments later Xena's men returned with the body. They cut the ties that held her to the horse's saddle and she unceremoniously dropped to the ground in full view of Xena, Darbin, Meklos and those of us in the cage. There was no question as to how she'd died. Running to a corner of the cage, I threw up. An argument broke out but I didn't hear it. All I could hear was the pounding of

my heart in my ears, rage and anguish coursing through my veins. Solari brought me a water skin, and I drank deeply after rinsing the sourness from my mouth. My attention was brought back to the others when I heard the challenge in Xena's voice. It matched the distinctive hiss a sword makes when it's drawn from its scabbard.

"Are you questioning my authority, Meklos?" Xena demanded. "Because I've had problems with second in command's before, and I'm afraid I don't have much patience for it."

"Ares assured us, all of us, that you would not lose sight of our goal. That this time you would not be plagued by the problems of your past..." Meklos' words were cut off as a soft hissing filled the air. Ropes fell from the trees as dozens of Amazons lowered themselves, attacking at will.

There was less confusion than I would have hoped for as Xena's men began to organize and counter attack. Those of us in the cage grabbed the swords that had been hidden. Ephiny and the others started stabbing any man that got within range, as well as hacking at our enclosure. Xena was shouting orders, warning some men, organizing others. Four Amazons attacked her, in a flash her sword was drawn, in moments she'd knocked the sword out of an Amazon's hand and was fighting with both weapons. She was parrying mostly while continuing to study the pattern of their attack. With dual swords flashing in the noon sun, she kept her three attackers at bay. I felt helpless, I didn't know what to do until I saw Meklos pick up a crossbow from a nearby table. He loaded the bow and backed up to get a clean shot. My body moved of its own accord when I saw his target. He was aiming at Xena. Without thinking I picked up the sword buried at my feet. "Xena!" I screamed, realizing that she'd be too late. Her back was to Meklos as she fought the three Amazons. At that moment, I felt, rather than heard the sword pierce his back, breaking ribs as it traveled upwards to his heart. He was standing next to the cage, using it to brace his body as he took steady aim. I felt the vibrations of his scream move down the sword and reverberate in my hand as blood began to spill down the sword, coloring the ground crimson. He twitched a couple of times then slumped down, dead.

The look on Xena's face made me wonder if Meklos had indeed gotten his shot fired. She looked like she'd been shot. An instant later she'd flipped over the heads of the Amazons and stood just outside the cage door. With one strike of her sword, the locking mechanism was broken from the chain and she opened the door. "You're getting out of here," she said as she whistled for Argo.

"Not without you, I'm not," I insisted.

"Don't be foolish, Gabrielle," she replied tossing me up onto the mare's back as if I were a sack of flour.

"Argo, stay," I demanded just as she slapped the mare's rump. Clearly confused, the mare danced a bit, agitated, with her ears flat against the back of her head. Suddenly Xena caught an arrow inches from my abdomen. She turned around, enraged. Her men were firing at her, at us. That made up her mind and she leaped onto the saddle behind me. With strong kick, Argo charged out of camp at full speed.

We must have run at full gallop through the forest for nearly an hour. Since I held the reins, I led Argo to a tight stand of trees which looked a little greener than the rest of the forest. The foliage was so thick the war horse was forced to slow down, then finally stop. Argo heard the stream before I did and walked toward it. I slid from her back, unsure if I should run from Xena or not. I watched her carefully as she dismounted, then took a couple of steps, only to fall to her knees at the water's edge. She splashed water on her face and took a long drink.

"This was not our agreement, Xena," a male voice thundered from behind us. "You will not walk out on me twice."

It was Ares all right, and the air around him crackled with rage. "My own men were going to kill me Ares, I'm of little use to you dead," Xena said as she faced the God of War.

"They were trying to kill you because you were backing out on our agreement. So what if Darbin rapes a hundred Amazons. What should it matter to you?"

"It matters because men who worry more about raping and pillaging are thugs, not warriors. I agreed to lead an army for you, Ares, not to direct a band of thugs. If you don't like the way I run things, you should find someone else." Her voice held no challenge, just a simple statement of fact.

He laughed as he stepped closer, his feet scorching the ground where he walked.

"It's not that simple, Xena. You gave yourself to me, body and soul, heart and mind. You're mine now, and you will do what I tell you, how I tell you." His voice was rich with ultimatum, and I shuddered to see Xena avert her eyes and look at the ground.

"No, she won't," I said as I stood up.

Ares blinked, as if seeing me for the first time. "You again. You just don't quit, do you, little girl? Xena, you can start making things up to me by getting rid of the brat. I want that irritating blond dead." He gazed at Xena intently, his eyes holding no quarter for disobedience.

"She doesn't belong to you, Ares," I insisted. "She can't give you something that isn't hers to give. You said she was yours 'body and soul'. That's impossible Ares, because she'd already given her body and soul to me."

"She has a point there, brother." A female voice said from behind me. I turned to see a beautiful woman dressed in hunting clothes holding a bow.

"Artemis?" I breathed.

"This matter does not concern you, sister," Ares bellowed.

"It doesn't?" she replied with a light laugh. "Let's see, we're standing in my sacred hunting grounds and you've just ordered the death of the queen of my chosen people. And you're tampering with the consort of said queen. Excuse me, but which part doesn't involve me?" Artemis stepped forward. I had to blink, so radiant was her beauty.

"Xena belonged to me long before she had anything to do with this girl," Ares insisted.

"Ah, that would be woman," I interjected from behind Artemis.

"You had her, Ares, and you couldn't keep her. In fact I've never seen you so dedicated to such a hopeless task. Give it up Ares." Artemis crossed her arms defiantly, watching as the God of War continued to seethe.

"No," Ares shouted, "Xena is mine, she came back to me willingly..."

"Exsqueeze me?" Another female voice asked.

"Aphrodite! This most certainly does not involve you," Ares growled through clenched teeth.

"As if," Aphrodite replied with a smile, standing near Xena. "That whole Ulysses fiasco, it was worse than the Perdicus fiasco. I'm so sure. Convincing Xena that the Gabster was dead and that it was her fault. That was *so* bogus."

"She believed me because she wanted to!" Ares shouted in fury. "She wanted a reason to turn back. Living the good life was just too hard for ol' Xena. She was aching for a reason to return to what she knew. I gave her that chance and she went for it." Ares marched over to Xena and pointed an accusing finger in her direction. "Tell me that isn't so, Xena, deny the truth to what I've said."

Xena looked at Ares then back at the ground. "It's true," she whispered.

"Oh, pu-leeze," Aphrodite shot back at Ares, "Like love is easy. Dude, you've poisoned her mind. Xena's trippin' on some bad henbane."

"The fact is, Ares," Artemis continued, "you failed again. Xena is not yours now, or ever."

"Oh yeah?" Ares taunted looking down at Xena, "Why don't we ask the Warrior Princess, shall we? What'll it be Xena: The life you were destined for, or slow death by boredom with the irritating blond?" My heart leapt in my throat as Xena remained motionless and silent. "I think that's your answer, ladies," Ares said, sounding smug.

Aphrodite walked up to Xena and briefly touched her head. "Okay Xe-- bad vibes gone. You're groovin' now."

"Xena?" I whispered. She looked up and my heart wanted to break. The pain and confusion was so evident in those normally self assured eyes.

"I...I've hurt you so much, Gabrielle," she whispered back, barely able to say the words. "I can't expect you to take me back."

"Nothing hurts as much as you not being in my life, Xena. I'll endure all the rest if I can have that," I said, fighting back tears.

“Your grrls have backbone, ‘Missy I’ll grant you that.” Aphrodite quipped with a grin to Artemis.

“But the army, the Amazons...” Xena stammered, looking from Artemis, to Aphrodite.

“The Amazons have made short work of Ares’ army in your absence,” Artemis replied, her face kind. She turned to glare at Ares one again, “as if any army is going to follow her again after this one. Face it, Ares, it’s *over*.”

“Xena, think about this,” Ares tried again, his voice almost pleading. “The power, the control you need that, you crave that. That girl cannot give you what I can.”

“No more than you can give her what I can, Ares,” I said.

“How dare you challenge a god!” He shouted, making the ground tremble beneath my feet. “I am her destiny!”

“Look, Ares,” Aphrodite interrupted, “this little encounter group is getting boring mondo fast. Do I need to get Hephaestus up here to discuss Xena’s destiny? Because he’ll come right on up if I call...” I was shocked to see Ares flinch as if he’d been burned. “Look Xe,” Aphrodite continued, “make up your mind, because I’ve gotta jet.”

“Gabrielle,” Xena said softly, her voice like a caress. She held open her arms and I rushed to be encircled by her warm embrace. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ares vanish.

“Congratulations Gabrielle,” Artemis said warmly, “you’ve made me very proud. It isn’t every day an Amazon thwarts the God of War. You’ve made a big sacrifice. Is there anything you’d like in return?”

“Yes,” Xena spoke up. “Meklos, bring him back.”

“No,” I protested, from the circle of Xena’s arms.

“But you’ve killed. Your blood innocence...”

I shook my head defiantly, “The Amazon that Darbin killed, bring her back.”

“No problemo,” Aphrodite quipped, “later, ‘Missy,” she said as she vanished.

“Later, ‘Dite,” Artemis replied with a grin. “Again, Gabrielle, you’ve done well.” She looked at Xena with an understanding smile. “Fear not valiant warrior, the loss of your bard’s blood innocence will be a light burden to carry in light of what she could have lost.”

“What is that?” Xena asked.

“Her destiny,” the goddess said as she vanished, “and yours.”

#### Chapter 4: Road To Morocco

Janice Covington woke slowly, her dreams fading as pale sunlight crept into the bedroom. She glanced down and smiled. Melinda Pappas was draped across her body, long dark hair spilling over her shoulder. She smiled, feeling the sleeping woman’s heart beat against her skin. Looking towards the foot of the bed, Janice saw Argo curled up next to her leg, the dog’s large head resting on top of her foot, snoring softly. She was pinned down. With a sigh she glanced at the wall clock. She could barely make out the time in the dimness of the room. At once regretting the need to leave her warm nest, yet looking forward to the trip, she gently caressed Mel’s back as she drew her lover from slumber.

“Janice, don’t you ever sleep?” Mel mumbled sleepily.

Blushing in spite of herself, Janice smiled. “Not much when you’re around,” she admitted. “But it isn’t what you think, Mel. It’s time to get up.”

“Already?” the Southerner complained. Rolling off of Janice, Mel sat up in bed, reaching for her glasses on the bed stand. As she moved, the sheet and blanket that had been covering her naked body slipped to her waist. Mel turned at Janice’s audible sigh, noting with some displeasure that the woman who had woken her from a blissful sleep had yet to move. “Well?” Mel asked.

“Just admiring the view,” the archeologist replied with a grin. “Come on, Argo, wake up.” She urged the dog off the bed and slipped from between warm covers. She was surprised to see that she was still wearing the tuxedo shirt from the night before, although it was completely unbuttoned. She glanced at Mel questioningly.

“I was in a hurry,” Mel explained, rolling her eyes. “Go on, take your shower. I’ll see if

Pandora has arrived.”

“Don’t forget your robe,” Janice advised as she headed for the master bathroom.

“Believe me, I’ve learned my lesson,” Mel replied with a grin.

Supervising Pandora’s sons carrying their luggage to the truck parked out front, Mel was at the foot of the stairs when she heard Janice bellow, “MELINDA!” from upstairs. Mel nodded to the young men to keep loading the truck as Pandora raced to the stairs.

“Lan’ sakes! What’s wrong up there?” the black woman said as she cast worried eyes up the stairs toward the master bedroom.

Mel smiled and put a comforting arm around the shorter woman’s shoulders. “Don’t worry, ‘Dora, I think Janice just discovered what she’s wearing today.” Gliding up the stairs, Mel could hear the sounds of a frantic search in progress before she even got to the bedroom.

“You bellowed, my love?” she asked sweetly as she entered the bedroom. It was all Mel could do not to laugh. Stark naked, hair combed but dripping wet, Janice Covington was frantically searching the closet.

“My clothes, where are they?” Janice asked without the slightest trace of amusement in her voice.

“On the bed, dear, where I laid them out for you,” Mel replied with a smile.

“That isn’t funny, Melinda. I mean my *pants* and my *boots* and my *shirt*, .357 *Magnum* and *whip*. This is an expedition, ya know, not a trip to the opera.”

“Don’t forget your hat,” Mel supplied.

Janice just looked at her, arms folded across her naked chest and seethed. Mel sighed, taking in Janice’s nude form with an approving gaze and smiled. “Your work clothes are packed and at this moment loaded in the truck. I packed your pants, boots, shirts, and hat. Your revolver is in the side pocket of your carry-on bag. I wouldn’t dream of separating you from your Smith & Wesson security blanket. Your whip and extra bullets are inside. You *are* wearing *that* rather casual ensemble on the plane. I’ve packed another for you to wear on the boat to Athens. You can change into your other clothes when we get to Amphipolis, not before.”

“But...but...” Janice stammered, visibly wounded by her lover’s words.

“Janice, I’ve arranged passage for us on a USO transport. We’re traveling with Bob Hope, for goodness sakes. I’m not going to have you looking like the wild man of Borneo. You’ve suffered in a dress all term, a few more days isn’t going to kill you. Besides,” she added, her voice dropping seductively, “I *like* you in a dress. Now get some clothes on before I decide to do something that will make us miss the plane all together.”

Mel headed to the bathroom, discarding her bath robe. Janice stared after her for a few moments before looking dejectedly at the outfit laid out on the bed. Argo gazed at her with sympathetic eyes which made Janice feel a little better. “When did I let someone else start calling the shots?” she wondered. The retriever looked at her mistress, then towards the bathroom where the other woman had gone, then back to her mistress. She barked once and Janice had to laugh. “I’m either growing up or losing my mind,” she decided.

Melinda Pappas, freshly showered and dressed, descended the grand staircase to find Janice saying her good-byes to Hyperion and Pandora. Her satchel was slung over her shoulder, Argo waiting patiently at her feet. “Be sure to call Linda if you need anything, and Hyperion, feel free to use the truck.” Hyperion smiled, his white teeth a shining contrast to his dark brown skin. He and Janice had hit it off instantly, finding a number of interests in common from guns to baseball scores. While he’d always felt shy and awkward around the elegant and sophisticated Melinda Pappas, with Janice Covington he instantly felt comfortable.

“Thank you, Miz Covington,” he said, his rich smooth voice filling the entry way. “Thas mighty kind of ya. Me and the boys will see about fixing up that shed out back...”

“Don’t worry about that, Hyperion,” Janice interjected, “just worry about getting the plumbing done on your house. Not that I mind finding the little ones in our bathtub-- especially when it’s time to bathe Argo.” They shared a laugh at that, but he shook his head.

“No ma’am, it’s the least we can do. You let us use the truck to haul the pipes and we fix up the shed or it’s no deal.” He spit on his hand and extended it to her. Without missing a beat, Janice spit on her own hand and sealed the deal.

“Suit yourself,” she said with a grin.

Pandora smiled as Mel reached the bottom of the stairs. “Lordy, I don’t know why they need to spit so much,” she muttered as she handed Janice a dish towel.

Janice grinned at both women. “It’s important to have at least one member in every family who knows how to spit.” She handed the towel to Hyperion who wiped off his own hand, then put an affectionate arm around his wife’s shoulders.

“Are you saying I can’t spit, Janice Covington?” Mel ask primly as she adjusted her hat and donned her gloves.

“I know better than to put anything past you, Mel.” Janice replied.

“Good,” Mel said with a nod, then glanced at Argo. “Don’t we need a leash for her or something?”

Janice was shocked. “Argo’s never worn a leash a day in her life. Don’t worry, she’ll do what I tell her.”

“Unless she decides not to,” Mel muttered under her breath as they waved good-bye to Pandora and headed for the truck.

Hyperion drove them to the Fort Bragg airfield. Janice was pleased to see the big man in such good shape. He’d suffered an accident working on the railroad several months before she’d moved to North Carolina. She wasn’t sure exactly how Hyperion fit into Melinda’s life, but knew that his wife, Pandora had been almost a second mother for her. Anything that distressed Pandora upset Melinda and she’d been very worried about the big man’s accident. His speedy recovery had been a boon to everyone.

“You take care, Miz Pappas and Miz Covington,” he said as he lifted their bags from the bed of the truck. “And watch out for Argo or Thea will have your head,” he added looking pointedly at Janice.

The archeologist smiled. Little six-year old Thea was absolutely devoted to the big dog, a feeling Janice knew was mutual. While she knew she came first in the dog’s affections, there was a special bond between children and animals that adults simply could not comprehend.

“You tell Thea not to worry about Argo,” Melinda interjected, “she and Janice take good care of each other.” Hyperion smiled in return, and after giving the dog a final pat on the head, got back in the truck. He pulled away only when he saw the two women greeted by an official of the USO, and escorted to a waiting plane. In moments their gear was loaded onto the C54 and the two women ushered into the large carrier.

“Mr. Hope sends his regrets that he won’t be joining you on this flight, Miss Pappas,” the official explained as Janice and Mel selected their seats. The young man, dressed in a crisp uniform with freshly cut hair, glanced nervously at Argo a couple of times, but did his best to ignore the dog. “He hopes you’ll give his best to your mother.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Mel replied with a sweet smile. Janice was certain she saw the young man’s heart skip a beat. “I would have been nice to have seen Mr. Hope again, but please convey my gratitude for his finding a spot for us.”

“Will do, Miss Pappas. If you need anything, Miss Dayton is your stewardess. Please make yourself comfortable, we’ll be taking off shortly.” With a final nod he turned and quickly walked back up the aisle to assist the other USO members who were boarding the plane.

“You *know* Bob Hope?” Janice asked incredulously as she took the seat by the window.

“Well, saying I *know* him is a stretch. He’s a friend of Mother’s. I recall meeting him once or twice as a child, but that’s about it. Still, if it takes connections to avoid traveling as cargo, I’m willing to do it.”

“You won’t hear me complaining,” Janice agreed fondly remembering her first plane ride with the heiress. Seated with the cargo on a C46, it had been a traumatic event for Melinda. Janice soon discovered all plane rides were. “You gonna be okay?” she asked softly, wishing she could take her lover’s hand. Janice’s eyes were soft, trying to convey what she otherwise couldn’t express at the moment.

“I’ll be fine. Sitting between you and Argo-- what could be safer?” Mel replied with a confidence she didn’t really feel. “You’ve got everything?” she asked as the plane began to move.

Janice opened her satchel, taking the opportunity to distract her lover. “Now is not a good time to find out if I don’t,” she said with a laugh. “Let’s see, we’ve got the book from the library, my notes, the stuff from Indy, assorted maps, names of where we’re going and who we’re seeing...” she rummaged through her bag some more as the plane began to build up speed. “...a gun, some bullets, a whip... ah yes, and a small loaf of cheese bread. I’d say we’re all set.”

Argo whined softly and put her head in Mel’s lap as the plane took off. Mel looked at the soft brown eyes gazing at her and couldn’t help but smile. “She learned that from you didn’t she?”

“Learned what?” Janice asked, looking at the dog sitting in the aisle with her head resting on Mel’s knee.

“Doing the right thing at the right time,” Mel replied. As if to answer her question, Argo sneezed suddenly, a fine spray dousing the southerner. “Never mind,” Mel muttered as the plane leveled out.

“Hi,” a new voice said from the aisle. Janice and Mel turned their attention to the newcomer; a young woman dressed in a smart uniform, with a sweet smile on her face. “I’m Sue. I’ll be your stewardess. Can I get the two...” she glanced at the dog who was sitting partly in the aisle and rephrased her statement, “ah, three of you anything?”

Janice shrugged. “Water for the dog would be nice,” she said.

“Water for all of us would be great, too” Mel amended, “and a towel.”

“Coming right up,” Sue replied as she headed up the aisle.

Janice laughed to herself as she pulled the blue leather bound book from her bag. Seeing Mel adjust her glasses out of the corner of her eye, she held it so they could both read it. She knew that help with the Latin text would be necessary, and anything that kept Mel’s mind off the ten hour plane flight would be a blessing.

They hadn’t been reading long when they were addressed by a new voice. “Melinda... Melinda Pappas, is that you?” a man asked taking a seat across the aisle.

Looking up, Janice noticed that her lover’s color pale slightly. “Hunter Richardson, who would have guessed,” Mel said sweetly, her composure forced as she extended her hand to the extremely handsome dark haired man. He brought it to his lips and kissed her knuckles softly. Argo growled as Janice narrowed her eyes at the intruder.

“And what is this?” he asked releasing Mel’s hand and moving away from Argo.

“It’s a dog,” Janice deadpanned.

Mel smiled and nodded to Janice. “This is my friend, Dr. Janice Covington, and her research assistant, Argo.”

“Dr. Covington,” Hunter said with a nod, not wanting to extend his hand past the gleaming teeth of the dog. “It’s a pleasure.”

“Charmed,” Janice replied, her smile static.

“Hunter is from Greensboro, North Carolina. Our families would spend time in the summers together,” Mel explained.

“Come now, Melinda, there was more to it than that. Your Mother was convinced we’d marry,” Hunter said with a winning smile.

“Hunter, we were six years old,” Mel replied with a laugh. “So you’re with the USO now?”

He nodded. “I’m a special attachment for the USO from the Army Air Corps. I figured it’d be safer than actual fighting. It wouldn’t do for America to start loosing her millionaires now would it?” he laughed at his own joke as Mel smiled weakly.

“God forbid,” Janice grumbled.

“So what type of doctor are you, Mrs. Covington?” Hunter asked looking at the open book on Janice’s lap.

Janice casually closed the book and studied the millionaire. He wore his hair short, in the military cut, his pale blue eyes gentle and expressive. It was clear to Janice why Kathryn Von Melosa would have wanted her daughter to marry this man. They would have produced inhumanly attractive offspring. Too bad he was such a pompous windbag. “It’s Miss, and my Ph.D is in archeology. I specialize in ancient Greece, pre-Mycenean to be precise.”

“Fascinating,” he replied with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “So Melinda, what are you doing on a USO flight? Fundraising?”

“Well, Janice and I are headed...” she glanced at her companion briefly and saw the warning in her lover’s eyes. “...to a conference in Cairo. I assist Dr. Covington with some of her research.”

He nodded, unimpressed. “So you followed in your father’s footsteps after all. That’s unfortunate,” he added to himself, “you had real potential in certain social circles...”

“Don’t worry about me,” Mel said in a deceptively friendly tone, “you’ll find the right gold-digger for you. Just give it time.”

“Ha,” he laughed thinly, uncertain of whether she was joking or not. “If it were only that easy. So, did you ever marry?”

“Well, I...” Mel’s reply was cut off by the stewardess’ return with the water.

“Here we are,” Miss Dayton announced as she moved in between Hunter Richardson and Melinda Pappas. “Water, and a towel.” She handed the first glass of water to Janice, then Mel, finally putting a bowl on the ground by Argo. The dog lapped happily at the water, splashing a good deal of it on Hunter Richardson’s shoes. Mel discreetly wiped the remnants of the dog’s sneeze from her lap then handed the towel to the annoyed millionaire.

“Charming creature,” he muttered as he dried his expensive Italian shoes. Not military issue - but so far no one had complained. “But I guess a dog would be helpful in digging up old bones, now wouldn’t he?” Hunter laughed again at his own joke, unaware that he was the only one who was doing so. He touched the arm of the stewardess to get her attention. “A vodka gimlet,” he requested without making eye-contact, then dismissed the woman. Janice’s eyes narrowed slightly at the pretentiously superior behavior. She glanced out the window, looking at the vastness of the ocean below, ignoring what she could of the conversation taking place next to her. Hunter and a reluctant Mel were catching up on old times. Mel doing little except making brief comments about her life. It was just as well. Hunter appeared much more interested in talking about himself. Which he did at great speed, barely pausing to breathe.

As the stewardess returned with the gimlet, Janice noted her progress down the narrow aisle, the position of Argo and the dog’s tail which lay near her feet. When Sue Dayton extended the drink to Hunter, Janice quickly stepped on Argo’s tail. Not enough to hurt the big dog, but enough to startle her. The dog’s head shot up with a snap, effectively dislodging the drink from the stewardess’ hand. The millionaire cursed as the cold drink landed neatly in his lap, turning the beige uniform a dark brown.

“Argo, what’s gotten into you?” Mel chided, her voice stern but not angry. She knew exactly what had prompted the dog’s action. “I’m so sorry, Hunter,” she sincerely told the fuming millionaire, echoing the apologies of the stewardess.

“No problem,” he replied insincerely with a smile. “America’s fighting force is trained to handle much worse. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll see what I can do about this...”

Mel nodded as the USO liaison got out of his seat, grabbed a newspaper and held it in front of his crotch as he headed to the lavatory at the back of the plane.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Mel scolded Janice when he was out of earshot.

“The guy was a windbag, Mel,” Janice replied then smiled at the stewardess. “You agree, right?”

The stewardess blushed slightly, then smiled. “Well, that gimlet did find a nice home. If there is anything else you ladies would like, just let me know. And I think I can find some biscuits for Argo. If that’s alright?”

Janice nodded and the stewardess departed. "I swear, sometimes you bring out the worst in people," Mel observed wryly.

"I've been told that," she answered, absently touching a fresh bruise under her dress near her neck.

"I don't mean that!" Mel shot back, blushing. With a grin, Janice reopened the Solari stories and began to read.

For the most part Janice found the ten hour flight to Morocco relaxing. She'd read through the thin book a number of times, checking words and phrases with Mel. She made copious notes in her notebook, then finally put the book away to ponder the implications. She looked over to notice her lover reading a book of her own and asked her about it.

"It's poetry," she explained. *Songs of Innocence and Experience* by William Blake. For some reason the poem, *The Tyger*, of late has made me think of Xena."

"Read it to me," Janice urged.

After adjusting her glasses, Mel cleared her throat and began to read:

"Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

"In what distant deeps or skies  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

"And what shoulder, & what art,  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

"What the hammer? What the chain,  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? What dread grasp,  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

"When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears:  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

"Tyger Tyger burning bright,  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?"

When she finished reading Mel Pappas closed the book and turned sad eyes to her lover. Janice understood the look. She'd worn the expression herself when she first learned she was related to Gabrielle. Someone who at the time she had thought was a useless tag-along. Apparently Mel was having some trouble coming to grips with her ancestor. "It's a beautiful poem, Mel," Janice said comfortingly. "But I can't say I agree with it. For tigers or Xena. Neither strike me as particularly evil. Each just does what they can to survive and thrive in their environments."

"Yes, but the more we uncover... the more we learn about Xena... there was just so much darkness." Mel shook her head, trying to distance herself from troubling memories she couldn't

articulate.

“Yes, there was darkness,” Janice countered, “but there was light too.” She held up her hand, warding off the comment she knew was on Mel’s lips. “Don’t say the light was Gabrielle. Xena had a goodness that was all her own. While Gabrielle may have helped her find it, it was up to Xena to let burn. And she did. Besides,” Janice added, “if what I’ve been reading here is any indication, Xena had a lot more to battle than her own personal demons.”

“What do you mean?” Mel asked, firmly putting her melancholy behind her.

“These stories,” Janice replied tapping the book. “I recognize some of them as Gabrielle’s tales. There’s the Titans, Callisto, the Thessalian War and other tales from the scrolls, but also some stories that are new to me. There is an Amazon legend about an oracle then later one about this warrior who is healed by one of the hunters. I also see repeated commentary about destiny and combat. Veiled references to Xena and Gabrielle I think. What is puzzling is the connection to Hephaestus and a contest between Ares and Athena. The Scrolls mentioned Ares, the God of War, not the God of Smiths.”

The stewardess returned to pick up the dog’s water bowl. “We’re going to land shortly,” she explained. “Welcome to Rabat, Morocco.”

Mel handled the plane’s landing surprisingly well. In fact, Janice’s arm even retained some of its circulation. When Mel released her with a shy grin, Janice couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’m going to get off the plane and stretch my legs. Wanna come?”

Mel nodded, agreeing. After grabbing her satchel with the books, Janice led the trio off the plane as it waited for refueling on the tarmac of the Rabat airport. It was night, the stars obscured by the bright lights of the airport. Mel, Janice and Argo headed to a strip of weeds and dirt by a chain link fence near the runway. In no time Argo was wandering among the grasses, relieving herself and marking territory she’d probably never see again. As Mel looked around the airfield, activity at the plane caught Janice’s attention. “We were just stopping for refueling, right?” the archeologist asked as she looked at their transport.

Mel nodded. “That’s what the USO liaison said,” she replied.

“So why are they unloading the baggage?” Janice wondered as she strode over to the aircraft. “What are you doing?” she asked one of the ramp workers in a combination of Arabic and French as he tossed several bags from the plane to the cart below.

“I’ll get the liaison officer,” Mel said as she headed back onto the plane.

Mel returned with the USO official to find Janice in a heated discussion with the ramp workers. They exchanged curses in a variety of different languages and gestured wildly at each other.

“What’s going on here!” the officer demanded.

“Someone’s given these... gentlemen... orders to remove Miss Pappas’ and my belongings from the plane. Care to explain why?” Janice said as she snatched the clipboard from the hands of one of the ramp workers.

The officer looked over the instructions and frowned. “This isn’t right,” he explained to the Moroccan, pointing to the few bags on the cart. “They are with us. Put those bags back on the plane.”

Janice walked away, leaving the officer to deal with the mix-up. “What happened?” Mel asked, when Janice reached her side.

Nodding with satisfaction as the bags were loaded back onto the plane, Janice turned to Mel, giving the Southerner her full attention. “He said that he was told to take the bags with red tags off the plane, which I noticed were just ours.”

“Why would someone do that?” Mel asked, as they returned to their seats.

“I don’t know, but it’s making me think our trip to Greece might not be a secret.”

“Now, Janice,” Mel chided softly, “don’t you think you could be over reacting?” as they strode down the aisle.

Janice picked up a plain envelope that had been left on her seat. She opened it as she sat down, frowning at the plain white card left inside. “Not any more,” she said as she showed Mel the card. “*Yankee, go home!*” was all it said.

“I don’t suppose this is for you,” Janice quipped regarding the note.

“I am most certainly *not* a Yankee, love,” Mel replied quietly, her offense genuine.

Janice looked up and down the aisle of the plane. A few of the USO dancers chatted with the comics, and someone Janice recognized as an actor but couldn’t place the name read a book. Most of the passengers, however, slept soundly in their seats. She handed the note to Argo who sniffed the note curiously. “Get ‘em!” the archeologist whispered to her dog.

Argo sniffed the note again, then the seat where it had been sitting then her questing muzzle explored the floor near the seat. “Wait here,” Janice said to Mel, and handed her the light brown satchel. Argo headed up the aisle, stopping occasionally to check the scent on the carpeted floor. Several passengers regarded the duo curiously, some were even surprised to see a dog in the plane at all. That relieved Janice tremendously. She’d hoped Argo had been unobtrusive enough on the ten hour flight for most passengers not to be aware of her presence. Finally the dog came to a stop outside the lavatory at the front of the plane. She sat obediently and barked once. “Thank you, girl,” Janice said as she praised the dog with affectionate strokes on her head. “Now, go see Mel,” she instructed quietly. Argo waited for a couple more scratches behind the ears then padded softly down the aisle to Melinda Pappas.

Janice watched her go, unable to keep the grin off her face whenever she saw her canine companion in action. Her attention was brought back to the lavatory as the door opened. A startled Sue Dayton emerged to see Janice waiting for her. “Can I get you something, Dr. Covington?” she asked.

Janice held up the note. “Did you put this on my seat?”

She nodded. “I put an envelope on your seat. A plain white one. A woman brought it over from the control tower.”

Janice’s eyes narrowed. “What woman?”

Miss Dayton moved from the lavatory to the open door of the plane. The two women stepped onto the stair platform that provided access to the carrier plane. “Over there,” she said pointing in the direction of the control tower. “A woman crossed the tarmac from the control tower. Tall, thin-- she had brown hair and blue eyes, pretty woman. She asked for you, I’m surprised you didn’t see her.”

Janice shook her head, annoyed she didn’t get a look at the visitor. “Miss Pappas and I were taking Argo for a walk. We were over there,” she replied, pointing to the area away from the runway.”

“Oh. That would explain why you missed her. I’m surprised we can’t still see her on the tarmac, it’s a long walk to the control tower.” Janice listened to the stewardess, her eyes searching the darkness for any sign of movement. Whoever their visitor was, she was gone now. “Is there something wrong?” the stewardess asked.

“What?” Janice replied distracted from her inner thoughts.

“I asked if anything was wrong,” the stewardess repeated.

“No, I don’t think so,” Janice replied, hoping she was right.

“Well that’s all taken care of,” the USO liaison officer said as he climbed the stairs to the plane.

“What was the problem?” Janice asked wondering if there was any connection between misplaced baggage and cryptic note.

The officer shook his head and shrugged. “Just some messed up paperwork. The ramp workers had been left instructions to remove your bags from the plane, I don’t know why. Anyway, they’re all back on board and as soon as we finish refueling, we’ll be on our way.”

Janice thanked the man, then returned to her seat. By the time she’d explained the situation to Melinda, the plane was again readying for take-off. In no time they had finished their ascent, had leveled out, and were on their way to Alexandria. “I think you’re getting the hang of air travel,” the archeologist commented when her companion finally opened her eyes.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Mel murmured back. “Why don’t you tell me about one of the stories from the book to keep my mind off this insanity.”

