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LOVE/SEX WARNING/DISCLAIMER:

There is no sex in this story. Nope, none at all. Not even a little bit.

Author's Note: This story takes place a couple of years before the X:WP episode THE XENA SCROLLS. This is a story about a woman and her dog- the best damn friend and truest companion she ever knew. It's dedicated with all the love in my heart to Idgie, who sadly had to leave this world on February 28th, 2003 after 8 wonderful years as my partner in crime. She was eleven years old and packed more adventure into her short life than most people do. I wouldn't be the person I am today with out her, and neither would my stories.

This one's for my soul mates— Idgie & Heather

Argo

By Bat Morda

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"You can tell a lot about a person by how they treat their dog when they think no one is looking"
Janice Covington

Plink. Drip. Rat a tat tat tat. The rain came down in a soft staccato that provided counterpoint to the throbbing in Janice Covington's head. She sighed and for a moment considered pouring herself a drink. Then she thought about her father and decided to leave the bourbon bottle hidden where it was.

Almost as if on cue, she heard the heavy footfalls of Harry Covington splashing in the wet outside her tent.

“We’ve got it, Jan, by the gods we’ve got it!”

Janice looked up as her father pushed the canvas tent panel aside. He was a proud man, a little road worn and rumpled perhaps, but his eyes still shone with cunning and mischief.

“The scroll checks out?” Janice asked. It was almost too much to hope for. It seemed her whole life had been spent out in the wilds with her dad chasing Xena from one dig site to the next. More often than not they came up empty handed and broke; not that there was much money to be made in Xena artifacts. No, the Covingtons’ search for Xena was driven by something stronger than the dollar—although to define what that was, neither could say.

Harry coughed. It worried Janice but she didn’t dare say so. Harry was far from his prime and any reminder of that fact was a preamble to a fight. After a few stifled coughs, he looked back at her. “My man from Athens just left. He authenticated it. I’m telling you, Jan, this is it. The first complete scroll recovered that details the life of Xena.” Beaming with pride, he placed a stack of neatly transcribed sheets on the desk. Janice knew that the original scroll, in its well-made box would be hidden in his room. “Now that we know it’s the real deal, we need to finish with the translations. I swear on your mother’s pearls, Janice, we’re onto something here!”

Inwardly, Janice flinched. She didn’t understand it, why her father still loved her mother so. After all, she was the one who’d left them, when Janice was only a baby. She guessed that her mother had decided a life of archaeology was simply too much for her. It was either that or the lure of that stuffed shirt from the bank proved just too strong. Still, her father never said a bad word about Theresa Covington. He kept a picture of her on his dresser and one in his wallet—not surprisingly, where the money should be. He never had any money anyway, and when he did he spent it faster than Janice could blink. Maybe it was so the dollars wouldn’t take space away from her mother’s picture, Janice wondered.

“I think this calls for a celebration.”

Janice snapped out of her reverie as her attention refocused on her father. There was going to be a fight.

Harry Covington was not tall by male standards and well past sixty, but all Janice's life he'd been a giant. He was solidly built with silver hair and bright green eyes. Lately though, the years hung on him like a cheap dime-store suit. He'd grown a paunch and his shoulders sagged some. He tried to stay clean-shaven, but more often than not he forgot. His skin was tanned from the sun, but looked thin of late, like old vellum. He'd cut quite the roughish picture in his youth—muscular and bronzed by the sun, with a gleam in his eye and a devilish smile on his lips. Harry didn't smile so much these days. His joints ached; his body wanted to retire long before his sharp mind would consider it. It was hell to grow old. Janice readied, wishing she could do more for her father than fight with him.

"Pop, you know what the doctor said. You've got to cut down on your drinking." She looked pointedly at his clothes, still dripping with rain. "And keep at least slightly dry, if that's at all possible."

"Bourbon is what I need to warm up the insides, girl. Besides that doctor is a quack."

"Pop, you say that about every doctor."

"Well, they are." He took a seat in the chair across from the makeshift desk his daughter had set up in her tent. "Give the old man a break and share that bottle of yours." Harry Covington was a gruff and charming man. Especially when he tried. His only child, however, had spent more than two decades growing accustomed to his brand of charm.

Janice took a deep breath and shook her head. "I'm sorry Pop, but no. I'll fix you soup, I'll make you coffee, I'll clean your gun. Hell, Pop, I'll even bake a damn cake to celebrate if it makes you happy. But I'm not giving you that bottle."

"Don't swear in front of your old man, Janice," Harry said, his anger rising. "Damn ungrateful children," he muttered as he stormed from her tent.

Janice closed her eyes as the sounds of his stomping and rustling outside her tent faded. For a moment, she just sat there, really scared. It was obvious he was sick; he'd hardly put up a fight for the bottle. Just then she heard the tent flap open.

"Pop, no is no!"

She looked at the partially open tent flap, but no one stood there. Finally a muted whimpering drew her eyes to the floor. Janice's eyes widened in astonishment. A wet and bedraggled puppy stood halfway inside the tent uncertain if it should enter or flee.

“What can I do for you?” Janice asked civilly. She didn’t believe in baby talk for children or animals.

The puppy cocked its head at the sound of her voice and barked once.

Janice smiled glancing from the puppy to the half-eaten sandwich on her desk. “Well make up your mind, kiddo. You’re letting in a cold wet draft.”

The puppy’s gaze followed hers; its mind made up, it padded all the way into the tent. Keeping a safe distance, it whined and stared at the food.

“I get the point, dog. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

It wasn’t hard to tell the puppy was hungry. It looked to Janice to be all feet and ears, with only bits of a skinny body in between. It was muddy and soaked and had a chewed on segment of cord around its neck. It looked to her like some kid’s dog which had run away. Her first guess was from neglect.

“See, here’s the deal,” Janice began as she sacrificed her sandwich. Tearing bits of meat into small pieces, she made a pile on her plate, mixing the meat with crumpled bits of bread. “You can’t eat too much at once or you’ll get sick. And don’t think I’m trying to throw the moves on you. I’m not about keeping pets. Don’t believe in ‘em. Not on archaeological digs anyway. You can hang around until you find yourself a better gig. How does that sound?” She put the plate down on the floor, and the puppy immediately pounced on it. The food vanished before her very eyes, the puppy looking up and begging for more.

Janice got up and poured some water in a bowl. “Try this instead, you’re probably thirsty too.”

The puppy tasted some of the water, then sat back on its haunches a little. With a small hop it lunged forward putting both front paws into the water and began to splash.

“What the hell kind of dog are you?” Janice murmured, amused. She didn’t mind that the floor was getting wet; it already was wet. She’d been living in dripping chilly wetness for what felt like eons. Looking the dog over, she guessed it was maybe three months old. It was clumsy and cute and had the biggest damn feet she’d ever seen on a puppy. It was too muddy and disheveled to take a guess at a breed. When the dog finished splashing it rolled over and Janice stole a casual glance. “It” was a “she.”

“Well, that’s one mystery solved,” the archeologist murmured. “Alright, girl. Time for a little beautifying. This might make you think that coming in here was a bad idea, but I only share my tent with clean women.”

Janice stood and crossed the large work tent, the puppy following and getting underfoot. She stopped before a stack of crates that served as her dresser. Pulling out a dry towel, she then took a seat on the floor near her bed, and smiled. “Time to get dry, tiger.”

The puppy looked at her confused, and a bit frightened of the big towel. “Oh come on,” Janice urged. “You afraid it’s gonna get you?” She stuck her hand under the towel and moved it slightly. The puppy saw the bulge and lunged for it. Janice laughed out loud. In moments the tent was filled with happy puppy noises and laughter as the two wrestled with the towel on the floor.

In between bouts of tug-of-war Janice managed to dry the dog off and was stunned at the soft, light golden color that emerged.

“You are beautiful,” she whispered in spite of herself. The puppy bounded up and licked her face apparently thinking the compliment was right on target. “But what am I going to call you?” she wondered. Gently, being careful not to scare the gregarious animal, she untied the rope from its neck. “A good looking dog like you can hang around as long as you like, but no leashes, friend.” She gently scratched the animal behind the ears and frowned when she found that the rope had caused sores.

The hour was late and Janice contemplated turning down the lamps that lit her tent and crawling into bed. Reconsidering she decided to take another stab at translating the scroll her father had found. Making sure her work surface was dry she picked up the stack of sheets her father had left. She knew they were the only copy, which he guarded nearly as closely as the original scroll. Taking a deep breath, she began to read.

For an hour she worked, carefully studying the ancient letters and begging them to become words she could read. She never understood why, but ancient Greek syntax always seemed a step beyond her; like some elusive butterfly she just couldn’t catch. Her father teased her relentlessly about it and on digs it took effort to be taken seriously. She’d overheard hired diggers comment that she could find the artifacts, but unless it was a weapon, go find Poppa Covington to learn out what it was for. Janice

hated that. But it was Harry's way to let her sink or swim on the merits of her own skills.

With a sigh, Janice closed her notebook. She twisted her neck feeling the muscles tight, but not nearly as worn out and spent as she usually was at this hour. Glancing down she noticed the dog curled up at her feet a comforting warmth on her boots and wondered if that might have anything to do with it.

She pushed away from her desk, the tired puppy waking and following her to the low cot that served as her bed. Janice stripped out of her clothes, and wearing a man's undershirt and her underwear, crawled in between the heavy blankets. The puppy hopped up onto the cot, curled up next to Janice's middle and with a contented sigh returned to sleep. Janice wasn't far behind. Although she didn't know it yet, Janice Covington had just met, with the possible exception of Melinda Pappas, the truest friend she'd ever have.

