

The Crazy Ramblings Of A Madwoman

[by Verrath](#)

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Sex, Drugs & Violence Disclaimer: Gab loves Xena, Xena loves Isabelle, Isabelle loves Corina. While it's not as adulterous as it sounds, sex between consenting women is definitely there, if not too graphic.

If this sort of thing is illegal at your age where you live, or simply doesn't float your boat, please consider reading some of my non-alt stories.

As for Violence: Our world today is not always a gentle place, and neither was ancient Greece, not with a certain Warrior Princess running loose.... Just be prepared. Includes an attempted sexual assault as well.

There is also some not-so-nice language. F-bomb and other profanities abound.

Drugs, well... Isabelle smokes, though I certainly don't approve, and that medication she gets... Yeah, I suppose you could say we have drugs here.

If any of this disturbs you, perhaps you'd better go watch the Waltons, or Lassie, or something.

I'm using San Francisco as my primary setting, but having been there only briefly as a tourist, I am being deliberately vague about details such as places and names. My apologies for this.

The institution referred to here, as well as the entirety of its staff, are fictional. Any resemblance to real places and people is purely coincidental. Some of the scenes happening in this part are intentionally familiar, however.

Thanks, T.Novan, for letting me use the little reference to that lovely "Gremlins"-story!

Comments appreciated, as always.

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- Part 1 -

The warrior speaks...

I am writing this journal because I feel I have come to a big turning point in my life. In the past few weeks, not only has my life taken a new direction, no, my entire universe has been turned upside down. I feel lost and disoriented, and I hope to be able to set a new course for myself by trying to put my troubled thoughts down in writing. I am not a bard, and I fear my ability with words is sorely limited. I cannot but wonder if I can even begin to express all that which is tormenting me, let alone convey the depth of the emotion that has been assaulting me because of the latest events.

*My name is Xena, and I am - no, I **was**, a warlord.*

I have conquered half of Greece in my time. My name is whispered in terror far beyond her borders, and mothers use it to frighten their children into submission. I have been called many things - the 'old Battleaxe', the 'Beast', the 'Destroyer of Nations', and many I'd rather not put into script, but mostly I am known as the Warrior Princess.

The sequence of events that have led to my present dilemma have been laid down in scrolls by countless bards all over the known world, and I need not go into them in detail. What none of those storytellers can ever know is the sheer turmoil I have had to face at being confronted suddenly with the truth of my own terrible darkness. I cannot possibly hope to cleanse all that evil from my soul, but I have taken a sacred vow to spend the rest of my life trying. And yet, until three days ago, it seemed I was to fail in that in the end, as I have failed my true calling from the beginning of my time.

I was ready to give up, bury my weapons, to go somewhere and quietly do away with myself. I don't think there is anybody who would have been sorry to see me go. The latest incidents had led me to believe that there are forces in me that I cannot control any more than I can stop the sun setting at night. This dark side of me is like a primeval huntress, and she demands blood. I felt that the only way to bury her for good was to die and take her with me. How wrong I was then I can only now begin to suspect.

Then I came across the slavers pillaging the village of Poteidaia, just

when I was throwing the last handful of dirt over my accursed battle gear.

I made quick work of the brutes.

I don't know what made me go back on my decision to end my troubles, afterwards. I think it may have been the memory of a young girl who offered herself to the pillagers in exchange for the life of her village, standing up to them with a vigor that belied her slight frame. Something in her stance spoke of more courage than I can ever hope to find in my own heart. But if this village girl was too brave to back down in the face of overwhelming odds, I found myself unable to do less. So I went on my way, after retrieving my battle gear. I will not run away from myself anymore.

*What happened next is a painful memory that I feel unable to put down here, for I tried to go home, only to find that I no longer **had** a home. But underneath that hurt is a small bright sliver of hope forcing its way through my pain, in the form of a stranger speaking up for me where my own family would not.*

She was the same young girl that had caught my attention in Poteidaia. It is not too much to say that she saved my life that day, on more than one level. And when I went on my way, she followed. She must have known I did not approve. She must have been aware of the fact that I have been known to kill for lesser annoyances. And still she persisted. In the face of the courage, the innocence, and the unconditional trust in those pleading green eyes, what could I have done but acquiesce?