“Fair enough,” Janice replied and carefully opened the weathered book to the first story. “The first story is called *The Challenge of Three Ages*,” Janice explained as she began to read. “From the heights of Mount Olympus, beyond the reach of mortals, the gods entertained themselves with the plight of humanity. Bored, Ares the god of war challenged his sister Athena to a duel. Selecting from the souls of the unborn, Ares chose a champion. ‘She will rule the world, nations will tremble at her feet and she will die with my name on her lips,’ he roared triumphantly. ‘She will not,’ Athena replied and the duel was set. It was decided that neither might directly touch the champion of the other in his arrogance, Ares had his champion born of Artemis’ chosen. Athena also chose a champion but not of her sister’s chosen. Not trusting the god of war to act fairly, Aphrodite and Artemis blessed the champion of Athena and tasked Hephaestus to bestow his blessing on the champion of Ares. Athena approved and thanked her sisters. To which Aphrodite said, ‘The name of yours she will utter when facing her darkest hour. Throughout time Ares’ thorn will be bound unerring to my flower.’”

“That doesn’t sound like Aphrodite,” Mel observed.

“I think the author used some artistic license,” Janice replied with a grin. “Anyway the story goes on to say that the Fates sent warning of Ares’ plan to the mortal realm, and in time the soul of Ares’ champion was sent forth into the realm of mortals as well. A fancy way of saying she was born. Zeus gave Ares three chances to demonstrate the devotion of his chosen, if he could not in all three ages, the god of war would forfeit the bet and Athena would be declared the winner.” Janice paused in her reading and frowned.

“According to this, the champion triumphed in the first age sending Ares into a furious rage and entombed until the second age. The contest of the second age would see the battle fought in his tomb. Unable to touch the realm of man he called upon the goddess of Chaos to bind the soul of his champion before the battle of the third age could take place.”

“Was she successful?” Mel asked, too engrossed in the tale to take note of the sun’s earliest rays hitting the Atlas Mountains below.

“I’m not sure,” Janice replied after gazing out the window at the splendor of the sunrise below then returning to the Latin text. “Check this phrasing. Doesn’t that say that the soul of Athena’s champion would be needed to keep the warrior from Ares’ grasp?”

Mel adjusted her glasses and read the Latin text. “It’s ‘Ares’ purpose’ but the meaning is the same. Do you think the battle of the second age was Macedonia?” the Southerner wondered aloud.

Janice grinned, “I suppose it could be. You... well, you and Xena certainly bested Ares.”

“And you left him a nice tomb of rubble,” Mel added.

“So I wonder if Leesto’s Island dealt with foiling the goddess of Chaos before the third age?” Janice asked, gazing again to the sunrise below. The snow of the Atlas Mountains reflected the morning’s sun, bathing everything in crisp white light.

“If that’s the case, then why are you so frantic to find our ancestors?” Mel asked softly. “I know you Janice,” she added, her voice gentle. “It’s beyond solving an ancient riddle, like the scrolls. You’ve been on edge lately, restless. Something is pulling at you, and I think we both know what it is.”

“What would that be?” Janice asked, taking her lover’s hand and quickly looking around to see if anyone noticed.

Mel’s eye’s sparkled as the sunlight streamed in the airplane window. “Your destiny, perhaps?”

“No, love,” Janice corrected her. “Our destiny.”

...Xena and I slowly walked back to the encampment with Argo following behind. Strangely, there were many signs of battle but not a single member of Ares’ army could be seen, aside from the corpses that is. A group of women were gathered around the now resurrected Amazon Darbin had killed. She stood over Darbin’s decapitated body. At the sight of our approach Ephiny rushed over, rage evident in her sculpted features.

“Xena, I...”

“Ephiny, don’t!” I demanded, not trying to curb the forcefulness in my voice. “Xena was under some sort of spell. This was the work of Ares. Leave her alone. You two can talk about this later.”

Ephiny blinked, surprised at my outburst then her face softened. “You’re right, Gabrielle. Xena, I apologize.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ephiny,” an Amazon I did not know remarked. “It’s the curse. Xena was not able to destroy us this time, but she will eventually...”

“Diana, that’s enough!” Ephiny barked to the Amazon. “Queen Gabrielle has made a request and it will be honored. Go back to the village and let the others know we’re alright.”

“What curse?” I asked, as we walked back to the Amazon village. Xena walked next to me, her eyes downcast, her thoughts distant.

“It’s nothing,” Ephiny assured me, “just an old story. Really, Gabrielle, don’t worry about it.” Her words were believable, but something in the way she glanced at Xena told me that she was lying. I wondered if perhaps it was a story I’d need to hear from my warrior.

We hadn’t been in the village long when Xena and I retired to Terreis’ hut. I still had trouble thinking of it as mine. “Argo okay?” I asked conversationally, hating the silence that hung between us like a curtain.

Xena nodded mutely, her back to me as she stared at the smooth surface of Terreis’ dresser. I stared at her back for a few minutes, deciding where to start. “What happened after I left?” I finally asked.

Xena continued to stare at the dresser. Finally, she took a deep breath and began to speak. Her back remained towards me, and she spoke with an even, expressionless voice. “Gabrielle,” she began. “I spent some time thinking after you left. It didn’t take long to see how wrong I was, how much I’d hurt you. I debated with myself whether you’d be better off without me.” She stopped talking and paused for a moment deciding how much she was going to say. Coming to a decision, she rushed on. “While I knew you’d probably be better off without me, I knew I simply couldn’t live without you. I wouldn’t want to. I decided, selfishly I suppose, to go after you. You said you were going home so I went to Poteidaia to find you. What I found was a decimated village. A plague had run rampant through the area claiming almost half your village. Both you and Lila died from it.

“But that’s impossible...” I gasped.

She nodded and I saw her shoulders sag slightly. “Somehow I should have known it couldn’t be true, but it was so real. Strife and Pestilence had been hard at work. Your family was in mourning.” She turned around to face me, and for maybe the second time since I’d known Xena, I saw tears that threatened to fall from vibrant blue eyes. “Gabrielle, I stood next to the ashes from your funeral pyre.” She shook her head trying to banish the images that were obviously haunting her memory. “I don’t know what happened, but something snapped. I felt myself die. Nothing mattered.” She smiled at me sadly. “I’ve had that feeling once before.” With a shake of her head she continued, “I had been so afraid of you being in danger from being with me. Or being in danger away from me by warlords or thieves. It never dawned on me that you could die from something as senseless as illness. I found out that the plague reached Poteidaia because someone brought in meat from a hunt that had been tainted with sickness. Two rival raiding parties had fought a battle near Poteidaia. The rotting corpses that littered the battlefield brought in the sickness.”

“So what did you do?” I asked as I watched her intently. She put her thoughts in order, seemingly by sheer force of will and continued with her narrative.

“I set out to track down the raiding party that won. I tried to tell myself it was to bring them to justice. To drag them back and force them to help rebuild what their skirmish had destroyed. For a time I really thought I could do what you asked, not become a monster.” She shook her head sadly as she gazed at me. “I’m sorry, Gabrielle,” she whispered, “I couldn’t. I’m not that strong.” Defeated she slumped into a chair.

I didn’t know what to do or say, so I walked over and put my hands on either side of her face, drawing her head up to look at me. “You didn’t let me down, Xena,” I said softly. “I love you. It was wrong of me to leave you the way I did and I’m sorry. No more leaving-- for either of us. We

stay together and work things out *together*.” Her body began to tremble as my hands moved from her cheeks to her shoulders.

“How can you forgive me?” she asked as her gaze moved to my injured shoulder. “I’ve hurt you.”

I took a deep breath. My next words surprised even me. It’s funny, how sometimes you heart can say things that are true, even as the rest of you wishes it weren’t. “You’re a violent person, Xena. I know that and I accept it. That doesn’t mean I like it, but it’s part of you. I just want to know why you did it.”

She cast her eyes downward. “I thought you were Ares,” she whispered. “He came to me, as you several times. At first they were dreams, then I wasn’t so sure. I can’t believe I was so foolish. I’m sorry.”

With a sigh I drew her to my chest. What else could I do? I held her as tight sobs wracked her powerful frame. I ran my fingers through her dark hair. I don’t know why, but I was surprised again at the softness of it. It’s funny, to realize just how much about Xena was soft. I don’t know how long I stood there. It only seemed like a moment, but when I raised my head I could see that it was getting dark outside. Xena had been quiet for a while. Things between us felt strange, but at the same time her arms around my waist felt so good. I sighed and felt her arms tighten. Xena was feeling this too. “Why are the Amazons afraid of you?” I asked.

“It’s an Amazon legend,” she answered finally.

I could tell she was uncomfortable and didn’t really want to talk about this. Still, the Amazons had become my family and I felt that I had to know. Especially if I was in a position to bridge the mistrust between the Warrior Nation and the Warrior Princess. “Would you tell me about it?” I asked.

Nodding, she dried her eyes and took a drink of water before relaying the story. It was then that I could really appreciate just how much I meant to Xena. Xena’s willingness to break down in my presence, then not try to cover it up meant more to me than she could ever know.

“The story isn’t from this village, but a remote one closer to the Black Sea, although by now I’d imagine it’s spread throughout the Amazon nation.” She stood and began to pace the room as she told her tale. I took the seat she’d just vacated and listened with rapt attention to the unlikely occurrence of Xena the Warrior Princess telling a story.

“Five women who were part of a hunting party found a lost traveler, an oracle. She was young and alone in the woods, having gotten lost on her way to Chalcedon. Since the Amazon nation was originally unified under the guidance of a very powerful oracle, Amazons take oracles very seriously. The lost woman was taken to the village to recuperate. That night she had a vision. She told the Queen that one of the five women who rescued her would give birth to a daughter, a child who would grow up and make the world tremble at her feet and lead the entire Amazon nation to their doom in the service of the war-god Ares. The prophecy was very specific. The child would be female, raised an Amazon and gifted in the art of war.”

“You?” I breathed.

“The Amazons seem to think so,” Xena replied. “Naturally all five Amazons were horrified that they might be responsible for the destruction of their people so they agreed not to bear children. Everyone was content, assuming that would circumvent the oracle’s prediction. The next year a wounded warrior was found by a scouting party on the banks of a large river that separated Centaur and Amazon land. He had been hit by a stray centaur arrow. The first skirmishes between Amazon and Centaur nations was well under way by then. The Amazon scouts took pity on the warrior, since, by all signs, it appeared he had simply been in the wrong place at the right time. The custom would have been to care for the man in the custodianship of the Queen. But the Queen had a young baby, named Melosa by the way, and it was decided the man would take healing elsewhere. He was carried on a stretcher to the hut of Xelana who shared it with her daughter, Cyrene.”

“You’re kidding,” I breathed. “Your mother? So the warrior was Atrius?”

Xena nodded. “Yes, Gabrielle. My mother was an Amazon and she fell in love with Atrius while tending to his wounds. But make no mistake, he felt the same way about her. Anyway, the

entire tribe was in an uproar, especially when she realized that she was pregnant. Atrius was kept under house arrest as everyone anxiously waited for the child to be born. It had been decided that if the child were female, a trial would be needed to decide their fate. As it was, a son was born. They named him Toris, a name honored by Atrius' family. Much relieved, it was time for decisions to be made. If Cyrene wanted to stay with Atrius, she would have to leave her people-- otherwise father and baby would have to go on alone. So mother said good-bye to her family and left with Atrius to start a new life. I can only guess they felt they'd beaten the prophecy by having a boy. The next year she became pregnant again. Now that she was well away from the customs of the Amazon, she was only slightly concerned with the birth of a girl."

"So you were named after your grandmother?" I asked.

Xena nodded and continued on with her narrative, "Mother made Atrius promise not to teach us about war or weapons. Being a warrior and proud of it, he refused. But after hearing of the prophecy, he agreed not to teach me. Finally Lyceus was born and named purely from mother's heart."

"So how did you learn to fight?" I asked in a rush.

"Atrius respected mother's wishes and only taught Toris and Lyceus the art of warfare. What they did not expect was that the two boys, needing someone to practice on besides each other, would teach their lessons to me. I'll be honest, Gabrielle, Lyceus lacked the killer instinct and Toris was plain clumsy. It didn't take long before they needed to work together to keep me at bay."

"And the Amazon customs, how did you learn about those?"

"Mother would tell stories about her people in the evenings. I don't think she realized what she was doing. But the stories were exotic and exciting; Tor and Ly never seemed to tire of them. I enjoyed the stories too, but tried not to draw attention to myself when mother spoke of her people. I guess that even back then I knew mother would freeze up if she knew I was paying close attention. I would sit near Lyceus and play with his toys when mother told stories, but I listened to every word. When I was five she saw me sparring in the field with my brothers. It's an understatement to say she was livid. I think Atrius left shortly thereafter, I suppose I was about four summers old at the time. Mother changed after that. She detested violence of any sort, and a strict 'no weapons' policy was started in the Inn. One night I heard her praying to Athena that I be spared the consequences of the prophecy."

"Did the Amazons try to keep in touch with your mother?" I asked, realizing the depth of the chasm that separated Xena and Cyrene.

"I think that maybe two or three visits were made. I remember one where she made it clear that she wanted Amazons well away from her family. By the time Cortese came to Amphipolis it had been many years since an Amazon had journeyed there. I certainly would have enlisted their help had they been a resource I could have turned to."

"And that's why you're so sensitive to being called Amazon?" I asked. Her blue eyes flashed with humor. For the first time in too long, she smiled at me.

"I wouldn't say it's because I'm particularly *sensitive* about it, Gabrielle. I may be born of Amazon blood and know their customs, but I don't feel like one of them. I suspect most Amazons feel the same way about me."

"Valaska called you Amazon when I was taking your body back to Amphipolis," I observed.

"Yes," Xena agreed, "and we all know what type of Amazon she was."

"So that's why your mother disowned you, because you became a warlord?" I asked as gently as I could.

"What I became, Gabrielle, was a horrible person." Xena said gazing out the open window. "I think mother would have disowned me, curse or no curse."

"But you've changed, Xena," I reminded her.

Xena turned to face me, an incredulous expression etched in her features. "How can you say that?" she demanded. "After what I just did to you?"

"Xena, you could have easily killed me, but you didn't. Even under the spell of Ares. What I want to know is what's the point? Why the curse in the first place?"

“Who’s to say, Gabrielle,” she replied softly, turning to the window once more. “The Fates, the gods? I don’t even know the validity of the prophecy in the first place.” She sighed and turned her beautiful face back to me. “The Amazons take it very seriously though. I don’t think we should stay here beyond tonight, Gabrielle.” She glanced down at her boots. “At least I know I shouldn’t.”

I stood up and moved into her embrace. “Xena, I go where you go. Above all else, I love you.”

“I love you, Gabrielle,” she whispered fiercely, resting her chin on the top of my head. “With all my heart.”

“I think we should go to Poteidaia,” I murmured against her chest. “I’d like to see my family, make sure they’re alright.”

“I understand,” Xena replied, holding me tightly. “We’ll leave at first light.”

## Chapter 5: Family Reunions

Janice Covington sighed as she boarded the yacht, *Lovely Lunacy*, its name proclaimed in gleaming gold paint on the stern of the magnificent vessel. While boats of any kind were not her favorite mode of transportation, she had to admit, Mel Pappas had style. The elegant luxury ship stood out among the variety of fishing boats moored at the harbor. This followed the ride in the immaculate black Bentley which had met them at the airport, then chauffeured them to the harbor at Alexandria. “Another family friend?” Janice asked wryly as they headed below decks.

“A cousin actually,” Mel replied as she unlocked the door to the main cabin. “That was his car as well. Nice man, though I’ve only met him once.”

“And he’s not worried about you taking his yacht into a war zone?” Janice asked as she looked around at the accommodations, which were quite spacious for shipboard setting. The cabin was furnished with dark antique furniture: dresser, dressing table and small desk were on one side of the room, an amoire and fluffy antique bed on the other. The archeologist plopped down onto the bed, experimentally testing the mattress. Argo took that as her cue and jumped up as well.

“I told Cousin Martin that I was touring the Aegean sea. I decided it would be best if I left out the war zone parts,” she smiled at her lover warmly, “as well as the roguish company I keep.”

Janice grinned back with mock surprise. “You don’t think Cousin Martin would approve of me?” Suddenly her eyes were alight with mischief as she gave her lover a suggestive leer. “You don’t think we have a crack at being a Von Melosa family scandal, now do you?”

“I swear, Janice, you’re incorrigible. If I didn’t find it so dammed charming, I’d be positively indignant,” Mel said resting her hands firmly on her hips and frowning down at the reclining archeologist.

“Ah, but you’re at your most irresistible when you’re indignant,” Janice shot back flirtatiously.

Mel laughed and picked up the satchel of books the archeologist had deposited on the dresser and tossed it over to the bed. “And you have work to do. We’ll be at the museum in Athens tomorrow. I want a full run down on what it is we hope to discover there.”

“Fair enough,” Janice replied. “Work first, then I’ll have to test you... see how closely you paid attention.”

As *Lovely Lunacy* left the harbor, two sets of eyes watched her departure. The shadowed figures watched through field glasses from the battered deck of an old fishing boat. “Dr. Covington does not seem to frighten easily,” the taller of the two commented.

“That is unfortunate for her,” the shorter figure replied. “Contact our people on board *The Charmer*. At least we know where she’s headed. We stop Dr. Janice Covington at Athens, she gets no closer to Xena than that.” The taller of the two nodded and headed to the radio equipment to relay the order. The other straightened her skirt then left, her heels clipping softly on the wooden planks of the dock as she headed to a waiting car. Comfortably seated in the white Mercedes, it sped off towards the airport for the next available flight to Athens.

Mel Pappas awoke slowly in the dimly lit cabin. Her arm leisurely made its way to the side of the bed normally occupied by her lover. Azure eyes opened in surprise when she found the space empty. Instantly her attention focused on the woman sitting at the mahogany desk. A small lamp cast soft shadows on the wall, bathing Janice in an eerie glow. Mel watched silently as Janice worked, Argo curled up, asleep at her feet. Carefully she turned the brittle pages in the decaying book, comparing the passages she studied with the notations scribbled in her notebook. Several times she checked references from a variety of loose papers she also carried, including the sarcophagus rubbing from Scotland. Melinda Pappas smiled. This was a Janice Covington she rarely had the opportunity to see: Janice the Scholar. While the Southern heiress was well acquainted with Janice the Adventurer and Janice the Lover, seeing the studious woman absorbed in her work was rare. Even while they had been translating the scrolls during their first months together Mel saw Janice the Suitor as much as the Scholar. It felt odd at first to be courted by someone who lived under the same roof, but Mel soon adjusted to Janice's surprisingly romantic nature. Smiling at the memory, Mel knew something Janice didn't. While pleasant, the courting was entirely unnecessary. Before settling in North Carolina with the archeologist, Melinda Pappas had already fallen completely and utterly in love.

"What time is it?" she asked, the gentle rocking of the yacht making it difficult to wake up.

Janice glanced over her shoulder and smiled. While she was wrapped in a warm bath robe, her lover was wearing nothing save the satin sheets they'd slept in. Janice decided that Mel made satin look especially inviting. "It's almost time to get up. I'm surprised you slept so long."

"Surprised?" Mel challenged with an arched eyebrow. "You wore me out, love."

"You should talk," Janice replied with a grin. "If we were on solid land I'd be sleeping like a baby. You know, we should get some sheets like this for home."

"If I'd known you didn't like ships I'd have gotten us a flight to Athens," Mel offered sincerely. "And since when are you a connoisseur of sheets?"

Janice beamed. "Since last night," she said with a wink. "Seriously though, I think traveling by sea is safer in light of the war. The Nazis are less apt to pay attention to a remote boat dock than the Athens airport. But truth be told, I detest sea travel, always have." Unconsciously as she spoke, the index and middle finger of her right hand firmly pressed a pressure point on her left wrist.

"You didn't seem to mind it on *The Gauntlet*," Mel observed.

"Let's see..." Janice said with a smile, tapping her finger on her chin. "I got in a fight, got thrown overboard, had to swim in icy water to *Remember Nothing* where I promptly got shot." She paused scratching her head for emphasis. "Then I got in another fight, had to blow up the ship, swim back to *The Gauntlet* where I promptly got blind drunk then had to endure the removal of the bullet. I don't think I had the opportunity to get seasick. Besides, Pop taught me how to hit a pressure point to keep the sickness away, only it makes me hungry so I try not to use it too often. Archeology isn't known for its leisurely lunches."

"I see," Mel replied with a grin. "You neglected to mention in all of that, that it was the first time you slept with me as well."

Janice turned in her chair to look directly at her lover. Soft blue green eyes began to darken with a now familiar passion and Mel felt her insides flutter at the sight. "Then let me correct my oversight right now," Janice said softly. "I adore you and there isn't an instant we've shared together that I don't relive over and over again whenever we're apart. I wish I'd let you take that bullet out of my arm with me sober just to have the memory of lying in bed next to you."

Mel felt a lump in her throat, "You're sober now," she whispered.

"Yeah, I guess I am," Janice agreed slowly standing and moving towards the bed.

"And no one has shot at you for..." Mel paused to think. "At least a month or so."

"Good point," the archeologist agreed as she slowly removed her bath robe. Mel smiled as her lover's naked body was uncovered. A smile that quickly turned to a frown as she saw Janice continue walking past the bed to the adjoining bathroom.

"Just where do you think you're going?" Mel demanded.

Janice took two steps backwards and grinned. "To take a shower and get dressed for the

museum. As I recall someone recommended, no, insisted I wear a dress. You know it always takes me longer to get ready when I have to dress up.” Still smiling she continued on to the bathroom. In moments Mel heard the sound of running water. Slapping her pillow in frustration she also had to laugh. Her lover had indeed repaid torture for torture. Still, she did not see how the discomfort of wearing silk and heels could compare with a day of sexual frustration. *“I’ll show her,”* Mel decided, *“I’ll make her wear make-up.”*

Janice Covington and Melinda Pappas arrived at the Acropolis museum at Athens without incident. Mel was especially pleased that the preparations she’d made for the trip had thus far worked out so well. A light breakfast was ready on deck. Mel made a mental note to write her cousin and thank him. The yacht was wonderful and the crew so professional and discreet as to have seemed almost invisible. As Martin promised a car for touring Athens was waiting for them at the dock. Dressed in smart skirts and blouses, the duo made their way to the city of Athens.

For all of Mel’s planning there were certain things that could not be counted on, the temperament of other people being one of them. As she and Janice walked up the steps to the museum they were rudely stopped by the guard at the door.

“Is there a problem?” Janice asked evenly.

“No dogs allowed,” he replied, his accent rough and heavy.

Janice glanced down to her left. Argo stood patiently at her side. As the guard and Janice argued, she sat down. Gazing up at her mistress, she waited.

“That’s no dog,” Mel interjected, “that’s Dr. Covington’s research assistant.”

The guard looked at Mel and snorted. “If that is the research assistant, then what are you?”

“Would you believe mistress?” Janice quipped.

Mel jabbed her in the arm and turned her attention back to the guard. “I am Melinda Pappas, Dr. Covington’s financial underwriter for this expedition and I have an appointment with Mr. Lendos.”

“Fine,” the guard replied. “You may go in, but the dog stays outside.”

“Alright then,” Janice said with a thin smile. She waved her arm towards the front door, “After you Miss Pappas.” Mel glanced at Argo, clearly not wanting to leave the dog unattended as Janice made a grand show of hand gestures to make the dog stay. Argo sat obediently, looking a bit confused herself. Leaning close to the canine, Janice whispered “big noise,” before following Mel inside the building. The moment the door closed separating dog from owner, Argo got up and paced in front of the museum doors like a caged predator. Howling followed, punctuated by barrages of barking. People heading up the steps toward the museum took one look at the distressed animal and headed quickly away from the building.

Mel and Janice had not made it further than the information desk when the guard rushed up to them. “You have to keep the dog quiet,” he said. Janice noticed that a subtle pleading tone had crept into the stern man’s voice.

Janice looked down to the vacant spot by her left side. “What dog?” she asked innocently. “Funny, I don’t see any dog.” The guard was about to protest when she silenced his objections with a wave of her hand. “Look, buddy,” she began, “I’ve got work to do. A lot of it. I’m going to be here for at least a couple of hours. You said the dog had to stay outside. Fine, she’s outside. Now you want her quiet. It’s up to you. Let her inside and I guarantee she’ll be so quiet no one will know she’s here. Otherwise you’re going to have to put up with her for the next two hours.” The man’s expression began to darken and Janice narrowed her gaze. “And I warn you, if anything happens to her out there... I’d like to point out that she has several brothers and sisters owned by prominent members of the United States Congress.”

With a frown the guard turned on his heel and headed back to his post. Moments later Janice heard the unmistakable clicking of Argo padding across the marble floor to join the rest of her ‘pack’. Mel made eye contact with the dog and grinned, then frowned at her owner. “Prominent members of Congress? Don’t you think that’s over doing it just a bit?”

“Maybe so,” Janice agreed. “But think about it, two houses of Congress... there has to be at

least one or two prominent members in all of that.”

Mel asked for Mr. Lendos, the museum curator, at the information desk. With a smile, the receptionist phoned her request. “Mr. Lendos will be a few minutes, the police stopped by first thing this morning. If you don’t mind waiting…”

“Not at all,” Janice assured the receptionist with a smile. “We’ll just be looking at the exhibits.” She pointed toward the exhibit to the left. Seeing the woman behind the counter nod in acknowledgement, the trio headed over. The first artifact encountered was a portion of a frieze from the Parthenon. The figures in the ancient marble stood in weathered relief, forever static in their poses. Next to the frieze was a stele of Athena. Janice was familiar with the sculpture of the warrior goddess. Her eyes glanced at the identification plate mounted on the wall near the stele. It read c. 450 B.C. Janice nodded, that sounded about right.

“Janice, over here,” Mel whispered from a nearby display case. Inside was an amphora with the distinctive black and orange glazing of ancient Greek vessels. She smiled seeing why Mel called her over. The pictures depicted a huge man wrestling a large beast. The information plaque said: *Hercules Wrestling with the Nemean Lion, Psiax. Amphora 520 B.C., On loan from Museo Civico de Brescia, Italy.* “It doesn’t look a thing like him,” Mel said softly.

Janice agreed, not too surprised that she knew exactly how Hercules looked. “Remember, this stuff was created by artisans who never met the man.” Janice stepped over to the next case. “Oh great,” she grumbled at the artifact housed there.

“What?” Mel asked, then read the information plate. *Proto-Attic amphora c.675 B. C., The Blinding of Polyphemus: “And they thrust the stake of olive wood into the monster’s eye, for he had but one eye, and that in the midst of his forehead, with the eyebrow below it.” On loan from Eleusis Museum, Greece.”*

“Ulysses, my favorite,” Janice said with a scowl.

“Janice, stop it,” Mel chided. “I’ve been a good sport about Solari, don’t start with Ulysses.”

Knowing she was right, Janice smiled. “Fair enough,” she agreed. Her attention was drawn to Argo who barked once sitting next to another glass case. Janice quickly scanned the museum to see if anyone noticed. Fortunately, it was early morning and the museum was almost empty. “What is it, girl?” Janice asked as she joined her dog by the display case. Laughing out loud, Janice called Mel over to take a look at Argo’s discovery. A faded and tattered dress was displayed on a somewhat mountainous dress form. Dozens and dozens of necklaces were positioned over the dress, hanging around the ‘neck’ of the headless dress form. Something about the sight was so familiar. After a moment of rapt gazing Janice and Mel looked at each other and uttered one word in unison: “Widgie.”

Peering over to the information plaque she grinned as she read its information. *“Ceremonial robes of the Widgian Oracle, date indeterminate.”*

“Widgian Oracle?” Mel repeated with a laugh. “I don’t know what’s funnier, calling her that or saying that housedress is a ceremonial robe?”

“You got that right,” Janice agreed, kneeling down to peer more closely at the bracelets that were arranged in the base of the display case. “But you know, Mel, this is the first physical evidence of Widgie I’ve ever…” Her voice trailed off as she looked up. Mel was no longer standing beside her but had wandered over to another display.

Janice followed her over, sensing something was wrong. Mel stood rigid, still as a statue, in front of the display case. Looking at the display, it didn’t take long for Janice to see why. The artifact in question was a large wooden board blackened from an ancient fire. Words had been etched deeply into the wood, the scrawl barely legible. Janice felt numb as she read the ancient writing silently to herself.

*The sky rained fire as the hour of death drew near and the anguished screaming of my mother and my all the love, mercy and goodness drained from me, suffocated by the killing smoke. All that is left of*

*In the village square I saw the princess of death looking down at me as if I were inconsequential. “Why?!” I screamed, daring her to make the murder of my family complete. I chose*

*my path as the warrior princess looked away. One day she will wish she had killed me when she had the chance.*

*From this day forward I dedicate my life the destruction of the warrior princess. I pledge with what is left of my soul to make her, the torch that set my world ablaze, pay for her crimes. If justice is denied me, I will welcome revenge.*

*I do not know her name, but the monster with blue eyes and raven hair commanding an army of ruthless killers murdered 62 men, 71 women, 28 children and 17 infirm this day. Though I have looked for survivors, I find I am all that is left.*

### *Callisto of Cirra*

“One hundred seventy-eight people,” Mel whispered, her voice cracking.

“Impressive isn’t it?” a new voice asked from over her shoulder.

“What?” Janice demanded, shocked at the comment.

“The artifact,” the man explained. “We’ve had some trouble dating it, but I’m confident that this is the actual writing of Callisto of Cirra, someone who survived a visit from the Warrior Princess.” He smiled warmly extending his hand to Janice. “Miss Pappas, right? I’m Xavier Lendos.” He looked past Mel’s shoulder as continued to talk to Janice. “Where is Dr. Covington?”

Janice cleared her throat getting his attention once again. “I’m Dr. Covington, and *this* is Miss Pappas,” she explained as Mel absently shook his hand.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Covington,” Lendos apologized, “you just weren’t what I was expecting.”

“The dress, no doubt,” Janice quipped, hoping to draw some response from her lover. Unfortunately, Mel just stood and stared at the only remembrance for the village of Cirra.

“Yes, well then, you must find this fascinating,” he continued with a nod at the artifact and a glance at the archeologist’s quiet companion. “I think Callisto was about twenty-one at the time Cirra was sacked.”

“No,” Mel disagreed, never taking her eyes from the scorched wood. “She was closer to thirteen. Xena was twenty-one when Cirra was destroyed.”

Lendos looked from Mel to Janice for further explanation. When it became clear the tall woman intended to say no more on the subject, Janice glanced at her lover, then smiled winningly at the museum curator. “I’ve found out a few details in the course of translating the Xena scrolls,” she explained, hoping that was enough.

“Yes, the scrolls. Congratulations on your discovery, Doctor. Your first paper on the scrolls is impressive. I look forward to more detailed research. Now that the scrolls are found, what brings you back to Athens?”

Janice studied the man a moment before replying. Xavier Lendos appeared to be about fifty, his graying wavy hair standing out in sharp relief to his olive complexion. His eyes were dark but his features were gentle. Dressed in a simple but well tailored suit he looked every inch the proper museum curator. “I’m here because of the recent theft. As I understand it several drawings, plans for a frieze for the temple of Artemis, were stolen along with a few other things. Any leads yet?”

The curator shook his head. “I was just talking to the local police about that. Nothing has turned up so far. It’s strange, considering the collection this museum has acquired. The fact that those drawings in particular were stolen is odd. There were a number of more valuable pieces nearby that went untouched. It’s sad really, something of such a modest value resulted in the death of one elderly docent and two guards.”

“Those plans are why I’m here. I need to know what was depicted in those drawings. Knowing exactly what was taken would aid me greatly in some research I’m doing as well as possibly suggest who might have taken them. Is there anyone here I could talk to? Any photographs I could look at, that type of thing?”

Lendos nodded. “Yes, Miss Swan is our statuary specialist. Come with me, I’ll take you to

her office.” With that, he quietly lead the way toward the administrative area of the museum. Once they began to walk down the quiet hallway, Mr. Lendos noticed the dog walking beside Janice and was startled.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t notice you had a dog.”

“Argo has a nose for antiquities. I know she isn’t allowed, but she is too valuable to be left outside,” Janice explained, hoping the curator wasn’t angry.

“I understand quite well,” he assured her. “I’ve two Irish Wolfhounds at home. Ah, here we are,” he announced pausing at an office door halfway down the hall. Pushing it open, they made their way into a large workroom. A young woman was hunched over a large table, sorting through a collection of photographic prints. “Miss Swan?” Lendos ventured, getting her attention.

She lifted her head with a smile, which quickly froze into place at the sight of her guests. “Miss Swan, I’d like you to meet Dr. Janice Covington, her associate Melinda Pappas and…” he paused forgetting the dog’s name.

Janice opened her mouth to speak but was cut off. “Argo. That’s Argo,” the young woman hurried over to Janice, her hand extended. “I’ve been following your research on the Xena Scrolls. Dr. Covington, it’s so exciting to meet you. I’m Allien Swan, buy the way. Please call me Allien. And Miss Pappas? It’s so good to meet you too,” she said extending her hand to Mel as well.