"Aghhhhh" was the first sound out of Janice's mouth the following morning as a playful puppy insisted she get a bath. The dog was all tongue and feet as she tried to alternately lick and paw her bedmate.

"That's enough," Janice grumbled, pushing the eager puppy back. "I'm not a morning person." A grumbling in her own belly, echoed by a similar sound from the dog, was enough to get her out of bed, dressed, and on her way to the hotel.

The Oasis Hotel was a half-mile walk from the outskirts of the Covington camp. Janice knew she'd find her father there since he'd been carrying on some sort of off and on relationship with the owner for years. Every time they were in this part of Greece something between them would get rekindled. Janice wondered idly if that was one of the reasons Harry kept coming back. She thought about it as she walked, the eager puppy following along behind. The dog would dive for the laces on her boots or nip at her heels, but Janice was too engrossed in thought to object.

On a whim she stopped by the small market that served as the center for the village. The post office, grocery and Chamber of Commerce all under one roof, most people could be found either here or at the hotel. Still, this morning it was quiet—nearly everyone seemed to be sleeping off last night's celebration. "Any mail, Milo?" Janice asked of the proprietor, daring to hope there might be a letter.

The grandfatherly Greek man smiled, pulling something out from under the counter.

Like everyone else, he spoke Greek- but kept his words clear and steady so Janice never had trouble conversing with him. "This arrived for your father yesterday afternoon. He never came by. Could you give it to him?"

Janice nodded with a sigh and reached for the letter. She was hoping for something for herself. Before she could grab it though, the old man pulled it away from her. "Is that your dog?" he asked disapprovingly.

Janice turned around. The puppy had knocked over a bottle of milk and was lapping happily at spilled contents.

"I guess she is now," she answered, pulling out a couple of coins from her pocket as she spoke.

"But that's not enough to cover the milk," Milo protested.

Janice smiled. "That isn't for the milk, I'm paying you for the dog. I'll take her with me. But if that isn't enough, I guess I can leave her here."

Milo watched as the dog knocked over a display of fruit and started to scamper towards the eggs. "No, please—take it away."

"Happy to help," Janice replied and picked up the dog now dripping with milk.

"I don't know why I put up with you," Janice grumbled all the way down the block to the hotel, the puppy trailing along happily.

The Oasis was a two-story structure at the end of the only street in the village. It had been there for as long as anyone could remember, and while the accommodations weren't fancy, it was clean and well kept. The paint on the outside was faded, but the porch was tidy and freshly swept. Janice pushed the door open, and let the dog follow her inside. The lights weren't on in the entry area, the hour being too early to expect guests at the Oasis; not that many people traveled to this part of Greece with a war going on.

In the dining room, Janice found Helen Dubois seated at a table, going over her books. Helen was in her mid-fifties, but the years had been hard. Her clothes were clean and neat but worn. The same could be said of her face. She had unnaturally red hair and the wrinkles of someone who laughed often; the loud raucous bawdy laughter of one who was born to be a barmaid. Helen started off working at the hotel and in time

had come to run, then own it. She'd never told Janice why she moved to Greece from France and Janice had never bothered to ask.

She smiled at Janice's arrival but the smile didn't quite meet her eyes. Janice returned with a somewhat forced grin of her own. The two women had, over the years, struggled to come to an understanding. They were both prominent in Harry Covington's affections, and had different ideas as to how to deal with him.

"Bon jour, Janice," Helen greeted, in a friendly enough manner. She'd learned some time ago that Harry was the only person permitted to call his daughter 'Jan'. "Your father will be down shortly. He is upstairs getting dressed. Breakfast?" Her accent had mellowed somewhat during her years in Greece, but enough remained to make her sound worldly. There was no denying the sultry voice and Janice supposed that was one reason her father was attracted to her.

She nodded taking a seat at the table. The puppy ambled over to Helen, saying "bon jour" in a manner all her own.

"What an adorable puppy!" Helen exclaimed, in between kisses. "I did not think you one for pets. Where did you find her?"

Janice shrugged. "She sort of found me. I'm just looking after her until she finds someone else."

"I see," the older woman noted, smiling at the young doctor's forced nonchalance. "Has Harry seen her?"

Janice frowned. "No, not yet. She wandered into my tent last night. I'm still deciding on the right approach..."

"What the hell is that?" Harry grumbled, descending the stairs. Not partial to mornings any more than his daughter, he had the gait of one who was useless until he'd had a cup of coffee.

"Canis Familiaris, Pop, thought you knew that," Janice said smoothly, accepting the steaming cup that Helen handed her.

"Don't get smart with me, girl. Where'd you get the dog?"

"She wandered into my tent last night. She's friendly enough, what's the problem?"

Harry shook his head and frowned. "Dogs eat, Jan. From the looks of that one, they eat a lot. I can barely afford to feed my diggers." He paused, a frown creasing his brow. "You're not planning to keep it, are you?"

"No," Janice mumbled. "When I find her a good home, she'll be gone."

"Good. I'm sorry, honey," Harry added, softening. "Pets just don't belong on digs and you're not in the States enough to take care of one." Janice nodded sadly. She couldn't argue with him because she agreed, but she didn't want to think of getting rid of the cute puppy either.

Helen brought her a bowl of cornflakes and a glass of milk. After requesting a second bowl, Janice poured the milk into it and put it down on the floor for the dog, opting to eat her cornflakes dry.

"Harry, you should let her keep the dog," Helen interjected. "Janice does not have any friends out here and the puppy is so sweet."

"It's okay, Helen—Janice understands," Harry replied, obvious pride in his voice. "Her work here is about the research, not about making friends or attachments." After drawing his pocket watch and checking the time, he turned his attention to his daughter. "How are you doing on your translations of the scroll?" Pointedly, he ignored the dog that had now moved over to sniff and explore his shoes. Instead, he withdrew his gun from the holster he'd draped over the chair next to him and inspected the action. His fingers moved with fluidity, as if they had repeated this ritual every morning over breakfast for decades.

Janice was grateful for the spoonful of dry cereal she'd just popped in her mouth. She had several moments of chewing before she'd need to give him an answer. She considered being honest then thought better of it.

"It's going fine, Pop," she finally said quietly.

Harry glanced at his daughter then his eyes narrowed. Janice didn't lie very well. "Then what was the name of Xena's horse?"

Janice's eyes snapped up. She hated getting caught. Quickly she recovered. "I said it was going fine. Pop, I didn't say I was finished. Besides, how important is the name of Xena's horse anyway?"

Shaking his head sadly, Harry accepted the cup of coffee Helen offered him with a gentle, "Thank you." Returning his attention to his daughter and his gun, his expression hardened somewhat.

"Everything about Xena is important Janice. The name of her horse, the name of her family, friends, and enemies. If she had a name for her whip, that'd be important too. It's all pieces of who she was, and none of it is devoid of value. And don't argue

because I know you believe that too. I swear Jan; I just don't see why you have so much trouble with translations. Besides, the horse's name was in the first line of that fragment."

Damn! Janice thought, *how could I have missed it?* Still, caught was caught and it was best just to move on.

"You got a letter, Scoundrel," Janice announced around a mouthful of dry cornflakes, deftly changing the subject. Harry smiled taking the letter, happy to have made his point. He put his gun away and opened the letter. As he read, he continued to chat, careful to keep his voice light and nonjudgmental. His daughter looked depressed about more than the reprimand.

"You were expecting a letter from Diana weren't you?"

Janice didn't meet his eyes, gazing to the floor instead to watch the puppy untying her father's shoes. To Harry, it spoke volumes.

His voice was gentle now, and Helen busied herself folding napkins at a table away from the two archeologists. In truth she didn't understand either Covington, but where Harry's daughter was concerned, puzzlement over the girl's heartbreak was met with fierce protectiveness.

"It's just as well Janice," he said quietly. "It's her loss."

Janice rolled her eyes. She'd never made a special effort to hide her life from her father—they worked together too closely to make that possible. Still she didn't feel entirely comfortable discussing it with him either. But he'd brought it up. "Pop, she went back to her husband. I don't see me as some big loss."

"You don't want to mess with a woman who'd leave her kids. It isn't right. You deserve better than that." Harry took a sip of coffee and continued, happy to vent at the source of his daughter's blues. "That woman didn't know what she wanted. Her husband, you... No doubt she's either forgetting or regretting you ever happened in her life and I say good riddance. You deserve better than to be a regret."

Janice put her spoon down and looked her father in the eye. It was one thing for her to whine about Diana but she still couldn't stand someone else speaking badly about her. "Pop, doesn't it bother you at all that I'm attracted to women and not men?"

Helen, curious as she was, picked up her folded napkins and headed to the kitchen to find some food for the dog. Janice noticed her departure from the periphery

of her vision but didn't move her eyes from her father's. He glanced down, embarrassed almost.

"Honey, I just sort of figured you took after your old man." The grizzled man shrugged. "I know you didn't grow up like most girls. Maybe I should have let your mother take you, raise you right, but you're my girl and I wasn't giving you up for some stuffed shirt from the bank to father you. There aren't many lady archaeologists on digs, so what did you have to learn from?"

Janice chuckled. "I don't think it works quite that way, Pop."

Harry continued, "Honey, I know what men are about and frankly I'm glad you've got the sense to avoid them, 'sides, women smell better."

"Amen to that," Janice muttered under her breath. "But come on, we both know you raised me because mother didn't want me. That's why you didn't like Diana, you thought she was leaving her kids the way mom left me."