So now it seems I have a companion. This is new to me, and I don't think I can come to terms with it. I will let her travel with me for the time being, until I find a place where she can start a better life.

She tells me her name is Gabrielle, and that she wants to become a bard. While she defers to me and acknowledges my superiority, she seems not in the least bit afraid of me. She nearly drives me crazy all day with her incessant chatter, and yet I can't find it in my heart to chastise her. Just one look into those melting pools of green, and I relent. Such open admiration, and not a trace of malice! She does not belong with me. I am dark. She is not. I must find a good place for her. I must.

We are spending the night out in the open once more, after my run-in with a particularly dense lot of young fools this afternoon. I just can't find any patience in me for dealing with such people. And so I prefer to be out here, where my dangerous temper will not get a

chance to flare. Because when it does, I hurt people. Kill people. For her sake, I must not let that happen now.

I can still see the scene now:

The inn is not very crowded at this time of day. Travelers spending the night there have long since continued on their way, and the locals stopping by for an evening of relaxation are only just beginning to trickle in. It is nothing much as inns go, but it is reasonably neat and clean. Nicer and friendlier than most I have frequented with my men. The tables are battered and used but sound, the chairs sturdy, the pottery spotless, and there is even a little fireplace in the back of the common room, and beside it a small stage, for bards or other artists, though that has obviously not been used in some time. On the other side of the fireplace, a door opens to the foot of a stairway leading to the guest rooms. The counter is meticulously clean, as though the innkeeper has nothing much else to do but swipe it all day with the linen cloth he is carrying, which is what he is doing as we enter.

I order ale for myself, and for Gabrielle, a lightly spiced wine. She has told me that she never drinks alcohol, and her face is a study as she cautiously sips the fragrant beverage. I almost burst out laughing at her puzzled expression when she feels the potent liquid warm her throat, and the wine's rich flavor spread inside her mouth. For some reason, I suddenly feel better than I have in a long time, and let my face relax into a genuine smile.

"Hey, I think I like it," the girl says, and enthusiastically takes a bigger gulp. And splutters, choking. "Though I have to say it's a little strong," she croaks when she has caught her breath. I do laugh at that, and she soon joins me, a chiming, pearly giggle that warms my heart.

But being what I am, my warrior instincts never sleep, and I am well aware of the hostile glances sent my way by the innkeeper and the handful of patrons. Hate and prejudice flare when the Warrior Princess is about, that much, at least, has not changed, I notice bitterly. I feel the hair on my neck rise, an unfailling sign that there is trouble brewing.

Sure enough, one of the patrons soon rises and makes his way towards the table in the back of the room, where we are seated. I expect him to challenge me to a duel, or to provoke me with hateful taunts until my temper snaps and battle lust claims me, anything to bring his name into the stories about the mighty Warrior Princess. I have dealt with more of this foolishness than I care to keep track of,

and if some of these poor idiots have indeed made a name for themselves in the bards' scrolls, most have not lived to brag about it.

I cannot help it, and neither am I proud of it. When the Huntress takes over, I fight, or I die. That primeval urge is strong in me. When my anger is kindled, it is very hard not to let go and give in, and let my dark instincts rule me. And once I do, I kill. The Huntress takes no prisoners.

To my surprise, instead of addressing me, the fellow approaches Gabrielle. He is still young. Most of them are, somehow. I don't think he has been shaving for very long. When he clears his throat, she turns towards him and gives him a cheerful smile. "Hello," she says, her face open and friendly. For a moment I dare to hope that my hunch was wrong as he returns her smile. But that hope is shattered as soon as he starts speaking, with a covert glance at me that I am sure my little naive companion never noticed.

"You seem a nice girl," he says, "what I can't understand is why you keep such distasteful company."

The girl seems taken aback, but that smile never leaves her face as she answers him. "Why, what do you mean?"