Lendos smiled at the young woman’s enthusiasm. “Well then, I see you are in very capable hands. I’m sure Miss Swan will help you in any way she can. If you need me for any reason, I’ll be in my office at the end of the hall.”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Lendos,” Janice said warmly shaking the man’s offered hand. “I appreciate the help.”

When the door closed behind him Janice turned a winning smile to the young woman. Tall and thin, she had short blond hair and shining gray eyes. Out of habit Janice estimated that she was in her mid to late twenties and working at the museum while she worked on her doctoral thesis. No doubt sharp and dedicated, however not fully sure of herself in conversation, and felt more comfortable with dusty relics than with people her own age. The grin on her face also told Janice that all arguments of taste aside, she’d just met one of her idols. “Miss Swan, sorry, Allien, would a glass of water be out of the question?”

“Oh no, not at all. I’ll be right back,” she said darting from her desk to the door. Once she was gone, Janice turned to Mel and gently touched her arm.

“Mel, are you alright?” she asked softly.

Mel nodded, absently at first, until her eyes focused on Janice’s face. “Yeah, I’ll be alright. Water is a good idea,” she took a deep breath, trying to decipher exactly what it was she was feeling. “I’m shocked, that’s all. I know Xena did a lot of terrible things. In fact, I vividly remember a few of them. But one hundred seventy-eight people?” Briefly, Mel touched her hand to her temple.

“I know,” Janice supplied, trying to comfort her lover. “But you also know about the good Xena did-- not that it justifies the rest-- I just don’t want you to lose sight of it. Xena’s ultimate legacy is a good one, not bad.” Mel smiled weakly, which Janice returned openly. “And not as well publicized.” Mel genuinely grinned at that.

Allien Swan returned with two glasses of water, handing one to each woman. “So what can I do for you, Dr. Covington?” she asked, returning to her work table.

Taking a seat across from her, Janice explained. “I’m researching what happened to Xena and Gabrielle at the end of their lives and after they died. I was informed that plans for temple friezes were stolen. They would have been for the temple of Artemis. I think there might be a connection between those drawings and my current work. I need to see them. If you’ve got photographs or anything…”

Allien shook her head sadly. “Our documentation on that exhibit was stolen along with the six parchments.”

Janice didn’t try to hide her disappointment at the news. “This is not good,” she muttered.

“Does it sound like something Dr. Leesto would do?” Mel asked her lover, sharing her disappointment.

Shaking her head, Janice wasn't sure. "Leesto isn't beyond robbing museums surely, but she prefers to get her antiquities *before* they get to museums. It would have to be something she wanted very badly to make her hit a secured facility like this. Besides, I didn't even know about the drawings. It isn't like Cal to do her own research."

"Maybe she's stealing from someone other than you?" Mel suggested.

"It's possible. But then there are the dead guards and the docent. While Leesto isn't above murder, she finds it very messy and distasteful..."

"That's it!" Allien Swan interjected, receiving surprised glances from the other two women.

"The docent. Walter loved to sketch the various exhibits. He practically lived here- that is why he became a docent. Nice retired old man who loved the past and talking to others about it. He kept his sketch book in here." With boundless energy she dashed over to the bookcase on the other side of the room and carefully searched for the sketchbook.

"Old man named Walter, you say?" Janice added conversationally as Allien searched through shelves of books.

"Yes, Walter Tildus," she confirmed not looking up from her work. "A really sweet old man, I can't believe he's gone." Janice's eyes flashed over to Mel who returned her stunned gaze. "I suppose as long as you're here, you'll be going to the ruins of Amphipolis?" Allien asked as she walked back to the table with the hard bound sketch book in hand.

"Depends on what I discover here. This might take a while, is there someplace I can sit down to look this over?"

Allien beamed. "Sure, please, use my desk. I'll get another chair for you, Miss Pappas," she said as she handed Janice the book. After rolling another chair over for Mel's use she excused herself to get a bowl of water for Argo.

"That's a crush if I ever saw one," Mel commented seating herself next to her lover.

"Don't be silly," Janice protested. "Did you see the size of the rock in that engagement ring?"

"Not all crushes are as...extensive as yours, Janice. I don't think you're a threat to her marriage. I'm just saying she has a crush. Not that I blame her, of course," Mel added with a loving smile.

Smiling in return, Janice sat down at the desk and opened the sketch book. "Let's see what Mr. Tildus left us, shall we?" She was silent for a few moments as she leafed through the sketches. A variety of statues and other priceless antiquities had been drawn in ink over light graphite by a very skilled hand. He was economical in his linework, leaving the details crisp and readable. With rendering that was impeccable, Janice couldn't have done better for herself had she been looking at photographs.

"So, do you think the name is a coincidence?" Mel asked as Janice turned yet another breathtaking page.

"Not really, do you?" Janice replied as Allien returned with a bowl of water.

"Here you go, Argo," she said fondly as the dog enthusiastically headed over for a drink. She sat with Argo for a few moments, scratching her behind the ears when Janice called to her.

"Allien, is this the first panel drawing?" she asked, pointing to an unfamiliar sketch in the book.

Allien looked over her shoulder, getting as close as she dared, and nodded. "That's right." Thumbing through the next five pages, she nodded again. "Walter drew these in order. The frieze was an illustration of some story Walter knew. Stories of Solidad, or something like that. I'd never heard of them. I know that these six panels were removed from the temple of Artemis around the time of Christ. I've read little mention of them apart from that. One story says they were destroyed, another says they were hidden. The plans themselves were discovered around the turn of the century in Macedonia."

"What can you tell us about Amphipolis?" Mel asked as Janice continued to study the sketches. Allien glanced nervously at the absorbed archeologist and Mel chuckled warmly. "This isn't a test, I'd simply like to know. Janice won't pay any attention to us."

Taking a deep breath, Allien returned the smile. "It's just that this is her specialty more than mine. Okay, I'll give it a shot. Amphipolis was located amid low hills on the east bank of the Strymon river, just below its egress from Lake Achinos, close to the sea. It was on the border of the provinces of Chalcidice and Thrace. An effort took place from 1936-1937 to restore the *Lion of Amphipolis* statue, which now guards the Strymon river bridge. The name *Amphipolis* was given to the city by the Athenians when it became part of the Athenian League in 437 B.C. While considerably far away from Athens, it was timber-rich with wood that was necessary for the Athenians to build war ships. They'd become quite the naval power by then. While Athens was rich from the gold mines in Mt. Pangaion, Amphipolis was still their most valuable northern possession. So much so, that in 424 B.C., when General Thucydides saved the port of Eion, at the mouth of the Strymon, but not the city of Amphipolis from the Spartan Brasidas, he was exiled for twenty years by his countrymen. In 358 B.C...."

"You forgot Athens' unsuccessful attempt to retake the city in 421," Janice mumbled, eyes still focused on the sketch book.

"Right," Allien agreed. "Both Brasidas and the Athenian general Kleon were killed in a calvary battle." Allien smiled when she saw the archaeologist's unconscious nod of approval. "Okay, as I was saying, in 358 B.C. Philip of Macedon seized a string of northern settlements which included Amphipolis as well as Thessaly and Olynthus. A peace treaty was negotiated but in it Philip kept Amphipolis. In 168 B.C., after the battle of Pydna it became the capital of one of the four republics provisionally set up by the Romans. Saint Paul passed through Amphipolis on his way to Thessaloniki. The city was a station on the Via Egnatia and the seat of a bishop in the early Christian period. That's about all I know. Not much has been done excavation wise."

Janice looked up from the sketchbook and grinned. "Very impressive. How are you on Poteidaian history?"

A light blush began to creep to the young woman's cheeks as she ran a hand through her short blond hair. "A lot less, I'm afraid. Lets see, Poteidaia was located about sixty miles south of Amphipolis and was also conquered by the Athenians. The Potediaians however revolted in 432 B.C."

"I can't imagine where they'd get the ideas for such daring exploits," Mel said dryly as she pointedly looked at her partner. Janice smiled but continued to study the sketchbook.

"Since Olynthus is only 10 miles north of Poteidaia, it is possible that it was also taken by Philip of Macedon in 357 B.C. Other than that I'm afraid there isn't much history on the village."

"No matter," Janice said with a smile, "it doesn't have much connection with the Xena studies, other than being the birthplace of Gabrielle, of course."

"But as such, I'd think it would have great significance," Allien protested.

"Not really," Janice explained. "She left when she was a young woman. After that her home was with Xena. Later, when they were older, they settled in Amphipolis and she lived out her life there. She's made it clear in her writings that Amphipolis was more of a home than Poteidaia."

"It sounds like there was some kind of rift," Allien commented.

Janice visibly shuddered at the word and nodded once. "There was. While it is clear that she missed them, Gabrielle left her family willingly and intentionally."

"But not when she first left to travel with Xena," Mel interjected to ward off any misconceptions. "She returned to visit occasionally, it was after many years of traveling with Xena that she finally left home for good."

"Sounds like her family didn't approve of her traveling companion," Allien observed.

"Among other things," Janice added. Changing the subject, she opened the book to the first panel sketch. "I think I know what's going on with these drawings. Take a look."

Before she could join Mel and Janice at the work table, Mr. Lendos poked his head in the door and called to Allien. "Miss Swan, the stone masons you asked to see are here to look at the caryatids." With a frown she nodded.

"I'll be right there, Mr. Lendos." Looking back at Janice and Mel, she sadly shook her head. "I'm sorry, this is for an important restoration project. Please take as long as you'd like with the

sketchbook. I'm trying to locate some next of kin for Mr. Tildus. If I can't find any, I'm sure he'd like you to have it."

"Thank you very much," Janice said sincerely, shaking the young woman's hand again and handing her a business card. "Here is where you can reach me, that's home. I certainly would be interested in the book if no one else claims it."

Allien nodded and shook Mel's hand one more time. After a final goodbye to Argo, she walked out of the office, quietly closing the door behind her. When she'd gone, heiress and archeologist returned to the sketchbook.

The first drawing was clearly a depiction of the Greek gods. Ares stood sword in hand facing his half-sister Athena. Both figures stood over a representation of Mount Olympus at the bottom of the drawing. Each god pointed away from their bodies, towards earth. Aphrodite and Artemis stood near Athena, and Hephaestus stood near Ares. Immediately below, three women held out their hands, as if in warning toward the earth below. "I think this is an illustration of *The Challenge of Three Ages*," Janice explained. "We can see Ares and Athena, it's the duel. Here are the Fates warning the earth, I expect we're supposed to envision a baby, the champion of each god next to the gods that blessed them." Janice pointed as she spoke to the smaller figures of Aphrodite, Artemis and Hephaestus.

"So where is the god of chaos you mentioned?" Mel asked, looking intently at the drawing.

"This tornado like thing, I bet that's supposed to be her," Janice said, pointing to the top of the drawing.

"Her?" Mel asked.

Janice shrugged. "Possibly Valaska. Know anyone else who travels like a whirlwind?" Mel nodded in agreement then turned her attention to the second drawing as Janice flipped the page.

"I think this is the story of *The Oracle and the Amazons*," Janice announced.

"They certainly look Amazon," Mel agreed pointing to five female figures standing around a prone one.

"And here," Janice said pointing to the prone figure now sitting at a table writing. "Here is her prophecy." Above the table were the figures of an Amazon, a warrior and a baby. To the side of the baby, Amazons were on their knees covering their eyes, obviously in pain. Ares stood proudly behind the Amazons, beaming at the baby. Her gaze fixed on the drawing, Mel's expression darkened. "I guess this is the closest I'll ever get to Xena's baby pictures?" Janice asked, hoping to lighten the mood. "Are you ready to move on?"

Mel nodded, and Janice turned the page. "Let me guess," Mel asked. "Xena the Warlord?"

Sadly, Janice nodded. The tablet's central figure was a woman. She held a sword in one hand and a chakram in the other. The sword pierced the bodies of three peasants and dripped blood out the other side. In the background a village burned and other assailants killed defenseless villagers in several areas of the drawing. At the bottom warriors raised their swords in tribute. Above, Ares looked down smiling.

The fourth drawing was a bit of an improvement. Here two female figures were central. The warrior woman from the previous drawing and a shorter woman as well, holding a staff. The warrior was depicted in battle with an armed assailant, while the bard was shown comforting someone who had previously been attacked. Ares was shown with his back to the warrior woman. The whirlwind reappeared, this time behind the bard. Several feathers in her hair appeared to be drawn toward the vortex.

"Are those feathers?" Mel asked, pointing to the bard.

Janice nodded, "I think it became a custom in the later Amazon period. Feathers took the place of ceremonial masks. I think this is showing Gabrielle as an Amazon." Janice frowned as she gazed at the bottom of the drawing. "This doesn't look good. Here Ares is facing the whirlwind. That's got to be trouble."

"I didn't know they ever collaborated," Mel added.

"Yeah, me either, and that's what bothers me."

The fifth drawing depicted the God of War and warrior in heated battle. The expressions of

the combatants, so intent on the other's destruction was pronounced in the illustration. Swords locked, they appeared equally matched in battle. Below the main figures was a sarcophagus and the warrior woman standing with a broken chakram, half in each hand. An eye-like symbol looked down on the tomb the whirlwind small and in the distance.

In the final drawing, the whirlwind was large, appearing to sweep down on a village, destroying a funeral pyre. Below that scene, women warriors carried two coffins through a narrow rocky opening. In fact, rocky tunnels dominated the lower part of the drawing. Looking at the expertly rendered rock work, the color slowly drained from Janice Covington's face. "Caves," she groaned. "Why'd it have to be caves?"

Making their way to the front of the museum Mel was worried. Janice had been uncharacteristically quiet as she'd drawn copies of the illustrations from Walter Tildus' sketchbook into her own notebook. After that she'd given her lover the briefest of explanations as to why she hated caves, then, like the folding of a fan, she withdrew into herself. After a brief goodbye to Mr. Lendos and Miss Swan, the trio stood once more on the steps outside the Acropolis museum. "Where to now?" Mel asked.

Janice peered at the sun, checking her estimate of the time against her father's pocket watch. They'd been working for over three hours. "I'd like to get to get into something more practical and head for the ruins of Amphipolis. I don't care if the bodies aren't there. I'd like to see Xena's village for myself. Besides, it's possible there may be some clues there, pointing us in the direction of the cave."

Mel nodded as she noticed several smartly dressed women climb the steps to the museum door. As a tall woman approached Janice, she tripped, falling into the archeologist and knocking the satchel of books from her arm. The books spilled out onto the museum steps, the sapphire blue leather of the ancient book standing out in sharp relief from the rest. The woman tried to grab the thin book but was not as quick as the dog. In a flash Argo grabbed the tome with her teeth, and took off at a run. Janice recovered quickly and shoved the woman aside, grabbing her own notebook in the process. "Argo, run!" she shouted, although the dog was already on the move.

Mel didn't have much time to be amazed. As the reddish gold dog sprinted across the square, women appeared from everywhere to block her progress. Unfortunately for them, keep-away was the dog's favorite game and she was an expert. Able to change directions midstride, and not afraid to run into her assailants, she knocked several women to the ground. As soon as Janice had a good grip on her own notebook she urged Mel down the stairs to their waiting car. "Let's go." In moments they were being pursued as well.

Reaching their car first, Mel slid in behind the steering wheel, then decided it was not where she wanted to be. She'd only been driving for three months, and that was because Janice insisted on teaching her. Suspecting this might be why, she was not happy about it. "You drive," she urged her lover who shut the door against grabbing arms.

"No time, Mel, just go!" Mel opened and closed her mouth once. Melinda Pappas prided herself on staying calm in an emergency and this was definitely it. She started the car, letting out the clutch and hitting the gas in a less than fluid motion. The car lurched forward, dislodging the women who had latched onto the hood. "Drive around to the square, we've got to get Argo," Janice said, keeping a sharp lookout for her dog as the vehicle picked up speed. Mel nodded and raced into the square, making several surprised women leap out of the way to avoid being hit. "Okay, slow down when we get close but don't stop." Janice spoke calmly and clearly, but her voice was threaded with tension. When Argo was in sight, she opened her door and whistled loudly. Darting between two women who ran at her from opposite sides, the women collided and the dog leapt toward the open door into her mistress' waiting arms. The car shook with the impact of ninety pounds of muscled dog at a full run. Janice yelped painfully as the book hit her in the eye and Argo's forehead connected solidly with her own. With her arms wrapped tightly around her dog she shouted for Mel to step on it. "Let's go-- just don't take the alley," she said trying to be heard around mouthfuls of dog fur.

“Take the alley?” Mel asked, surprised at the request. Then she spotted it, a narrow alley near the back of the museum. She heard loud shouts as women headed for their cars, others still in pursuit on foot. The alley was indeed narrow. Unable to see out the side window due to the large dog in Janice’s lap she got too close to a brick building as they entered the confined passage. Having been unable to shut her car door, it was snapped off its hinges with an ugly crunch as the car sped down the cobblestone road.

“What are you doing?” Janice screamed, seeing the ground speed by.

“You said take the alley!” Mel shot back.

“I said DON’T take the alley. This is a one way alley and you’re going the wrong way!” Janice’s voice began to hold a note of panic as she felt her grip on the squirming dog in her lap slipping. Just then Mel heard the unmistakable sound of a large truck approaching. Slamming on the brakes Janice and Argo were almost thrown from the car as Mel threw the vehicle into reverse. Janice managed to get a firmer purchase on her dog as they were slammed back into their seats. Whether from fear or shock, Argo had stopped squirming and pressed against Janice’s body, perfectly still. Several women who had chased the automobile into the alley found themselves being chased by it. Running for all they were worth, everyone cleared the alley as the car emerged, followed immediately by a truck. Mel stayed in reverse until they reached the square once again. Spinning in a tight circle she proceeded forward once again, this time on regular streets, headed for the dock.

Speeding away from the Acropolis museum, Janice felt herself relax. No one was in pursuit and the confusion in the square persisted as they sped out of sight. “That was too close,” Janice mumbled as she loosed her vise like grip on Argo.

“I’m so sorry, Janice!” Mel pleaded, on the verge of tears. “I didn’t know the alley was one way, I could have gotten us killed.”

“Mel, please, don’t,” Janice said gently. “You did great. That was quick thinking, I tell you, you’re a natural behind the wheel. Besides, you can’t see when you’re crying, and now would be a bad time to run into something.”

“You’re right,” Mel agreed with a snuffle. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me.”

“It’s just the adrenalin,” Janice assured her. “It affects everyone differently. Now, just get us to the *Lovely Lunacy* in one piece, and we’ll be alright.” Nodding, Mel extracted a tissue from her pocket and dried her eyes. “How are you girl?” Janice asked the shaking dog in her arms. “Oh hell,” Janice groaned in a worried voice.

“What’s wrong?” Mel asked, briefly glancing over.

“Something happened to Argo, she’s bleeding,” Janice replied trying to inspect the dog without changing her grip on the large canine. With the side door missing the pavement whizzed by at an alarming rate. Trying to keep her body still, as well as Argo’s, she studied the dog closely to determine the extent of her injuries. “It looks like she broke off a toenail and got some cuts on one of her legs. I think she’s okay, just scared.”

“We’re almost there,” Mel said comfortingly as they pulled into the dock area.

As the car eased to a stop in front of her cousin’s yacht Janice let go of her dog. With the book still in her mouth, Argo half fell, half climbed out of the car, and took a few shaky steps. The connection with solid land seemed to improve the dog’s disposition dramatically, and aside from favoring one front paw slightly, she began to walk normally.

“She okay?” Mel joined her lover on the other side of the car.

“Yeah, I think so,” Janice replied. “But I still want to wrap up her foot when we get on board.”

“Ah, Janice?” Mel asked, her voice shaky.

“Yeah, Mel?” Janice replied absently, her attention focused on Argo.

“I think you’d better look.” The urgency in her lover’s voice startled Janice, whose head snapped up immediately. The entire crew of the *Lovely Lunacy* stood on the top deck with their hands firmly grasping the upper railing. A group of women in long overcoats stood behind the men. Judging by the terrified expressions the men wore, Janice suspected some heavy firepower concealed

beneath the black dusters. More women approached from both directions on the boat dock, as well as from the luxury yacht. Janice straightened her shoulders when she recognized the woman walking toward her as the one who had originally knocked her books to the ground. She was tall, trim with straight brown hair and an expression Janice Covington had seen many times cast in her direction. This woman was *very* annoyed. Letting her eyes wander over the women who were now surrounding them, Janice was amazed at the diversity of them. A few were older, looking like spry grandmothers. Some were her age and were dressed either as housewives or women from the workplace. Two wore nurse's uniforms, several looked like they belonged in a bank or a school. One woman even wore the traditional habit of a nun. It was apparent which women were joining them from the altercation at the museum. Those women were disheveled and more than a few showed signs of injury ranging from ripped dresses and skirts to a variety of scrapes and bruises.

"What do you want?" Janice asked hotly. She was in no mood for pleasantries, and these women were responsible for the limping of her dog. Only harm to Melinda Pappas could have made her more angry.

"We want the book, Dr. Covington. I think that should be obvious."

Janice glared up into the face of the woman standing a few feet away, a glare that grew darker when the woman calmly pulled out a gun.

"Oh my!" Mel breathed in surprise at the sight.

"Why the fuck do you want it?" Janice growled at her assailant.

The woman shook her head calmly and leveled the gun at Argo. "Dr. Covington, I don't want it, I just can't let you keep it. Simply put, there is too much at stake for this little research project of yours. It is vital that Xena and Gabrielle's bodies remain where they are-- hidden. Now send the dog over with the book."

With a frustrated sigh, Janice looked down at Argo. "Go ahead, girl. Give her the book." Without hesitation, the dog limped over, laying the book at the woman's feet. As she stooped to pick it up, not taking her eyes off of Janice, another woman rushed up and spoke to her in quiet tones. "We've loaded all of their belongings onto *The Charmer*. Quest, Emily says to bring them onboard at once."

"Fine, Kit, tell Emily we're on our way," the woman now identified as Quest replied.

The newcomer departed as Janice heard the sound of a car pulling up behind them. "Get into the car," Quest ordered evenly.

"You've got the book. What do you want with us?" Janice protested.

"We're taking you back to Alexandria," she replied, "You're going home, Dr. Covington, back to the United States."

"You're so sure we won't come back?" Janice couldn't help but ask.

"If you know what's good for you. This is a warning. Next time we won't hesitate to kill you if we have to." With a flick of the gun, Janice was instructed to turn around and walk to the waiting car.

She'd gone a few steps when she asked another question. "Who are you?"

"The Children of Solari," Quest replied before bringing the gun down onto the back of Janice Covington's neck, knocking her out cold.

"Ugh," Janice groaned painfully as her eyes began to flutter open. Immediately she was aware of several things. First, she was at sea. The disquieting rocking of her insides bothered her before she fully regained consciousness. The second thing she noticed was that, in spite of the throbbing of her head, she felt warm and comfortable. It took only a second to realize that she was laying down on a bed, her head comfortably resting in Melinda Pappas' lap. Long gentle fingers slowly stroked her hair and caressed her cheek. Then, suddenly, she was aware of a large warm wet slobbery tongue licking her chin and face, welcoming her back to the land of the fully conscious.

"Alright, Argo, that's enough," Mel said gently. "Go lay down, you need to rest yourself."

"How is Argo?" Janice asked as she sat up. Groaning against the spinning of the small cabin, she wished it was just from the headache.

“She’s fine,” Mel assured her lover. “Debby brought me some bandages and some peroxide to wash out the scrape. She’ll be good as new. Provided she stops chewing on the bandage,” she warned the dog in a stern voice. With a guilty expression, Argo stopped and rested her head on her front paws. Turning her attention to her lover once again, she looked deeply into pained green eyes. “Janice, we know these women.”

“What are you talking about?” Janice grumbled, dabbing at the bloody bruise on the back of her head. “I’ve never seen them before ...*in... my... life,*” With realization dawning on her she glanced toward the door. “Of course, the Children of Solari. These are the descendants of the Amazons.”

“Yes, and they’re trying to protect Xena and Gabrielle from people they think might hurt them,” Mel added thoughtfully.

“Hurt them? They’re dead, Mel, and they’ve been dead for millenium.”

“Not *completely* dead, as you’ll recall,” Mel said with a knowing smile. “Janice, you’ve got to talk to them, convince them of who you are and that you need their help.”

Janice nodded. It sounded crazy, but so did most of her research proposals of late. “Who’s at the door?” She asked, blinking in surprise at her suitcase on the floor by the bed.

“Carmen and Kate,” Mel replied. “They brought us our things from my cousin’s yacht. Except for your whip and gun that is.”

With more relief than she cared to admit, Janice changed into the clothes that fit her like a second skin. “Take it easy,” Mel warned her lover gently, “you’ve got a black eye from where Argo got you with the book, and you’ve taken a bad blow to the head.”

“Did they hurt you?” Janice asked, danger threading her voice.

“No, love. They’ve been very kind. Quest said she couldn’t take the chance of you doing something stupid, that’s why she knocked you out. They take this protection thing *very* seriously.”

Janice shrugged. “In a way I suppose I should feel flattered, only I don’t,” she said as she winced again at the throbbing of her head. Trying to stay steady in spite of the rocking, she rapped sharply on the inside of the door. A panel covering a small window was pulled aside revealing two inquiring faces peering in. “Hi, ah, Kate and Carmen is it? Look, I respect the fact that you folks are so interested in protecting Xena and Gabrielle,” she began brightly. “Believe me when I tell you that Mel and I are *the last* people in the world who would want any harm to come to them. We’re ah... quite attached to them in a way...”

“How so?” Carmen asked suspiciously.

Janice fished under her shirt and withdrew the chain that held her half of the celtic symbol Xena had given Gabrielle centuries before. For its protection, Mel had each of the necklaces set into the chakram circles she had made for herself and her lover. Two sets of eyes grew wide seeing the necklace before them. “We’re their descendants,” Janice explained. “Just as you are descended from the Amazons.”

Suddenly there was a flurry of excitement outside the door, Janice heard several voices shouting instructions and the rattle of a key being inserted into the lock. “Quick, Shayne, tell Emily it’s them-- they’ve got the medallion.” Carmen or Kate shouted, Janice couldn’t tell who. With one powerful rock of the boat, her world spun out of control and Janice Covington dropped to the deck, unconscious again.

...In the two weeks it took Xena and me to reach Poteidaia things between us had drifted back to normal for the most part. We spent a fair amount of time each day talking to one another both in ways we hadn’t for a long time, and in ways we never had before. Xena never failed to amaze me. Just when I thought I had her figured out, I’d discover some new facet to her that would endear her to me all over again. It that two week journey from the Amazon highlands to my home village, she was surprisingly open, candid and tender. When the fields that surrounded Poteidaia came into view, I felt the only barrier that still separated us was physical.

For the fortnight it took to get there, Xena and I spent our nights curled up together under the stars, but that was it. I suppose at first we were both too worried about making some small mistake. Perhaps she thought I still saw her as a warlord blinded by Ares. Maybe she couldn’t believe

I still wanted her in that way. Maybe we were each waiting for some signal from the other. Whatever it was, we were close, but not as close as we could have been. Not as close as we belonged.

We made it as far as the village square before someone recognized us. After that, it was only a matter of minutes before Lila came rushing out of my parent's home to greet us. Seeing my sister's face, I couldn't help but reflect on the last time I'd been home. That dreadful time three seasons ago when I married Perdicus. My mind flashed back to his enthusiasm, his desperation to be wed. Both of our families were gone from Poteidaia, to a regional meeting up north. He refused to wait the three days it would have taken them to return. When my family did return, they found not a blushing bride, but a mourning widow. I remember that the rains started when they arrived. I stayed at home just long enough for them to return, to deliver the bad news to my family and that of Perdicus. As soon as that task was done, I told Xena I was ready to go.

It didn't really dawn on me until the moment I stood facing Lila again that this visit would be a lot harder than simply making sure everyone was alive and that Xena's nightmare had been hers alone. This was my first reunion with them since all of that pain, and only the second time Xena had interacted with my family at all.

Lila hugged me fiercely, a gesture I returned in kind. After all we'd been through, I was closer to Lila than anyone else in my family. "Gabrielle," she said pulling back a little, "why didn't you send word you were coming?"

"I didn't want anyone to make a fuss. Xena and I won't be staying more than a couple of days."

I felt a shudder course through Lila's body at the mention of Xena's name. Reluctantly, she nodded in my warrior's direction mumbling, "Hello, Xena."

"Hello, Lila," Xena replied formally, but with warmth and kindness threading her voice. I think Lila was surprised.

Lila ran to the fields to tell mother and father we were there. Shortly thereafter, the three of them returned. Xena got Argo settled in our barn and gave her mare a thorough grooming. I was a little shocked to see Lila follow Xena inside. She'd been afraid of Xena when the warrior rescued us from Draco during her first visit to Poteidaia. After that, she'd grown jealous of the warrior and the relationship that she and I had forged. With a rueful sigh, I could only imagine what she might think if she realized how much deeper my bond with Xena had become. Still, watching her silently follow my warrior into the barn, I knew exactly what she was going to do.

Before leaving home, Perdicus' younger brother Erasmus used to fit shoes on the village horses. Lila would sit quietly for hours on a bale of hay and watch him work. As I walked across the village square to pay my respects to Perdicus' family, I envisioned my sister quietly watching as Xena tended to her horse. As I softly rapped on the door of my husband's home, I don't think I ever envied her more.

Dinner that night was a strained affair. Mother and father were happy to see me, I didn't doubt that. But there was a pain and sadness interwoven in their joy that was palpable. Maybe it was because they knew I'd never be home for good, or perhaps it was simply out of fear of the company I kept. My heart went out to Xena. While she'd never been the type of person to care much about what others thought of her, my parents' cold civility must have hurt. I had to remind myself that this was Xena: Warrior Princess. What would the Destroyer of Nations care what two simple villagers from Poteidaia thought? Then I realized I knew better. These two simple villagers were the parents of the woman she loved with all her heart and soul. While she might take an arrow through the gut with barely a second thought, my parents' careful politeness was hurting her. Still, she held her head high and took everything my family dished out with warmth and grace. I'd be hard pressed to think of a time I ever saw Xena more magnificent.

I made my own share of mistakes that night which made things even harder for my love. My mother asked what I'd been up to and I made the mistake of telling her. I suppose the storyteller in me couldn't help it. I told her about the Amazons, how I'd become Queen and battled Valaska. They had heard about Xena's rumored death so I filled them in on that as well. I kept my recollections far from my heart, telling only tales I could tell to a room full of strangers. I made no

mention of Xena and I becoming lovers. Instead I talked about Cecrops the Lost Mariner and his journey to find love. For my own sake, I omitted any mention of Ulysses and the real reason Xena and I had come to visit. Maybe it was my inward editing that kept me from noticing the gazes of my parents growing darker with each adventurous tale I told. When the dishes from dinner were finally cleared away they were stern and moody. Their faces said it all. What I saw as adventure and experience, they saw as danger and hardship. They blamed Xena for taking their little girl from the safe confines of the village. They'd lost the little girl who didn't fit in, and gained a grown woman who was more like a stranger than a daughter.

We didn't talk much about Perdicus. I thank the Fates for that bit of luck. I'm sure my parents thought the loss still too painful to talk about, and in a way, they were right. I couldn't talk about Perdicus, not because I loved him so deeply, but because I didn't love him enough. Guilt and remorse were the legacy of my marriage, a marriage that never should have taken place. Absently, I wondered if I'd be able to keep that sad truth from my family. Gaia herself knows I tried to keep it from myself.

When the hour grew late, Lila got up for bed. "We've left your bed, Gabrielle," mother said awkwardly. It was clear they didn't have the faintest idea as to what they were going to do with Xena.

Xena stood gracefully and headed for the door. "If you don't mind, I'd like to sleep in the barn. I've got some sewing to do and I don't want the light keeping anyone up."

Father grunted in agreement, obviously relieved. I kissed my parents goodnight then followed Lila to our room as Xena headed for the barn. "It's getting cold," I commented to Lila as I selected a warm blanket from my trunk, "I think I'll take this to Xena."

"You care about her a lot, don't you, Gabrielle?" Lila asked simply.

"She's my best friend in all the world," I replied. "And I love her dearly."

"It's good to have a friend like that," my sister remarked as I quietly opened the door. "Especially now that Perdicus is gone." Her words hung heavy in the night air as I silently made my way to the barn.

I saw Xena just inside the doorway, her armor was off, as well as her boots and bracers, but she wasn't sewing. Her thread and needle were out, I could see them resting on the saddle bag at her side, but her attention was clearly elsewhere. "Hi," I said softly as I entered. "I brought you an extra blanket."

"Thank you, Gabrielle," she replied with a soft smile. If I hadn't known better I would have almost attached the word 'shy' to that smile. But, simply put, 'shy' was not a word that could be associated with Xena.

"I'm sorry about my parents," I added, wanting to bridge the silence that hung between us.

She accepted the blanket as I sat down next to her on the straw. "There is nothing to apologize for. Your parents love you very much and I don't blame them for worrying. I worry about you, too."

"No Xena, it isn't that," I countered. "The problem is they treat you like it's your fault. That isn't fair. For one, it implies that I'm incapable of making my own decisions, and that simply isn't true."

"They love you too much to be angry with you, Gabrielle, I'm sure it's easier to blame someone else. You've got to admit, I make a pretty big target. Besides, I think anyone who has spent any time with you knows you're quite capable of making your own decisions. You have a way of letting people know that." She smiled as she said it, a slightly lopsided grin she wore when she was feeling playful. My heart pounded painfully at the sight-- it'd been much too long since I'd seen that grin.