"Look here missy, I raised you because I wouldn't let you go—whether your mother had come after me with the law or the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Since the day you were born you've been the most stubborn, bull-headed, doesn't-have-the-sense-god-gave-a-potato-when-it-comes-to-syntax pain in the ass to me, and I wouldn't have it any other way. You're a Covington, through and through. And if you'd just put your mind to it, you'd be a hell of an archaeologist."

Helen returned with a bowl of food for the dog and some fresh coffee for the Covingtons. She didn't understand Harry's unequivocal acceptance of his daughter, but knew him to be an oddly tolerant man. As long as it didn't get in the way of his Xena studies, he took almost everything in stride.

"So what's the letter?" Janice asked, finishing off her cereal. Harry's mind was made up about Diana and it was pointless to argue. The dog had finished eating so Janice picked her up. With a full belly and warm strong arms to hold her, the animal quickly went to sleep.

"A colleague of mine, Melvin Pappas is expressing an interest in my scroll studies. He's the Dean down at the University of South Carolina and when I told him how close I was, he's offered to help verify my translations should I find something." Harry read further, his brow crinkling into a puzzled expression. "He mentions you here, Janice. Says he met you a few months back on campus—was impressed with your

knowledge of archaeology although he says that he didn't think you were feeling too well at the time. He hopes you're better."

Janice cringed, remembering the hangover she had been enduring the afternoon she'd met the Southerner and shared some coffee and pastries. Diana had just broken off their relationship for the first time and Janice was certainly not at her best. Still, Melvin Pappas had been kind and didn't seem like the sort that would hold heartache against her. She shrugged her shoulders returning her attention to her father.

"He gave a talk at the university. I met with him afterwards and he agreed to take a look at some of my notes. We chatted a bit on mapping techniques. He's an academic, but a nice man. I don't think he's done field work for some time, but he'd be a great person to go over our findings."

Harry nodded in agreement then returned to his letter. A small smile appeared on his face and he couldn't resist teasing his daughter. "Well, Dean Pappas hasn't been feeling too well lately, says here he tires fast, but he's got a daughter to help him out. Seems his daughter actually helps him in his work and is quite respected in his field."

Janice looked up, hurt and annoyed. It didn't matter that her father was right; he had a way of pushing too far. "I'm sure it's quite a thrill for Melvin Pappas' daughter to work for a respected academic. It's also nice to know Dean Pappas has no qualms about working with Harry the Grave robber."

"Ungrateful child," Harry muttered.

Janice rolled her eyes. A part of her was glad they were going home. She hated Greece in the rainy season, even if it was just about over. Maybe some sunshine in California would improve her mood. "When do we head back to the states?" she asked.

Her father shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. "That was the other thing I needed to tell you, Jan." He fiddled with the fringe on a placemat. "I've extended the dig for another three months."

Janice's eyes flashed over to her father, then to Helen who'd come to pick up the plates. It was then noticed the sparkly necklace around the older woman's neck. "What did you sell, Pop?" Janice growled. It never failed. Harry would get close to a discovery, run out of money and sell some antiquity that he promised Janice would be destined for a museum. Then he'd take most of the money, pay off his diggers and buy a present for Helen. He would finance the excavation with what was left until that money ran out.

“Janice, we’re so close, I had to do it,” Harry argued, not liking the necessity of justifying his actions to his daughter.

“What did you sell, Pop? Ephiny’s mask? The dagger of Helios? Hercules’ gauntlet? The remnants of the urn of Apollo?” Janice was fighting to keep her voice down to avoid waking the sleeping puppy. If she hadn’t been holding the dog she’d have been on her feet, charging at her father.

Harry looked at Janice. He’d been that young once, that passionate. It felt like several lifetimes ago, but he saw the pure clarity of anger in Janice’s eyes. Vibrant green bored into him. She didn’t have to make the choices he did, didn’t have to choose what to sacrifice for the greater good. In that moment he really envied her. “The dagger,” he finally admitted. “But Janice, honey—we’re so close. We’re going to find the scrolls this time.”

“Jesus Christ, Dad!” Janice exclaimed. “We’ve heard two conflicting stories about that dagger. Either it was used to get ambrosia from some sort of chamber or it was used in some weird ‘twilight of the gods’ ritual. You sold it to a private collector, didn’t you?”

“Now Janice, don’t swear—settle down.” Harry’s voice rose in volume. “I’m not the daft old codger you think I am. I could have sold it to those low-life swindlers Adam and Gary. They’d have had fake Daggers of Helios flooding the market from here to New Zealand. But I didn’t. I sold it to a scientist in the states. Our buyer has promised me that the dagger will indeed see the proper scientific research that it deserves.”

Mollified, Janice relented a little, “Okay, fine.” What was done was done and there wasn’t much she could do about it now. “So we continue on the South Ridge?”

Harry nodded “I want you to oversee that group. The tomb of Hephaestus has to be there. The scrolls may be there as well or at the site on the East plateau. They are around here somewhere Janice, I can feel it. I’ll work with a few men on the East Plateau. I’m convinced that this tomb had a series of chambers leading to it. Something is trapped there, there was a huge battle, and if it isn’t the scrolls, then they must be in one of the adjoining chambers. One of us is bound to find an entrance.”

Janice nodded. “If you’re right Pop, why would Xena cart all of her scrolls every where she went? I mean, if the sense is that she went there for a battle, which has never

been documented anywhere, then why would she lug those things around? Unless she wanted to bore her opponent to death with dramatic readings?"

Harry frowned. Active sense of humor that he had, he never, ever, ever joked about Xena. "Janice, Xena is in my blood, but sometimes I wonder if I passed that on to you. Some things you just have to feel. I don't have the answers, which is why I go looking for them. You can look or not, it's up to you."

Now Janice felt bad. She'd genuinely hurt her father's feelings and she hated that. She sighed; it'd be hard for the morning to get any worse. Hard, but not impossible.

There was a commotion out in the foyer of the hotel. Several diggers came in looking for Harry with a middle-aged man and young girl in tow. The spoke quickly in Greek and Janice's heart sank. The man was a nearby farmer. He'd traded for a puppy for his daughter, which had run away. She'd been inconsolable and the two had come to town looking for it. Milo at the market had told them about the puppy with Janice and they'd come for a look-see.

Harry smiled. "Fine then, Janice your problems are over—give the man the dog."

Janice tensed and the puppy woke up. The animal took one look at the people who'd come for it and began to whine.

"We don't know that these are the rightful owners, Pop."

"Who cares, girl, they'll take the dog off your hands."

"Harry, let Janice keep the dog," Helen butted in quietly.

"If the dog had been well cared for it wouldn't have run away," Janice added. She smiled at Helen in thanks. She didn't really know why, but she didn't want to see this dog taken away from her. The farmer's daughter began to cry, mumbling something unintelligible in Greek.

"Come on Janice, don't make the little girl cry," Harry said firmly, sliding his chair back. With gentle force, he lifted the puppy from his daughter's arms and handed it over to the girl's father. The puppy tried to squirm away while the girl squealed with delight.

Janice stood there, shocked and angry. It had happened so fast. Before she knew it, a truck drove off taking away a man, a little girl, and her dog. Green eyes cold with fury she turned back to her father. "You know, Pop, I never thought there was anything wrong with the way I grew up until today. I guess unless something belongs to

someone centuries dead, it ain't worth shit." With a curt nod to Helen she stormed from the hotel, leaving her bewildered father behind.

Harry Covington had the good sense to stay out of his daughter's way and gave her a wide berth that entire day on the dig. In fact, everyone who came into contact with Janice that day gave her room. She was much harder than usual on the diggers unfortunate enough to work under her, even though she shoveled along as hard as any of them. She'd hoped to wear out her anger with physical exertion and failed; she had cleared a large bank of land, it didn't help her mood much.

Night found her in the same spirits. She'd had two glasses of bourbon and was pouring a third when she stared at the bottle as if seeing it for the first time. She was behaving exactly like her father. Harry didn't start drinking like a fish until her mother left. He didn't lift a finger to get her back mind you, but had lifted more than his fair share of whiskey glasses.

Janice blinked at the sound of glass smashing as it hit the floor of her tent. She'd dropped the bottle, shocked, as if the cheap glass stung her hand. She had a choice now. Diana had left her and she did nothing but weep; now someone was trying to take a puppy she knew damn well would rather be with her and she was going to drink. Not anymore, she decided. Grabbing her coat, hat, bullwhip and a flashlight she headed to town.

She briefly thought about taking a car and decided not to as it might draw unwanted attention. With her hands in her pockets for warmth and the collar of the coat turned up around her neck, she made the short trek to the Oasis Hotel. Outside, she found the tire tracks left by the truck that had taken the puppy away. The rain had slowed to a light drizzle; it was cold but the tracks would stay. Tightening the coat around her once again, she started to walk.

Janice guessed she was at least six miles from the village when she came upon a poor farm. Sure enough, the pickup truck was parked outside. Lights were on in the house and smoke rose from the fireplace. Quietly, she snuck around the back and her eyes narrowed in anger. A heavy rope kept the puppy tied to a tree. It was curled up at the tree's base in a futile attempt to stay warm and dry, while the whole family was inside snug as a bug. Janice was infuriated that a young dog was left outside alone and

cold. Any guilt or remorse she may have felt for what she was about to do quickly vanished.

It didn't take long for the puppy to spot her and it quickly stood, barking to get her attention. Cautiously Janice looked at the house; the occupants made no move to check on the animal. Taking a piece of beef jerky out of her pocket, she tossed it to the dog. Ravenous with hunger, the puppy immediately began to chew, staying silent.