*His eyes flicker towards me, and his smile vanishes to be replaced by a mask of hate. "I'm sure there are more... adequate... traveling companions for a beautiful woman than...the likes of **her** ." His eyes dare me to react, but this mild provocation is hardly enough to stir my anger. And I admit to myself I am curious about Gabrielle's reaction.*

She looks at me, and gives me a tiny smile. "I can't find anything wrong with my company," she says without taking her eyes off me. Then she looks back up at the young man, who somehow does not seem so cocksure anymore. "As a matter of fact, I'm quite comfortable where I am now, thank you."

Something does snap inside me at that, and it is not my temper. I realize I am staring at her, and quickly pull myself together. When she turns back towards me, I am outwardly composed.

The young man seems at a loss, but his friends soon come to his rescue. Together, they continue prodding the girl, trying to make me react by utterly ignoring me, and commenting to her about me in crude jokes. I've heard each one of these gibes a thousand times, but made in front of her... they cut deeper than they should. Gabrielle is beginning to look a little distressed. I am on the brink

now, the heat that is the Huntress boiling just under the surface, but a pair of trusting green eyes keeps her at bay. Just.

When they haul her roughly from her chair and start fondling her, I decide this farce has gone on long enough. I flow to my feet, and draw myself up to my full height - I top the tallest of the men here by half a foot - to tower over them menacingly. My glower alone is enough to make them back away, their hands going nervously to dagger or sword at their waists. They begin to see that they may have made a mistake. I have always enjoyed that look of dawning horror, when the predator suddenly realizes he is about to become the prey. I never fails to bring a feral grin to my face. I know that I look like the Bacchae in heat when I let that leer come, and I realize that it strikes terror in their hearts. I make no move to draw my weapon. I will make them sweat, and tremble, and run squeaking to their mothers.

For, all of a sudden, as never before in my life, I have the Huntress firmly under my conscious control.

San Francisco, 1998, after midnight:

"Hey, I think that's pretty good," Isabelle said as she hit the "save" button on her word processor. "I love the part where you stare down those silly oafs. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes." She sighed happily. "I think this might finally be something I could bring myself to send to a publisher!"

The tall, dark figure seated against the far wall of the strawberry blonde woman's little study stirred and got to her feet. The light of the small lamp by the computer did not extend far beyond Isabelle's desk, which left her mysterious companion shrouded in partial darkness. Moving noiselessly to the edge of the illuminated sphere, blue eyes glinting dangerously with a light of their own, the raven-haired woman gave the distinct impression of a black cat in a dark alleyway, crouched and ready to leap. Even after almost a week in Xena's company, Isabelle still found her breath catching at the sight.

And she still struggled with the insanity of it all. Here was a warrior from ancient Greece, by her own words a reformed warlord who traveled the known world in an attempt to redeem herself, together with a young and spirited bard named Gabrielle. And this so-called Warrior Princess had just appeared one night by this very desk, where Isabelle had been sitting after a particularly hard day at

work, trying to type up some sort of coherent story, perhaps one day to be published. Writing was a hobby of hers, but one she never seriously hoped to make into a profession. She enjoyed it, but felt she just didn't have what it takes.

So this warrior woman had popped up, and rattled on about story line and continuity, and bringing events to life, and had basically taken the young woman's budding story - about the misadventures of a clumsy magician - apart bit by bit. And had offered the crestfallen writer to give some pointers by telling tales from her own life.

Thus Isabelle had ended up writing about Xena, the Warrior Princess, and her faithful sidekick, Gabrielle. With the warrior's unique perspective, and Isabelle's ability to render the warrior's somewhat crude speech into expressive prose, they made a decent team. Somehow she had never thought to question the fact that Xena had just...appeared. Or that she couldn't be touched. Or, for that matter, that no one else seemed to be able to see or hear her.

"Yeah, well," the dark warrior replied, "but I still think you should elaborate more on the part where I kick those slaver's butts. Your skimming over that takes all the... spice... out of the scene." A quick, wolfish smile flashed across her face.