I leaned in close resting my head on her shoulder. "I love you, Xena, with all my heart," I murmured. "You being here with me, it means a lot."

"That's why I'm here, Gabrielle," she said gently. "It isn't just to spend time with your family... although I think we've actually grown quite close."

"Very funny," I countered. "I knew you had a sense of humor somewhere, I just didn't

know you kept it in Poteidaia. Don't worry, we won't have to spend all day with them tomorrow. I'll help mother with the morning chores, then there is a place I'd like to show you. A little spot near the coast that was a favorite of mine growing up."

"Then I look forward to seeing it," Xena replied resting her chin on the top of my head as she wrapped her arms around me. I don't know why but she started to sing. She softly hummed a tune that I knew was a particular favorite of hers. I wanted so badly to spend the night with her, to hold her until morning but I knew that if I didn't get back to Lila soon, my curious sister would come looking for me.

"It's been too long, Xena," I said as I regretfully extracted myself from her embrace.

"Too long for what?" she asked.

"Too long since I've heard you sing, too long since I've seen you smile, and too long since I've felt your touch." Xena smiled a wonderful, radiant smile that told me she couldn't agree more. As if a missing puzzle piece were put into place, the connection was there. We could both feel it. She leaned in and kissed me, a kiss that was warm and soft, full of love and the promise of devotion. Although I know she didn't intend for it, the kiss left us both hungry for more. When we broke we gazed at each other breathless. We would have to wait until tomorrow, and from the way I felt, tomorrow was a long way off.

"G'night, Gabrielle," Xena called to me when I reached the barn door. A familiar hum surged through my body at the sound of my name falling from her lips. Had I not heard Lila outside, approaching the barn, I would have turned around and taken Xena right then and there. I turned my head to look back as I opened the barn door, my other hand going reflexively to my lips that still tingled from her kiss. Her eyes shined with desire and playfulness. Glad I wasn't the only one of us who was going to have trouble sleeping, I returned her smile as I left.

"Sweet dreams, Xena," I said, then quietly closed the barn door behind me.

"I thought you'd gotten lost," Lila said as she met up with me outside the barn.

"No, Xena and I just got to talking. That's all," I replied.

When we'd gotten ourselves tucked into bed, Lila piped up once again. "Do you miss Perdicus?" she asked.

Boy, was that a question out of the blue. "Of course I do, why?" I replied.

"I mean," she continued, "do you miss *him*," she amended, stressing the last word.

I was puzzled until it dawned on me she was talking about: sex. I was glad we'd blown out the lamp because a flush crept to my cheeks at the question. Had I not been wanting Xena so badly I'm sure I could have answered that question in the light of day, but as it was, my thoughts kept wandering off in more intimate directions. "Ah, well yes, certainly. I mean it's natural to miss that." I know she meant Perdicus but I simply couldn't answer the question with him in mind. To be honest, once I'd been with Xena, all memories of my husband were blissfully distant in that respect.

"What did it feel like?" Lila asked, unabashed.

"Lila!" I exclaimed, shocked at her question, although I should have expected it. Unfortunately, my sister could talk to me about *anything*.

"Well, his kiss," she amended, doing her best to be tactful. "Was it special?"

"Very," I replied, replaying in my mind the recent kiss I'd shared with Xena. "When you love someone, really deeply love them, as you've never loved anyone in your life, it can't help but feel very special. Your whole body resonates with their touch, you can feel it when they're near even if you can't see them. When you're apart, the memories linger in your mind and your body responds all over again. It's wonderful, Lila, like magic."

"Did it hurt?" she asked breathlessly.

"Goodness no," I replied without thinking, then remembered we were talking about Perdicus. "Well, a little maybe. But don't worry, it passes then you feel wonderful things."

"Oh," she said, apparently satisfied with my answer. Then came up with another question. "So what do you and Xena talk about?"

The change in topic from making love with Xena where Lila assumed I meant Perdicus to actually meaning Perdicus to friendship with Xena was a little jarring, but I think I handled it

smoothly. "I can't think of anything Xena and I don't talk about," I answered truthfully. "What do you talk about with your friends?" I asked.

"My friends aren't murderous warlords," she replied.

I rolled onto my side to look at Lila across our darkened bedroom. "Xena isn't like that anymore, Lila, you know that."

"Yes, but does she talk to you about it?" she asked. "Since you've been gone I've heard stories. Xena is responsible for the death of thousands of people. Aren't you afraid that someday she's going to lose her temper and hurt you? And how can she live with herself knowing what she's done? It's scary, Gabrielle, you being with her. Mother and father are scared, and sometimes I'm scared too. I heard father talking to a visitor one night, he'd heard a rumor that we gave you to Xena so she wouldn't attack our village. And that's not the worst thing I've heard..."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Lila," I said reaching out to touch her arm for emphasis. "You know why I left. You know that I've never felt like I belonged here. With Xena I feel that I do belong, and I can't tell you what a difference that makes. It's not just seeing the world and having adventures... it's hard to explain. I think that sometimes things are just destined to be. I've learned a lot from Xena, but I've also been helpful to her as well. While I doubt she would openly admit it, I think she's learned a thing or two from me, too. Her past haunts her constantly. Yes, she did terrible things, but she's changed so much. She is prepared to one day stand in judgment for the things she's done, but in the meantime, she uses every fiber of her being to make a difference for good now. Maybe I should be afraid of her, but I can't. We've camped in the cold and I've woken up with her blankets wrapped around me as well as my own. In times when our food ran low and game was scarce, she'd go hungry to see to it that I didn't. One time while stopping at a village for supplies she came out of a dry goods shop with parchment for me so I could write to you when her boots were so old she'd worn a hole through one. Lila, how can I fear someone like that?"

I could tell from my sister's expression that I'd just given her a lot to think about. Her brow was creased as she chose her next words carefully. "I think Xena can see something in you that mother and father can't. Something that I'm only beginning to see. You must be very special, Gabrielle, for Xena to treat you like that."

"She makes me feel special, Lila. She truly does," I whispered before the tears slipped from my eyes and I drifted off to sleep.

I awoke early the next morning. In fact, it was unusually early for me. Deciding to make the most of it, I quietly got up and dressed. My conversation the night before with Lila still resonated through my mind. While I had answered her truthfully, about Xena at least, I had also left out several details. There were times that I did indeed fear Xena, when I would have been crazy not to, but they were very rare. I also neglected to explain the changes I'd seen in Xena during our travels. I didn't doubt that I'd impacted Xena's life as deeply as she'd impacted mine, but Xena's privacy was important to her. Often her image alone was enough to prevent a fight, the mystique she'd unconsciously groomed since before her change for good. It was not my place to tell my sister, the biggest blabbermouth in Poteidaia, that Xena was as human as everyone else.

Deciding that a soak in a nice hot bath would be the perfect way to start the day I headed out behind our house to see if father had kept the big tub. I grinned with delight when I saw that he had. It was a large oak tub we'd used in the summer to cool off. Father would fill it with water and all of the village children would splash and play in it. It was smaller than I remembered, but I suppose that happens when one gets bigger. Still, it could fit four adults comfortably, maybe five. I started a fire on the grate outside. It would take a lot of hot water to fill this tub but a luxurious soak would be well worth it. Besides, when we were done, the water would still be fine for washing clothes.

Far enough away from the sleeping rooms of the house, I didn't worry too much about waking anyone. I practiced with my staff as I waited for each bucket of water to heat then put another on the fire as I emptied the contents of the hot bucket into the tub. The oak retained the heat nicely and the day was warming up, so I was reassured that my efforts were not going to waste.

I'd been working at my project for an hour or so when Xena joined me. Her eyes sparkled as she enthusiastically pitched in to help. Another hour or so later Xena and I were enjoying our bath when Lila came looking for me.

"Gabrielle!" she exclaimed, stunned I suppose. "What are you doing?"

"Taking a bath," I replied. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"But out here?" she stammered, "what if someone sees you?"

I smiled ruefully. It was hard to believe I'd been that modest once. Traveling with Xena had certainly cured me of that. Xena's example, as well as active interest in my body had convinced me I had nothing to be ashamed of. "Lila, we're behind the house and unless the neighbors can peer through the hill behind us I'd say we've nothing to worry about. Besides we used to play in this tub all the time as kids."

"We were young then, Gabrielle," she said in a superior tone. "And not fully *grown*," she added pointedly looking at my chest which was submerged in the clear water.

That got a chuckle out of Xena. Lila smiled at her, then looked away blushing furiously. She'd gotten a good look at Xena's nude body reclining in the tub, that much was obvious. "Don't worry about it, Lila," Xena assured her, nodding in my direction. "Things always look bigger underwater."

"Hey!" I protested, slapping water in Xena's direction. "Just because I don't have Mount Olympus sitting on my chest..."

Xena slapped water back and in moments we were engaged in a water fight with Lila laughing her head off at the sight. She stuck her hand in the water to join in, splashing water in my direction and made the fatal mistake stepping around the tub within Xena's reach. In an instant Xena had scooped her up and dumped her, head first and fully clothed into the tub.

"Aughh," she sputtered when she righted herself, "you pig-headed brute!" she yelled, clearly without thinking.

"Pig-headed?" Xena asked evenly, arching an eyebrow.

"Brute?" I echoed, realizing that I'd never seen Lila that particular shade of red in her entire life.

"Ah, um..." she stammered at Xena, looking like she expected to be dead at any moment. "I didn't mean that," she said nervously glancing at Xena's sword and chakram which rested on the woodpile, along with our clothes.

"Too bad," Xena said thoughtfully, "because I've never been called that before. Murderous brute and merciless brute surely, but the swine reference is new."

I could see that Lila was holding her breath too scared to speak. It was only when Xena's face broke into a wide grin that she visibly relaxed. "So you're not going to kill me?" she asked in a small voice.

"Not today," she replied then added, "probably."

With a shy grin Lila decided to join us in our bath now that she was fully soaked anyway. With my help she shucked off her soaked clothes and we spent the morning catching up. I realized I'd done most of the talking last night and it was nice to find out what she'd been up to. She washed my hair, then I washed hers, then Xena's. When we finally emerged from the now tepid tub of water Lila was actually engaging Xena in conversation, sort of.

"What's that scar from?" Lila asked pointing to a deep scar on Xena's side.

"Crossbow bolt," Xena answered simply.

"And that one on your thigh?" she continued noting another thin white line.

"Which one?" Xena asked looking down. "Oh, that one, a sword... a two handed broadsword if my memory serves me correctly."

When I'd dressed I went into the house to get some dry clothes for my sister. When I emerged she was still at it, only now she was asking as she helped my lover with her armor. I felt a slight twinge of jealousy at the sight then put it aside. I did not have to worry about Lila that way. She was much too boy-crazy. "What about this one on your neck?" Lila asked lightly touching the side of Xena's throat.

Xena's eyes flashed over to me as she answered, "Bacchae bite," she said with a knowing grin.

"You were bitten by a Bacchae?" Lila breathed in awe.

"A ferocious, voracious Bacchae with very sharp fangs," Xena added.

"Did it hurt?" my sister wondered, hanging on Xena's every word.

"Not exactly," my lover replied, a sensuous edge to her voice.

"Well, Lila," I blurted deciding it was time to change the subject, "let's surprise mother and father with breakfast." She nodded and headed inside. "Not exactly," I muttered to Xena as I followed my sister indoors.

"Well, it didn't," Xena said innocently as she followed behind.

Breakfast went much smoother than the previous dinner. Mother and father were still reserved but quite pleased at the prepared meal that greeted them that morning. I'd learned a thing or two about cooking during my travels and no doubt they were surprised at the results. Mother asked what I'd planned for the day so I explained that after helping her with the morning chores I was going to show Xena around the nearby countryside and take a picnic. Lila didn't even miss a beat.

"Can I go too?" she asked hopefully.

That was a mistake. Of course she would want to go. Before the disappointment could show on my face as my plans for a romantic afternoon went up in smoke, my father spoke up and saved the day. Well, saved the day for me at any rate.

"No, Lila, you may not go," he said sternly his eyes touching on Xena briefly. "You promised Healer Tessa that you would help her with her mending."

"Maybe next time, Lila," Xena offered gently. "You don't want to break your word to anyone, especially a healer."

I saw mother smile at that, the first actual smile she'd ever flashed in Xena's direction. I only hope that Xena saw it, too.

After breakfast, as Lila went off to help Tessa, Xena helped me with the household chores. She was outside splitting wood for the cookfire as I helped mother with the dishes. "So how long are you and the warrior staying again?" father asked, trying to sound casual.

"She has a name," I chided gently. "Are you trying to get rid of me already?" I asked, keeping my tone light.

He looked at me seriously, no trace of humor in his face. "We've lost one daughter to that warrior, excuse me... Xena. Isn't that enough?"

Anger flaring to the surface, I put down my dishcloth. "You think because Lila treats Xena like a human being that she's going to leave with her? It's funny, I don't recall being dragged from this house two years ago at sword point!"

"Gabrielle, please," mother urged, trying to diffuse the argument that was inevitable.

"She's a dangerous woman," father continued, raising his voice a little. "I'm sorry you're too blinded by hero-worship to see it."

"Hero-worship?" I repeated incredulous. "*I'm* blinded by *hero-worship*?! Suddenly a realization dawned on me, a particularly ugly one. "You don't think I matter to Xena, do you? You think she just lets me tag-along to do the cooking and the cleaning, to keep her entertained between adventures," Father looked away. I'd hit him too close to home. "Well I have news for you, for both of you. Xena appreciates and respects me more than either of you ever will. She doesn't think that my dreams are immature, that my ambitions are unobtainable. She says I can go as far as my abilities and hard work will take me. Two years ago I never would have suspected that a reformed warlord from Amphipolis would have more faith in me than my own parents."

"Stop right there, Gabrielle," mother warned me in a voice I'd only heard once or twice growing up. "That isn't fair. You don't know how it's been, how father has stood up for you." She threw down her dish rag and glared at me. "He's come home with a bloody face more than once defending you against hurtful things people have said. What happened to Perdicus wasn't right,

Gabrielle, it wasn't."

"You don't think I agree with you?" I said quietly.

"Gabrielle, he was killed defending you from Callisto. That woman was only here because of Xena,"

"So if I didn't travel with Xena, Perdicus would still be alive," I finished the thought for her.

"And you'd be happily married," she added.

My eyes burned with unshed tears as I looked at my mother. "I might be married, but I wouldn't be happy."

"You don't know that," father warned.

"Has everyone forgotten that had Xena not come by this way two years ago a bunch of us would have been enslaved by Draco?" I said forcefully, but still hoping to keep this discussion from Xena's keen ears.

"So the safety of the village cost me one of my daughters," my father shot back sullenly, "and you expect me to be happy about that." He spun on his heel and stormed out the back door, passing Xena as she came in carrying the firewood.

"Mother," I said gently as I could, tears falling from my eyes, "I didn't belong here, you both must have realized that by now. If I hadn't left when I did, I would have found some other way. I love you, so much but I just couldn't stay."

Mother cried as well as she took me into her arms. "I know, Gabrielle," she soothed, "and father knows it, too. It's just hard for him to admit it. You and Lila mean the world to him, to both of us. We just miss you so much."

I hugged mother fiercely, "I know, mamma," I whispered, "I know."

We both regained our composure, and she gently pushed me away. After dabbing at her eyes with the dishtowel she looked at Xena squarely. "Xena, I want to apologize for the way Herodotus and I have treated you. It's clear that you mean a great deal to Gabrielle, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking such good care of my daughter."

"Gabrielle means the world to me, Hecuba," Xena replied simply. "I'd give my life to protect her."

"I know you would, Xena," mother agreed. "I pray it never comes to that." The emotional moment passed, mother became all business once again. "Let's see, I think we have a picnic to prepare."

Xena and I rode Argo to a secluded glade high atop a cliff overlooking the brilliant blue sea. The weather was warm, but the air mild, and the sky picture perfect for a picnic. A lone cypress tree with full branches provided shade over a grassy knoll and it was there we spread out the blanket for our feast. "Not very secluded," Xena commented, noting the dense foliage twenty paces behind us and the open trail that led to the glade.

"Well for an invading war party maybe not, but no one comes here. When I was young the other kids always wanted to take the trail that led down to the beach. I was the only one who loved this spot, high above, overlooking it all."

"Why was that?" Xena asked tenderly.

"Because I wanted a place where I could think and dream in peace," I answered. I grinned in spite of myself. "And now I'm here with someone who fills my dreams whether I'm awake or asleep."

"Gabrielle," she purred as I moved into her arms for a long delicious kiss.

That picnic I always remembered as the single most wonderful picnic in my life. Everything was perfect. The sound of waves crashing on the shore echoing from far below kept time in counterpoint to the beating of our hearts. The sun was warm, the breeze gentle which caressed and cooled the heated skin of our bodies. Xena and I took our time feeding each other, talking, flirting, binding our hearts and souls together once again. It reminded me of the first time we'd been together, in the Amazon village after fighting Valaska. The difference this time was that we were alone and wonderfully isolated from everyone and everything.

Earlier, while Xena packed our food into Argo's saddlebags, mother had gone outside. When she returned her apron was full of fresh picked strawberries from the plants along side the house. As Xena held the succulent berries for me to taste, my lips brushed her fingers again and again. When I could stand it no more I stilled her hand with my own and drew her warm fingers into my mouth. I sucked on them gently as a seductive smile eased across Xena's face. "Yes," she whispered, "I love that."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked as I withdrew my lips from her fingers. "Care to tell me what else you love?"

I moved my mouth to her wrist, keeping eye contact with her as I slowly placed moist kisses up the inside of her arm.

"I love the way you kiss me," Xena replied, her voice low and husky and full of promise. "I love the way your touch sets me on fire. I love the way your skin feels and how you move as my hands touch your body. I especially love the way you taste, when you're wet and ready. The sensation of your climax against my lips and tongue and how my fingers reach so deep inside of you... Gabrielle, I love it."

I was dumbfounded. Xena was a lot of things, but being known as a talker certainly was not one of them. The pulsing between my legs brought me back to reality and I touched her cheek softly. "Will you show me, Xena?"

"Yes," she breathed and claimed my lips with her own. Gods, it felt so good to wrap my arms around that leather clad body again. There were so many scents I associated with Xena. Regardless of where I was, or what I was doing, I couldn't help but respond to the scent of leather, mixed with a hint of sharpening oil. Her hair smelled of herbs, rosemary and lavender since that had been in the soap we'd used that morning. I marveled once again at its softness as my fingers threaded through her hair and I held her mouth close to mine.

She lowered me to the blanket, roughly shoving the satchel of food out of the way. Holding her body above mine, one elbow supported her weight as her free hand roamed over my exposed skin. She took her time, with feather light touches until I thought I'd go mad with need. I sucked on the skillful tongue that searched out the depths of my mouth, toying with my lips and throat. "Xena," I groaned with want, "this isn't fair."

Straddling my hips she began to undo her leathers as I unlaced my top. Her armor had been discarded some time ago when we'd set up the picnic. In one fluid motion the garment came over her head then she quickly discarded her breeches. My eyes hungrily roamed the naked body of my lover. I wanted it all, and was having some difficulty deciding where to start. With a practiced hand, she removed my skirt and breeches, then lowered herself to me once again. My bliss at the contact was short lived as my hunger for her intensified. Xena might have been the picture of contentment as she reacquainted herself with my body but I simply did not have the patience to wait.

I snapped my hips sharply and rolled her over onto her back. I think she was surprised, but I could tell she was loving every moment. "Please, Xena," I urged, crazy with desire, "let me taste you, now."

"Yes," she breathed, her eyes half lidded in pleasure. I started at her neck and kissed my way down her abdomen, stopping briefly at each glorious breast to pay my respects. As I teased my fingers through her curly down, she stopped me.

"No, Gabrielle," she said tightly, "the other way." Seeing what she meant, I repositioned my body on top of hers, feeling my erect nipples press into her hard abdominal muscles. The muscles of her thighs rippled as she moved her legs apart for me. With a giddy grin I continued my exploration. A bolt of electricity caused my grin to vanish as Xena's mouth pressed delightfully against me. I enjoyed the sensation of her tongue roaming along the rim of my outer lips. My hands tickled up and down the inside of her thighs. Only when I saw her quivering with expectation did I lower my mouth and taste the moisture that had seeped from her core. "Yes, Gabrielle," she groaned, momentarily distracted from her own rediscovery. She quickly recovered though, and in moments we were rocking in tandem to the pleasure we were giving each other.

I didn't know if it would be possible to climax together, but I was determined to try. When I

felt Xena's body quicken, I slowed my ministrations to casual exploration. Xena did the same to me and we teased and toyed with each other mercilessly. Her sounds of passion and delight were muffled, but I could feel the perspiration building on our bodies, making our skin slick. Finally, when I thought I could hold off no longer I inserted two fingers deep into Xena's opening, then added a third. Her muscles clamped around me like a vice as her tongue drove me faster and harder. I was almost there when I felt the pressure of her tongue increase deliciously and she pressed two fingers deep into my core. Pleasure surged through me, heightened by the vibrations that coursed against my mouth and hand. Xena and I had indeed reached that peak together. Neither of us screamed, but we must have done something because a flock of birds took flight from the nearby shrub. My body went limp as I rested my wet cheek against Xena's thigh. "Woman, I love you," I panted, my breath against her center making her shiver.

"Heart and soul, Gabrielle," she agreed. "Heart and soul."

We spent the afternoon like that, making love more times than I would care to count. It felt so good to finally be together again, neither of us had the willpower to stop until Apollo started his descent from the sky. We were both sore but sated when we led Argo from the glade back to the village.

"What's this?" Xena remarked, stopping by the bush closest to the trail.

"That's where all the birds were," I supplied.

"What birds?" Xena asked.

"The birds that took flight while we were...busy." I was a little surprised. It wasn't like Xena not to notice those things.

She peered at the ground critically then glanced at my boots, "Those weren't birds, Gabrielle. That was Lila."

## Chapter 6: Homecomings

"Ack!" Janice sputtered shaking her head with a start. The cold water dripped from her skin spotting her shirt in several places. "What the hell was that for!" she demanded as she wiped her face, eyes scanning the assembled women, looking for whomever was holding the glass.

Mel put the now empty water glass on the floor and smoothed the strawberry blond bangs on her lover's forehead. "We were worried Janice, you fainted and weren't waking up. Are you alright?"

Shaking off her disorientation, the archeologist was helped to a sitting position. "Yeah, I'm fine." From the assembled group another woman kneeled down to look Janice directly in the eye. The woman was attractive with blond curly hair that hung well past her shoulders. Janice guessed the woman to be a couple of years older than herself, and regarded her with a suspicion Janice instantly related to. "Who are you?" the archeologist asked sullenly.

"My name is Emily Stevens. *The Charmer* is my ship," she said matter of factly as she handed Janice an ice pack. The woman nodded at the archeologist's eye. Janice touched her right eye gingerly noting, that it was almost swollen shut. "Quest tells me that you're rather insistent about this Xena business," Emily continued conversationally.

Janice studied the woman with her good eye. She fairly radiated decisiveness. This explained why she was in charge. Janice wasn't surprised this woman was calling the shots, it was in her blood. "I suppose you're behind that little love note I received on the USO transport?"

"I had Quest leave it there, yes," Emily admitted. "You really should pay attention to warnings like that, Dr. Covington, they're for your own good." Leaning back on her heels, Emily glanced at another of the women that had gathered around. "Shayne tells me you've got an unusual medallion," she prompted.

Janice held the necklace up for inspection. "The outer rings were added recently to protect the inner piece. These were stolen from the entombed remains of Xena and Gabrielle, I'm here to find out why."

Emily studied the necklace with interest. In spite of its age, it was in remarkable condition. Mel held hers out as well. Emily held the two pieces together, seeing that they did make a perfect fit.

“This is a long way to go for some stolen jewelry,” she commented, studying the two pieces.

“Yeah, well, it’s a family matter and I’m pissed,” Janice quipped, repositioning the ice pack over her eye. Emily’s eyes snapped up at the comment and Janice smiled. “That’s right, Emily. Mel and I are descended from Xena and Gabrielle, just as you are descended from the Amazon queen, Ephiny.” At her words a startled murmur swept through the crowded cabin. Several women looked at each other, surprised. They whispered excitedly to each other.

“How did you know that?” Emily demanded, her eyes boring into Janice’s.

“Because I recognize you,” the archeologist explained, well aware that she was sounding like a madwoman. “I can’t explain it, but there are just things that Mel and I know. She spotted the necklaces, I recognize you.” Janice let her eyes scan the room of women. “In fact I recognize several of you. Look,” she said, shaking her head. “Mel and I just want to know what happened. I know it sounds crazy, but I feel like Xena and Gabrielle need our help, like something’s going on.”

Emily smiled, a warm radiant smile as she stood up. “It’s not crazy Dr. Covington. Something is indeed going on.” She turned to address the other women as well. “It seems that the time has come to finish the work started by our sisters centuries ago. Xena and Gabrielle will finally be put to rest and Valaska will be vanquished once and for all.” Looking back to Janice, she held up her hand to forestall the barrage of questions she knew was coming. “I’ll answer all of your questions over a hot meal. Please join us up on deck you’re ready. We’ll wait for you.” Before turning to go she kissed Janice on the cheek then turned and did the same for Mel. “Welcome home,” she said, then was gone.

As the other women filed out, following Emily’s lead they stopped to kiss each woman on the cheek and say one or two words of welcome. Quest was the last one to approach Janice, an uneasy smile on her face. “I’m sorry about...” she began.

“When this is over,” Janice said with a grin, “buy me a drink and we’ll call it even.”

“It’s a deal,” she agreed then turned to welcome Mel.

Mel accepted the kiss, then looked her squarely in the eyes. “Just don’t hit her again,” she warned gently through a warm smile. With a nod she left the cabin, closing the door softly behind her. “Why are people always beating up on you?” Mel asked as Janice rummaged in her bag for a dry shirt.

“It isn’t like you haven’t done your share of late,” Janice quipped.

Janice and Mel followed Argo up the narrow stairs to the main deck of the fishing boat. The retriever was still favoring her bandaged paw, but Janice suspected it was more for the attention she was sure to receive than anything else. Well past noon, the sun was edging its way down the western sky. She’d been unconscious for some time. Several tables were on deck with women taking their places around them. Two seats to Emily’s right were left open. Janice smiled when she saw the bowl of water on the deck near the empty seats. As the aroma of food reached her nose, Janice pinched the pressure points on her wrists, thankful that the twinges of sea-sickness were subsiding quickly.

There were spaces for eight women at each table. As Mel and Janice took their seats, bowls were passed around as the women served themselves and began to converse good naturedly. Mel chatted animatedly, her accent quickly becoming a favorite among the Greek women. One woman giggled uncontrollably when she had to have a friend translate exactly what it was Mel was saying. Emily smiled at the exchange. “I suppose not much has changed in hundreds of years. Gabrielle’s descendants still have a way with words,” she commented looking at Mel.

“I agree,” Janice replied, “except that I’m Gabrielle’s descendant. Mel is related to Xena.”

Emily raised a surprised eyebrow at Janice and then looked at Mel with new appreciation. “I never thought I’d see a descendant of Xena’s giggle,” she said with a warm smile.

“It’s one of her many endearing qualities,” Janice chimed in. “So, you said all our questions would be answered. Why don’t we start with you. Your accent sounds British.”

“It is,” Emily confirmed. “What’s left of it anyway. I moved here with my mother when I was eight. She was one of Solari’s Children, and when I was old enough to understand what that meant, she explained it to me.”

“Children of Solari being the descendants of the Amazons?” Janice asked.

“Not all Amazons. While the Amazon Nation had been united for generations after the Great Oracle, things fell apart when the centaurs were wiped out. Tribes scattered to the winds and eventually lost touch with each other. Gabrielle’s stories were passed down through the Children of Solari, a name that came to mean descendants of Gabrielle’s tribe.”

“Why not just say ‘Gabrielle’s tribe?’” Mel asked dabbing the corners of her mouth with her napkin.

“For many generations it was very bad luck to say the bard queen’s name out loud. It was a curse,” Janice rolled her eyes at the statement, but Emily ignored it and continued on. “Valaska hounded the Amazons relentlessly. She destroyed the centaurs and was determined to see every Amazon perish as well. Uttering the bard’s name was a sure way to attract her attention,” Emily explained.

“Attract the attention of Valaska,” Janice repeated dubiously. “Valaska that ate ambrosia and became a god.”

“You sound like you don’t believe it?” the woman Janice recognized as Carmen asked from across the table.

“Well, I wouldn’t go quite that far,” the archeologist explained, selecting a stuffed grape leaf from a passing plate. “I just thought all the...um... gods were trapped in tombs or some such.”

Emily shook her head. “Xena trapped Ares in a tomb using the eye of Hephaestus, other gods disappeared for reasons unknown. Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, no one has heard from them in centuries. Still, I suspect others are alive and well. Strife seems to be very busy these days.”

“We also see the work of Aphrodite from time to time,” a woman farther down the table added.

“Pop always used to say that a god can’t be stronger than the conviction of their believers,” Janice remarked. “I guess without believers there isn’t much point in making oneself known. Especially when other religions hit the scene and things get messy,” Janice said with distaste as childhood memories surfaced. Scores of missionaries on dig sites robbing the native workers of their cultural beliefs in the name of God, civilization and progress. Like wolves in disguise, they used food, clothing, and education as tools in their assimilation process until the natives were just like them. Looking around the table and hearing bits of conversation in Greek, Janice smiled. A few differences remained. She was glad of that.

Since early childhood, she’d been taught to celebrate the uniqueness of the various places she traveled. Harry Covington had often said, usually while drunk, that the preservation of cultural diversity was the only hope humanity had. “Sure, it might make living together more challenging, but survival has always been a challenge,” Janice remembered him saying. He had been convinced that aspiring to be sheep, in any flock, holy or otherwise, spelled doom for mankind. “They can’t get us all if they don’t understand all of us,” he would say without explaining to young Janice exactly who “they” were.

She often wondered if that was why her supposedly unusual attraction toward women had never really bothered her. It certainly hadn’t surprised her father. In an odd way he seemed relieved, but then Harry Covington was an unusual man. Eccentric even for an eccentric. Shaking off the memory, she returned her attention to Emily. “So, Xena trapping Ares was the battle of the first age?” she asked the Amazon.

“That’s right,” Emily answered. “The battle of the second age will take place when a descendant of Xena’s battles Ares once again.”

“That’s come to pass,” Mel interjected taking a sip of ginger ale. Suddenly all conversation at the table stopped all eyes riveted on Melinda Pappas. Uncomfortable as the center of attention, she smiled nervously. “Six months ago in Macedonia,” she explained, her voice quiet and shy. “Janice was there, she helped.”

“What happened?” Emily sensing Mel’s nervousness, asked Janice.

“The scrolls were found in the same tomb that held Ares. He was trapped in a separate chamber by the Eye of Hephaestus,” she replied. “He killed three people in the tomb, then Mel

fought him,” she added with nonchalant shrug, as if Mel’s heroics were an every day occurrence. Mel smiled shyly at the unspoken compliment. For all her pampered mannerisms, it was clear that Janice Covington had the utmost respect for her lover and her abilities.

“Well, it was really Xena,” Mel added demurely.

Looking with new found appreciation for the Southerner, Emily had to shake her head to refocus her attention on her story. “It says in the *Challenge of the Three Ages* that, ‘Unable to touch the realm of man he called upon the goddess of Chaos...’

“...to bind the soul of his champion before the battle of the third age could take place,” Janice finished for her. “I read that story on the plane over here. What does it mean?”

“It means that Valaska will return as a favor to Ares. When Valaska and Callisto became gods and were still adjusting to their newfound powers, they were thrown into lava. That, coupled with the rage of their fight, made them the joint god of Chaos- one entity with two forces of will,” Emily explained.

“Makes sense for a chaotic god,” Janice agreed.

“Somehow Callisto managed to separate herself from Valaska. When that happened Valaska lost the ability to effect Gabrielle in life,” the blond Amazon continued, seeing the puzzled expression on the archeologist’s face. She smiled. “I don’t know how,” she said. “I suppose Mount Olympus had some rules we mere mortals were not privy to. So while Valaska couldn’t hurt Gabrielle in life, she waited patiently for her death. Perhaps there was some way for her to keep the bard from reaching the Elysian Fields. We simply don’t know. What is written however, is that in order to move beyond Valaska’s grasp, Gabrielle’s body would have to be surrendered to the rites of traditional Amazon passing.”

“Body committed to flame,” Janice murmured, understanding.

“That’s right,” Emily confirmed. “When this prophecy, dating to before the bard’s time, was understood by her Amazon tribe, a runner was dispatched with the warning. Xena had crossed over years before and most suspected that Gabrielle would join her soon. The runner returned with a message. Gabrielle requested that five Amazons be sent to Amphipolis to wait with her for her reunion with Xena. She asked that when that happened that the bodies of herself, Xena, Lyceus and Cyrene be committed to the ceremonial fires because she did not want to be separated from her family. Five of the bravest, most skilled Amazons left for Amphipolis. None of them were ever seen or heard from again. That winter the worst rains in memory plagued the countryside. When a messenger could finally get through, they found no trace of Gabrielle or anyone else in Lyceus’ tomb. Little Xena and Lyceus the younger met with the runner and told her that the rains started the day that Gabrielle died. Ceremonial fires were out of the question as everything was too soaked. It was explained that as soon as the last breath escaped the bard queen’s lips, she and her deceased family were spirited away from Valaska’s grasp. It is unknown to us whether the five Amazons were killed in the course of hiding the sarcophagi, if they killed themselves to keep the location a secret, or if they simply disappeared from view. It is our belief that only when the time was right would their children come forth to finish what had been started centuries ago. To free Gabrielle before Valaska can find her body and bind the bard’s soul to her will.”