The rope around the dog's neck was made of sterner stuff this time. It would have taken the animal some time to chew through it, but she could see where the dog had already tried. Fortunately, Janice was obsessive about sharpening her pocketknife and the rope severed without too much effort. Once she'd gotten it off the dog's neck, she quickly made her way back to the road, the dog following right behind.

In Janice's mind, she wasn't exactly stealing the dog. She was merely giving it a choice of where it wanted to go. If the puppy had been happy where she was, she never would have wandered off. As long as she didn't try to keep the animal against its will, Janice felt confident that she was doing the right thing. About a mile down the road however, she had to rethink her philosophy.

She was walking briskly, in part to keep warm, but in part not to get caught so close to the farmer's house. The puppy, malnourished as it was, simply couldn't keep up. Janice was jolted from her thoughts at the sound of a pitiful howl. Spinning on her heel, she saw the puppy sitting about twenty-five yards behind her. Its paws were sore and even though it desperately tried to keep up, it flopped over in pain and cried.

"Oh shit! I'm sorry, girl. I wasn't thinking." Janice hurried over to the animal who licked her hand thankfully. "Okay, okay, you've made your point. You're not in shape to keep up with me yet. Okay, I'll carry you this once, but don't make a habit of it." Janice lifted the dog, surprised at her weight in spite of her skin and bones appearance, and walked the five miles back to her tent. En route she tried to think of some way to protect the dog's paws should they encounter terrain more unruly than a dirt road.

Rain that had been a mild sprinkle turned to a shower and by the time Janice returned to her tent she and the puppy were soaked. She poured a bowl of water from which the dog drank greedily. Taking off her drenched coat, she collapsed onto her cot, exhausted. After shaking most of the water out of her own coat, the puppy hopped up and joined her. In seconds both were sound asleep.

It's already been noted that Harry Covington was not a morning person. This was especially true when farmers with their crying daughters in tow demand he get out of bed and find his daughter. Helen came along, just in case the farmer's accusations were correct and Harry tried to strangle Janice.

"I'm telling you, friend," Harry said gruffly, "my daughter doesn't have your dog." Harry parted the flap to Janice's tent, his eyes wide with shock. "Janice Covington," Harry roared. "What the hell are you doing with that dog?"

From sound sleep Janice sat bolt upright on her cot, happy she'd left her clothes on the night before. "Dog?" she asked lamely. "What dog?"

"That flea-bitten mongrel that's trying to hide behind you," Harry growled.

The farmer said something quickly in Greek and Harry's expression soured further.

Giving the man an angry glare Janice answered, "Stealing does not run in the family. My Pop doesn't steal and neither do I. I paid Milo for the dog—ask him. Besides, it's not my fault the dog keeps running away to be with me. Maybe if you treated it better..."

"Janice, give the man back his dog."

"No," Janice answered her father simply. "No and that's final. I don't see any collar or address tattooed on the animal. He can't prove it's his."

The farmer pulled out a knife and Janice picked up the gun that had been resting on a crate next to her bed. She acted as if she was preparing to clean the weapon but her message was clear. She would fight for the dog. Harry, ever protective of his daughter, even when she was driving him nuts, straightened up to his full height, his big hands balling into fists.

"Please, we can settle this in a mature fashion," Helen soothed, stepping in between both men. "We will put the puppy in the middle of the street with Janice at one end and your daughter at the other. Whoever the dog goes to keeps it—what could be more fair?"

Both fathers grumbled a bit, but relented. Helen gently picked up the dog, showing more upper body strength than Janice imagined the older woman had.

Like a showdown from the Wild West, archaeologist and seven year old squared off against each other in the middle of the dirt road that ran through the Covington camp. Janice's uncertainty was clear on her face. In the time she'd spent with the dog,

she'd never called it the same thing twice. She needed to think up a name for the animal quickly. Idly she wondered what Xena would do in her situation and then wondered why she was thinking about Xena at a time like this in the first place.

Helen walked into the street midway between the two contestants. Janice and the farmer's daughter stood about 100 feet apart. Once the puppy was put down, the little girl started cooing and calling to the puppy with a happy friendly voice. She spoke clearly now, in flawless Greek and Janice could understand her.

"Lily, Tigerlily, precious baby—come here!"

What a dreadful name, Janice thought. The puppy looked at her and, not hearing any sounds of encouragement, began to walk towards the voice. Janice racked her brain to think of something, anything to call the animal. *What would Xena do? What would Xena name an animal?*

"Lily, Tigerlily!"

Janice began to panic, suddenly thinking about untranslated scrolls- at the moment, her only connection to Xena. The dog continued to walk, looking back frequently at Janice, searching for some sign.

"Lily."

The dog was halfway to the girl when the farmer tossed his daughter some bread. The dog started to run towards the food when Janice exploded.

"Argo! Come here, girl!" Janice yelled with just a hint of triumph in her voice.

The dog's head whipped around at the sound of a voice she found comforting and joyful. Turning on a dime, she charged down the street straight into Janice Covington's arms. The archaeologist scooped her up as if she were light as a feather. Holding her prize, she walked over to both fathers.

"I don't want to see either of you anywhere near my dog. Got that?" With sadness, she glanced at the little girl who began to cry. "Mister, I suggest you get your daughter another puppy when she's older, or get her a full grown dog now. She's not old enough to raise a puppy—they don't belong outside alone in the cold. Puppies are children too." With that she turned and headed back into her tent.

"Well that's some piece of work I raised," Harry said, following Janice into her tent, his voice rich with disapproval. "When did I teach you to steal dogs from children?"

Janice ignored him and pretended to gather the things she'd need to take to the South Ridge. She selected a satchel from one of the shelves and packed some tools, a canteen and other items.

"That animal is completely your responsibility. You're going to feed it and take care of it and keep it out of my way." Harry stood there silent, wondering—not for the first time, mind you—why he couldn't figure his daughter out. He shook his head sadly.

"At least I'm glad to see you've learned the name of Xena's horse."

Janice looked up at that, but he'd already left her tent.

With a sigh Janice sat down, the puppy immediately scrambling into her arms. Absently, she pet the dog trying to figure out just what she'd gotten into.

She glanced around her tent. It wasn't large. She had a cot, a small work area and some storage crates she'd fashioned into shelving and places to keep her stuff clean and dry. It kept her dry enough when the rain was light, and she'd done her best to keep up with repairs so she didn't get too soaked when it rained hard. She didn't have a big supply of food on hand, just the ration tins she's saved up over time. She was always the last to get paid, being family and all and it'd been some time since Harry had given her any money.

She'd have to sell something that much was clear, but she couldn't think of what. Her gear, she'd need for the dig—and she kept precious few personal effects on a dig with her. Then she knew. With care she extracted a black velvet bag from the crate by her bed. Carefully tucked between some clean shirts, she withdrew a small pouch, heavy for its diminutive size. It contained a gold bracelet with sparkling blue sapphire chips. She'd spent most of the money she'd earned from the previous dig on the bauble and had intended to give it to Diana before her classmate changed the nature of their relationship. Janice hadn't sold it back at the time because she still held hope of reconciling with the woman. Now she decided that not only was the dog better company, but more likely a better investment to boot. Not giving it another thought she put the bracelet into the pouch and with Argo trailing along behind headed into town.

Word of what had happened had obviously preceded them. People looked at her and whispered, but Janice didn't let it bother her. It wasn't the first time people stared at the archaeologist and her female companion. Argo for her part seemed to bask in the attention. The puppy nearly marched down the street with a swagger—proud to show

all the world that she was in the company Janice Covington. Before entering the market, Janice picked Argo up, not wanting to revisit the previous morning's episode.

"Hello, Milo. What'll you trade for this bracelet?"

The old man looked at the jewelry critically, his eyes shining with approval. "I'm sorry Miss Covington, but I don't think I have anything here you'd want for that. It's a beautiful bracelet."

Janice smiled her most winning smile. "I need dog food, Milo. Lots of it. Tins of horsemeat, as many as I can get for this."

The proprietor smiled knowingly. "I'll fix you up. My son will bring the truck out to your camp. It's too much to carry."

"Thank you, can I take this handkerchief too?" Janice had selected a soft white one with blue trim. The man nodded. Picking a fountain pen off the counter, she carefully wrote on the handkerchief: "*Personal friend of Janice Covington, if found please notify.*" Gently, she put Argo on the counter and Milo held her while Janice carefully tied the bandana around the dog's neck. The words "*Personal Friend of Janice Covington*" could be seen, the rest tucked underneath. Janice figured it would do.

She didn't see any reason for putting off the inevitable any longer so she and Argo selected one of the remaining trucks at the Covington camp and headed to the South Ridge dig site. Dozens of diggers carefully scooped sand and dirt away from meticulously erected measuring rods. Foot square parcels of the ruins were precisely marked with rope and colored strings indicating levels and dates. Even the dirt was carefully sifted between mesh bottomed crates lest some small artifact go undiscovered. It was complicated, precise, and expansive. For all her father's faults, Janice had to agree that he was a master planner. The whole dig was as organized as any campaign of war.

The South Ridge got its name because it was a steep embankment of land due south of the Covington camp. Janice tended to oversee it because it was steep and she had an easier time of navigating the ups and downs of it than her father did. It was right next to a small copse of trees that provided protection from the sun or rain depending on the weather.

Gathering her bag of tools, she opened the door for the dog who followed her out of the truck. Argo seemed a little unsure of the surroundings and stayed close to her mistress. That was, of course, until the squirrel showed up. Janice had no way of

knowing Argo had a weakness for squirrels and it was possible that Argo didn't know it either. But something happened when sharp canine eyes saw the bushy tailed rodent that scurried on the ground from one tree to another.