Isabelle lit another cigarette. "Xena, you didn't just kick their butts. You made one big bloody mess out of them. I'm not going into detail about that, and that's final. This is supposed to be PG13, remember?"

"Yeah, whatever," Xena agreed crossly, obviously still not sure what PG13 meant exactly. "Anyway," she continued after a while, "That Huntress metaphor is brilliant. You sure have a way with words." She looked wistful. "Just like *her*."

Isabelle flushed at the compliment. "And has Gabrielle ever written about that?"

"She has, but only in her private journals. I used to corner her about it, but she always said she wanted people to see the noble spirit I have become, not the dark monster I was before. I suppose I can't argue with that, even though we both know the monster is as much part of me now as it was then. As a matter of fact, the allusion she used was not so very different from yours."

The writer looked at the clock on her desk, and sighed. "I should be getting to bed. It's way past midnight, and I have to go to work

tomorrow. But, oh what the heck! Come on, tell me more! About her. What happened after you left the inn?"

Xena's eyes shone brightly in the back-light of the monitor as she spoke. "The whole thing rattled her good, I can tell ya. I don't think she'd been confronted with much violence in her life..."

The warrior speaks...

I can see she is still distraught by what happened in the past few days. As we relax by the fire, she just sits there, arms wrapped around her legs, chin resting on her knees, and stares glumly into the flames. The flickering light of our campfire sends flitting shadows across her almost childlike face and makes fiery highlights in her strawberry blonde hair. She is a beautiful young woman.

But I cannot tell which bothers her more - the brutality she herself has had to face, or the darkness she has seen surface in me. She hardly knows me, but she has shown me a trust that I have never before received, and most certainly do not deserve. I am not much for conversation or comforting, so I just leave her to her thoughts and go about mending my sadly neglected armor. It gives me time to ponder my own predicament.

I suddenly feel a familiar prickle on my skin, and look up to find Gabrielle gazing at me across the campfire. She does not look away upon meeting my eyes, and I am startled by the intensity written on her face.

"What?" I finally rasp.

"Thanks for... what you did at the inn." I just shrug. I cannot really trust myself to speak at the moment.

She studies her hands for a moment, then continues, "you're not what I thought."

I raise an eyebrow in question. She seems a little flustered at her own boldness, and drops her gaze, but she goes on to explain, "There are so many stories about you, I guess I really couldn't fit you into any mold at all. I somehow thought you'd be more..." She looks at me apprehensively. "horrible. Uglier." I will my face to be impassive, but she must have seen my eyes narrow, for she prattles on hurriedly. "Of course, there are tales that picture you as a seductress of kings and queens, and that would imply... uh... you..." She lets that trail off, biting her lip. "Oh, Zeus, I don't know."

"And are you disappointed?" I ask, intrigued now in spite of myself. I do not think anyone has ever said anything like that to me before. They would have had to be suicidal to even think about it.

Gabrielle shakes her head, looking at me again. "You are more than all the stories combined. More formidable, more deadly, more... beautiful." She watches for a reaction in me, and almost gets one, as I firmly push down a new emotion I suddenly find surfacing. This young woman seems to know instinctively where all my triggers are.

"And you hurt inside," she adds in a whisper that I do not think I'm supposed to hear.

W&B Software office, San Francisco, early morning:

"Yes, Mr. Cleaver, of course we'll get that update to you as soon as we have it ready. But it will be at least two more days. ... Of course... Well, you see, these things take time. And we need to get clearance from the Information Center before... uh huh. Yes. Mr. Berringer? Yes, he's in. Hold the line, please, I'll put you through.... Ron? Howdy. I've got our friend Cleaver on hold. Wants to talk to you about that contract, again. He just made quite a stink... Okay, here you go!" Isabelle heaved a sigh as she put down the receiver. "I wish I could tell him just once what he can do with his stupid update," she murmured darkly.

Hank Miller, who shared an office with her, gave her a grin. "That would not be very ladylike, Isa."

"Who's a lady?" Isabelle countered with a pout.