“If Valaska wins,” another voice added from further down the table, “Ares will surely be freed in the third age. If she loses, Ares won’t be able to hold the souls of Xena and Gabrielle hostage during the battle. He will have to fight their descendants alone.”

“Descendants,” Janice repeated with a frown, “after us? I’ve got news for you, it doesn’t seem likely.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that right now,” Emily said with a knowing smile. “After all, Gabrielle had a sister. Besides, the reference to descendant isn’t as clear as it was predicting your arrival. The original text makes reincarnation seem equally plausible.”

“Oh, that’s real plausible,” Janice muttered.

Ephiny ignored the comment. “Valaska is the one you’ve got to worry about at the moment. If you’re certain you want to find the bodies, you’d best be prepared to deal with her when you do.” Janice and Mel nodded, still stunned by what they were hearing. “One more thing,” Emily added.

“You’d also better be prepared to finish the ritual if you find them. It’s imperative that the bodies of Gabrielle’s family be committed to flame as soon as they’re discovered. If you can’t agree to do this, we won’t help you.”

Janice nodded, considering the Amazon’s words. “I can’t make any promises until I’ve thought about it. Besides, we’ve no idea where they are. I’ll have my decision for you once I’ve seen the ruins of Amphipolis. Is that acceptable?”

“If you didn’t need to think about it, I’d be suspicious,” Emily agreed. “We should reach our destination by evening. We’ll stay onboard *The Charmer* until first light. Then we’ll take a car to Amphipolis.”

“You’ve got people in position there?” Janice asked mildly surprised.

Emily nodded with a slightly guilty smile. “Our last line of defense, should we have been unable to stop you in Athens. You’ll be all right when they see you with us.”

“In other words they’d have killed us if they had to,” Mel remarked.

Emily shrugged. “For hundreds of years, the stories of Solari’s Children have been passed down, each generation learning the responsibility that was their birthright. The survival of thousands of people depends on those bodies not being disturbed until the appointed time. We are prepared to die ourselves for that, as well as take lives if necessary.”

Janice nodded her head in understanding. There wasn’t much to say in response so the group ate the rest of their meal in silence. When the dishes were cleared away, the archeologist excused herself from the table and took a stroll around the ship, her dog, as always, at her side. Lost in thought, she eventually made her way to the starboard bow.

Melinda Pappas joined her lover sitting on the edge of the ship, legs dangling over the side, ignoring the sea spray that covered her heavy leather boots with a light sheen of mist. Argo was curled up next to Janice’s side, so Mel took the seat on the other. Holding onto the rail, Janice studied the expanse of ocean as if somewhere in the surrounding blue she might find answers. “You’re a mess,” Mel commented affectionately, taking in the pallor of her lover’s face and the troubled cast to her green eyes.

Janice smiled weakly and nodded. She felt a mess. “If only it were just sea sickness. I’ve been thinking about something I said to my students last week. I was talking about Pop, the infamous grave robber. I said that sometimes we don’t notice when our search for facts blinds us to the science we claim to serve. It’s happened to me, Mel. I’ve fallen over the same edge dad did. How can I sit here and seriously consider setting the find of the century on fire, yet that’s exactly what I’m thinking of doing.”

“Why is it so important to put Xena and Gabrielle’s bodies in a museum?” Mel asked, turning her own blue eyes to the cerulean blue of the ocean.

“They can teach us a hell of a lot. How they lived, what people were like back then,” Janice answered absently.

“Do you think Xena and Gabrielle were typical examples of the period? We know how they lived from the scrolls, haven’t they done enough?” Mel knew she was only voicing the archeologist’s inner thoughts. Still, she suspected that Janice needed to hear it.

“I know, Mel, but every find is like a puzzle piece. What are the pyramids but desecrated graves? Why should this be different just because it’s my family?” Janice shook her head in frustration. Her quest for knowledge was at war with her sense of duty.

“I think because it’s our family, it is different. Janice, when I fought Ares in that tomb, my path was clear. I didn’t have time to ponder and wonder if what I was doing was right. I have a feeling that when the time comes you’ll feel the same. Y’all will know what to do, and mark my words, you’ll do the right thing. In the meantime, see what you can discover at Amphipolis.”

They both turned their eyes back to the expanse of blue. After a bit, Mel wondered aloud, “Are you worried about meeting Valaska?” Janice looked back over her shoulder and shrugged.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I keep telling myself it can’t be any worse than meeting Callisto, right?”

“Except she’s a god,” Mel amended.

“Thanks for reminding me,” Janice shot back with a rueful smile.

“So, do y’all find it difficult to remain an atheist? Considering what’s going on and all.” Mel teased good naturedly.

“Me?” Janice chuckled back. “Doesn’t this conflict with your Southern Baptist upbringing just a tad?”

“Episcopalian, Janice. Episcopalian.” Mel corrected, “Still, it does make me wonder if certain parts of the Bible might have been left out by mistake. But I suppose when you believe in one god to begin with, you’re halfway there to believing in others.”

“Is this a private brooding session or can anyone join in?” Emily asked as she took a seat on the bow of the ship next to Argo. The dog raised her head noting the newcomer, then lowered it back to Janice’s lap, drifting to sleep once again. “I’ve talked to the others, five of us will accompany you on shore, the rest will stay with the boat.”

“Five?” Janice asked. “Sticking with the original story, are you?”

Emily smiled warmly. “It seemed only fitting. I will accompany you as well as Stacey, Tory, Debby, and Shayne. Quest will take charge of things here on the boat.”

“How do you guys survive?” Janice inquired. “I mean obviously you come from various walks of life. I’m assuming you don’t live in an Amazon commune in the middle of Greece.”

Emily arched an eyebrow at the notion. “An Amazon commune in the middle of Greece, now that’d be something to see. No, we live apart. Many of us have families, children, jobs. For most, their husbands don’t know, or don’t care. They see women getting together as some kind of coffee klatche or bridge club. We keep in touch with each other in person where we can, and by mail when we can’t. The descendants of Gabrielle’s tribe have gone to all the corners of the world.”

“Yes,” Mel agreed, “there is the Clan MacGab contingent in Scotland.”

Emily nodded, “MacGab is just one name associated with the Children of Solari, there are others.”

“It doesn’t seem quite fair,” Janice commented absently.

“What doesn’t?” Emily asked.

“You keep bringing everything back to Gabrielle. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but I don’t think Xena’s being adequately revered here.” As she spoke, she continued to look out to the shimmering ocean, noting the pod of dolphins that followed, frolicking in the wake of the ship. Janice Covington was unaware of the glances exchanged between her lover and Emily, an ancient injury instantly reigniting.

“I think Xena’s memory is best served by it’s fading,” Emily answered honestly, casting a wary glance toward Mel. “At least as far as we’re concerned. While she did mend her fences with Queen Ephiny in life, so many of our trials can be traced back to her very existence. She is a difficult figure to celebrate.”

“I agree,” Mel added. “Xena well knew that the best thing about her was Gabrielle...”

“That isn’t true, Mel, and you know it!” Janice snapped, instantly hating herself for doing so. “If you’re going to give me the argument of Gabrielle being responsible for Xena’s redemption then I’m going to have to give Xena’s darkness credit for bringing out the best in Gabrielle. If Xena hadn’t shown up in Poteidaia, dark and ill adjusted as she was, Gabrielle would have lived and died there in oppressive obscurity.”

Mel opened her mouth for a retort, then closed it. Janice was right, there was no point in arguing. Emily smirked, but then Janice continued, this time leveling her steely gaze on the Amazon. “And it seems to me that all of this current unpleasantness can be traced back directly to Gabrielle. Valaska didn’t originally have a quarrel with Xena, after all.”

Emily was also going to respond, but thought better of it. After all, centuries later it didn’t make much sense to assign blame to one or the other when the two women in question led lives that were so interwoven with the other’s.

Later, in the cramped confines of the small sleeping cabin, Janice readied herself for bed. She still felt rotten about her outburst earlier. Mel had been unusually quiet, and Janice knew she was still

stinging from her harsh words. The archeologist fidgeted, not knowing quite what to say. Used to many years of living in uncompromised isolation, and never needing to explain herself to anyone, she didn't know where to start. She slipped out of her clothes and put on a clean sleeveless undershirt. Mel stood quietly a few feet away, dressed in her silk slip, fumbling with the clasp of a bracelet.

Janice silently approached the taller woman, walking up behind her and resting her head between Mel's shoulder blades as she wrapped her arms around the Southerner. "I'm sorry lover," she whispered.

"Sorry for what?" Mel asked as she gently traced her fingers along the strong arms wrapped around her.

Inhaling the scent of dark silky hair, Janice mumbled into Mel's back. "Sorry for being such an ass. I shouldn't have snapped at you, Mel."

"You've a lot to be tense about, Janice," Mel offered, leaning her head back as Janice's hands began to softly roam over her torso.

"That isn't any excuse to take it out on you," Janice said as Mel turned in her arms to face her. "I hate to see you hurting, especially when it's my fault."

Mel looked down into soft green eyes and smiled warmly. Everything Janice had said was true, as was her apology. That was one thing Mel found so endearing about the brash archeologist. "I guess I'll have to let you apologize then," Mel offered, her voice a warm whisper.

Janice's eyes flashed with excitement then quickly looked toward the door. "Mel, this ship is rather crowded... someone's gonna hear."

"I never said apologies, especially quiet ones, were easy. You'll just have to keep your screaming to a minimum," the taller woman offered with a wicked grin.

A similar grin eased across Janice's face as she slowly eased her palms up the front of Mel's slip, teasing and enticing the warm flesh beneath. "Oh, I'm not worried about me," she drawled leaning up to claim waiting lips. "Just don't say I didn't warn you." With a warm chuckle and hungry heart, Melinda Pappas felt up to the challenge.

...We reached my parents house as it grew dark. Lila had already come home and left again. Mother said she'd been there a while ago and had gone to feed the chickens. I nodded and headed for the door. It made sense, our chickens were kept in a communal coop a short ways from the house. As children it had been the nearest thing to privacy we had.

Lila was there, sitting on an overturned barrel outside the coop. "Lila?" I called to her as I approached.

"I'd rather not talk to you right now, Gabrielle," she said darkly.

"Lila, I know you were at the glade this afternoon, I just want to know why you didn't say something. I thought you were going to be helping Tessa."

She looked at me, and the fury in her gaze was piercing. "I went to Tessa's house to help with the mending. When I told her you were visiting she said the mending could wait, and that I should spend time with you. I wanted to surprise you, so I hurried to the glade and hid in some bushes. I fell asleep waiting for you. When I woke up the two of you were talking. I didn't say anything because I was too shocked at what I heard. After that I was too disgusted." She turned away from me and stared into the chicken coop. "Xena was having a wonderful time," she added acidly. "She really seems to enjoy you."

It was a dig, I could tell she meant it as such. It didn't bother me though. Two could play that game. "I assure you, Lila," I shot back. "The feelings are mutual."

She glared at me again. This time I saw tears welling up in her eyes. "How could you?"

"I'm in love with Xena, as she is with me," I offered simply.

"Great Zeus, Gabrielle! Perdicus hasn't even been dead a year," she sobbed "Or were you servicing the warlord before you even married him?"

"Stop it, Lila, you're just trying to be cruel," I said fighting the urge to slap her senseless. I took a deep breath. While I wasn't ready for it, it was now or never. "Lila, I know you were fond of

Perdicus. Believe me when I say that I loved him, too. His loss still hurts me very deeply. But you have to understand that he and I never should have married in the first place. I know it's what mother and father wanted, what they'd always planned on, but it wasn't for me. I made a mistake when I agreed to marry him. My mistake resulted in his death and that is something I'll carry with me forever."

"But you said you loved him," Lila said in a small voice. "And I've never known you to lie. You're not very good at it."

"I did love him, Lila," I tried to explain. "But it was the love for a dear friend or a brother. He connected me to home and he needed me so badly." I pulled another barrel over and sat down, hoping I could make my sister understand. "I never lied to Perdicus, not really, because the truth of my heart and my feelings was hidden, even from me. Looking back now, I can see that I was in love with Xena, even then. But at the time, I honestly thought that if I married Perdicus for the love of friendship that it might bloom into something else later. Maybe if he had lived it would have, but we'll never know."

"After Perdicus died I was so wrought with pain I literally threw myself at Xena, hoping she would make me forget. Xena would have none of it. She wouldn't take advantage of me when it would have been the easiest thing in the world for her to do. Xena has been the truest friend to me that I've ever known. It was only after she died and the magnitude of my loss came crashing down around me that I realized that I loved her very deeply. The kind of love I should have felt for Perdicus but didn't. Later I came to know the depths of her feelings for me. When that happened, neither of us could help but act on it." My words were as much for me as they were for Lila. I was still coming to terms with what had recently happened between us.

"Lila, Xena has made me happier than I ever imagined, even when things get difficult. I never wanted to hurt you with this, and I certainly never wanted you to see such intimacies, but beyond all of that, I do hope, as my sister, you'll be happy for me that I've found someone who makes me feel the way she does."

"You're asking too much, Gabrielle," she said solemnly.

My own anger flared at the remark. "How dare you," I growled. "Xena's done nothing to hurt you. In fact, she saved you and me from a horrible fate. How can you sit there and believe idle talk and stories about her when I'm here to tell you different? What was so incredible about Perdicus that no one believes I can actually move beyond his death?"

"Because we can't move beyond it, Gabrielle!" she shouted. "Perdicus was the last thing that connected you here, to your home and to your family. We knew him and understood him. He was like us, ordinary. We've lost the ability to understand you, Gabrielle. At least through Perdicus we had a connection to you. But I suppose an Amazon Queen needs a Warrior Princess. Us mere mortals must seem rather dull. I bet you tell people you're from Amphipolis as well and that you have no family."

"This is crazy," I countered. "I love you and mother and father very much. That never wavers just because I don't live here. I'm proud of Poteidaia and my family. Besides, I've got news for you, Lila-- Xena is very human. She has faults and makes mistakes just like anyone else. But no, she isn't a farmer, she never had that chance. She didn't take up the sword because she wanted to be famous. She thought that her village and family were worth protecting, and she paid a dear price for that. I'm sorry if that makes her too intimidating for you, but that's the way it is. Besides, it isn't as if I'm asking for your permission." I stopped myself there, knowing I was close to saying things for the sole purpose of being hurtful. Gods, but Lila could bring out the worst in me.

"Last night, all that talk that I thought was about Perdicus-- you were talking about Xena, weren't you?" she asked. I nodded. She shook her head, sighing in disgust. "As long as you don't need anyone's permission, I hope you spare mother and father this little bit of news. It will kill them."

"I hadn't intended for any of you to find out yet. I know Perdicus has only been gone for nine months, but this love that Xena and I share has been growing for two years. I'm not sorry you know, Lila, but I am sorry you disapprove."

“She can’t even give you children,” Lila shot back, her anger losing steam.

I sighed. This was a truth I was beginning to realize. “I know that, and it saddens me. But Xena has my heart. It’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make. Come on, let’s go back. Mother and father will be worried.” She didn’t say anything, but got up and headed back. I tried to put my arm around her. She flinched and moved away. I guess I wasn’t surprised.

Dinner was dismal, even more quiet and strained than the night before. Mother and father didn’t ask about it, since they knew Lila and I always worked things out on our own. Lila glared at Xena whenever she thought my warrior wasn’t looking. Xena tolerated this for a while, then taught Lila a lesson. Lila looked over, only to find Xena’s eyes already fixed on her. When she wants to, Xena can have a very formidable stare. It made Lila choke on a bit of stew and she had to leave the table.

That night, as the night before, Xena headed for the barn. I walked out with her, igniting a new flare of hostilities in my sister. She stormed off to our bedroom. I seriously considered staying in the barn all night. I said as much to Xena, which made her smile. “As tempting as I find that offer,” she said as she held me, her voice a deep rumble in her chest, “I don’t think you should. I doubt I’d be able to restrain my warlordly passion and, well, you don’t want to wake the whole village.”

“I don’t think warlordly is a word, Xena,” I chided softly.

“You know what I mean,” she amended. “Besides, you know you won’t be able to sleep until you settle things with Lila. We’re leaving tomorrow, and neither of us knows when we’ll be back this way.”

While she didn’t say it, I knew what she meant. Like it or not, I was in a very dangerous line of work now. Every time I left home, it was entirely possible that I might not ever see it again. Traveling with Xena taught me the importance of letting the people I loved know how I felt, since I never knew when I’d ever see them again. While it sounded rather morbid, it was nice to live without having unspoken loose ends with people.

By the time I got to our room, Lila was already in bed feigning sleep. Her back was to me, but I could see by the movement of her torso that she was very much awake. “Lila,” I began softly. “I know you’re awake and I really wish you’d talk to me.” She didn’t respond so I continued. “Since you won’t, I’ll do the talking, you listen. The love Xena and I feel for each other in no way diminishes the love I feel for you or mother and father. Someday, when you’ve found someone who makes you feel as wonderful... maybe then you’ll know what I’m talking about. The fact is, I’m leaving tomorrow and I don’t know when I’ll be back. I don’t want to leave with harsh words between us. While I’m happy traveling with Xena, it isn’t without regrets. I regret not being here with you, watching you grow into the beautiful woman you’ve become. I’m sorry you think I’ve changed so much. Maybe I have. I just wish you thought I was worth staying close to.” It was getting hard for me to talk, and Lila still failed to move. Deciding to give it a rest, I quickly told her that I loved her and wished her sweet dreams.

I wish I’d taken my own advice. Since leaving the Amazon camp, I’d pushed all thoughts and memories of killing that warrior out of my mind. By force of will I didn’t think about it. I certainly didn’t talk about it. Had the circumstances been any different, I’m sure Xena would have brought it up. I had a feeling that she was trying as desperately as I was to put the whole wretched experience behind her. In later years, we talked about it some, but it was always one of those things she rarely ever mentioned.

That night, as soon as I drifted off to a fitful sleep, the nightmare started. I was walking along the beach when I happened to glance down at my hands. They were covered with blood. The memory of that man’s blood running down the sword, bathing my hands in warm, sticky gore made me cry out. I looked around frantically for Xena, but she was nowhere to be seen. I felt the tide lapping at my feet, but something was not right. The ocean shouldn’t have been that warm. I looked down at the surf and saw that the ocean was a sea of blood, crashing upon a black shore, the sea foam clinging to red-black sand in sickly pink tendrils. I tried to run, but my bare feet stuck to the blood drenched sand. I fought for every step I took, my feet skidding on something slick that turned

out to be a decomposing skull. In terror I looked back to the waves and saw bodies bobbing in the surf. White from death and bloated from exposure, they crashed onto the shore, propelled by the waves. As the tide receded they were reclaimed by the bloody surf.

I felt complete despair as I sank to my knees in the grotesque surf. I couldn't even cry, so overcome was I with remorse and grief. I just sat there and waited until the madness that was sure to follow simply claimed me. Then I felt a strong warmth envelope me. A presence gently asked, "What is it, Gabrielle?"

"There's so much blood, on my hands, all over me." I whispered, wondering if I was indeed going mad. I wondered if this was the type of nightmare Xena endured in her sleep. If it was, I didn't see how she could stand it. I couldn't see the blood anymore, but I could feel and smell it.

"Sometimes blood has to be spilled," the presence reassured me.

"What if I can't make it stop?" I wondered. I was thinking that no one would want to be near me, that I would taint them, covered in blood as I was. I said as much.

"No, you won't, Gabrielle," the voice answered. "It will stop when you make it stop. Why is there blood?"

"I killed a man," I choked. "Stabbed him in the back, took his life."

"Why did you do this?" the voice asked patiently.

"He was going to hurt my friend," I replied.

"Do you accept the consequences of your actions?" I was asked, somewhat hesitantly.

I nodded, sure that this was indeed madness. I deserved it, I decided. I was a killer, I wore the blood of others. But, given the chance, I would have done the same thing again. "Yes," I said. "I accept the consequences of what I've done."

The warmth closed tighter around my body "Then let this go, Gabrielle," the voice said. "Understand this and move on."

"But how?" I cried. My senses jolted, and I awoke with a start. The familiar warmth I felt was none other than Xena's body holding me tightly. I breathed in the scent of her skin, felt the softness of her long hair as it brushed against my face. "Xena?" I asked hesitantly, aware that my skin felt chilled and my eyes were wet. I'd been crying.

"Shhhhh," my warrior soothed. "It's alright, only a bad dream."

"How did you know?" I asked, remembering I'd left Xena in the barn.

"Lila came and got me, Gabrielle," Xena softly explained.

"You started thrashing around," Lila added, "and I couldn't wake you. You seemed so scared, in pain almost. I didn't know what to do, so I got Xena." She added this last part somewhat shyly. I could well imagine how difficult it must have been for my sister to seek Xena's aid in light of our recent conversations about her.

"Thank you, Lila," I said sincerely.

She stood, then came to the edge of my bed where she sat down. Xena was still behind me, holding me in her strong arms. She glanced nervously at the warrior before turning her attention to me. "I'm sorry about earlier," she said. "Regardless of our differences, you're my sister and I don't want to see you in pain, ever." She glanced once more at Xena, then continued. "I'll spend the rest of the night in the barn. If you wake up early, there's no reason for mother and father to know."

"I love you, Lila," I said. Xena released me as Lila bent down for a brief hug.

"I love you too, big sister," she replied.

Unfortunately, waking up early has never been a particular strength of mine. I was sound asleep when Lila came quietly back to the bedroom. "Come on, you guys, wake up." I vaguely heard her voice as Xena gently shook me awake. She'd held me all night, standing guard against nightmares that wouldn't dare intrude on her embrace. Twisting as she stood, Xena's back popped loudly. I'm sure her muscles protested the hours spend in an awkward position. I made a mental note to give her a backrub as soon as it was convenient.

My parents seemed relieved that breakfast went well. I chatted with Lila and mother while Xena occasionally added something to the conversation. I don't think my father said two sentences, but to my surprise I think those two sentences were directed at Xena. I think they had a brief

exchange about blacksmithing and horse feed.

After saying my goodbyes Lila walked us to the edge of the village. I hugged her briefly, then to my surprise, she turned and hugged Xena as well. I could tell Xena wasn't expecting it, but she returned the shy hug with a smile. If Lila could make an attempt to accept Xena, I had hope that in time my parents would as well.

Still somewhat shaken by my nightmare, I wasn't quite ready to get back to business as usual. I don't think Xena was either. I suggested we travel to Amphipolis as long as we were in the area. She was hesitant, I could tell, but agreed nonetheless. While Cyrene had essentially forgiven Xena for her warlord past, there was still tension between the two that never eased completely. Xena and her mother still ached from the death of her younger brother, Lyceus, and while that pain drew them together, it also kept them apart.

The last time we'd been to Amphipolis, Xena had been trapped in Callisto's body. We had sent word when Xena got her body back, but until now no one had seen her. I suppose that was why the villagers were so apprehensive at the sight of our approach.

Things settled down somewhat, and the town gave a collective sigh when we reached Cyrene's Inn. Xena's mother made the comment, loud enough for the nearby eavesdroppers, that if I was in Xena's company, she had no doubt it was her daughter. Cyrene had always been so warm and loving towards me. This trip was certainly no exception. After a somewhat formal greeting with her mother, Xena went to see the blacksmith, so Cyrene sat down with me over big bowls of rabbit stew to hear about what we'd been up to.

I gave her the basic run down of what her daughter's adventures, omitting the darker parts, glossing over the violence. I've no doubt Cyrene knew it, but I think she appreciated the gesture. She smiled, her eyes kind and warm as she squeezed my hand affectionately. "What troubles you, child?" she asked gently.

"Troubles me?" I stammered, thinking frantically.

"Gabrielle," she said gently in a tone so reminiscent of Xena's. "I'm not blind. Something is bothering you and I don't think it's the retelling of your seasickness." I didn't know what to say so I just looked at the table, afraid to meet her gentle gaze. "Gabrielle?" she asked more firmly this time. "Is something wrong between you and Xena?" My eyes flew up at that statement. That wasn't what was bothering me, of course. Still, I couldn't believe she knew. She laughed, a low chuckle that was so much like her daughter's. "Surprised I know?" she teased. "Don't be. I knew the moment you showed up to rescue my daughter from a village ready to stone her that it would only be a matter of time before you had her heart." She sighed, and I could tell she was debating her next words. "To be honest, I don't think Xena deserves you." I was about to protest that remark but she put up a gentle hand to silence me. "Please, Gabrielle, let me finish.

"I love my daughter, very much. It's hard to describe what it's like for a parent to watch her child sink to the depths of darkness the way Xena did. There was a time when I'd hoped the next messenger coming to Amphipolis would bring news that the Warrior Princess, Destroyer of Nations had been killed in battle, not tale after tale of sacked cities and victims that numbered into the thousands.

"The change in Xena over these past two years is more than I'd ever hoped for. I don't know if she will ever atone for what she's done, but that is between her and Hades. That someone like you, with a kind and loving heart, would choose my daughter, knowing her past and her darkness..." she smiled as she wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, "again, it's more than I hoped for."

"Thank you," I said, beginning to tear up myself. "But to answer your question, there isn't anything wrong between Xena and me. She's very good to me, I've never loved anyone the way I love her. It's just that..." Without really meaning to, I told Cyrene about the nightmares, which led to why I was having the nightmares, which in turn led to telling her the whole story. When I was finished, smoky blue eyes studied me for a moment before she spoke.

"Gabrielle, you must be the bravest woman I've ever met," she finally said. "Xena had better be good to you indeed after what you've gone through for her." She shook her head sadly as she

cleared our lunch dishes. "I can't help but feel responsible," she explained. "I willingly chose to ignore the oracle's prophecy. Arrogantly, I thought that leaving my tribe would invalidate the prediction. The blood on Xena's hands weighs heavily on me..."

"No," I protested. "Xena doesn't feel that she's controlled by prophecy and neither should you. She's a grown woman and is able to decide for herself. Granted, in the past some of her decisions weren't so great, but she's grown a lot since then. With each brush with darkness she's had in the past two years, Ares has had less and less of a hold on her. Who knows, maybe all of this will eventually result in her besting him once and for all."

"Maybe so," she agreed.

"So, um, Cyrene?" I asked hesitantly. She looked up from the sink where she'd poured water to wash the dishes.

"Yes, Gabrielle?" she asked as I dried the dishes she handed me.

"Would you tell me about your Amazon tribe?" With a light laugh she agreed and proceeded to tell me the most wonderful stories beginning with her adventure rescuing a lost oracle. It was almost time for dinner when Xena returned, looking at her mother and me suspiciously. She looked exhausted. Clearly she'd been to the blacksmith's to use his forge, and not to have him do the work.

"Sorry I'm late," she announced. "I'll clean up for dinner."

As soon as she left the room Cyrene handed me a small pot of ointment. "Dinner can wait, why don't you go help Xena."

I smiled back. "You know, she's going to wonder how you figured out... about us."

She shook her head and waved me in the direction Xena had gone. "She's not ready for that yet. For now, let's keep this between us."

"Fair enough," I agreed grateful that, for once, I knew something before Xena did.

## Chapter 7: Amphipolis Found

Janice Covington squatted down, absently letting the dirt in her hand trickle through her fingers. Lifting her head, she surveyed the landscape from this new perspective, as if a change in viewing angle would make all the difference. She didn't need any sign or marker to tell her that these were the ruins of Amphipolis. She could feel it. Argo strolled over and nudged her mistress' hand. Janice smiled as she absently petted the dog, her eyes continually roving across the ruins. Slowly she stood, brushing her hand against the leg of her sturdy work pants. Her six-shooter comfortably rested at one hip, her bullwhip at the other. Janice minutely adjusted her hat and smiled. She was close, she could feel it.

"Any luck?" Emily asked from behind Janice's left shoulder.

"Janice doesn't believe in luck," Mel supplied from next to Emily. The Amazon leader gave a mild snort and returned her attention to Janice, waiting for an answer.

"These are the outskirts of Amphipolis, no doubt about it," Janice commented. "The location of the Strymon river, the place where Lake Achinos was... the details all fit. The central city would have been built over, many times, but out here... we should have a chance at finding something intact."

"What exactly is it we're looking for?" Stacey asked as she strolled over to the group, taking a moment to pull her jacket more tightly around her body.

Mel empathized with the young woman. The temperature was cool but the breeze coming off the ocean carried a penetrating chill. Mel removed her hands from her pockets to quickly turn up the collar of her jacket against the brisk cold. Janice's eyes flicked over and she smiled. While she was fully in the company of Janice the Archeologist, her lover was still acutely aware of her every move.

Something caught Janice's eye. She focused her gaze on a low hill just past Mel. "I think I may have found it," she said softly as she walked over to the hill. The mound was perhaps seven feet high and twenty-five feet in diameter. The other women watched, puzzled, as Janice circled the formation, Argo keeping close to her left leg. "Emily, can you have someone bring the surveying equipment over here?" she called from across the mound. The Amazon leader relayed the request.

A short time later, Janice had moved beyond surveying equipment to a shovel. After some deliberation, she chose a section of the mound and began to dig. The other women offered to help, but Janice sent them away, asking them instead to take readings and survey other areas of the city. “What’s going on?” Mel asked when she and Emily were the only other people remaining by the mound.

Janice looked briefly at the Amazon leader before speaking frankly to her lover. “I think this is the crypt,” she said without preamble, “what do you think?”

“How can you tell?” Emily asked immediately.

Mel smiled demurely at the blond woman, who was nearly able to look her in the eye. “Janice and I have *very* strong gut feelings where these things are concerned,” she explained. Picking up the canteen that was slung around her shoulder, she handed it to Janice. “Why don’t you take a break? Let me look around.”

The archeologist nodded, took a healthy swig, then wiped her mouth with her sleeve. She readjusted the hat on her head, then slowly poured some water over Argo’s muzzle, getting hit by flying droplets as oblivious to the cold, the dog enthusiastically lapped at the falling water. She sat down against the bank and watched Mel as she slowly strolled around the mound. Her movements were graceful and elegant in spite of her attire. Mel was dressed in a similar fashion to Janice, finally realizing the practicality in such wardrobe choices. Still, her pants were pleated and better fitting, and her shirt was crisp and wrinkle free. She returned to Janice’s side and accepted the offered canteen wishing it were hot coffee.

“So you’re thinking the tavern was that way?” she asked, pointing to her left.

Janice nodded. “Yeah, across and just west of the blacksmith’s shop. That would put the entrance to Amphipolis over there.” She pointed toward crumbled ruins some distance away that may have been part of a gate or wall.

Mel nodded, agreeing. “Okay, so we’re just outside the city. That makes sense. I reckon this could be it.”

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others in case I’m wrong,” Janice continued, picking up the shovel once again.

“Lan’ sakes,” Mel replied with a smile. “Janice Covington, wrong? Perish the thought.”

Smiling, Janice teased right back. “Listen to Scarlett O’Hara...”

“I heard,” Emily said dryly, looking at both women. “Last night, *all night*, and I didn’t get any sleep.” She picked up another shovel and joined Janice in digging.

Janice looked over at Mel and winked. “See, I warned you.”

“Actually,” Emily broke in, “you’re the loud one.”

The archeologist frowned at that, then resumed her digging in earnest. A short time later she stopped, looking critically at the rock she’d uncovered. “I think this is the top of the doorway,” she announced. “It almost looks like a rockslide or some other debris sealed it. It’s a good sign.”

Emily radioed the four Amazons surveying the city. When they returned, the entire group worked to clear a small section of doorway.

By late afternoon, Janice Covington eased herself through a small hole at the top of the door to the chamber below. She lit her lamp and looked around. Satisfied that it was safe, she whistled. Argo scrambled up the hill and followed her mistress inside. The slope on the inside of the crypt was such that the dog was able to scramble down the debris with little difficulty. Mel followed Argo and was in turn followed by Emily and Tory. Stacey remained outside in radio contact with *The Charmer*. Debby and Shayne remained on the perimeter of the mound as lookouts.

Janice surveyed the interior of the crypt, fighting against the anxiety she felt in the chill setting. Four large stone slabs were positioned in a row in the center of the room. Each slab was about three feet wide, seven feet long, and just over a foot thick. “So the sarcophagi were here?” Emily asked, following Janice’s gaze.

“Yeah,” the archeologist confirmed. “They would have been set on those base stones.

“That would be a huge project, moving something that big,” Tory commented.

Janice nodded. “I’m surprised they didn’t just put all the bodies in one sarcophagus, and take

that..."

"Oh my!" Mel exclaimed, cutting Janice off. Reaching the heiress' side, Janice saw what had startled her lover. Two skeletons sat side by side in the far corner of the room. "Who are they?" Mel asked, horrified.