"Argo!" Janice had time to yell when the dog took off at a full run charging right through the middle of the dig site. In moments measuring stakes went flying, carefully laid strings snapped, and diggers fell over each other trying to get out of the way of the charging animal.

Janice took off at a run and while she avoided the dig areas, she ran into just about everything else. Tables of equipment toppled over, a row of packing material fell into a ditch, and a digger struggling to get out of Janice's way bumped into a generator, shoving it into a tent where it promptly caught fire.

Harry Covington looked up from his logbook on the East Plateau at the prompting of his lead digger. The small Greek man spoke rapidly and pointed towards the south. Harry looked over to see curls of black smoke bellowing up towards a gunmetal gray sky. "What in Tartarus?" he grumbled heading for his truck.

When he approached the dig he saw nothing but chaos. Several diggers were bandaging the elbows and arms of a few others. Some were picking up tables and supplies. The word on everyone's tongue however was the same—"dog". One look at the ground and the paw prints that charged towards the center of the dig and the elder Covington's eyes widened in fury.

"Janice Elizabeth Covington!" Harry roared.

Janice had been at work realigning the measuring stakes. She hadn't seen her father drive up and grimaced at the use of her full name. Taking a deep breath, she stood and walked over to him.

"Yeah, Pop? Look, I'm sorry about the mess."

Harry's face was red with anger, the veins on his neck were bulging; the hammering of his heart was clearly visible. "Mess? You call this a fucking mess? That mutt of yours has reduced four months of painstaking work to a disaster area."

"But—"

"Not one word out of you, Janice. Not one word. You have three choices here." His nostrils flared as he tried to suck in the air needed to calm his raging fury. "You can do the right thing and get rid of that blasted animal and get back to work. You can take that dog and leave the dig and either train it to be an archaeologist...or go back to the

States. You know which one I want, but the choice is yours.” With that he turned his back and marched back to the truck, giving orders to the lead diggers on how best to combat the chaos that was now the South Ridge.

Janice stared after him, feeling like she’d been punched in the gut. No, she decided—she’d rather be punched in the gut. This was much worse. Her head was down as she walked back to the truck where she’d put Argo when she’d finally caught her. Opening the door, Argo jumped down and stuck close by Janice’s side. The pair walked back to camp, Janice’s thoughts were on what to do—the dog wasn’t thinking much at all.

One look at her tent and she realized it was the last place she wanted to be. The tins of horsemeat had been delivered and stacks of them covered every surface in her tent. They were piled on the bed, the desk, the crates she used for shelves, for the dresser and even a small pile on the floor. She needed a place to think and this certainly wasn’t it. Not even entering, she turned and headed away from camp.

The Covington camp was situated halfway between the dig site to the south and the Oasis Hotel, which was north. To the west, however, was a small lake and grove of trees. Janice liked to go there to get away from everyone and enjoy some solitude. As usual she was the only one there. Well, she and Argo. Unfortunately, she didn’t feel the relaxing peace and quiet the spot usually afforded her.

If anything, she felt weighed down by a decision she’d have to make. Argo ran off and began investigating every little rock and blade of grass she came upon. Janice kept an eye on her, though she was doubtful that the dog would run off. The archaeologist took a seat on a large boulder on the lake bank and selecting a small handful of pebbles began to toss them into the water, mesmerized by the ripples they produced. Before gathering another handful, she fished a cigar and a match out of her pocket. With thoughtless efficiency she lit up and blew a few rings of smoke while she considered what to do with her new companion. She picked up another rock.

One of the choices Harry had given her was completely out of the question so she didn’t have to think about it. No way was she taking Argo and going back to the States. Archaeology and Xena were in her blood; there was no denying it. True, she hated Greece in the cold and rain, but that time was ending and the weather would improve soon. Besides, her place was with her father and she knew it. Harry Covington was home to Janice, on whatever gods’ forsaken dig they ended up on. Harry was home

and the dog was family; there was symmetry to that. Even now, absently watching the golden puppy and the ripples of water and the rings of smoke, she felt more complete. Something about that dog just felt right and as much as she loved her father, she wasn't giving that up. So it seemed that the choice of simply getting rid of the dog to make her father happy was out as well. That left her only the option of somehow making the animal fit with the life she was already living.

Before she could ponder it further, the sound of a snapping twig from behind her drew her attention. She could see Argo's tail from behind a bush in front of her so she turned to see who the intruder was. To her surprise it was Helen, making her way along the thin trail.

"Your father said I would find you here," she announced, joining Janice by the lake's edge.

"I don't think Pop wants me found right now," Janice replied solemnly, taking another puff from her cigar.

Helen chuckled. "Yes, that is true. He told me about what happened. He is very angry at your dog."

Janice shrugged. "It's not her fault, she didn't know any better. Pop should be mad at me."

Helen put her hand on Janice's shoulder. For the most part Janice looked and acted like most other middle-aged archaeologists. She didn't go for frills, dressed for the business of archaeology, and worked harder than anyone else on the dig. Harry demanded it, and Janice complied without question. But now, with real sadness on her face and some dim sunlight peeking through the clouds highlighting the red tint to her long hair, Janice looked like what she was—a woman in her early twenties, worn out from filling shoes that were far too big for her.

"Harry will never be mad at you, Janice. He loves you more than anything. Even when something is your fault, he will never see it that way—there is no room in his heart for that." Helen's words were kind. Not overly gentle, but simply stating the facts as she saw them. The older woman looked out at the lake for a moment, choosing her next words carefully. "He sent me with some texts for you to translate. He's been working on them in his room, but his eyes are not what they used to be. I think he is afraid you'll go back to the States."

Janice laughed bitterly. "He should know better than that. I just don't want to get rid of the dog, that's all. I can't explain why."

Argo had meandered back to Janice at Helen's arrival to greet the newcomer. She was all feet, tongue, nose and ears with bits of golden fur in between. "It's important to have somebody to talk to Janice, even if it is only a dog. Your father just doesn't understand that his life's work is not enough for you."

"This work is important Helen, I'm not saying—"

"Shhh, child. I do not doubt your loyalty to your father. No, you've been everything he could have hoped for in a son and more. But who do you tell about your discoveries at the end of the day?"

Janice looked at her with a level expression. Helen was approaching a touchy subject. "I'm far from lonely, Helen, despite what my father says about Diana."

Helen blushed, as that was hardly what she was talking about. "I mean to trust, Janice. You trust your father, but who else? We both know he's been sick and is not growing any younger. He's weaker than he lets on and a lifetime of hard living is catching up with him. You need to learn to love more than him if you're ever to survive without him."

Turning her head away, Janice blinked back a tear. Everyone died, Janice well knew that, but she didn't want to think about that possibility for her father. She knew it would happen at some point—but not now. "He's just going through a bad patch, Helen. You'll see. Tell him I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying on at the dig. I'm not getting rid of the dog, but I'll take a couple of weeks to train her and when I think she's fit, we'll both be back. In the meantime, I'll get this stuff translated and drop it off at the Oasis when I'm done."

Helen didn't push, sensing that the younger Covington wasn't equipped to take it yet. That time would come however, and for both their sakes, Helen hoped it was a long way off.

Janice Covington didn't know the first thing about training dogs. She saw that, however, as an asset. "Firstly, Argo—you're only going to learn the important stuff. None of that sissy show dog stuff for you." The dog paid rapt attention to Janice's voice until a butterfly fluttered into her line of sight and she was off chasing it. Janice readjusted her hat, and undeterred, tried to come up with a plan.

Deciding that Argo might be more receptive to learning if she'd had a chance to run off some of her copious energy reserves, the two settled into a routine. Janice would get up first thing in the morning and, rain or shine, take the dog for a run to the lake. After that initial expenditure of energy she'd work on the basics—teaching Argo her name and commands like sit, stay, down and come. She used the word with a hand signal, which seemed to help. Then she would play some more, helping the dog find squirrels in the trees to chase or throwing a tennis ball she'd kept from her last game on campus with Diana. She paid careful attention to what the dog liked to do on her own and tried to give those behaviors their own names. Argo was young and had a short attention span but Janice stayed patient. She figured that if the animal learned half of what she was saying, she'd still be ahead of the game at the end.

Time was spent working on her father's translations while the dog rested. At first she would make the dog lie still while she deciphered one word, then a sentence then a paragraph. In time Argo learned that book reading was 'quiet time' and she used it for napping.

By mid afternoon she'd make her way back to the Oasis where she'd bathe and get cleaned up. If necessary she'd make the dog join her in the tub, which was clearly not on Argo's list of fun things to do. With proper food and exercise the puppy began to fill out and by the end of the first week the dog was visibly healthier.

A routine developed and with each passing week the dog grew bigger and stronger. Janice split her time between working on her father's translations and spending time at the dig, with Argo napping in the truck, or taking her to survey new dig sites. Janice wasn't going to make the same mistake again by mixing puppies and the meticulous work of excavation. As an added precaution she didn't work on the same dig site as her father but rather would supervise the secondary site. Before returning to camp, Janice would leave whatever she had translated with Helen to give to her father and either pick up a new batch or wait to see if he'd left it in her tent. She didn't see her father much, just in passing, and it was clear that Harry was determined to ignore Janice's new companion.

There were minor catastrophes from time to time, but thankfully none of the diggers mentioned them to Harry. Most of the diggers enjoyed Argo's company. She caught the occasional rabbit and if you could catch her she'd share it. She was also a comic diversion and would occasionally roll in things so foul Janice would throw her

hands up in dismay. Still, as long as nothing caught fire, and no actual work was destroyed, she was happy.