The young woman returned to the unfinished business piling on her desk, and sighed. Customers like Cleaver could be more than unpleasant. He had bought their product, offered loads and loads of suggestions for improvements, and when gently explained that they weren't improvements at all, or had nothing to do with what the product was originally intended for, he would turn distinctly unfriendly. Of course, he expected everything to be done yesterday, and considered himself a much better software engineer than those who had actually learned the trade.

Cleaver seemed to feel that W&B was there to please him and him alone, and that there weren't dozens of other customers to be served. And he had not even paid his bill yet. Wouldn't it be just great if Xena were there! She could just pummel him a little and

make him whine, and then maybe pick him up by the scruff of his neck and stuff him head first into a toilet, or feed his tie to the shredder. She put her hand over her mouth to hide the sudden hysterical giggle at the mental image.

She turned to find Hank looking oddly at her.

"What?" she said, still fighting for composure.

"You just had a very unpleasant phone call, and you sit here cackling like an old hag. Is there something I should be worried about?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I'm just... visualizing."

"Excuse me?"

"Trying to imagine Cleaver's face when he gets his tie caught in a shredder."

Hank chuckled. "You're bad, Miss Barnes."

Isabelle gave him a grin. "Yeah, maybe. But it feels good."

The day progressed rapidly from bad to worse. Deadlines virtually stumbled over one another, and at this time, there just weren't enough people working here to help meet them all. A lot of the work lay on the shoulders of Isabelle and two of her colleagues, Tim and George.

The situation wasn't helped by Isabelle's new inability to concentrate. Her mind kept wandering to her writing of Xena's story, as she kept turning over new possibilities in her mind. She just could not wait to get back to it, and she admitted to herself that she missed Xena's company. The warrior's tale was truly compelling, and it was fun to have the mysterious woman around. Even if the dark-haired beauty was a bit gruff sometimes, she had a wry sense of humor and very quick wit. If only Isabelle knew more about the mystery of why she was here at all. Even the Warrior Princess herself didn't seem sure about that. Oh, but the young writer would enjoy it while it lasted! Never in her life had she been caught up in anything so completely. Well, it seemed Xena had that effect on people.

In any case, it had her sitting for long stretches staring unseeing at the screen, happily traveling the meadows and forests of ancient

Greece, utterly unconcerned by the steady passing of time. Then the ring of the phone would make her start, and jolt her right back to present day San Francisco. For a while.

Worse yet, a phone call just before 5pm announced some serious problems a customer had with one of their products. It seemed there had been a power loss, and the software had failed to start properly afterwards. So, chafing at the delay, she had had to go into overtime, helping Tim fix the problem.

Thus it was after dark when Isabelle finally left the company's building, carrying her purse and umbrella. In late September, despite winter still being a ways off, darkness came fairly early. She only had a few blocks to walk, so she hardly ever went through the trouble to take the bus, or her little-used and battered old Plymouth.

She made her way along the lighted street that was wet from recent rain, and reflecting the lights like a dull and warped mirror. The main streets were thoroughly clogged at this hour, motors buzzing, horns blasting, and the fumes that wafted from the cars' exhausts stinging in Isabelle's nose.

She crossed another traffic light and turned a corner into a narrower, darker and less frequented street that would eventually lead her to the huge apartment building where her flat was. She passed a group of mean-looking young men leaning casually against one of the buildings. Even with the cold, they wore leather vests over bare, generously tattooed skin. Isabelle noticed them exchange quick glances, then lazily put themselves into motion, following her. Suddenly nervous, she ran a hand through her hair, pulled her coat closer about her and quickened her pace. *Oh my God, please don't let this be what I'm afraid it is!*

A rough hand descended heavily on her shoulder. "Where ya hurryin' ta, luv?" Rasping breath by her ear, a stubble of beard scratching her cheek, and the reek of stale alcohol and old sweat wafting to her, sent her heart way up into her throat and effectively rendered her bones into jelly.

Frantically, she searched her brain for any scrap of knowledge she might have retained from the class in self-defense she had taken in the spring. But her mind was twirling so badly that all she could come up with, somehow, was the picture of a young bard in an inn being molested by a group of young men. Only now there was no warrior here to dissuade them.