"Good question," Janice agreed as she kneeled down to examine them more closely. Peering at the skeletons critically, Janice took note of their position, what little remained of their clothing and their immediate vicinity. Shifting her position so she could sit next to them she looked over at the debris that sealed the door. Peering closely at the bodies once again, she studied each rib cage. Finally, she followed the arm bones of the skeleton closest to her down to the floor to the point where the bones of the hand rested among dust, ash and cobwebs. "Mel, would you hand me that lamp?" she asked as Mel passed her the light.

Bringing the lamp to the floor she studied the hand. Blowing at the dust, yet careful not to disturb the bones, she meticulously cleared a small section of floor. "What is it?" Emily finally asked, unable to restrain herself any longer.

Janice looked up, her expression serious. "I think these two women were Amazons," she said sadly. "It's my guess that they stayed behind when the other three took the bodies. I'll bet Valaska showed up here expecting to find Gabrielle and found these two instead. I'm afraid they got the brunt of her inevitable temper tantrum."

"What are you saying?" Mel whispered, staring at the two still forms wondering how they could have told Janice so much.

"That door," Janice continued, hurrying over to the blocked entrance. "This kind of debris, coupled with those scorch marks," she said pointing to the walls just inside the entry way, "are from an explosion of some sort, not a natural cave in of an ancient structure. What's left of the clothing is clearly Amazon. Here," she said pointing to the rib cage of one body, "she was stabbed in the heart." Mel followed Janice's eyes to the knife still clutched in the hand of the other still form. "By that knife, I suspect."

"They don't look like they were fighting," Emily commented.

Janice shook her head. "No, they weren't. If Valaska found them instead of Gabrielle and sealed the entrance in some godly fit of anger... they would have starved to death. This one is holding the remains of a water skin. I'd guess that they tried to escape, but for whatever reason couldn't. Maybe when the food and water ran out they decided to end their suffering quickly as opposed to waiting for the inevitable."

"So there is nothing here to tell us where Xena and Gabrielle are," Tory said sadly.

"Oh, no." Janice disagreed, nodding at the other skeleton. "She's told us exactly where they are." Holding up her hands to stop the barrage of questions she gathered the other three women around the bodies, pointing to the recently dusted floor.

"What's that?" Emily asked, looking at some flaky black markings.

"Dried blood, very ancient dried blood," Janice supplied then looked at Mel, her eyes gentle. "Look familiar, Mel?"

It took only a moment but the pattern registered and Mel's eyes grew wide. There, drawn in the blood of a dying Amazon, was an image Mel knew all too well. "It's a chakram," she breathed.

Outside the crypt, Emily, Mel and Janice stood deep in conversation as the other women reverently put the remains of their ancestors to rest. Janice watched without regret as bodies were lovingly removed from the tomb and set upon a hastily constructed funeral fire. "But you said the chakram was in Ares' tomb," Emily said, puzzled by the cryptic clue.

Mel nodded. "I saw it myself. Do we have to go back there?" she asked Janice, her concern evident.

"I don't think so. It has to be something else..." Janice wondered aloud. "I wonder where it came from?"

Mel's head snapped up, her blue eyes shining with understanding. "That's it Janice!"

"What?" Janice asked, perplexed.

“The clue. There was a forest not far from here, on the cliffs. It’s where Xena first got her chakram. The cave entrance where the bodies were hidden, it must be near that spot.”

Suddenly a breeze blew through the ruins of Amphipolis. While it was gentle and mild, it made the hair at the back of Janice’s neck stand up on end. Time felt like very precious commodity now. There wasn’t much of it left.

Coming to a decision, she turned to Emily, bravery and determination etched in her fearless features. “Emily, take Argo and the others and get back to the boat. We’ll radio you with our location when we find the cave. Until then stay out of sight.”

“No, way,” the Amazon protested. “We’re going with you.”

“This isn’t about me,” Janice countered. “If you really want Xena and Gabrielle to be put to rest, do what I say. I’m going to need some dynamite and rope. We don’t need the boat calling attention to our location. When the bodies are gone, we’ll call you and you can come get us.”

Mel brightened at the Janice’s use of the word ‘we’. “You’re going to take me with you?” she asked.

“I need you to help me find the cave, Mel. But I don’t want you going in. I need you to lower me on the rope.” Mel nodded. There would be time for further discussion later.

Emily hurried off, getting the supplies Janice requested as the archeologist whistled for her dog. Argo padded over and sat down, looking up expectantly at her mistress. “Good, girl,” Janice said, her voice cracking. Untying the bandanna from around her neck she knelt on the ground and with trembling fingers tied it around the big dog’s neck. “For once in your life you’re going to have to listen to me, girl.” She said fighting back tears. “You’re going to go with Auntie Emily. Mommie’s going someplace you can’t follow. ‘Sides you hate caves as much as I do. Remember I love you and I’ll see you when I get back.” Argo cocked her head to the side, enjoying the attention of her mistress and her mistress’ mate. While she couldn’t comprehend the words she could tell that the mood was serious and sad. Moments later the blond haired one returned and handed Janice a heavy pack. After getting a final kiss on the top of her head, Argo watched as the two women left, quickly heading across the ruins. Strong arms restrained the dog as she struggled to join her pack. Finally there was nothing to do but howl in sorrow and frustration.

“Is this it?” Janice asked as they neared the cliff edge. They were on a high plateau. The rhythmic pounding of the surf could be heard from far below. The Aegean Sea reflected the brilliant sun creating the dazzling effect of diamonds sparkling on its surface. It took a few moments for Mel to catch up. When she caught her breath, she looked around, studying the landscape.

“Janice, I just don’t know,” Mel said anxiously as panic began to set in.

The archeologist nodded, and walked over to where Mel stood. Offering her the canteen, she smoothed a stray strand of ebony hair that had escaped Mel’s pony tail. “It’s okay, Mel,” Janice soothed. “I know this looks a lot different. The forests that were here centuries ago are gone now. Just take it easy, relax.”

“Relax?” Mel demanded. “How can y’all tell me to relax? I know y’all think something bad is going to happen. I saw you say goodbye to Argo.” Janice’s eyes fell at the words and Mel knew she’d struck close to home. “Janice, I’m scared,” she finished quietly, not sure how her lover would respond to that admission.

Taking Mel quite by surprise, Janice smiled up at her, her eyes suddenly almost dancing in their warmth. “I know you’re scared, Mel. Trust me, I’d be worried if you weren’t. But you can handle this, I know you can. Mel, you’re not the same woman you were six months ago. I didn’t think you could get any more magnificent, but you did. You’re a natural behind the wheel of a car, you shoot straight, hell you can toss me around like a sack of flour. That’s all you, Mel, not Xena. You can do this, too. Just try to remember when you first saw the chakram. When did Xena first see the chakram? Don’t worry about where you got the info. I don’t care if it was a scroll, a dream, a Solari story. Just think about the images.”

Taking a deep breath, Mel closed her eyes. “You’ve changed, too, Janice,” she commented as she let her thoughts wander.

“How so?” Janice asked as she patiently waited for Mel’s input.

Mel shrugged, her eyes still closed. “When I first met you, I wondered if there would be room in your heart for me. Yet at every turn you surprise me. You have an enormous capacity for love, Janice Covington. I see it with how you treat Pandora, Hyperion, the children. I know adjusting to the university and to me has been hard. I’m glad you decided to stick with it.”

“Mel,” Janice said, her voice urgent and intense. “I love you more than I’ve ever loved anything. I’d happily walk on hot coals if it were into your arms.”

At that Mel’s blue eyes flashed open. “Then promise me you won’t sacrifice yourself for Xena and Gabrielle,” she said softly.

Janice flinched as if she’d been slapped. Tearing her eyes away from her lover, she looked at the ground. “Mel, I hope you love me too much to ask that.”

Mel closed her eyes again, this time brushing away a single tear that made its way down her sculpted cheek. “I do,” she whispered. Steeling herself against her inner conflict, she looked around the plateau once again. “Xena saw the chakram for the first time when she was a little girl. She couldn’t have been more than ten winters old at the time.”

“Ten winters?” Janice interrupted with a frown.

Mel smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, ten years old. She’d been playing in the forest near the cliffs with Lyceus and Toris. The boys had run off, and Xena was tracking them.” As Janice followed, Mel began to walk towards the cliff edge. “She came across a crippled man, over there.” Mel pointed to a patch of ground a short distance away. “She wasn’t afraid of him. Rather, she went to see if she could help. He was a kind man, impressed that Xena was not intimidated by his disfigurement. She was immediately intrigued by the chakram he held and asked to see how it worked. Isn’t that strange, Janice?” Mel asked hoping against hope that her memory was not as significant as she now suspected.

“It was no accident that Xena encountered Hephaestus that day,” the archeologist replied, her voice gentling the firmness of her words. “What happened next?”

As if in a trance, Mel continued. “He taught her how to hold it without cutting herself. He also showed her how to throw it. Positioning the chakram in her hand he drew her arm back and she threw it with all her might. It ricocheted off of two trees and a boulder then imbedded itself high up in a tree...” she paused turning her head to the side, “right here. Hephsestus said that when she could reach the chakram and pull it free, it would be hers.”

“When was that?” Janice asked, intrigued at the story.

“After Xena’s encounter with Caesar, when her heart was consumed by hatred, she came back through Amphipolis. Her original intent was to pay her respects to Lyceus. She came through this grove of trees to keep out of sight. She didn’t want anyone to know she’d been here, especially her mother. As she rode by this tree, she saw the chakram. On horseback it was now within her reach. Sure enough, when she touched it, it easily pulled free.”

Janice nodded. “Okay, that tree was where? Here?”

Mel shook her head, clearing her mind. “What? Oh yes, the tree. Yeah, it was right there,” she said, more certain of herself this time.

Walking straight for the cliff from the point Mel indicated, Janice paused at the cliff edge. Blue and white surf pounded the rocks one hundred feet below. “Oh my!” Mel exclaimed, moving near the ledge behind her lover.

“Careful, no shoving,” Janice warned, looking critically at the sheer cliff wall. Easing back from the precipice, she extracted a length of sturdy rope and proceeded to tie it around her waist. “Okay, I guess it’s time to go cave hunting.” While looking around for an anchor, the radio in the pack crackled to life. Mel answered it and in moments Janice’s thoughts were interrupted by the Southerner’s frantic warning.

“Janice, it’s Quest and the women on the *The Charmer*. Another boat has arrived, and it sounds like Leesto.”

“Oh no,” Janice groaned. “I really didn’t think she’d show.” Janice’s eyes closed in pain, several tears spilling down her cheeks. It took Mel only a moment to figure out why. Leesto had

showed up, near the boat where she'd just sent Emily and the others. It was quite possible that at that moment Calisandra Leesto had Argo.

The transport truck shook violently as it headed down the steep dirt road. "Damn," Emily cursed from behind the wheel. "I think we've got a flat."

"You can say that again," Shayne agreed from her spot at the back of the truck. Argo sat between the large Amazon and Debby, the nurse who had earlier bandaged her foot. Soon, the vehicle rolled to a stop and the back of the truck opened. Argo watched carefully. When the women began to move and the grip on the bandanna around her neck loosened slightly, she charged for the back and leapt from the truck.

Emily and Stacey chased after her, but it soon became apparent that they had no hope of catching the muscular dog. "Damn it," Emily swore as she kicked at the dirt. "Covington is gonna have my head for that." She watched as the moving form of the retreating dog sped out of sight.

"It's hot, and we've been on the road for an hour. Maybe by the time Argo catches up to Janice, the danger will be over," Tory supplied helpfully.

"I hope you're right," Emily replied as she returned her attention once again to the flat tire.

"A little more to the right," Janice called from her position on the cliff face. It was steep, enough so that the rope was quite necessary to keep from falling, but not so steep that the archeologist could hang directly from the sturdy rope. That had made her progress down the cliff face slow. She frequently had to change position to keep her life line from catching on protruding rocks or small plants that thrived on the cliff face.

"You see anything yet?" Mel called down, tying off the rope to halt her lover's downward progress. She winced painfully, her hands having suffered painful burns from lowering Janice down the cliff face.

"No, not... wait, there's a shadow." Mel listened intently as she heard Janice shuffle over a few feet. "Hot damn, there it is."

"I declare, Janice Covington, y'all don't need to swear. A simple 'I found it' would do," Mel said, crossing her arms. She winced again as her hand came into contact with her arm. Having never had blisters on her hands before, she was finding it an inconvenient as well as painful experience.

"Awww, that's what makes you crazy about me, Mel," Janice continued, her voice now picking up the traces of an echo. "I say and do all the things you were brought up to think unseemly. Deep down you're a rebel, Melinda Pappas, sure as I'm standing in Xena's cave."

Mel hurried to the cliff edge, getting as close as she dared. "Are you sure?" she called down hopefully.

"Oh, yeah," Janice called back. "I can see the marble friezes here at the entrance. That's one mystery solved. Lower down my satchel, and three or four sticks of dynamite. It looks like this tunnel goes a ways back. I'll have to check it out."

After hearing Mel's affirmative response, Janice turned her attention back to the cave opening. The late afternoon light shown brightly at the entrance. As her eyes adjusted to the deep shadows, Janice noted how high the ceiling extended. Even Mel would have plenty of head room. The discovery would have felt great if only Argo were here. Aside from the discovery of the actual scrolls themselves, Argo had been present for all of Janice Covington's triumphs. It was impossible for her not to dwell on the absence of the animal that for several years had been her closest friend. Only in Mel Pappas did she find another soul as trustworthy. With a sad sigh, she searched through the debris at the cave opening, finding a serviceable torch among the rubble. With a light source in hand, she headed into the dark recesses of the cave.

The temple friezes were lined up three on each side as the tunnel extended into the cliff wall. As Janice felt the ambient temperature decrease, her own heart rate sped up. After a few twists and turns, she could no longer see light from the entrance. Fully consumed by the cliff, and surrounded by stone that was cool to the touch, Janice fought the urge to flee with every fiber of her being. Chiding herself for irrational fears, and drawing some measure of comfort from the tiny animals she

saw packed together along the cave ceiling, she continued on. It was a familiar routine. Janice Covington was far from fearless, she only seemed so because she simply refused to let her fears get in the way of her objectives.

The tunnel sloped sharply upwards, and Janice began to climb up the cool rock formation. Pressing her back against one wall and her legs against another she made quick progress. "How the hell did they get it up here?" she wondered aloud as she worked. In moments she had her answer. Reaching out with one hand to climb some more, a piece of wood broke off in her strong grasp. After examining it and the spot where she'd pried it loose, it was clear she was looking at the remains of an ancient ramp. Something big and heavy had been either shoved or pulled up this tunnel.

It was almost anticlimactic when she happened upon her prize. Sitting there in the middle of the tunnel was a simple sarcophagus. It was unmarked and plain, but the style and structure told her what she needed to know. Here was the final resting place of Xena of Amphipolis and Gabrielle of Poteidaia.

Janice debated for a moment if she should pry the top off now and make sure the bodies were intact. Deciding against it, she climbed back down and headed back towards the cave entrance. Reassured by the glimpse of sunlight and sky, she considered her options. It would be dusk soon. She wanted, needed, to be out of the cave by night fall. She was almost to the entrance when she heard a loud noise. Spinning around, her gun drawn and ready to fire, it took a moment before she realized that Mel had just lowered the satchel with dynamite. Reholstering her weapon, she shouted her thanks up to the woman waiting topside, and slung the bag over her shoulder.

Argo kept a steady pace as she headed back up the road to rejoin her pack. She was tired and thirsty, but knew without a doubt that she would be needed, most likely to save her mistress as she had so often in the past. Stopping to check the trail again, she sniffed first the air, then the ground. She was close, very close. In moments she'd be at the place where she'd been sent away with the other pack. Argo didn't dwell on unpleasant thoughts, she was certain her mistress hadn't done it to be malicious. Humans just didn't always know what was best for them. Pack unity was a painfully simple concept that humans struggled with endlessly.

Mel peered over the cliff edge, anxiously waiting for some sign that her lover was ready to come back up. She was startled half out of her wits by the calm voice that spoke right next to her. "What are we looking at?" She spun around to find a dapper young man on the ground kneeling next to her.

"Professor Byron?" she asked, puzzled by the appearance of Janice's university suitor.

"Not exactly," he replied, his eyes holding something sinister. Shoving Mel away from the cliff edge he picked up Janice's backpack and rummaged through it until he extracted the radio. Mel was about to scream a warning to Janice when he smoothly pulled out a gun and pointed it at her. Mel shut her mouth soundlessly. "Leesto, this is Byron. You got all of those bitches rounded up?"

"That's no way to talk about your family, William," Callisandra Leesto's voice chimed back. "A few had some car trouble and were late, but we're all one big happy family now. What about pretty Xena and the irritating blond?"

"Xena is going to be taking a nap up here shortly. Sure you don't just want me to throw her over the cliff? She could meet you down there." Byron smiled as he spoke, looking at Mel as if she were dirt. Frozen with fear, the Southerner tried to exude a confidence she didn't feel, praying that what ever part of her was Xena would hurry up and surface.

"Don't you dare," Leesto warned. "I'll be right up. Any sign of Jan's mutt?"

As an afterthought, Byron looked around. "Here, puppy, puppy..." he called then whistled. "No sign of it. I'm sure it's around. Kill it when you finish off Xena. I'm going to take care of Jan and those bodies. Byron out." Dropping the radio into his pocket, he grinned once again. "Nap time, my dear," he said then extended his open hand toward the Southerner. A small explosion erupted at her feet, sending her flying backward. Her momentum was stopped by a particularly large

boulder, her crumpled body falling to the ground, unconscious. Byron chuckled to himself as he grabbed ahold of the rope and began his descent down the cliff face. “Now to find Janice. I told you once before, Gabrielle, you can’t hide from a god.”

Argo strolled into the clearing, her hackles rising instantly. There was a danger here so intense she could almost taste it. Growling softly in her throat she continued forward, looking for any signs of movement or danger. In no time she found her mistress’ backpack. She followed her scent to the edge of the cliff where the scent of danger assaulted her sensitive nose anew. Backing away slightly, she scouted for the best way to proceed downward when the scent of her mistress’ mate registered in her canine awareness. Turning her head, she spotted the taller woman about twenty-five feet away.

Without making a sound, the big dog ambled over and immediately began to inspect the unconscious form for injuries. This process consisted of licking the woman’s face and prodding with her nose until she woke up. “Janice, not now,” Mel mumbled groggily until she realized that the wet sensation at her ear was most certainly not her lover.

Her eyes flew open and she saw soft brown eyes gazing at her with love and concern. Unable to restrain herself, she threw her arms around the big dog and hugged her fiercely. Argo tolerated the confining display of affection for a moment, then growled very softly. Mel took the hint and released the claustrophobic animal. “Okay, okay,” she said with a smile. “Ya know, Mommie doesn’t mind my hugs.” Brushing herself off she stood. The back of her head ached and she was sore, but nothing was broken. Moving cautiously, she walked back to the cliff edge. The ropes hadn’t been moved and Byron was nowhere in sight. Coming to a decision, she grabbed Janice’s pack and headed for the cover of the rocks where she’d been tossed. “Leesto will be here soon. I say we have a nice greeting planned for her.” Taking a swig of water from the canteen, she then poured a liberal amount for the dog who lapped at the falling water enthusiastically. Thirst sated, the big dog sat and patiently waited while mistress number two decided what to do.

Janice extracted the four sticks of dynamite Mel had stowed in the bag, tucking them into her kakhi shirt for lack of a better place to store them. With her bare hands she started moving rocks out of the way, clearing a path for the stone coffin. As she worked, she found more remnants of the ramp that had been used to move the sarcophagus to its final destination. With any luck, the right kind of shove might move the stone tomb from its location up the tunnel onto the remnants of track where its weight would carry it down to the cave entrance. She wasn’t worried about damaging the priceless artifact. She was planning to destroy it completely after all.

“You would have been better off going to Hollywood,” a cold voice commented from the cave entrance. Without the alert canine to warn her of danger, Janice Covington had been caught lost in her thoughts. Slowly she stood and turned around to face the voice.

“Professor Byron?” Janice exclaimed instantly recognizing the Egyptologist. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Really, Janice, you can call me William. There are no students here after all.” Smoothly he pulled a small cigar from his pocket and placed it in between his teeth. In a blur he lit a match, and in moments puffed on the cigar contentedly.

Janice’s mind, tuned into small details, noticed that the thin trail of smoke that should have come from near his feet from the discarded match was missing. Catching a whiff of his exhaled smoke, she realized that he was smoking one of her cigars. Suddenly she began to get a very ominous feeling about the man. “Yes, Janice. I know all about you,” he said conversationally taking the cigar from his mouth and examining it briefly. “I’ve had my eye on you for some time.”

“Sorry to hear that William,” the archeologist replied with more confidence than she felt, “I’m flattered, but you’re not my type.”

He laughed, a tone that sounded hollow in the confines of the cave. “I might surprise you.”

With effort, Janice relaxed her limbs. She’d have one chance and one chance only to draw her gun on the smoking man, of that she was sure. “So you work for Leesto?” she asked envisioning

her .357 Magnum leaving its holster in one fluid movement.

“Not exactly, Janice. You see, Leesto works for me.” Byron watched and waited. In some form or another he’d been waiting for centuries, what were a few more seconds. “You realize, of course, that I’m going to kill you?”

Janice’s muscles tensed, as hours of practice came to fruition. In the space between heartbeats her hand grasped the ivory handle of her six shooter, cleanly drawing it from the holster. In an instant she had the gun cocked and aimed at his head.

“Not bad, Janice,” Byron allowed, his brown eyes turning to milky white. “But still not quite good enough. Go ahead, pull the trigger.” Without pause, Janice squeezed the trigger. The hammer slammed home but nothing happened. It was then she noticed the gun getting warmer in her hand.

“Who are you?” Janice breathed as the gun steadily got hotter.

“Come now, Janice. Surely a bright girl like you can figure it out. Tell me, who can you possibly think of who might have a centuries old score to settle with you?”

“Valaska.” The archeologist gasped at the searing pain from her weapon.

“Your insight serves you, Gabrielle,” Byron commented, “too bad it isn’t going to save you. You took something of mine Gabrielle. You had no right to be Queen of the Amazons. All these lifetimes later I have not forgotten.”

Realizing now that she really was going to die, Janice acted before thinking. “Maybe now would be a good time to grow up Valaska,” she quipped throwing down her weapon, now glowing orange with heat. It discharged as it hit the stone floor. Using the distraction of the dust and small rocks that rained down on Byron, she ran, heading back into the dark tunnels of the cave.

Callisandra Leesto walked confidently across the clearing. She’d spotted Melinda Pappas some time ago. Xena’s descendant hadn’t moved from the boulder where she’d been sitting, looking out at the ocean as if she were on a picnic. Shaded by one of the few trees that dotted this cliff, she stood without an apparent care in the world. Leesto drew her gun anyway. She didn’t see Janice’s dog, and that was troubling.

“Surely Janice told you I was top marksman in our class,” the blond woman called out. “I could kill you with one shot from here.”

“Yes, you could,” Mel agreed, looking calmly at the approaching form of her lover’s nemesis. “But do you think that will fix anything?”

“What do you mean?” Leesto asked guardedly.

“I saw the panel in the museum,” Mel explained. “Callisto’s eulogy for her murdered family. Killing me won’t bring anyone back. Death seems too simple and small a payment for the damage Xena wrought in life.”

“You’re not seeing the big picture, dearie,” Leesto laughed. “What is a simple death now, ends up being a major defeat in oh...a hundred years or so.”

Before Mel could respond, a shot rang out from the cave below. Argo, startled from her hiding place near the cliff, sprinted for the edge. At full speed she navigated the sheer rock wall with the coordination of a mountain goat. Leesto only had time to fire off one round before the dog’s body dropped out of sight.

Leesto hurried to the cliff edge, keeping a wary eye on Melinda as she moved. The big dog was nowhere to be seen, and she noted with disappointment, there was no evidence of blood to indicate that she’d hit the animal. “Fuck,” she muttered, searching for any sign of the dog. “I swear that dog has more lives than a cat.”

“How long have y’all been working with Professor Byron?” Mel asked, hoping to draw her attention from Argo.

Leesto laughed, a thin insincere sound. “In a way, William and I have been working together for centuries. Trapping Callisto and Valaska in that river of lava was not the smartest thing Xena ever did.”

“Professor Byron is Valaska?” Mel asked stunned.

“So he says. Personally I don’t give a rats ass if he’s Hades himself. He contacted me after

our little soiree six months ago. I'm willing to listen to anyone with plans for Jan's demise... and yours as well of course."

"Of course," Mel allowed.

Mel watched, feeling surprisingly calm as she looked down the barrel of a gun steadily drawing near. Leesto pulled a pair of handcuffs out of her pocket with a sinister grin. "We're going for a little ride Miss Pappas," she declared as she stepped within five feet of the Southerner.

"Not today," Mel muttered under her breath. Moving her foot, released the rope she'd been standing on.

Leesto saw the rope fly as she heard a whizzing sound. Without the time to turn around the backpack filled with rocks sailed from its position in the branches of the shady tree and connected solidly with the back of the archeologist's head.

Mel knelt over the other woman's prone form and checked her pulse. She was alive, but very unconscious. Sending a silent thanks to Xena, Mel headed for the cliff edge.

Janice frantically climbed up the tunnel. Without a torch to guide her she fumbled in the inky darkness. Clenching her teeth she fought back cries of pain as she used her badly burned hand. That was one small asset afforded by the inky blackness, she couldn't see just how extensive the damage to her hand was. Byron's taunting laugh reached her ears as she continued to climb. "You can run but you can't hide, Janice Covington," Byron called.

Her attention focused solely on moving one limb after another she startled herself when her hand felt the distinctive smoothness of the stone sarcophagus. Janice pulled herself up onto the ledge she'd felt earlier. Sitting next to her ancestor's remains, she valiantly tried to focus her mind.

"*You don't have much time Janice, think!*" she told herself. "*You're gonna die, what can you do?*" Fumbling in her pocket with her left hand she extracted her lighter. She flicked its switch and was rewarded by a tiny flame. Not much to see by, but she confirmed that there wasn't anything sitting on the sarcophagus lid. Letting the light go out, she climbed to her knees, wincing at the pain. Finding purchase in the seam of the lid, she pulled for all she was worth. With a shove, the top came off the stone tomb. It flipped over with a dull thud, rocked a couple of times, then lay still.

Reaching into the opened sarcophagus with one hand Janice felt around blindly. With her other hand she searched the area below the stone casing until her fingers touched a length of track. Pulling the wood free with her good hand, she pulled something soft and textured out of the sarcophagus at the same time with the other. Seconds later she lit the crude torch she'd fashioned. The faded material blazed to life, hints of bilious green still clinging desperately to the homespun fabric.

Now able to see, Janice spared a glance into the stone tomb. She stared, mesmerized at the pale white bones of the two intertwined skeletons. Fragments of leather and fabric still clung to the one on the bottom, bits of Amazon-styled cloth to the skeleton on top. The one, she realized, she'd robbed for her torch. Two small urns were also present, the names Cyrene and Lyceus faded but legible on the outer surfaces. Janice looked closer, finding bits of hair still unconsumed by time, red-gold and cave-black mixed together. Reaching out a trembling finger, she touched a strand, only to have the brittle hair crumble at her touch. Coming to a decision, she began to pull and tug at the stone, moving it into position.

Byron watched Janice run, feeling powerful and fearsome. He knew Janice Covington, knew the fear that clung to her soul like stars in the night sky. She could be dangerous when cornered so he decided to dispense with the games. He would not make the mistakes he'd made as Valaska.

"Time to say goodbye, Janice," he called out. "I need you out of the way to pay my final respects to Gabrielle." Staring intently at the cave floor, he noted with satisfaction the tiny rocks and pebbles that began to shimmer. Suddenly, the ground began to move as the cave floor was transformed into a blanket of crawling, chittering insects. With an evil grin, Byron watched the chittering carpet of destruction surge toward the back of the cave and the dark tunnels beyond.

Argo scrambled down the cliff face. The momentum of her movement made stopping an impossibility even if she'd wanted to. Following the instructions provided by her keen sense of smell, she headed down the cliff, unconcerned by the pounding surf below. Finally with the cave in sight, she leapt from a protruding boulder, landing lightly on her feet at the entrance to the stone mouth. Without a second thought, she sprang at the man she'd seen earlier at her mistress' workplace. Ninety-five pounds of teeth and muscled fury leapt for the neck of the person Argo somehow knew had to be stopped. All of this was observed by a second figure in the shadows. A presence Argo sensed but did not fear. Ancient eyes watched as the battle for the souls of the Third Age commenced. "Be brave, Janice," he whispered.

Not expecting the attack, Byron was caught completely off guard as the canine body slammed into his back. With a howl of pain and fury, he flung the red-gold dog away from his body. Argo landed with a yelp ten feet away. Extending a hand, a burst of light shot forth, narrowly missing the dog who ran behind the cover of a boulder. The cave shook with the energy from the explosion, causing small rock fragments to rain down from above.

Janice's good eye went wide with panic as her other eye throbbed painfully at the attempt. Still swollen from the impact of the book corner, Janice had to struggle to keep her vision in focus. From the first rumble of the cave floor, her heart rate doubled. A heavy rock, shaken loose from the ledge above tumbled down and landed squarely on her shin. She cried out in pain as she felt the tibia of her break from the crushing blow. To make matters worse, she heard a soft sound, a faint chattering that steadily increased in volume. Propping her torch between a couple of big rocks she froze panic at the dark tide moving in her direction. It took a few moments of petrified observation from her unswollen eye before she realized that it was a swarm of insects. Beetles, centipedes, millipedes, earwigs, ants, and roaches all swarming toward her.

"Just so you know," the taunting voice of Byron called out. "I'm not going to cut off the flow of blood to your brain." He laughed at his own joke, which angered Janice enough to put her fear aside. "No my dear colleague, you're going to be eaten alive by any number of crawling things. Take a good look at Gabrielle's bones, you'll be twins soon enough." With a pained gasp, Janice shoved the rock off her leg, sobbing as the pain shot through her. "You were so easy to beat," Byron continued. "I'd hoped to find the bodies without you, of course. But Leesto was never as smart as you. I handed her the drawings and the Solari stories, and she still didn't figure it out."

With tears flowing freely from her eyes, Janice got to her knees and crawled to the sarcophagus as the first of the insects reached her. She absently hoped the pain of her leg would keep her mind off the tiny bites. She was wrong. She felt every bite, every sting. In a futile attempt to buy herself some time, she sent a silent apology to her ancestors and crawled into the stone coffin.

"The Third Age will be mine, Janice, as was always destined." Byron bellowed with rage. "Once Ares is free I will have my due. You robbed me of a throne once, you won't stand in my way again."

Immediately she felt the brittle bones crumble under her weight. Still, she reasoned, that was the idea. Destroy what was left of Xena and Gabrielle. Outsmarting the insects for the moment, they made futile attempts to climb the slick sarcophagus surface. Still under attack by the tiny monsters already crawling on her, she fought against the pain of their attack, as well as the pain in her leg. With shaky hands she took the sticks of dynamite out of her shirt and held them reverently in her lap. Carefully she put one stick in the front of the coffin, one behind her, and one next to her thigh. The fourth she held toward the crude torch that was just out of her reach. In a matter of heartbeats, her sole source of comfort, the tiny flame, appeared to become her undoing. With a valiant stretch, she cried out as her tortured bones and muscles protested. Made of no sterner stuff than flesh and bone, she passed out, inches from her goal.

... In a way, the understanding I reached with Cyrene was prophetic. While I made one or two more attempts to maintain some sort of bond with my birth-family, each time it seemed more tenuous and fragile. The summer I broke my leg was the final blow, both mentally and physically.

It took many years to realize it, but ultimately the rape wasn't the worst part of that fateful

visit to Potiedaia. No, the wound that cut much deeper and took the longest to heal was the betrayal of my family. Erasmus violated my body, but the others, they violated my soul. For a time, I wondered if I'd ever be able to see any of them again. Nothing positive came from the rejection of my own flesh and blood. At least something positive came from the rape. Lyceus.

Xena and I felt such devotion to our children, I didn't see how any one could divorce themselves emotionally from their own offspring. One day I said as much to Cyrene. The silence that met my ears brought tears to my eyes instantly.

"I'm so sorry, mother," I said, turning around.

"It's alright, Gabrielle," she finally reassured me. "But I'm here to tell you it can happen. While I don't think the actions of your family was warranted, I had my own reasons for letting Xena go."

I nodded, rushing over for a hug. "I wonder what I'll say should I ever see them again," I wondered aloud from the warmth of her embrace.

"That is for your heart to decide, little one," she whispered back.

That day came sooner than I might have expected. It was our first family trip to Thebes. It had been ages since Hercules or Iolas had seen the children, and we decided they were old enough for the trip. While we'd visited the Amazons from time to time since Lyceus' birth, this was different. For one, it was our last trip with Argo, and I'm glad the children had a chance to see what life on the road had been like for Xena and I.

Xe was seven, and like her grandmother in almost every way. She was fearless, precocious and stubborn. Handling responsibilities seemed second nature to her. As soon as she came to live with us, she'd adopted Argo as her own personal charge. I'd watch for hours as Xena taught her how to handle and care for the mare. Now, the only input Xena seemed to have was lifting things that were, for now, too heavy for the child.

Lyceus was a different story. Argo, or Ego, as he called her, made him nervous, and he'd only ride the mare in the company of someone else. I didn't blame him. He was only five, so what if Xe was riding alone by then? Lyceus was a talker, I don't think that surprised anyone, but he was also a listener, and to my occasional embarrassment, he remembered everything.