Janice enjoyed her work on the site much more than the translation work her father had given her to do. She did it because she was sure it was her father's way of making sure she knew she was needed. The texts were maddeningly dull and never mentioned Xena by name. Some was nothing more than incredibly dry references to ancient local village politics. Records of crop yields were included as well as temple receipts. Still, the information did add to her already staggering wealth of information about the period and the people who lived there. One month followed the next and the weather improved.

One sunny afternoon Janice was met with a surprise at the Oasis. An opulent Rolls Royce was parked outside, a car which Argo wanted to investigate more thoroughly. The back windows were rolled down and Argo seemed determined to get a peek inside.

"Down, girl!" Janice requested firmly, which Argo promptly ignored.

Janice glanced inside the car to see what was of such interest to her dog. The car appeared clean enough. A road map was folded on the front passenger seat but not much else up front. It was the back seat that seemed to have Argo's interest. There were a few scattered dried fruits on the leather cushion and a large crate that was covered with a wire grill in the front- it was standing open. The box looked like an animal carrier- there was some cloth bedding inside, but it was empty.

Shrugging, Janice headed into the Oasis, making Argo lie down just inside the door.

"She's so big!" Helen exclaimed. Something she tended to do nearly every time she saw the dog. Argo was indeed growing daily it seemed. "She's listening to you very well, Janice," Helen continued, picking up the dishes from an early lunch.

Janice smiled at the compliment; happy the French woman hadn't seen Argo's performance minutes earlier outside. Seeing her father engaged in conversation at the central table, she headed over.

Two men were seated with her father. Both were pale and on the effeminate side, wearing impractical white suits. The one on Harry's left had his hat tilted to the side. The other was older, with the slimy smoothness of a used car salesman. Janice hated both men on sight. "What's going on, Pop?" she asked, her voice deceptively casual.

“Janice, I’d like you to meet John Smythe and Jameson Leesto,” Harry said, nodding first to the one in the hat. “Mr. Leesto here says that his daughter Callisandra attends University with you.”

Janice looked straight at the old coot that wasn’t wearing a hat. “Yes sir, your daughter seems to have some trouble understanding the definition of plagiarism.”

The old man laughed. “Kids will be kids, eh Harry?” Leesto checked his watch, then he and Smythe stood up and gathered their briefcases.

“Consider our offer, Harry. You won’t find a better one,” Jameson said, donning his hat. With that they turned and left the dining room.

“What’s going on, Pop?”

Harry sighed. “Nothing to worry about, Janice. They wanted to partner up with me on the dig, and I said ‘no deal’. Your old man isn’t so daft that he can’t see swindlers for what they are.”

Janice felt reassured, but on edge nonetheless. The men looked too slimy to give up that easily.

“Argo’s working out really well at the dig, Pop—”

“It’s a dog, Janice, not an archaeologist. It doesn’t belong on a dig, it won’t ever belong on a dig, and you’re just taking chances. But if you can assure me that it won’t tear the place up--again, it’s a chance I’m willing to let you take.”

Janice closed her mouth and bit back a nasty retort. She glanced over to the beautiful brown eyes looking up at her from the doorway full of love and devotion, and more than a passing interest in the plates being cleared from the table. It was clear that no matter how well Argo behaved, she’d never amount to much in her father’s eyes, so Janice let it go. Sometimes she wondered if he felt the same way about her.

Helen brought out a bowl of stew, and Janice sat down across from her father to eat. Occasionally Harry looked towards to doorway to the dog waiting obediently, rarely taking her eyes from Janice.

Janice noticed, but dared not say anything. Instead she slid the packet of translations across the table to her father. He grunted, then with a heavy sigh stood up. He seemed to be moving a bit slower today. “I’ll put these upstairs and get you the next batch.”

“Aww, come on Pop, leave it ‘till later, you don’t need to go upstairs.”

Harry shrugged her off and headed upstairs to his room. In moments he came running down the stairs straight for the door with the speed of a man half his age. Argo, startled by the large man running at the door, scampered out of the way, instantly at Janice's side, if not slightly behind her.

"Bastards, those bastards!"

"Pop, calm down, what's wrong."

He turned to Janice, anger and disbelief in his eyes. "I don't know how they did it, Janice, but Leesto and Smythe stole the scroll right out from under me."

Janice looked the room over carefully, Argo doing her own survey as well. Harry was staying in Helen's room, decked out with silks and satins. A couple of framed impressionist reproductions hung on the walls, and dried flowers sat in a vase on her dressing table. Harry's clothes were kept in a large armoire, a couple of pairs of boots neatly sticking out from under the bed. A window was open and the curtains fluttered with the fresh air breezing into the room.

"Did you move anything Pop?"

Harry shook his head. "I came in, was about to grab that stack off the desk," he said as he pointed to a pile of papers. "I noticed the scroll box sticking out from under the bed, then headed back downstairs."

Janice studied the open box then picked it up. It didn't have a lock on it, since it was small enough for someone to steal. With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Janice looked to the window, which was open. It was dark now. With no streetlights or towns for miles, it'd be easy for a car to pull off the road and disappear into inky blackness.

"Pop, I've got a bad feeling about this."

"There's no way a man could climb up here," Harry said, following the line of his daughter's vision. "No way. The only way in or out of our room is the stairs."

"Pop," Janice continued, "Argo was really interested in a cage that was in their Rolls. I think they had some kind of trained animal."

"There must be some way to stop them, get the scroll back before they leave the country," Helen said, furious.

Harry just shook his head sadly. "Rich bastards like that? Not likely."

"Now wait a minute," Janice chimed in, trying to sound hopeful. "They've got the scroll for now, but what can they do with it? Wasn't Milo just saying that it's a good

thing we extended the dig because the army has commandeered the airport? We're not in the middle of the War, but it is happening around us. We'd have had a hard time getting a plane out right now anyway."

"So they could take it out by boat," Harry said, not feeling any better.

"Have you seen the river lately?" Janice asked.

The rains had stopped and the sky was clear, but the Strymon River was moving quickly. Its banks swollen with rain and melting snow from the mountains, it was at its most treacherous.

"I spent the better part of a day checking out the bridge before letting the diggers take equipment over it last week," Janice continued, "If they don't have a death wish, they'll probably hole up somewhere for a week or so to let the river settle. It's always worse after a storm. We may be able to entice them into sticking around."

A very thin smile crossed his lips as Harry looked at his daughter. "I'm listening Janice," he said.

Janice Covington stood on the muddy banks of the Strymon River and surveyed the rocky cliffs with binoculars Harry had loaned her. The sun was just beginning to rise, illuminating the sky with tinges of light blue. It was still nearly too dark to see. She adjusted her pack and headed up the cliff as quickly as she dared. It was important to get her "find" into position before the first crew of diggers showed up at the site. While Janice and her father disagreed on many things, it seemed clear to both of them that Smythe and Leesto probably found out about the scroll and where it was kept from someone working on the dig.

Carrying a heavy box and heavier backpack, Janice made her way up the steep rocky incline just behind Argo. It was slow going. There was little vegetation, and not much to keep the rocks from sliding under her feet. The dog was instrumental in helping the archaeologist avoid loose rock that would send her and the box she carried tumbling down the incline- or worse into the quickly moving river. Reaching the shallow cave she'd found, she set the box down and took a canteen from her pack. After pouring some water into a small tin cup for Argo, she had a few sips herself. Worried about the approaching dawn, she quickly set to work burying the box in a shallow hole, covering it with dirt and rock. If all went well, this new "discovery"

would be unearthed when she set off some explosions near by. The sounds of the river echoed surprisingly loud in the cave. Looking down she could see, even in dim dawn light how swiftly the river was moving.

Janice and Harry had worked feverishly the last few nights on devising a find that would be irresistible to the swindlers that had stolen Xena's scroll. Harry's first impulse was to fake another scroll, but Janice thought that the diggers might recognize it as a fake. After three pots of coffee, they came up with something unlike anything they'd previously exhumed, that when described by a third party would sound priceless. Wanting to leave nothing to chance, she also scattered some debris around the cave area, lightly covering everything with dirt. It would not do to have light reflecting off of bits of metal prematurely.

"I think this will have to do girl," she said to her companion, giving her a gentle scratch behind the ears. "If I can get the explosion just right, this should look like one amazing accidental discovery." With Argo at her side, she made her way down the hill to the road where Harry waited in the truck.

"Did you have any trouble?" Harry asked as Janice approached the truck. He squinted up the path she'd been walking.

Janice lowered the tailgate to the truck so Argo could jump in the back. "Don't worry Pop," she said, "you won't see any glints of metal until that explosion uncovers them. That spot will be hard to get to so keep your crew too busy to help us out and we'll have to spend a couple of days excavating." Harry nodded as he put the truck into gear.

"We could really use some luck right now, Jan," he muttered quietly, "I hope we get it."

His daughter nodded, with a quick glance to the back of the truck where her dog rested contentedly. "Pop, I actually feel like our luck is about to change."

Harry wasn't convinced that Smythe and Leesto hadn't left the country, but Janice was certain that the swiftly moving river and floods from the rain would delay them at least a week. The only thing he was sure about was if Smythe and Leesto, hadn't left the country, they certainly could not be persuaded to meet with him again.

Any overture to a meeting would surely be seen as a trap, so the Covington's plan hinged on the swindlers being tempted enough by a find to steal it from the excavation site. The location was crucial, some place difficult enough to slow down the work, impossible to reach by car and easy to watch. Harry had to admit that his daughter had found a location that had fit the bill.