The man's other hand went roughly around her waist, and she was dragged, stunned and unresisting, into a nearby dead-end alleyway. *And now, it ends.* It was just a stray, oddly detached thought that suddenly popped into her head. *Just like that. Like the little articles in the newspaper, down on the bottom of page four, the ones you just sort of skim over and shake your head a little, thinking 'What is this world coming to?' I wonder if they'll rape me first, or if they just want my purse...*

She felt her throat constrict with fear as one of the men stepped in front of her. He carried a long knife that he guided slowly towards her neckline. Wide green eyes followed the weapon's progress in terrified fascination. This assailant looked rather young, and under normal circumstances Isabelle might even have found him attractive. But now, with a greedy leer on his face, and that blade slowly approaching her neck.... The knife descended to her collar and neatly cut away the topmost button of her coat, making it fly off with a little popping sound. The thug proceeded to open the whole of her coat in this way, and pulled it apart to reveal the gray tweed suit she wore underneath. The leer became a grin, as his free hand came up to fondle her breast, then ran down her body. Today, of all days, she had had to put on a skirt!

"Don't make a noise honey," a voice hissed, "or it's gonna hurt ya!"

It hurt anyway, because they were none too gentle with her. After having relieved her of her coat, they flung her against the wall, her head connecting with a painful thump, leaving her dizzy for a few seconds. When her vision cleared, she saw a familiar shape pad silently up behind her tormentors. Time slowed. Isabelle's heart lurched. Hope! Xena stepped up to her, frustration showing clearly in her glinting eyes. None of the men showed the slightest reaction. They didn't see her, of course. And there would certainly be no pummeling, slashing or intimidating from the warrior ghost. Isabelle was still on her own.

"Isabelle, get a grip," Xena's voice was insistent. "You'll do yourself no good if you just let this happen. Come on, fight!"

"I can't, Xena," Isabelle replied in a whisper, "they'll hurt me! I'm scared."

"Who's the slut talkin' to?" one of the street toughs asked. "She crazy or somet'n'?"

"Does it matter?" another replied. "C'mon, guys, let's get on with

this."

"Isabelle," that was the warrior, "they won't just hurt you. They'll hurt you *real* bad. And then they'll kill you. I know the type. You've got to fight them. I know you have the spirit in you. You can do it!"

"But how...?"

"Anything goes, Gabrielle. Kick, bite, scratch, scream, I don't care. And for the love of the gods, use that thing you're carrying!" Meaning the umbrella that the young woman still clutched uselessly in her right hand.

"I can't! I can't..." Isabelle whimpered.

"Hey, Fred, she's a real weirdo. Like, talkin' to 'erself an' all," the man who was holding Isabelle muttered. "Shut up, bitch," he yelled, and backhanded her across the face. She felt a dull pain in her nose, and warm liquid running into her mouth. One eye suddenly felt swollen, its vision blurred.

"Gabrielle! Act, don't react!" The warrior said the words with a peculiar emphasis.

Act, don't react. There was something vaguely familiar about that line. It stirred some very, very deep part of Isabelle's being. Xena must have seen something dawning on the young woman's face, because she spoke once more.

"Act, don't react. Yes, that's it! You remember. Come on, my bard, fight!"

As if some wilder, hidden part had suddenly taken control, the still dazed Isabelle suddenly exploded into action. She yanked her knee up with all her strength and was rewarded by a startled grunt and a painful widening of eyes of the man in front of her. The guy sank down with a groan and curled up into a ball, hands pressed over his private parts. His knife clattered harmlessly to the ground. Before he was halfway down, Isabelle had whirled and rammed her elbow into the second one's gut. In one fluid motion, the fist of that same arm snapped upward and connected squarely on the ruffian's nose, slamming his head back into the wall. He fell like a sack, slumping against the wall.

"Gabrielle, look out, he's going for the knife!"