The children enjoyed our time on the road. Sleeping with us under the stars was a novelty, and they made a game of finding pictures in the bright patterns. Both pitched in with camp chores. Xena taught both to hunt, although I never really developed the stomach for that task. I taught both children to cook, and over time even my lover picked up a few things.

There is nothing quite like the sight of a big city through the eyes of a child. I don't think I ever forgot the squeals of delight that came from Xe and Ly as they sat together astride Argo as Xena and I approached Thebes. It was all so new to them. While Amphipolis is not a small town by any stretch of the imagination, it was one they were used to. They knew almost everyone and considered all of the Inn's regular patrons assorted uncles and aunts.

With Cyrene's Inn in mind, our first stop was to a purveyor of exotic beverages. There would be Hades to pay if we came home with out a cask or two of Cyrene's favorite port. Daxen's Obsession was the only tavern that carried it.

"Xena, if you can take care of this, I'll take the children over there," I suggested nodding in the direction of stalls selling a variety of fabrics. "They need some new clothes."

"I suppose they spend enough time in taverns at home," she agreed, helping Lyceus climb down from Argo.

"We could get some sweet meats," Xe offered helpfully.

"And candy," Ly supplied.

Xena grinned at the two faces gazing at her hopefully. "You'll have to work on mama for that one," she said giving each child a warm hug and a kiss. "I'll meet you over there as soon as I finish here."

"Hurry, Na," Xe suggested.

"Love you Nana," Ly added.

“Where did they learn this stuff?” Xena asked me with feigned embarrassment.

“Only from the best,” I replied, puffing up with pride. “Don’t take all day, Xena, I love you too.”

She smiled wryly before giving me a quick kiss and disappearing into Daxen’s tavern. My mission clear, I took Lyceus’ hand in my left and grabbed my staff with my right. Xe held Ly’s other hand and three of us were on our way.

“I’d like blue,” Lyceus chatted as we crossed the square.

“I want black,” Xe added.

“Anything but green,” they both chimed in unison. I don’t know what it was, but both children hated the color green. Xena found it terribly amusing, but it only served to puzzle me. It was a shame though. Lyceus had hair that was more blond than mine, but still had copper highlights. He would have looked quite handsome in green. Xe’s choice was no surprise. She tried to emulate Xena whenever she could. More than once I’d seen her cutting off the flow of blood to a doll’s brain when it needed the surgery of restuffing.

As I’d hoped, the dry goods dealer had a wonderful selection of cloth. I was able to find several colors for the children, as well as pick out something for Xena. I didn’t often get the chance to surprise my love, and I indulged myself whenever the opportunity presented itself.

At Ly and Xe’s constant prodding we headed over to the area where racks of meat strips were smoking over a low fire. “We’ll have a clear view of the tavern from our new location,” Xe pointed out helpfully. I was counting out my dinars to get a treat for the children when Ly tugged at Xe’s hand. They’d developed the habit of only turning to Xena or myself when they couldn’t handle a problem on their own. I well knew I’d eventually have to deal with obsolescence, but with children ages seven and five, it was a little earlier than I expected.

“Why is that lady staring at mama?” Lyceus asked his sister.

“I don’t know,” she replied.

Picking up Lyceus, I asked him directly. “Who is staring at mama?”

With all the discretion of a five year old, he stuck his arm straight out and pointed to a pregnant woman nearby. “She is.”

I had to do a double take. Then I realized that the pregnant woman was Lila. She looked ready to flee when I called to her. Realizing she’d been spotted she froze. Sweet meats purchased, the three of us walked over.

“Gabrielle,” she said quietly.

“Lila,” I replied, noting the advanced stage of her pregnancy. “When are you due?”

“Three weeks,” she said taking a seat on an available bench.

“Who are you?” Lyceus asked curious.

Lila smiled at him, so I decided I might as well do introductions. “This is my sister Lila.”

“Who’s children are you watching?” Lila asked, plainly enough.

I bristled at that, but quickly reminded myself it had been my choice not to inform my parents or sister of my pregnancy.

“They’re mine,” I explained, watching her eyes widen in surprise. “This is Lyceus, and this is Xena.” The children nodded and smiled, looking at her extended belly curiously.

“I’m sorry, Gabrielle,” she said in a rush. “I didn’t know you married.” I was trying to think up a suitable retort when Lila’s mouth dropped open in wonder.

“Everything okay?” Xena asked softly from behind me.

The children turned around in surprise, not having heard her walk up either. “Na!” Lyceus shouted and leapt into her waiting arms.

“But how?” Lila wondered aloud, staring at little Xena and Lyceus in amazement.

“I have many skills,” my lover replied flatly, turning to go.

A seven years later we received word that Perdicus’ father had died. As the widow of his oldest son I was, naturally, expected to attend the services. Since Argo was no longer with us, we packed our belongings onto Idgie, Argo’s successor, and as a family made the trip.

We attended the ritual fire apart from the other mourners. I'd always liked Hector, he was a very kind man. Xena quietly sang a hymn for the ears of her family alone. I saw mother and father standing with Lila and Erasmus and their child. Lila, I noted, was pregnant again. I made a point to keep Xena as far away from Erasmus as possible. Understandably, the anger was still there. I felt it too. We'd already explained to Lyceus who his father was and what the circumstances of his conception had been. I had hoped to wait until he was older, but he came in with all sorts of questions one day about why Xena and he didn't look more alike. We decided that if he was old enough to ask the questions, he was old enough to hear the answers. Little Xena knew about her parentage, it had never been a mystery. Still, it was hard for her to hear that she and Lyceus didn't share blood since they were so close.

After the funeral fires burned low, we decided to get a bit to eat before heading out of town. To my surprise, father sought us out. We were eating our meal in silence, well aware of the curious and hostile stares that were cast in our direction. This was not new to the children. On occasion they'd been taunted or teased and knew that after some persuading from Xena, they'd be apologized to and left alone. This time one farmer in particular was a little drunker and louder than the others.

"How do you think she did that?" he muttered to his friend.

Both Xenas leveled their steely blue gaze in his direction.

"I mean the girl is a spitting image, and the boy looks just like the bard," he continued with a laugh.

Xena was about to stand, only to find fourteen year old Xe already on her feet and walking toward the group of inebriated farmers. We all tensed, watching our child calmly walk into trouble.

They abruptly quieted when they realized the subject of their comments was in their midst. "Is there something you'd like to know about my family?" she asked sensibly.

The drunk man didn't back down. "Yeah, how did the Warrior Princess sire you?"

Xe flashed a grin. "Because she's more of a man than you'll ever be and twice the woman you'll ever have. She has many skills." The farmer slammed his drink down on the counter and was about to stand when Xe grabbed his ear, keeping him in his seat. "I'd think very carefully if I were you," she said conversationally, looking at the whole group. "Is Xena of Amphipolis someone you really want to anger?" They all looked nervously over to my lover who sat with her arms crossed, beaming with pride at our daughter. They slowly shook their heads. "Good," she continued with a nod to her grandmother. "But I wasn't talking about her."

"She's a smart lady." A new voice I recognized as my father's came from the tavern doorway. "Any affront to Gabrielle, or her family can be taken up with me." He sternly looked at the men as he walked over to Xe. "May I join you at your table?" he asked softly.

Xe looked at us for an accepting nod, then led father to our table. He'd aged a lot in the past dozen years, it hurt me see him so old.

He didn't take a seat, only stood there looking at me. It took a while, but I noticed tears in his eyes. "Gabrielle, can you forgive a foolish old man? I was wrong. I thought you weren't the daughter I'd tried to raise, but seeing you at the funeral and now, with your children..." he stammered, looking for the right words. Taking a breath he began again. "I know you didn't learn it from me, but somewhere you learned the important things, and you've raised fine children. I wasn't there for you... when it happened. I'll carry that regret with me to my own fire. I just want you to know I'm proud of what you've become. Of who you are."

I couldn't keep my own tears back as I cried in my father's arms. He was the last person in the world I would have expected to try to reconcile with me, and he surprised me beyond words. We spent three or four hours with him in that tavern. He got to know Xe and Ly, and I know that meant a lot to him. Xena was happy for me, and I was beyond happiness. I had something back I thought I'd lost forever. My father had returned.

## Chapter 8: Hereditary Heroes

Mel carefully climbed down the rock face, forcing herself not to look at the crashing surf below. At one point she slipped, and would have fallen into the pounding waters were it not for the

wise like grip she had on the rope, her lifeline. After what seemed like an eternity, she saw the outer rim of the cave opening. Moving like a spider along the slick stone, she finally positioned herself to drop down to into the cave mouth. She landed lightly on her feet, not making a sound. She clung to the shadows and was surprised to see another man besides Byron in the cave. Before she could move, he spoke. The familiarity of his voice kept her riveted in place.

“Byron, old boy,” Tildus offered cheerfully. “You’re cheating.”

“What are you doing here?” the Egyptologist screamed, his voice taking on a hysterical feminine edge.

“I’m watching, as required by the ancient texts,” Tildus replied. His eyes traveled upward as he scanned the ceiling of the cave. “You know the insect thing isn’t allowed,” he said with mild reproach.

“And just what to you plan to do about it?” Byron asked, cocky.

Tildus grinned, and lightly blew a puff of air toward the ceiling. Byron watched, amused, until he noticed the bats that covered the cave ceiling waking up. One by one, then in groups, they descended from their sleeping perches as they began to swoop down and consume the insect feast that carpeted the floor of their cave. The flapping of leathery wings could be heard in the far tunnels of the cave as more bats continued to wake.

“If you’re going to beat Janice,” Tildus scolded the seething man. “You’re going to have to do it on your own.”

“You’ll pay for this, Hephaestus!” Byron growled menacingly.

“We shall see,” the elderly man allowed with a smile.

Without another word, Byron turned and picked the six shooter up off the cave floor. Gun in hand he headed back toward the tunnel, towards Janice Covington.

“No!” Mel shouted as she ran from the concealing shadows.

Calmly, Byron turned, aimed the gun at her head and fired.

Mel blinked, expecting to feel the sting of lead as life fled from her body. After a moment, realizing that she was still very much alive, she opened her eyes. There, floating mere inches from her forehead, was a stationary bullet.

“Come, come, Valaska,” Tildus chided as he walked over to Mel and plucked the bullet from where it levitated. “You made an agreement with Callisto, remember? You leave Xena and her descendants alone, and in turn she leaves Gabrielle and her progeny to you. Don’t renege, it’s bad form.”

With a fuming scowl, Byron turned and continued back to the tunnel once again. Mel was about to race after him when a gentle hand on her shoulder stopped her where she stood. “No, child,” Tildus said softly. “The battle with Ares was yours, this one is hers. Let her fulfill her destiny.”

“But she’ll die,” Mel sobbed. Imploringly, she gazed into the face of the kindly old man. “Don’t let her die.”

Sadly, Tildus shook his head. “I’m sorry, Melinda, but that isn’t for me to decide. Janice will live or die based on her own actions. Still, she doesn’t strike me as the sort finished with life, now does she?” Mel nodded in reluctant agreement.

Mel Pappas was not the only one in the cave who had difficulty with Tildus’ instructions. Argo crept from the cover of the bolder where she’d been hiding to slink toward the back of the cave. “Not so fast,” Tildus continued with mild reproach. “You’ve done your part too, Argo, this last isn’t for you.” With a guilty expression, the dog returned to the cave mouth and sat at Mel’s side.

“She’ll be okay,” Mel assured the dog, hoping with every fiber of her being she was right.

Janice heard the unusual sounds just as she felt a light weight settle on her thigh. She opened her unswollen eye and, after a moment focused on a tiny bat picking a centipede off of her leg. An instant later, it took flight with its meal. Staring in amazement, she looked around as bats everywhere went after the tide of insects. More landed on her, gently touching down, grabbing a bug, then taking flight. With a renewed sense of hope she shook the sleep from her mind and with

determination borne out of that hope leaned forward for the torch. Before pain claimed her anew, she had to get this done.

“Got any last words?” Byron’s voice taunted from down the tunnel. He was getting close Janice realized. It was now or never. She cried out as the pain of movement surged up through her body. Bending her broken leg, she reached the torch, lighting the dynamite fuse just as the sputtering flame went out and Byron’s form appeared down the tunnel.

His eyes went wide at the sight of the sputtering fuse, then wider still as the stone sarcophagus started to tip. Put off balance by Janice’s lunge for the flame, it rocked slightly, then tipped off its ledge, sliding down the track like a bobsled. “Oh shit!” Janice gasped as she realized what she’d done. She originally moved the coffin onto the track so she could haul it to the cave mouth before blowing up the contents. Riding it down was hardly her plan.

Byron looked equally surprised as Janice sped towards him. There wasn’t anywhere to go in the narrow tunnel. Before being able to fire a single shot, he was knocked into the coffin on top of Janice.

Neither passenger had time to get their bearings. The tunnel twisted and turned, the ride bumpy in places where the tracks had disappeared completely. Still, it was steep enough, and the sarcophagus smooth enough, that nothing short of hitting a wall would stop its progress. Hitting the last descending slope, they picked up speed and sped into the mouth of the main cave.

In an instant the sarcophagus appeared at one end of the cave, each passenger struggling for balance, the next moment they were shooting out the cave mouth, flying through sky over the brilliant blue ocean below.

“Ohmigawd!” Mel screamed and took off out of the cave mouth, climbing down as fast as she could.

Argo tried to follow, but was stopped by Tildus’ hand around her bandanna. “This is not for you to see,” he said gently, picking up the ninety-five pound dog in one arm and climbing up the cliff to the top.

Janice regained her wits as the cold air hit her in the face like a slap. She grabbed the gun from Byron’s hand and threw it away from the airborne coffin. He struggled, clearly disoriented. Grabbing for another stick of dynamite, she lit another fuse from the now almost expired one. “Hold this,” she screamed at Byron. Then, with a shove she rolled her body out of the falling tomb.

“Wha...” he stammered, confused. He looked at his hands to see what Janice had given him.

As soon as his eyes registered the lit stick of dynamite, it exploded. He didn’t have time to scream. Janice felt the impact of the explosion as she plummeted to the ocean floor one hundred feet below. She doubted she’d live, but at least she took Xena, Gabrielle and Valaska with her. As the blue of the Aegean Sea rushed up to greet her, she instinctively stretched her body out into a dive position. Seconds later she hit the water with tremendous force.

Mel watched as the sarcophagus soared over the ocean. Pausing for an instant in its arc, it angled downward and fell. Janice’s form could be clearly seen launching away from the stone coffin seconds before the whole thing blew up. The rapid sound of explosions, one after the other rang in her ears as dust and rock rained down into the sea.

Mel had made her way part way down the cliff face. Standing on an outcrop perhaps fifty feet above the water, it took a moment for her to spot Janice’s body. There wasn’t much in the way of debris, but the lingering smoke made vision difficult. Without stopping to consider the safety of her actions, Mel leapt from the cliff. The water was a cold shock as it rushed up around her, making her clothes heavy and cumbersome.

“Janice!” Mel shouted looking around frantically for her lover. From her vantage point it was impossible to see the archeologist. Mel listened intently for any response, but was rewarded with only the sounds of water lapping against her body. Not deterred, quickly discarded her heavy boots then swam with powerful strokes in the direction she’d last seen her love.

Janice hit the water hard, its stinging chill alerting her mind even as the impact made her leg

scream in agony. She felt the pressure on her ears increase painfully as her body continued downward, propelled by its' hundred foot fall. Angling her body slightly, she used what momentum she could to carry her back to the surface.

With lungs burning from exertion, she finally broke the water's surface, expelling spent air and taking in fresh oxygen greedily. The clear air made her head swim. She felt dizzy, exhausted, spent and giddy all at once. "So what if I die right now?" she thought. "I kept my word to my ancestors." She readied herself to slip below the surface one last time, absently regretting the need to leave Mel and Argo.

"Oh, no you don't," a stern voice said as a strong arm reached around her chest.

"Mel?" Janice asked grogily as she tried to open her eyes. Was she dreaming?

"Damn right it's me. With all the trouble I went to get y'all housebroken, I'm not about to let you drown," Mel replied as she carefully kept Janice's head above water. Inwardly she cringed. Janice was a mess. Her eye was still swollen and she had several bug bites. Her hand hung limp at her side, severely burned. Peering into the clear water, Mel could also see the bloodied disfigurement of her left shin. She was bleeding profusely and the Southerner wondered how long before the blood attracted any variety of ocean predators.

"I'm tired, Mel," Janice whispered. "Really tired."

"Well, you can't give up yet," Mel urged. "I love you, Janice. Me and Argo need you, you're not leaving us without a fight."

"Kiss me," Janice breathed, barely audible.

"Now is funny time to get friendly," Mel said gently before tenderly claiming soft lips with her own. At the contact she could feel Janice's body relax in her grip as she slowly slipped away.

"Love you, Melinda," she whispered softly before closing her eyes once more.

Mel fought against the urge to panic when she noted the shallow movement of her lover's continued breathing. She was alive for now, but wouldn't be much longer if she didn't get out of the cold salt water. Treading water for both of them, she held Janice tightly, determined to keep her lover alive, by sheer force of will if necessary.

She didn't know how long she'd been treading water, continuing to kick her strong legs in spite of the exhaustion and cramping of her muscles. She heard an odd noise that didn't match the sounds of the sea. Distracted, she looked around, breaking out a huge grin as she saw the familiar hull of *The Charmer* approaching.

...The final trip I made to Poteidaia was for the funeral of my father. Once again the four of us made the trip. Lyceus was sixteen, the only thing that surpassed his good looks was the gentleness of his heart. Xe was eighteen and resembled Xena more every day. In a way Cyrene got her wish and was able to envision a Xena and Lyceus without Cortese's raid on Amphipolis. Lila had a total of four children, two boys and two girls. Erasmus was no longer in the picture. I didn't know all the details, but understood that he'd been a troubled soul since they married. Like Melegar, he took to drink to wash away what ever pain he suffered, only serving to create more. Lila told me she was pregnant for the third time when he took off for good.

We were at mother's house. I was surprised she'd invited us over after the lighting of the funeral pyre, but accepted nonetheless. Lyceus and Xe were immediately adopted by Lila's two eldest, Daphne and Ulysses, and taken outside to play. I swear she named her son that just to annoy me. As for the other two, they were twins, a boy and a girl. Lila tried to balance them on her lap as I helped mother prepare dinner. I felt so bad for my sister. It was bad enough what she'd had to endure with Erasmus, what we'd all had to endure. But to be left, two months before giving birth to twins, then facing the monumental task of raising four children alone -- life was not going to be easy for my sister.

Xena came in from tending to Idgie, and noting Lila's distress, offered to take one of the babies. Shyly Lila handed the girl over, since the boy was finishing up his latest meal.

"What's her name?" Xena asked as she shifted the child in her arms. I smiled to myself. Xena was an expert with children and it showed.

“Gabrielle,” Lila answered softly. My eyes shot over to my sister in wonder.

Xena only smiled. Without taking her eyes from the infant’s face she smiled. “Well, hello then Gabrielle,” she said.

“This is Xenos,” Lila announced as she handed me the other infant. Now it was my turn to grin as Xena looked over, amazed.

“Lila, you didn’t have to do that,” I said, my voice thick with emotion.

“It was your father’s idea,” mother said as she brought a steaming roast to the table. “Lila has a chance raising her children to undo a lot of mistakes we’ve both made,” mother explained.

“I don’t want to lose sight of that,” Lila finished.

“It was your father’s final wish,” mother finished.

The only thing that prevented me from crying my eyes out was Xe and Ly bursting through the door, each with a small child clinging to their back. I don’t know how, but both children inherited my appetite.

“Dinner ready?” Lyceus asked.

“We’re starved,” Xe added with a chorus of laughter from Daphne and Ulysses.

Shortly after returning to Amphipolis we were paid a visit by Xenan Gabris Phantes, my Centaur nephew. Ares was on the move to the north. He spoke hurriedly about the battle for the first age.

“Slow down,” I finally asked. “What battle?”

“The Oracle,” he replied, rushed. “Mother said to mention the Oracle’s predictions. The old myths.” He looked at Xena imploringly. “I came because I can run faster than any of the Amazons. Mother said that you would understand.”

“I do,” Xena assured them.

“Well, I don’t,” I interjected.

“Gabrielle,” Xena said gently turning to look at me. “I told you before about the oracle that made the predictions about mother.” I nodded. I’d heard those stories several times, and had even written them down. “The oracle also told her of a battle that would be fought in three different ages. I have to go fight Ares...”

“Then what?” I interrupted. “Our children will have to fight him? Xena, we need you here.”

“Shhhh,” she said placing gentle fingers on my mouth. “It’ll be okay. I know I’m needed here, which is why I have every intention of coming back. I have to do this. Trust me, my heart.”

There wasn’t much I could do. Xena’s mind was made up and that was final. Did I mention she can be stubborn? I managed to persuade her to take a satchel of my scrolls for luck. It was going to be a long trip and it would give her some distraction all those nights until the inevitable. The month that we waited for her return was the longest I’d ever endured. She did come back though. Exhausted, bruised and bleeding, but came back she did. The children were asleep, as was Cyrene. I was up writing, waiting as I had been each night. The door opened silently, but I felt the breeze and the presence that made my pulse race. “Xena,” I whispered as I ran to her.

“I’m home, Gabrielle,” she said, wrapping me in those wonderful strong arms. “For good.” It took a moment to realize what she’d just said. Then I noticed that her sword and chakram were missing. “They’re gone, Gabrielle,” she explained. “As are your scrolls I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, Xena,” I assured her. “I can always write more. You’re back and that’s all that matters. Is there anything you can’t do?” I wondered aloud.

“Making you happy, Gabrielle, is the only goal I’ve got left,” she replied with a kiss.

Xena did make me happy. And I her, for many, many years. Eventually we lost Cyrene, which was hard, but our family continued to thrive in spite of our loss. Lyceus was the first of our children to marry. He met a poet who’d studied under the great Sappho and was smitten from the moment she’d entered the Inn. He was seventeen at the time and it took him three years to convince her to have him. Xe was another matter. For a time it seemed unlikely that she would marry or commit to anyone for longer than a season or two. For several years it seemed as if her interest

didn't extend beyond women. There wasn't an attractive woman who came through Amphipolis that our entire family didn't appreciate. After breaking the hearts of both sexes for so long, I think even Xe began to wonder if she'd ever meet her match. Naturally, as Fate would have it, she did. She was won over by a young philosopher. They'd argue for hours about philosophy and ethics. Finally, she agreed to marry him. As she said, put up with him on a permanent basis. Xena and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Lyceus and his wife had two children, Lila and Cyrene. Xe and her husband had a son, Marcus. We enjoyed our grandchildren immensely even though technically Marcus was Xena's great-grandson. We were sorry that Cyrene never had the opportunity to enjoy them, but sadly, that is how life works sometimes. To my surprise, Lyceus kept in contact with my birth-family. While I'd essentially come to an understanding with mother and Lila, the closeness that had existed before was irretrievable. On his own, Ly forged a new bond with his aunt and grandmother, occasionally taking his family to Poteidaia for visits.

Sadly, as the Fates command, life can not endure forever. My world came crashing in around me on a bright summer morning. After more than six decades Xena could still leave me breathless and sated. To the very end we were fiercely in love with each other. Living with a passion that could not be curbed, we indulged ourselves and each other as often as our aging bodies would allow. Xena told me she wanted to go for a ride. "Gabrielle, you ignite me," she said. "I've got to do something with this pent up energy or I'll wear you out."

"I'd like to see you try," I replied with a grin.

Still the day was warm, and she was feeling her oats, so I kissed her goodbye and wished her a nice ride.

"You know I love you more each day, don't you?" she asked, as she mounted the roan stallion.

"As I do you, my heart," I replied. "Be careful."

Around noon, Lyceus and Xe went to look for their Na. She'd not come back yet and I was a little worried. Xe's expression when she returned was all I needed to see. With an anguished cry I ran outside as Lyceus was lowering Xena's body from his horse. Both children were sobbing, but I scarcely noticed as I cradled my love in my arms one last time.

Later, when the grieving had begun, something that would take until my own death to finish, Lyceus explained what had happened.

"The roan threw a shoe and stumbled," he said his voice raw from sobbing. "They were on a steep incline, and the horse fell. Na broke her neck when she was thrown, she didn't feel a thing." I nodded absently. At least I had that.

Xena was put to rest in a sarcophagus between Lyceus and Cyrene. I contacted the Amazons and explained why I would not be committing her body to the fire they'd wanted so many years ago.

"Gabrielle," Ephiny said gently. "We don't want you to. Now that the battle of the first age has happened, it changes things." Although I was hurting beyond belief at my loss, I listened attentively as Ephiny relayed the last of the Amazon legends I would need to know.

I lived eight years after Xena left. They weren't bad years, but too much of me was missing to fully enjoy them. I continued to live at the Inn. Lyceus had taken over running it. While I loved Xe dearly, it was harder to see her than my son. She was so like her grandmother. She looked then as Xena did in her prime. Her voice, the smile... I had to remind myself that it wasn't Xena.

I continued to write, some. When I'd decided I'd penned my last tale, I had the scrolls carefully wrapped and sent to Solari. I knew she'd take good care of them. My own children already knew my stories, they wouldn't need them on parchment. When my last day arrived, I knew it was so. I didn't feel particularly bad, I just felt ready. In a way I was looking forward to crossing over, to being reunited with my love. Since my health had been slipping, the children came by each day to visit. As the Amazons had asked, I sent for them as well when I knew my time was near. They kept a respectful distance, providing what support they could for my family. I kissed each grandchild goodbye before saying my final farewells to Xe and Lyceus. "I'm proud of you both," I told them, "and love you with all my heart. You've learned, and passed on the important things. A greater gift

you could not have given Xena and me.” The blue of Xe’s eyes was the last thing I saw on this earth, until I saw the blue eyes beyond.

## Chapter 9: New Beginnings

“Is she alright?” a gentle Southern voice asked, the worried edge unmistakable.

“Yes, Mel,” another voice replied patiently. “Same as yesterday. She’s been through a lot. She’ll wake up when she’s ready.”

“Mel?” Janice gasped weakly, her throat dry and tight.

“Janice, you’re awake,” the Southerner replied, relieved.

“Maybe,” Janice whispered as she thought about opening her eyes. Then, feeling a vaguely familiar, softness against the skin of her breast, she opened her eyes and looked down. She was back on board the *Lovely Lunacy*, nestled in a bed and wrapped in black satin sheets.

“I thought those might wake you up,” Mel teased with a knowing gleam in her eye.

“How did I get here?” Janice asked, taking in the faces of the concerned Amazons gathered around the bed. “Where’s Ar...” Before she could get the dog’s name past her lips the Golden Retriever/Alsatian jumped up on the bed. Janice flinched, expecting the jolt of the bed to hurt her broken leg. Looking down, she could clearly see a cast outlined by the satin. She checked her hand, noting that it was bandaged as well. “What happened?”

“You pulled it off, that’s what happened,” Emily said, beaming from the foot of the bed. “Xena and Gabrielle are ashes as they should be, and Valaska, or rather Byron, is no more. We found chunks of him floating all over the place.

“Small chunks,” Quest added for clarification.

Mel frowned at the grisly tone the conversation had taken. “*The Charmer* came and picked us up. Quest and the others managed to fend off Leesto’s thugs.”

“Picked us up?” Janice asked confused.

“You should have seen it,” Tory continued, picking up the story. “After you hit the water, Mel jumps off this fifty foot cliff after you. I saw it with the binoculars. Once we got rid of Leesto’s thugs we came right over.”

“Yeah,” Stacey added. “Debby fixed your leg and wrapped up your hand. You’ve been unconscious for two days.”

“How did Argo get here?” the archeologist asked, finally beginning to wake up.

“That’s the strange part,” Emily replied. “Someone had delivered her to the crew of the *Lunacy*. She had our coordinates tucked into her bandanna. They arrived only a couple of hours after we picked you and Mel out of the water.”

Mel looked over at Emily, her surprise evident. “You didn’t tell me that. Did y’all get a description of whoever it was who dropped her off?”

The blond woman nodded. “The Captain said it was an old guy with glasses.”

Mel smiled, sending a silent thank you to Tildus. “What about Leesto?” Janice asked.

“She was picked up at the top of the cliff. She’s in custody, in connection with the Athens museum theft,” Kit supplied, passing Janice a glass of water.

“I doubt it’ll stick, but I’m glad she’s out of the way for now,” the archeologist replied thoughtfully. “What about the marbles?”

“From the temple frieze?” Mel asked to clarify. “Why, they’re only the most recent amazing discovery of one, Dr. Janice Covington. The authorities have secured the sight and I’m sure teams will be assembled in no time to retrieve them.”

“That might not be so good, Mel,” Janice warned.

“Why ever not?”

“Because the sarcophagus lid is still in the cave. When word gets out I destroyed the remains...”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Emily assured her. “After all, none of us saw you blow up the coffin. Did we, Tory?” she asked, looking at the younger Amazon.

“See it? Why, no, of course not. It isn’t your fault, Dr. Covington, if you discovered the cave

but the remains were already gone.”

For the first time in a long while, Janice smiled, a relaxed grin that threatened to stay on her face for days.

Later, when Janice had convinced everyone that she was indeed on the mend, she and Mel were left alone in their cabin. Propped up against Mel’s side, her head resting against a soft breast with Argo curled up at her feet, Janice Covington was the picture of contentment.

“They’d like us to stay in the vicinity for a day or two, to make sure you’re okay,” Mel explained, stroking Janice’s hair softly.

“Fine by me,” Janice agreed with a sigh. “Now that the crisis is over, it’d be nice to spend some time with the family. Maybe I’ll even find the time to get seasick.”

“I can hardly wait,” Mel replied snuggling closer and resting her chin on top of Janice’s head. “But I’m glad you think seeing family is a good idea. I was thinking...”

“Yes?” Janice asked rolling over. Her left leg was clumsy but after a couple of tries she got it out of the way. With Mel stretched out beneath her, she rested her head on the Southerner’s chest, sighing with contentment at the sound of the familiar heartbeat.

“I was thinking that for summer break,” Mel continued, lightly touching her lover’s back, “we might meet some more relatives, head to Scotland, perhaps?”

“The MacGabbers?” Janice asked, her left hand roaming over familiar skin.

“Exactly,” Mel agreed.

“Good, because I’ve been thinking, too,” Janice continued. “I don’t think the scrolls we found are all of them. Who knows, maybe we’ll find something new in Scotland.” Janice continued her ministrations, nipping at soft flesh beneath Mel’s satin slip.

“Ah, Janice, what do you think you’re doing?” she asked concerned.

“You mean you can’t tell?” Janice replied, stunned.

“What about your leg?” her lover inquired gently.

“I’ve got news for you, Mel, I don’t use my leg for that. Having my right hand bandaged is going to be a problem, but I’m willing to improvise.”

“You’re incorrigible, Janice Covington,” Mel breathed, her voice throaty and warm. “And I hope to God you stay that way for a long, long time.”

“With you, Melinda Pappas, I don’t doubt it,” Janice replied claiming hungry lips. Passion ebbed and flowed as two hearts beat in tandem. Souls bound together beyond the confines of time and space pulsated with the devotion of their union. With a love to rival that of their ancestors before them, Janice Covington and Melinda Pappas were connected, as they would remain forever.

#### Epilogue: The Year 2042

Xero smiled as her fingers moved across the sensory input pad. Arctic blue eyes watched lines of data scrolling across the top and bottom of her screen. It was a new security protocol by Hybrid Systems Inc. Running an absent hand through her long black hair, she studied the data carefully. Xero was at work. Paid to compromise and steal intellectual property, Xero was one of the best in the business. At age twenty eight, she already had fifteen years experience as a professional hacker, a nettie, cyber thief, and virtual thug. Watching the two data streams simultaneously, she keyed the sequence to launch one of her own encryption programs. It would take a few moments to insinuate itself within the data stream, so Xero reached for her glass of water and took a long decadent sip.

There was nothing quite like the taste of natural water, and Xero sighed as the cool liquid spilled down her throat. Sadly, she knew that her bottle was almost empty. It had been a gift from her roommate and occasional business partner after a tricky job well done. Never taking her eyes from the screen she saw the green flash as her program launched into operation. Xero proceeded with the next phase of her theft. After defining her search parameters, she let the retrieval program go and checked its progress with her watch as well as the on screen chronometer.

As the seconds ticked down something at the top of the screen caught her eye. Almost

imperceptible, there had been a slight lag in the data reading across the security field. Keeping her input strokes on the sensory pad consistent, Xero keyed the sequence to her personal trace/counterseek program. It was doubtful she'd been tapped by a syscop, it'd never happened before. But Xero knew all too well that there was a first time for everything.

There it was again, someone was definitely on her channel observing. Carefully, she continued her work. So far she could only be hit with snooping charges, since she hadn't downloaded any data, yet. Keeping a steady hand she relaxed. If it was local security, they might just think she was with an MIS company or an overworked employee doing routine maintenance. Her cyber-retriever flashed orange, it had the data. She could set it aside to download later, or continue with her theft. She was spared the decision when the watching entity made its presence known.

*Nice work Xero*, the greeting flashed on her screen, gold text on a black background. Automatically Xero keyed the sequence to launch a tracer program.