As they drove back to the hotel, Harry cast a quick glance at the woman sitting next to him. Something about Janice had changed. She looked exhausted, certainly. The two of them had been working feverishly for the past two nights readying their only chance of getting Xena's scroll back. They maintained their regular work schedules at their respective dig sites, but at night worked tirelessly to get everything ready. Despite the fact that the two of them had barely four hours of sleep between them the last two days, she seemed more at peace with herself than he'd remembered her in recent years. Her work was focused; she wasn't as morose. He wouldn't say she was pleasant, after all she was still a Covington, but she didn't seem to be afflicted with the unquenchable emptiness Covingtons were known for. He couldn't remember a time since they'd been working together when she'd seemed as content. With a quick glance to the rear view mirror, he wondered if the answer was riding in the truck behind them.

Harry stopped the truck down the road from the dig-site Janice was supervising. She still managed to be the first one there for the day, which was her usual routine. If they'd made a discovery, someone would watch the site around the clock until it was excavated, but that was something Janice or her father rarely had to contend with. She was halfway through her first cup of coffee when the diggers arrived. She exchanged morning pleasantries all the while wondering if any of them had tipped off Smythe and Leesto. She'd been winding up the site she was working on for the past two days, so it was not unusual for her to open the map of the area and let them know where she would have them dig next. She gave her demolition man explicit instructions of how she wanted to dynamite a small ridge over the Strymon River. She casually mentioned that the outcrop of rock didn't look natural and she wondered if some sort of chamber might lurk beneath centuries of debris. Four hours later two diggers rushed excitedly

down the incline excitedly telling her they' d found something. For Janice, there was absolutely no reason to hide her smile.

“Very strange,” Janice muttered examining a small coin, turning it over in her hand. There was a shine line in the dull silver but this and all the coins found thus far, showed varying degrees of scorching, probably from the blast. “I think this is a symbol of Ares,” Janice added, to no one in particular.

“What in blazes are you doing, Jan?” Harry shouted getting out of his truck and storming over to the base of the hill where Janice' s men were working. The diggers were having a hard time moving the various crates of excavation equipment up the steep incline. Inwardly Harry grinned. Janice had picked a good spot.

“Pop, you' re not going to believe this” Janice said excitedly. “This could be the treasury of Ares.”

Harry looked from his daughter to the small hole in the cliff face. “I don' t believe it,” he said.

“Just look at this,” Janice continued, pressing a small coin into his hand.

“That' s the stamp of Ares. Give me half your crew and we' ll know if we' ve hit the treasury by tomorrow”

Harry took the coin and looked at it critically. “Interesting,” he muttered.

“But that doesn' t mean you' ve found the treasury. It means you' ve found a coin. Look Jan,” he continued in a firm tone, “I know you' re excited, and that' s fine. But I can' t spare any men. I know we' re on to something at the north ridge and that will have to come first. Do your best and when I can spare the men I will,”

“But Pop, I' ve really found something,” Janice complained. “I need more diggers.”

Harry headed back to his truck then turned to Janice once more. He cast an annoyed glance at the dog sitting quietly at Janice' s feet. “Then get your mutt to do some digging for you.”

Janice might have laughed at that added touch of believability had she not suspected that the sentiment behind the comment was absolutely serious. Her eyes

cold, she turned back to her foreman. “We’ ll show him, Hector,” she said, “Focus on getting the equipment up there. I want everything excavated properly, with documentation.”

“You really think this is something?” Hector asked.

Casually Janice glanced around at her team of diggers that had gathered to hear what she had to say. Now was the time to seal the deal. If one of them was the informant, now was the time to be memorable. If they weren’t, it was even more important her story be memorable enough for her team to tell her father’ s team when they gathered for dinner. “Harry is a damn good archeologist,” she began, looking intently at Hector, “but he’ s blinded by his obsession with Xena. He’ s convinced that Xena ran her own show, that she was a warlord for herself only.” The diggers around her nodded in agreement. “It’ s a valid theory and I’ m not disputing it, but.” She let her voice drop a little “there is another theory.” Looking around she could see that she had everyone’ s attention. “In those papers I’ ve been translating for Harry, I’ ve read about a treasury that was established for Ares. Conquered villages had to pay taxes to Ares with special coins minted from the town’ s own silver and gold coinage. A lot of towns resented the tax and put filler metal in with the silver and gold and did a pretty shoddy job of minting them, but they made the coinage just the same. The papers I’ ve been translating never mention Xena by name, but they never say it isn’ t her either. They talk about a powerful warlord collecting more tax money than any other, and gaining special favor with Ares by establishing a huge treasury off of a river near the warlord’ s home town.” Janice looked around; the diggers were riveted. “Know of any other warlord who grew up near the banks of the Strymon River?”

Janice insisted on precise set up of the equipment, telling the team to do the job right the first time, even if it took longer. Even so, by dusk, everything was set to begin excavation in earnest the next morning. She noticed that the crate she’ d buried had been brushed off, but she suggested they leave it until morning when everyone was fresh to dig it up. She did have a small box filled with loose coins that had been collected.

She told Hector to post two guards at the road, since that would be the only way up to the dig site, and headed back to town.

As she and Argo walked the road to where her truck waited she had time to reflect on the gamble she and her father were taking. She knew there wasn't a treasury buried beneath cliff and tomorrow they would excavate everything she'd hidden. She spoke of gold, but knew she hadn't faked any gold coins and the "silver" ones she'd made wouldn't hold up to any sort of scientific test so it would be up to dumb luck and the strength of her story telling to see if the bait she'd cast would yield any fish.

She and her father staged another fight that night about the dig which resulted in her storming off in her truck with her dog at her side. She parked the truck in the forest and waited until midnight before taking Argo to the bank of the Strymon River and taking a small boat across. She'd stashed the boat far upstream from her fake dig-site, so she'd have time traveling on the strong downward current to get to the other side of the river. The water was icy and the current swift so reaching the far side was a welcome relief; now it was just a matter of waiting and seeing if her hunch was correct. She didn't dare risk a fire, so she sat still in the cold, her dog laying next to her keeping at least one of her legs warm. By two o'clock in the morning she heard the distinctive sound of a boat motor approaching. She was in place, and if her father was as well, they may yet get their scroll back. Instinctively she checked the belt at her waist to make sure her gun and whip were still there.

Leesto and Smythe cut the engine to the boat but left it idling and coasted to a stop 20 yards from where Janice and Argo sat hiding. The cloud cover rendered the night an inky dark that had the two men stumbling over the loose rocks. "Did your man take care of the guards?" Leesto asked, stepping out of the boat and into the icy water. He tossed a loop of rope around a nearby boulder and stood on the muddy bank.

"I told you," Smythe replied, "He *is* one of the guards. I gave him money to get the others going in a dice game. There won't be a problem." Smythe stifled a yelp as he knocked his knee on the boulder that tethered the boat. "What I don't

understand is why don't we just send the monkey up after the find like we did with the scroll?"

Leesto absently stroked the small simian curled around his neck. Since stepping into water the monkey had seemed particularly adjitated. "Because we don't know how much money is up there," he replied smoothly. "Here, take Hercules with you, He doesn't like the river," see if you can manage the box yourself, I'll stay with the boat.

Smythe looked irritated, like a man who clearly wanted to watch the boat and not baby-sit a hydrophobic monkey while climbing a steep cliff. Resigned, he adjusted his hat, shouldered a large empty backpack and began to climb. In moments he was gone from Janice's sight although she could hear the scraping as he moved up the mountain. Before long even that sound had vanished. Janice looked at the tethered motorboat. While dark, the moon provided just enough light through the clouds so she could make out the monkey's cage as well as another small box that she imagined held her father's missing scroll. Her eyes narrowed as she moved from her hiding place with her gun drawn.

"Don't move Leesto," she said stepping forward.

Jameson Leesto started in surprise his eyes focusing on Janice as she stepped into view. "Janice Covington," he said with appreciation, "I should have known." He raised his hands, taking note of the gun she had leveled at him. "Are you going to shoot me, young woman?"

"I'd rather not", Janice said levelly. "I want Harry's scroll, I know you have it with you."

"And if I tell you I don't know what you're talking about?"

In a slow steady motion, Janice cocked the gun.

Leesto nodded at the boat. "I have it with me." Janice approached cautiously, Argo at her side. She was a couple of feet from Leesto when a gunshot sounded from the cave up the mountain. Her head whipped to the direction of the sound. Distracted, Janice spun with the impact of Leesto's fist as it hit her face. Her ankle twisted on the unstable footing of the riverbank and she tumbled into the boat, the snarling sounds of Argo filling her ears. She lost her grip on the gun and it slid along the metal boat to the

front; operating on instinct alone she kicked for all she was worth, her boot heel hitting the motor on the boat, shoving it into gear.

What followed was a blur to Janice. She could hear Leesto swear when she tried to get out from under him and grab the gun. He was trying for the same prize but had been hampered by the large dog attacking him. The motorboat snapped its mooring rope and took off down the swiftly moving river. As they cut through the water icy spray hit Janice, water making the metal bottom of the boat slick. With outstretched fingers she'd just about reached the gun when Leesto's foot slammed squarely down on her fingers. Leesto grabbed the gun.

"You get this dog off of me or it's dead," He said coldly.

"Argo, heel," Janice demanded sternly. Confused the canine looked at Janice and tried to back up, teetering in the swiftly moving boat.

Leesto was standing at the front of the boat facing her as she held Argo back, moving herself into a sitting position. It was from this vantage point that Janice noticed the bulge in the man's coat. The bastard had the scroll on him; it wasn't in the case at all. "You stupid bitch," Leesto snarled.