Isabelle gave a wild yell and aimed a high kick, but missed, her momentum carrying her past her target and throwing her off

balance. Those precious seconds were enough to allow her assailant to reach the knife. Knees bent, arms spread, he took a fighting stance before her, blocking the exit of the alleyway, and her escape.

"So, you like fightin' rough, little bitch? Well I'll show ya!"

"Behind you!" Xena yelled, "use that stick-thing!"

Without looking, Isabelle quickly stabbed backward with her umbrella and felt it bury into soft flesh. She had no time to be amazed, however, because there was still the one with the knife, and he was slowly advancing on her. Surrendering completely to that other self, the young woman let a wild and dangerous look come over her face.

"Good job, Gabrielle, you're scaring him. He doesn't know what to do."

"Well, neither do I, really," Isabelle hissed through clenched teeth.

"Improvise. All you need is an opening, and then you run for it."

Improvise. Act, don't react. With a blood-curdling scream, Isabelle hurled herself forward, umbrella poised before her like a medieval lance. And then she was past him, and out on the street, where she broke into a dead run, hardly noticing the uneasy glances people sent her way, a mother pulling her child close and quickly crossing to the far side of the street. Only when she saw the elevator door in her apartment building slide shut behind her did she stop her frenzied flight.

Entering her flat, she closed the door, leaned next to it against the wall and let herself sink slowly to the ground, sobbing hysterically.

It took the young woman a while to realize that somebody was talking to her in a soft voice. "Isabelle, calm down! Shhh. Hey. Calm down. It's over. You did great." Xena's leather-clad form crouched next to her, blue eyes looking at her with concern. "Come on, we'd better go have a look at your nose, and your eye. I sure hope those bastards didn't break anything..." She scowled furiously. "Oh, how I wish I could have..." A sudden grin. "You were good."

The soothing words helped Isabelle to get a grip on herself. She looked up at her new friend.

"I was?"

"Yeah. Pretty darn good, I'd say. That look you had on would have given a Bacchae credit." The warrior smiled at her. "C'mon, let's get that blood off your face."

Isabelle laughed weakly. "I must look a sight. Oh god, I still can't believe I did that! It's like... I don't know, something inside me just... knew what to do. But I swear to God I've never learned any of these moves." She paused and looked intently at the warrior, considering. "You saved my life out there. Thanks."

Xena smiled gently. "Nah, you were the one doing the fighting. I just... reminded you that you could."

Isabelle just looked at her. She got to her feet, but had to grip the wall for support, suddenly dizzy.

"How'd you know I was in trouble, anyway?" she asked when she had recovered a little.

Xena shrugged. "I have many skills," she said with a secretive wink.

They went into the bathroom, where Isabelle, under Xena's watchful eye, proceeded to clean her face and check for any serious injury. It turned out that her nose was not broken after all, but a little sensitive to the touch, and the blow had burst the skin of her upper lip. Her eye was badly swollen, and already a dark, ugly bruise was starting to show.

"So much for keeping this secret," the red-blonde woman muttered wryly.

Following the warrior's competent advice, she covered the area around her eye with a soothing lotion, and then pressed a damp, cold cloth to it, before she went to the kitchen to prepare a mug of hot cocoa. For her nerves. While she waited for the milk to heat, she flopped down on the sofa in her small living room. The phone sat on a little round table just beside it, and she noticed that there was a message on the answering machine. She also noticed that Xena was eyeing the device rather warily.

"I've been wondering what that thing is for," the warrior said, watching her closely, "and I have to admit it kind of made me jump out of my skin when it suddenly came to life. There was a ringing noise, and then a voice spoke. Is that somehow related to this radio thing you have?"

Isabelle smiled. She did not get many phone calls these days, except from Lilli, her younger sister. But Lilli had been on a business trip the last few days, so Xena had no way of knowing about telephones.

"Well, close enough," the young woman explained. "It allows you to talk to somebody who's actually far away. They might be next door, or on the other end of the world."

Xena clearly didn't believe her, just as she had trouble coming to terms with the TV set or the radio, or all the other electric devices in her household. To the warrior, these things were pure magic, and she didn't trust magic.