*Who are you?* she replied, stalling for time.

*An admirer, possibly an employer*, came the immediate response.

Xero's blue eyes flashed in surprise. The tracer error message was unmistakable. Whoever was at the other end of the data line had heavy duty encryption. She read a few lines into the error subroutine and froze. The encryption had syscop data nodes. She'd been spotted by a net cop.

*As you've no doubt discovered by now, I've got syscop access, the message flashed. But I'm not interested in arresting you. Xero, I need your help. My keyword is Amphipolis. I'll meet you at--*

Xero launched her scrambler and cut the connection cutting off the data stream mid flow. Letting out a controlled breath, she launched her sanitation program and shut down the system. It was possible if she'd been tapped, she'd also been given a worm. Virtual tapeworms were an effective tool cybercops used to identify the hardware used in the theft and compromise of intellectual property. A tiny data code, it was impossible to find unless you knew what to look for, but when activated could shut down entire systems as well as forward transcripts of all net activity to the authorities.

"Hey, Xero. I'm back," Bat called from the doorway. Xero could hear the distinctive sound of groceries being put away as various cupboards were opened and closed.

"Bat, get in here," she called, "I've got a job for you."

"What's the problem?" Bat asked, navigating the various cables and link lines that littered the floor of the tiny living room.

"I just got tapped by a syscop. I need your eye to check out the system," Xero said with a glance to the woman who had taken a seat next to her.

The most unusual thing about Bat was a black eye patch worn over her left eye. The result of a botched lens implant job, she'd decided on practicality over vanity. She'd gone to a gray market surgeon for a mechanical eye. Revolting to look at, it gave her an edge hacking. In a business where every edge counted, this was a decided advantage. "A syscop?" Bat echoed, impressed. "No shit. Must've been a good one."

"Not that good, I spotted them," Xero replied. "I hope you didn't have any plans tonight. I need you to go through my system, check for tapeworms. I still need to get this job done, cop or no cop."

Bat nodded, understanding. She had no illusions about her role under Xero's roof. She worked for the enigmatic woman, simple as that. Until her debt was paid off, Xero, for all intents and purposes, owned her. "No problem. Like I've ever got a date," she muttered. "Why don't you give me some space. If I'm going to disassemble the system, you'll only be in the way. Go down to the 'Horn. Get something to eat, relax, get laid."

Xero watched as Bat pulled her long brown hair into a ponytail. Already she could see the shorter woman planning which backup systems to use, what tools she'd need. "I thought that was what you were for?" she shot back good naturedly.

Bat frowned. "What? I don't kick you out of my bed the two or three times you end up there drunk, and now I'm a dyke? Spare me."

"You didn't have any complaints at the time..." Xero stopped herself. She knew exactly why

the other woman hadn't complained. Bat was afraid of her. As one of the few *former* corporate systems managers, Bat had a price on her head. People who worked corporate and then got out didn't have long life expectancies. That was in fact how they'd met. On a rainy night, with two corporate security thugs at her heels, Bat had wandered into the Saddlehorn Pub & Grill. Desperate for a cover, she'd foolishly made a play for Xero and ended up in an entirely new line of work. Since then, she'd enjoyed the protection of Xero's association, but also responded to the taller woman's demands unflinchingly. "Sorry," Xero mumbled, thinking she may have pushed the other woman too far.

"Shit, don't worry about it," Bat replied with a grin. "You know our deal. I worry about your hardware, you take care of your own software, so for chrissakes, go get some, will ya? You've been edgy as hell all week." Xero grinned at that. The other woman got up and began to set up some diagnostic equipment. "Xero," she continued as she worked, "I'd consider you a friend if I thought for a millisecond that you had any. This thing has obviously gotten you spooked. So take the night off and chill. Say hi to everyone at the 'Horn for me and by the time you get back, this rig will be running in top form." Xero nodded, grabbing her leather jacket from the couch.

"Here," Bat said, picking up a small mobile communications unit. "Take the mobie." From a compartment on the bottom she extracted two tiny ear pieces. "Wear the wire, and if I've got any questions, I'll let you know."

"Sure," Xero agreed, slipping the tiny receiver into her ear.

"Oh, and do me a favor, will ya?" Bat finished as Xero headed for the door. "If you see some good looking Bobs tonight, for god's sake get their number. It's been so long since I've had a guy, I'm forgetting what being straight is all about."

"I'll see what I can do," Xero replied with a grin, pocketing the mobie unit and clipping the tiny phone to her jacket.

The Saddlehorn was unique even though it was only one of several hangouts frequented by hackers. Versus was a well known hacker bar as was Fire Circle, but they didn't have the mystique of the 'Horn. The Saddlehorn Pub & Grill was exclusive. The word was out that only the invited and initiated could congregate there, those who ignored the warning usually found corrupted net accounts soon after an unwelcome visit. The clientele was also exclusively female, not that it was a lesbian hacker bar per se, although at first blush that was what most people assumed. The usual crowd of hackers also included those buyers who would procure their services. Only the most serious and determined buyers ended up at the 'Horn. Simply put, it was the place adopted by the best of the best. Even the managers of other bars spent time at the 'Horn. If you were female and good on the nets, you had to be there.

It wasn't an easy place to find, but Xero knew the route by heart. The 'Horn was more of a home for her than her apartment. Nodding to the bouncer, Bandit, she stepped through the door. The security light glowed green. She wasn't packing any weapons. Several unfortunate incidents with flamethrowers had made the precautions necessary, but Bandit did her job with unobtrusive efficiency. Quickly, her eyes adjusted to the dim light. The ancient battered saddle that hung over the bar was bathed in soft blue light today, reflecting the mood of the patrons gathered. It was a little on the early side, only nine thirty. The lights would be changed over to red when the prowlers were out. A place to relax, make business deals, have a decent meal and cruise, the 'Horn was something different to everyone.

Xero made her way to a table in the back. Lady Delirium and Addict, the bartenders nodded and sent the Pirate over to take her order. "A little early for you isn't it, Xero?" Pirate Ska Mayhem asked conversationally.

"I'll have a beer, make it a Buckner. Maybe dinner later, ask me then," Xero replied as she looked around. The small dance floor was vacant. Several women played darts at one end of the room. Credit codes exchanged hands after a decisive throw won the game. At a corner booth, Wordee sat with several other women. She recognized MaryD, but the other two she couldn't place.

"Where's your sidekick?" Ska asked, putting a dark bottle down in front of Xero.

"Working," Xero answered as she keyed in her payment and a tip. "Who's the newbies?"

“Just that, newbies. Both after Wordee, the one on the right is a potential employer, the one on the left is a suitor.” After a moment’s reflection she continued, “I guess it’s your fault.”

“How do you figure?” Xero asked, taking a sip of the smooth beer.

“You nailed Bat, one of the few straight women who hang out here. That makes it hard on the rest of ‘em. Not that I’m going to cry them any rivers anytime soon.”

“I heard that,” Lani remarked from a table behind Xero’s. “Pirate’s picking on the straight chicks again,” she continued, only louder this time.

“Oh, look who’s talking,” Ska shot back sarcastically.

All eyes turned to a table in the center of the room. Blue, the Arbitrator who had been trying to enjoy a peaceful dinner with Jenbob, was suddenly the center of attention. “So make her buy the straight chicks a drink,” she finally decided. Sentence passed, everyone returned to their individual business.

“There go my tips for tonight,” Ska muttered wandering off.

Xero enjoyed her beer. Left alone to observe the interactions around her, she felt herself finally unwind. The big winner at darts, Trillbaby, bought the next round for the house. Halfway through her second beer, the receiver in her ear clicked on.

“I’ve got something for you, can you talk?” Bat’s disembodied voice asked softly in her ear.

“Yeah, what do you have,” Xero asked after another sip.

“I’m off the nets, running a closed loop system to check out your files. You’ve got a tapeworm all right, but it isn’t a tracker.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean she sent over a shitload of files, but nothing to track you. It’s all stuff so you can get ahold of her. She may be a psycho.”

“How do you know it’s a she?” Xero wondered.

“That’s what I’m telling you. She sent over personnel files, all kinds of shit. Her name is Rielle MacGab, I’ve got a picture, she’s cute... I mean if you’re interested in women, that sort of thing.”

“I get your point, Bat, go on,” Xero pressed.

“According to this, she’s a syscop for the Archives Corp. But she’s on a leave of absence. She had a medical leave a couple of months ago, now she’s just taking vacation.” Xero could picture Bat as she went through the files. Shoes off, curled up on the couch fidigitng with a pen in one hand. She was talking fast. That meant she was scanning files as she spoke, struggling to keep up with her mechanical eye.

“So why do you think she’s a psycho?” Xero asked.

“All this other stuff she sent you. Xero, buddy, she must have been waiting for you to log into that data stream. She was watching you the whole time. She’s downloaded a book, *The Adventure of a Lifetime, a Memoir by Melinda Pappas*. Provided links to a television database for an old ‘90s show, her own records and the message that you tried to cut off. Be careful, Xero, she’s planning to meet you at the ‘Horn.”

“You unlocked all this with the keyword Amphipolis?” Xero asked, scanning the inhabitants of the club once again.

“Yeah, just like her greeting said. I’m running a buffer system, so I’m not worried about getting zapped. But it was just a simple keyword. No traps or homing beacons. If this picture is an accurate one, you’re looking for a twenty six year old red head with green eyes and,” she paused to read further “according to her psyche files, a sunny disposition.” Xero didn’t answer right away and Bat laughed. “Yeah, I know. Just your type. Still, why not have a go? The ‘Horn regulars are too intimidated to actually sleep with you. Did I mention you being annoyingly tense all week?”

“If that’s all the news you’ve got,” Xero cut her off. “Why don’t you reassemble the system and get it back on the nets. Put all this new stuff on an isolated drive and I’ll look at it later.”

“Okay, will do,” Bat assured the hacker. “Logging off now.”

The ‘Horn was beginning to fill up as more women came in after their mid-day shifts. Few of the women who frequented the place had regular jobs, but a number of hackers kept regular

hours too. Especially the women who worked for hacking companies. They had shifts and benefits like legitimate workers. Xero considered ordering dinner when a tense hush settled around the club. A couple of men, Bobs as they were known at the 'Horn, stepped through the security markers and were making their way to the bar. Both were tall, about Xero's height and good looking. Their sun bleached hair and bronzed skin screamed 'surfer'.

Xero noticed Lady Delirium step away from Addict, who was pouring drinks for the Bobs. Retrieving the mobie unit from her pocket, she keyed in the secured frequency and turned on her communications unit.

"...obs at the 'Horn, Shadow. See what you can do." Lady Delirium said quietly.

"They been here before?" Xero asked quietly.

"Xero, that you?" Lady D asked as she looked over. Seeing the dark haired woman's affirming nod, she continued. "No, they're newbies, not trolls. They just told Addict that they're in construction and retrofit, they're here on vacation. Too tan to be hackers."

"I'm in their net accounts now," Shadow offered.

"Then take it easy on them, Shadow," Xero asked. "When you screw with their files, don't mess 'em up too bad."

"Bat send you out to find her dates?" Shadow asked with a wry laugh.

"Yeah, so give 'em her locator file. Then they'll know who to contact to clean up the mess."

"Okay, will do," Shadow agreed. "They should be out of there as soon as they try to pay."

As if on cue, one of the men looked up alarmed as he swiped his account card through the reader a second time. The other man tried his card but with the same lack of success. Both men left abruptly when they'd logged on to their accounts only to find garbled text instead of account information. Once they were out the door and down the block, their drinks were raffled off, the two women who won raising their glasses in silent toast to their now absent benefactors.

Bat carefully adjusted her baseball cap before connecting the final system wire to the net brainbox. If a trap or other aggressive program had slipped past her careful examination, this was often enough to trigger it. She held her breath for a couple seconds, and when nothing happened she readjusted her hat and relaxed. No matter how many years went by, every system connection took her back to the day five years ago when she'd earned the name Bat and lost an eye in the process. She should have seen the trap but didn't. As a result her client's brain box blew up in her face, damaging the lens of her left eye beyond repair. Convinced she'd be blind, her friends started calling her 'Bat'. Her eye recovered, with the aid of a mechanical replacement, but the name stuck anyway.

System initialized, she keyed in Xero's general use account. If someone was after her boss, logging into the system as herself would serve little purpose. She started with routine housekeeping. Xero's preferences were pretty straightforward, and Bat knew the subroutines as if they were her own. She logged in the day's messages and took note of the net account balances. Everything was in order there as well.

Satisfied that the system was operating as it should, she launched the program that would fling her onto the nets. Cruising Xero's regular haunts, she began to notice a few familiar faces, identified by their screen icons, as well as several new ones. She'd cloaked Xero's own icon, making her invisible to the other passersby unless they were using a high end detection program. Even then, the detector would only be able to tell that another entity was logged on, not that it was Xero. Unfortunately, such programs caused more trouble than they were worth while hacking, so they were only used for sightseeing or other legitimate net business only.

Things were slow, but Bat noted that it was still early. She was about to make her way to the node for the 'Horn when she was stopped by a greeting.

*We meet again, Xero,* the message said.

"Holy shit," Bat gasped, her good eye wide in surprise staring at the screen.

*Or should I say, Xena?* the message continued.

"It's her psycho," Bat whispered as she touched the control of her mobie unit. "Xero, you

there?” she asked, worried. There was no response. Either Xero was on another channel, or the mobile communications system had been jammed. Bat glanced back at the screen. The message was waiting for a response. “What would Xero say?” she wondered. She’d been spotted and tagged, it was no good to try to pretend otherwise. Finally she keyed in her response. *Who the fuck is Xena?*

*Could it be that you don’t know yet? This gets better all the time,* the message flashed, red letters on black. *I’m going to enjoy killing you, Xena, I only hope it’s as good for you as it will be for me.*

*Who are you?* Bat asked, trying to fight her growing fear, and losing.

*I’m sorry, it’s been such a long time. Xena, my dear, my name is Ares.*

Xero decided it was time to leave. There wouldn’t be anything happening here for her tonight. She pushed away from her table, and stood as a third Buckner was put down in front of her. The hacker looked up into lovely green eyes she’d never seen before. “Mind if I buy you a drink?” a soft voice asked.

Towering over the shorter woman, Xero smiled. It could only be the syscop Bat had warned her about. Strawberry blond, petite, beautiful. Her one-eyed associate did have a gift for understatement. Xero wrapped her long fingers around the neck of the beer bottle. “You don’t mind if I take it with me?” she asked. Beautiful as this woman was, she was still a syscop.

A smaller hand wrapped around her own, holding the bottle onto the table. “As a matter of fact, I do,” the young woman said evenly. “When I buy a beautiful woman a drink, I expect her to finish it in my company.”

Xero flashed her a grin, displaying a mouthful of perfect white teeth. There might be something here worth the risk after all, she decided. “That’s rather butch of you,” she commented sitting down again. The other woman took the seat opposite her and let go of her hand but didn’t say anything. “Use that line a lot do you?” Xero asked, after taking a sip of the beer.

“On occasion,” the other woman replied with false bravado. Xero laughed and the other woman frowned. “I say something funny?”

“You don’t lie very well,” the hacker replied. “No, I’d bet a bottle of spring water that I’m the first woman you’ve hit on in a bar. Isn’t that so, Rielle?”

Her companion looked at the table as her cheeks flushed crimson before making eye contact again. “I’m glad you took the time to look at my files at least,” she finally said, changing the subject. “Xero, I need to talk to you.”

“Too bad, I don’t talk to syscops,” the older woman replied flatly.

“Can I buy you dinner? Give me that much time at least?” Rielle asked.

“Fine,” Xero replied with an artful shrug. She nodded to the Pirate who came over to take her order. “Kitchen have fresh produce?” she asked.

Ska blinked, naturally grown fruits and vegetables were very expensive delicacies. “Yeah, some,” she replied.

“I’ll have a salad with the works,” Xero requested.

“For two,” Rielle added, handing over her account card.

When the waitress was gone she turned to her companion once again. “Xero, I’m going to tell you a story, you’re going to think it’s fantastic, but I want you to hear me out anyway.”

“Until I’m done eating, I’m all yours,” she replied.

*Feeling warm, Xena?* The message on the screen taunted.

Bat tried again in vain to break eye contact with the data code that scrolled past her eyes at blinding speed. If she’d had two natural eyes, all she’d see was a mesmerizing blur, unfortunately with her mechanical eye she could make out some of what she was reading. The repetitive, hypnotic code was sending signals to her body. Her brain, unable to filter out the harmful instructions, could only wait and experience the body’s self destruction. Like subliminal advertising on steroids, Bat was helpless against the onslaught of information. Sweating and dizzy, she guessed her fever must be well over one hundred three degrees by now.

*I’m not Xena,* she finally managed to send.

*Sure you are, the message came back. You just don't remember yet. I really didn't know the battle for the third age would be this easy. Even Melinda Pappas was more of a challenge than you. So, wanna race?*

Bat's heart started beating faster, her heated blood pulsing through her system. Then her lungs collapsed, cutting off her air as the hacker tried desperately not to panic. If she was going to die, as now seemed likely, she wanted someone to know why and how. Eyes still riveted on the scrolling text, in the periphery of her vision she could see the isolated drive sitting on top of the brainbox. After yanking a wire from an unused diagnostic unit, she plugged the drive in and keyed in a record sequence. Just then her chest expanded, air finally filling her lungs. The racing of her pulse continued. Whatever was killing her intended to do it slowly.

*You don't know how long I've waited for this, Xena. I've had thousands of years to plot your destruction. I never doubted that as long as I got to you before that irritating blond did, I'd have you. I hope you're able to fully appreciate what you could have had all those millennia ago, when a simple 'yes' from you would have given you immortality.*

Feeling something wet on her leg, the hacker noted that her hands had broken out in blisters that were popping soon after forming. Clear plasma ran down her hands onto the input pad and finally and dripping on her thigh. Her eminent death looking messy, Bat took the battered baseball cap off her head and tossed it aside. A remembrance of her mother who had died in the Plague, she wasn't about to let her own demise ruin Mickey Mouse.

Her lungs collapsed again, this time she hoped for good. Her vision changed and she absently noticed it was from her natural eye giving out. The moisture and soft tissues burned. Were it not for her implant, she'd be blissfully blind.

*Well, Xena, it's been fun. Give my regards to Callisto, Valaska and Hades when you see them.*

She could smell charring flesh now and would have screamed had she been able to get the air, to do so. Instead she winced as she felt her heart finally explode in her chest cavity. After that everything slowed down until life itself mercifully ended.

"Let me get this straight," Xero said dubiously. "You're saying this bar was originally funded by the Pappas Foundation. That saddle hanging over there bought at the big auction the Smithsonian had when their funding was cut?" Rielle nodded and let the other woman continue. "And this Melinda Pappas fought the battle of the second age." Rielle nodded again. "And I'm related to her, how?" Xero asked.

"That's just it. You aren't," Rielle explained. "Melinda Pappas was related to Xena and Janice Covington was related to Gabrielle. You and I are the reincarnated souls of Xena and Gabrielle."

"That's right," Xero amended, not believing a word of it. "Which one am I again?"

"You're Xena," Rielle said losing her patience.

"Of course, the 'X's, I should have known. Okay, I'm Xena and I'm going to fight the battle of the third age. Against who?"

"Against Ares," the syscop continued clearly annoyed. "And believe me, if you don't start taking this a bit more seriously, you're going to loose."

"Well I wouldn't want that," Xero shot back with a smirk.

"Didn't you read any of the material I sent over?" Rielle asked. "I was hoping it'd jog your memory."

"You've said that Xena and Gabrielle were lovers," Xero offered. "Don't you think *that* would jog my memory?"

An unreadable look crossed the younger woman's face. "I'm willing to try anything," she said quietly.

"Well, don't make it sound like such a chore," Xero shot back miffed.

"It's not that, Xero, it's just that obviously I can remember things at this point that you can't." She shook her head sadly. "It'd be a lot different for me than for you, I suspect."

Xero was tempted to tell the young woman to forget the whole thing and just leave. Still, there was something about her company she found intriguing and wasn't ready to part ways just yet. If nothing else, she could take the woman home and let the terrified newbie off the hook then.

“Fine then,” Xero said as she stood. “Let’s go.”

All eyes in the Saddlehorn Pub & Grill watched the newbie leave with Xero. The only puzzling thing was why she didn’t appear pleased about it.

“So when did you first realize that you were the reincarnated essence of an Ancient Amphipolitan Bard?” Xero asked as they stepped off the lift at her floor.

“Poteidaia, Gabrielle was from Poteidaia,” Rielle corrected her.

“Whatever.”

“I started having vivid dreams a couple of months ago. Unusual at first, but they wouldn’t go away. Then I started to do some research. The more I learned, the more things fit into place,” the syscop explained as they walked down the hall to the older woman’s apartment.

“I still don’t see how it’s possible to be reincarnated from a television show,” Xero insisted.

“Not from a show, you big dumb hacker,” she snapped. “The show was based on a collection of scrolls Janice Covington discovered in 1942, then later in 1961. The ‘42 Scrolls were hidden away until the ‘90s when they were used for the show.”

Xero nodded as she ran her thumb over the door’s ID patch. It unlocked and upon opening it her senses were immediately assaulted by the acrid smell of burnt hair and flesh. “What the fuck!” she gasped and ran inside.

Bat, or rather her charred remains, rigidly sat on the couch. Small tendrils of smoke still drifted off of her body. A flaming sword could clearly be seen rotating on the screen in front of her with the words *Goodbye Xena* below them. A green light was blinking on the portable drive indicating that it had just been backed up.

“That’s Ares’ symbol,” Rielle said, pointing to the screen.

“What happened to her?” Xero whispered realizing her roommate was beyond dead. “She’s grounded,” the hacker noted the grounding wire trailing from band wrapped around the dead woman’s wrist. “How could she have been zapped?”

“That is what I’m trying to explain,” Rielle said softly. “Ares must have thought she was you, or he’s just practicing. Xero, this is a god we’re talking about. He’s powerful.”

Xero turned to her companion, her blue eyes flashing in sorrow and anger. “So now you’re a Fundie?” she demanded. “Did you orchestrate this?” she growled as she advanced on the smaller woman. Wisely, Rielle backed up. “Rig the equipment? A syscop who works for Archive Corporation, maybe, is that it?” Backed against the wall, Rielle looked up into the face of her aggressor. She was much shorter than the hacker, her head only reaching just past the taller woman’s shoulder. Craning her neck back she tried to remain calm as cold blue eyes bore into her. “I’ll ask one more time, ‘cop. Are you or are you not a bounty hunter?”

“Xero, you know I’m not,” she said carefully. “You can see for yourself she’s still smoking. She’s only been dead a matter of minutes. I was with you. Do you honestly think I could construct a remote program that your friend wouldn’t be able to disable?”

“She wasn’t my friend,” Xero muttered turning away.

Rielle looked again from the charred body to the woman who once was Xena. “What was she then?” she asked quietly.

“A good acquaintance,” Xero answered with a shrug.

Walking over to where the taller woman stood, she put a comforting hand on her arm. “Even so, it isn’t safe for you to stay here. Even if you don’t believe what I’ve told you about Ares, surely a corpse in your apartment isn’t something a hacker would care to explain, now is it?” Rielle asked seriously. “Why don’t you come to my place. You can crash there tonight. Maybe in the morning you’ll listen to some of what I have to say.”

Xero nodded absently. The syscop was right. Bat’s body would have to be tended to and there were too many unanswered questions for her to remain. She’d probably be implicated in the murder, although the authorities didn’t worry too much about the death of a hacker. She would find whoever it was who did this, syscop or no syscop. Shaking her head, Xero grabbed a small bag and began to collect a few things.

First she picked up her portable system. After that she picked up the isolated drive that had been blinking. She grabbed a second pair of jeans and a shirt and some loose credit slips. When she'd added her wallet and mini discs, she was ready to go. "I should take Argo," she said as an afterthought.

"Argo?" Rielle asked, eyes wide.

"Yeah, Bat's iguana."

The syscop looked at the dead woman in wonder. Could she have been mistaken and contacted the wrong one? "This woman has a pet named Argo?" she asked to be sure. "Where did she get the name?"

"I don't know," Xero replied with a shrug as she headed for the bedroom that led off from the main living room. "I think she said she heard me mumble it in my sleep." She returned several minutes later with a large bright green reptile perched on her shoulder. The animal's body was about forty centimeters long, Rielle guessed, with a tail almost as long. "I don't know why, but Bat had a soft spot for lost causes," Xero explained as she put a container of food into her pocket.

"Is that why she lived with you?" Rielle asked.

Xero glared at her. "She lived with me because she worked for me. She put in long hours keeping my rig in shape. Besides, here she had some measure of protection against corporate thugs." Xero looked once again at the dead woman's body. "Apparently it wasn't enough." She made her way towards the door when she paused at the couch. Picking up Bat's antique baseball hat, she put it on and smiled sadly. "I'm going to find the thugs that did this," she whispered. "And when I do, they won't end up looking half as good as you." Cold blue eyes taking a final sweep around the small apartment, Xero realized that there was nothing else she needed, nothing else she could take with her. "Let's go," she muttered tightly to her companion.

"Here we are," Rielle said as she pushed open the heavy front door to her apartment. Xero already impressed by the prime location of the building. She was speechless at the spaciousness of the dwelling.

"How many people live here?" she asked, putting her heavy bag down on the overstuffed couch.

"I live alone," Rielle answered.

"I didn't know syscops did so well," Xero quipped, trying to mask her amazement. No one lived alone save the extremely wealthy. The fact that she only lived with one person spoke volumes about how well she did as a hacker.

"Yeah, well it belonged to my parents," Rielle explained, answering Xero's unasked question. "They both died a few years ago. The flat was already paid for."

Xero nodded and looked around. The place even had windows. Unable to resist, she strolled over and looked outside. At night the city lights sparkled brightly, making the South California skyline pulsate with glowing beauty. "Would you like something to drink?" Rielle called from the kitchen.

"Sure," Xero called back. "Whatever you've got." After moments spent in rapt fascination at the window, she was joined by the syscop.

"You mentioned spring water earlier, so I thought this would be okay," Rielle explained, handing her a glass of iced water.

"You seem to have everything here," Xero commented after long sip.

"I guess," Rielle replied, uncomfortable. "But I stand to lose it all, everyone stands to lose everything if you don't get your memory back and battle Ares."

"Are we on that again?" Xero asked, exasperated. "Look, kid. If this is a clever line you're using to get me in the sack, trust me you're trying way too hard."

"Is that what you think this is about? Fucking you?" Rielle stormed away from the window. "Xena must have looked long and hard to fine the densest, dumbest... most clueless body she could. Your friend is sitting burned to a crisp on your couch and you think I'm making a pass at you?"

"I'd be careful if I were you," Xero growled. "I'm in no mood to be taunted by some spoiled

syscop who thinks she's bringing in the catch of the day. You don't play this game very well do you, Rielle? You pick me up in a dyke bar, give me this bullshit about past lives, throw in New Age Fundie crap with the god Ares and tell me I'm going to suddenly remember being a reformed warlord from Amphipolis!" As she turned she winced. Argo, losing his balance from her shoulder grabbed with a foreclaw, sharp nails digging into her exposed skin above the collar of the leather jacket.

"Here," Rielle offered moving to take the lizard from the taller woman's shoulder. "Why don't we put Argo down." Gently as she could, she put the big reptile down on the floor. The lizard was heavier than he looked.

"Thanks," Xero muttered.

"I'm sorry," Rielle replied. "Why don't you take some time. I'm sure there's someone you should notify about your fri... associate's death. I wish you'd trust me, but I realize that you think you can't. Still, I have to tell you that I've no intention of arresting you or turning you in. You're welcome to stay, the couch is yours. Make yourself at home. We can talk more about Xena and the other stuff in the morning." She turned away and walked toward the bedroom. "If you were serious about what you said earlier," she added turning back around. "About needing to jog your memory, I'll be in here."

Xero watched her go. The other woman made it clear that she was up for sex but didn't want it. No matter, Xero decided, she wasn't in the mood anyway. She wandered into the kitchen, opening up cupboards until she found a small bowl. She poured some of the spring water from her glass into the bowl and put it on the floor near the lizard. Pulling out her mobie unit, she keyed in the satellite codes for maximum encryption and called the 'Horn.

Wandering back to the window, she waited for the connection to link up. "IQ? This is Xero, put me through to Shadow." After a moment's pause she was connected. "Yeah, Shadow, it's Xero. Look, I've got bad news. Bat is dead. She was fried about an hour ago. I found her when I went home... No, I'm not there now. I'm... elsewhere. If she's got any family or anything, you need to let them know. I'm uploading the codes to my place. Security would just dump the body, she deserves better than that.... Thanks, Shadow, I appreciate it. Keep my place secure if you can. I'm going to track down whoever did this, I might need to go back and get some things... Okay, I will. Thanks again." Feeling numb, she broke the connection and put the mobie away. She looked around the stylishly decorated apartment, then headed for the couch. If the syscop was set on taking her in, Xero decided it was one way to see how good the young woman really was. She took off her boots, casually tossing them under the low table near the couch. Next she removed her jacket. While she was at it, she pulled out the small container of food pellets and put a few down on the floor for the lizard. She also extracted her small hand held flame thrower from a concealed pocket and put it on the table as well. Finally she took off her hat. She gazed at the faded picture of a cartoon mouse for long minutes, reverently tracing its outline with her finger. Shaking off the pensive reflection, she put the hat on the table as well. She laid down, stretching her long legs, flame thrower concealed in her right hand. With that, and easy access to two knives, Xero realized that she was as safe as she could be under the circumstances. When she closed her eyes, sleep was almost instant.

*...Xero looked around disoriented. She was standing in a board room dressed in her jeans and t-shirt with nothing on her feet.*

*"So glad you could make it," a firm voice said in greeting.*

*Looking up, Xero was startled to see two women sitting behind a polished black table. Both were dressed in old fashioned tuxedos, one of them looked a lot like her, the other looked like Rielle, the syscop.*

*"I must be dreaming," Xero said trying to make sense of her surroundings.*

*"The hacker catches on fast," the strawberry-blond continued. "We decided on formal wear for our first meeting, I hope that's okay with you. I am Janice Covington, and the ravishing creature next to me is Melinda Pappas."*

*"It's nice to meet you, Xero," Melinda said with a Southern accent.*

*"I never dream," Xero stated bluntly, wondering why she wasn't simply waking up.*

*“Believe me, that’s been a major problem for us,” Janice replied. “Fact is, this isn’t going to be fun. The stuff Rielle is telling you is true. If you can stop thinking with your libido and refrain from bullying her you might learn something. Why don’t you try listening for a change.”*

*“I don’t have to take this crap from you,” Xero growled deciding she liked the syscop’s look alike even less than the syscop.*

*“Aactually , Xero you do,” Janice replied with a grin.*

*“What she means,” Mel interjected, “is that you have to sleep. Now that we’ve reached you, we’re going to keep at it.”*

*“Look kid,” Janice continued. “Ares is on the move, he offed that friend of yours. With our help we’re going to see to it that you blow his sorry ass to kingdom-come.”*

*“Janice!” Mel implored at her companion’s harsh language.*

*“Relax, Mel!” Janice soothed. “I’m just trying to get through to the Warrior Princess over here. Xena, we need you to remember. We’re going to do whatever it takes to see that you do remember. We didn’t risk life and limb to have you forfeit the battle of the third age.”*

*“Battle of the third age?” Xero mumbled.*

*“Gods she’s slow,” Janice groaned in frustration.*

*“Janice, please!” Mel implored. “She’s been through a lot. It was hard getting through to Gabrielle too if you remember. Give her some time to get her bearings, get to know Rielle. At least let her say goodbye to her friend.”*

*“I don’t have any friends,” Xero replied automatically.*

*“I never thought I’d meet someone who made Xena look well adjusted,” Janice quipped. After getting an icy glare from Mel she continued in a rush, “Alright, you’ve been through a lot. We won’t get started right now. Rest up some, but start thinking. Search your feelings. You are more than you imagine. Get in touch with what’s beyond you. We can’t help you if you don’t help us.”*

“Whaaa…” Xero looked around the dimly lit room. The lights had dimmed automatically with her inactivity. Something felt odd but she couldn’t quite describe it. She checked her watch, she’d been asleep for three hours. Mildly surprised that the syscop had not in fact tried to arrest her, she sat up and stretched. Absently she considered that the young woman may have been telling the truth after all, far fetched as it sounded. Putting her weapons on the coffee table with the baseball hat, she silently walked over to the bedroom door.

Rielle was sleeping on her side, facing the door on the far side of the bed. Staying as far away as possible from me, no doubt. Xero considered. When she crossed the room and picked up the bed cover the other woman’s eyes flew open with a start.

“What is it?” Rielle asked worried, frightened.

“Relax, Rielle. I’m not after your virtue. I think the couch is uncomfortable, it made me have a weird dream. I’m sleeping here,” the hacker mumbled as she slid under the covers.

“Weird dream you say?” Rielle asked, the hint of a small smile tugging at her lips.

“Yeah,” Xero muttered. “These two women in tuxedos. It’s nothing. Lemme sleep.”

Rielle’s smile broadened as she watched her companion slip into slumber. Realizing that things might just work out after all, the smile remained as she too drifted off to sleep.

The end…

Well for now anyway. Stay tuned for *UberMadness (The Battle For The Third Age)*…