In the distance Janice could see the Strymon River Bridge, its dark silhouette showing faintly in the murky night. It looked to Janice like there was someone on that bridge but she wasn't sure. She decided to indulge in some uncharacteristic optimism. "Are you referring to me or my dog?" she asked conversationally.

"You pathetic losers," he gestured with the gun for her to switch places with him. "We've got the scroll, we're going to get the coins from that cave. You are going to end up with nothing. Nothing, just like you always do in spite of your father's dumb headed persistence. You are what's wrong with archaeology. This isn't a quest for the grail; for some higher knowledge or power. We are digging up the past and it's worth what someone will pay for it. We're not going to learn from our past now, we never have before."

Janice made a show of having a hard time getting to her feet. She slipped and fell then had to start over. With a quick glance she could see that they were almost at the bridge. "You just don't get it. It's not about learning from our past or not," she said, "It's the *trying* that makes us who we are. Besides, that find in the cave is about as real as your daughter's ethics."

He cocked his head as he looked at the archaeologist quizzically, "Do you think I'm stupid? I know real coinage when I see it. What the hell are you laughing at?"

Leesto lurched forward as Harry Covington landed on him. The elder Covington had leapt from the bridge and landed squarely on the other man. Janice had readied herself and she lunged; shoving her hand into Leesto's inner coat pocket she pulled out the scroll. The revolver went off once as Leesto and Harry struggled for control, the shot going into the river. Argo barked excitedly and went after Leesto's leg. Harry had grabbed the gun, but it was still in Leesto's hand. A second shot went off hitting Harry in the leg and sending him overboard as he wrested the gun away from the thief. With a fury she didn't know she possessed, Janice lunged at Jameson Leesto, shoving him backwards. As he lost his balance he reached out with his hands and managed to grab part of the scroll Janice was clutching. The fragile tome tore, one end of the scroll going overboard, the rest of the scroll and vellum clutched tightly in Janice's hand. She still didn't let go as she grabbed the motor with her other hand and turned the boat around in the direction her father had fallen. The river was choppy and the visibility wasn't good. Leesto's cries for help in the swiftly moving river were quickly drowned out.

"Pop!" Janice screamed. "Pop! Where the hell are you."

She heard a faint yell but couldn't tell where it came from. Argo, however, could. The dog leapt from the boat and began to dog paddle in the water, fighting the icy current. Janice circled, keeping an eye on the dog and watching where she was moving. Before long she could see her father bobbing in the water, his head dipping below the river's surface, taking longer to resurface each time. When Argo got close he grabbed onto the dog, sending them both below the water's surface. They bobbed back up and Argo pulled the old man towards the boat as Janice maneuvered closer. The muscles of her small frame straining, she managed to pull her father into the boat and with even more difficulty managed to get the dog in as well. She spared the briefest of moments to make sure her father was still breathing, and then put the boat into gear heading back to town.

"Hang on Pop," she yelled. "You're going to be okay." Harry nodded, too weak to speak. The color had drained from his face and his pant leg was soaked with blood. His face rolled to the side and Janice feared he'd lose consciousness. Argo stood over his inert form, trying to balance herself in the swiftly moving boat and first shook the water from her coat, then licked the old man's face.

"Janice get this mutt off of me!" He rasped.

"Not a chance, Pop," Janice replied with a grin, "not a chance."

The hallway outside Harry's room at the Oasis Hotel was dimly lit. Janice and Helen waited in silence for the doctor to emerge. Janice was cold but didn't care, Helen had persuaded her to drape a blanket around her, but she refused to change out of her wet clothes until she knew Harry was okay. With each passing minute Janice could feel herself slipping away. How could the plan have gotten so screwed up? Why did she mess with a gun when she could have used her whip? How could she let Xena's scroll get ripped in half... The doctor emerging from Harry's room interrupted her reverie. He was older than Harry with silver hair and a kindly face.

"How is he?" both Helen and Janice asked in unison.

Gravely he shook his head. "Miss Covington, your father is alive for now." He sighed. "He can live a day, a week, a month, a year. For certain I cannot say. He has lost a lot of blood, he is very weak, but he will not give up on life. How he still breathes I can not explain."

"Can I see him?" Janice asked, her eyes getting moist in spite of herself.

The doctor nodded. "I am sorry. I've patched him up, but there isn't anything more I can do for him tonight. I will come by tomorrow to check on him." He started to turn down the hallway and reconsidered, pausing at Helen, he spoke. "I will stay in the Hotel tonight. If he gets worse, have someone wake me." Helen nodded and then cast a quick glance to Janice. This would be a long night for them both.

Argo preceded Janice into the room and sat next to Harry's bed. Janice sat in the chair by the bed and Helen stood at the door. Janice scarcely recognized the man in the bed. Harry Covington's color was ashen, his cheeks hollow, his lips chapped and cracked. The stubble on his face was uneven and was more grey than black. Janice shook her head.

"Pop, I'm so sorry."

"Nonsense," he rasped, faintly.

"Everything went wrong, Pop. I don't know—"

"I said stop it, Janice," Harry said, his voice a little stronger. "We did what we had to do. Do you have the scroll?"

Janice shook her head in disbelief, putting the torn scroll into the old man's hand. "Pop, one stupid scroll isn't worth your life."

He turned his head to look at this daughter. "My life's work is indeed worth my life, young lady, stupid or not." He thrust the scroll back to Janice. "You keep this now. This is your work." Absently he put his hand on the dog's head, petting her gently.

"I'm not going tonight Janice," he said steadily. "But I'm not going to live forever. You decide right now if this is your life or not. Will you finish what I've started, will you find Xena's scrolls?"

Janice nodded, "Of course I will Pop, but you're going to be fine."

He shook his head. "Don't lie to me Janice, a man knows when his time is waning. Not for nothing Janice, but I have some things to tell you and you're going to listen to me."

"Pop—" Janice started, only to be silenced by his steady gaze. Harry Covington's breathing was shallow, his voice weak, but there was a fire in his eyes that belonged to a much younger man. Janice sat quietly and listened.

"Janice, tonight wasn't a failure, it was a success. We got our scroll back, we let Leesto and Smythe know who they were messing with and this..." He handed her something he'd had concealed in his hand. Janice opened her hand to see a small gold coin resting in her palm.

"Girl, you did discover the treasury of Ares. You didn't get a chance to go back up and poke around after the blast. But there were a whole mess of coins up there that I know you didn't plant. There is something to this dig site, Janice. This really is the place. Xena's scrolls are here, I can feel that." He took a deep breath, the talking clearly taking its toll on him. Smythe was digging up all these gold coins. I sent a shot over his head and he fainted, dead on the spot. Our men came running, Hector spotted their stooge, and secured the site. This is your dig now, Janice. These are your men. Take Ares' blood money and make something out of this. Janice Covington, your old man is proud of you."

Janice didn't know what to say. Silent tears spilled down her cheeks in spite of herself. Then she noticed her father absently petting Argo. "I thought you didn't like dogs, Pop?" she asked teasingly.

He coughed. "This mutt saved my life," he muttered. "I'm not in the habit of saying I'm wrong Janice, but this is a good dog. She's good for you, maybe someday you'll find a human being as good for you."

"Maybe so Pop," she smiled, "maybe so."

Epilogue:

Harry Covington didn't die that night, nor had the doctor lied. Pneumonia set in and he fought it for as long as he could. He and Janice had four months together to prepare each other for what was to come next. Janice took over running the camp, keeping her father apprised on the excavation of the Treasury of Ares. No one doubted which Covington was in charge and Harry beamed with pride every day. His daughter has assumed his mantle with pride, and while her affinity for ancient Greek syntax didn't improve nearly everything else did. They'd even gotten a congratulatory telegram from Melvin Pappas in South Carolina. Helen spent a great deal of time with Harry too often having to do battle with Argo for space to sit down on Harry's bed. Now that she'd finally gotten the elder Covington's approval, Argo had decided to milk it for everything it was worth.

The rain had stopped and summer had arrived. When the chill and wet had vanished from camp Harry enjoyed the most beautiful week of weather Macedonia had to offer before passing. Harry died and Janice moved on with his work, somehow morphing his life into her own with Argo never far from her side. The ensuing years were ones of adventure and challenge and in time Harry's last wish did indeed come true. One day Melinda Pappas walked into Janice Covington's tent and the lives of both women were forever changed. Janice, Mel and Argo forged a family and enjoyed a happiness that most people read about only in stories. Argo managed to see more of the world than most people and gained the respect of many in the archaeological field. It was a foolish adversary indeed who wanted to end up at the business end of Janice Covington's whip or annoy her dog.

All along Janice knew that life's profound cruelty was that dogs simply do not live as long as people do. Argo grew, blossomed lived a rich wonderful life and in time grew old. She never had a truer friend than Janice Covington, and Janice never had a better friend than her dog. Mel understood that, respected that and Janice loved her all the more for it. After 11 years together, the time came when Argo's vision wasn't as

good, her eyes not as bright, her gait shaken by arthritis and finally a liver ready to quit. Part of Janice died the day she held that huge dog in her arms as her friend administered the injection that would put Argo to sleep and keep her from suffering. While Argo had always made a game of wanting to lick anyone but Janice, licking the hand of her life-long friend was the last thing she did before she died.

While Janice Covington didn't believe in Heaven on principle, she did consider as she felt the life ebbing from that warm canine body, that if there was one it would have to include dogs. It couldn't be "heaven" otherwise. While it would be a long wait, Janice did look forward to the day she could stand on a grassy hill and hear the thunder of big dog feet as she was reunited with Argo once more.

The End