The message was brief, telling Isabelle that Lilli was back, and she was having so much fun in this new job, and wouldn't she, Isabelle, call back soon!

Somehow, she could not bring herself to call her sister just now. The events were still fresh, and she did not want to ruin Lilli's enthusiasm about this job of hers. Besides, she was sure that she'd go to pieces if she allowed herself to be shown sympathy and commiseration now. So she finished preparing her cocoa, and went to her study, where she turned on her computer, hoping that Xena would provide her with some tales to keep her mind occupied. The warrior's presence was somehow very reassuring, and the young woman found herself wishing her ethereal friend were more solid. Here was a strong shoulder to lean on, if ever she saw one!

Just when she was getting ready to type, the phone rang. Startled, Xena whirled, drew her sword in a fluid, graceful motion, and crouched immediately into a fighting stance. Isabelle fought to hide her grin, but knew she hadn't succeeded, by the sullenly sheepish look on the warrior's face as she relaxed and put her sword away. Xena shot the shorter woman a dark look.

"I'm sorry, Xena," Isabelle said, knowing how touchy the warrior could be. "I don't mean to embarrass you. Honest. I can't imagine what it would be like if I were suddenly stranded in your world. It's just..." Blue eyes pierced her coldly.

"Hey," the young woman said softly, "Sorry, okay?" The phone rang again. "I have to get that. Don't be mad, please!"

It was Lilli.

"Hi, Lovey!"

"Oh, hi, Lil."

"What's up? I've missed you. Why didn't you call back!?" Lilli sounded, as usual, almost annoyingly chipper. Despite everything, it brought a small, fond smile to Isabelle's lips.

"I'm sorry, but I- I only just got home from work. Had some trouble with one of our projects, so I had to go overtime."

"Is everything okay? You sound funny."

As well she might, with her nose swollen and sill clogged with blood, and her nerves on edge! "I'm fine, really. So, how was your trip?"

A short silence. Then: "It was great! The presentation was a success, and I think my boss is really happy with me. And there's sooo much to see in DC, I'm glad I decided to stay for the weekend. Hey, what do you say we go out to grab a bite of dinner out by the Pier? I brought you something."

Isabelle sighed inwardly. That was just about the last thing she felt like doing right now. But, she knew her sister well enough to be sure there was no putting her off completely. "I don't know. Do you think I could interest you in some pizza, here at my place? There are a couple in the freezer. I really don't feel like going out just now."

Another slight hesitation. "Sounds fine. But.. are you sure you're okay, Is?"

The young woman took a breath. "I'll tell you more when you're here. Nine o'clock sound good?"

"Whatever you say, Lovey. I'll be there."

She heaved a sigh as she put down the receiver, and turned to find Xena standing right behind her, arching an expressive eyebrow in question. That woman could convey more with a quirk of that eyebrow than most others in an hour of talking!

"That was Lilli. She's coming over to dinner. I need to put the pizza in the oven, and then try to get...this...," touching her swollen eye, "covered up a little. I wish I could avoid her seeing me like that."

"Lilli? Who's she?"

"My sister. And my best friend. I told you about her. You haven't met her, because she was away on business the last week or so. I think

you'll like her. She's very nice."

"I see." Isabelle could not quite place the sudden flash of fierce emotion on the warrior's eyes.

All of her efforts had only succeeded in making the bruise stand out more clearly, Isabelle thought. But after half an hour of carefully painting her face with make-up, with a taciturn warrior looking on, she lost patience. Xena had not talked much at all, and the young woman feared the phone incident had alienated her tall companion. They had only just met, but it seemed like they had been friends forever. Xena understood her, and Isabelle found she had a remarkable grasp of the warrior's sometimes dour and withdrawn character. And she thoroughly enjoyed the ethereal woman's company.

Needless to say, Lilli was shocked when she learned what had happened. She seemed every bit as distraught over the matter as Isabelle herself was. So it was that after a while Isabelle found herself trying to calm *Lilli*.

"It's okay, sis, I fought them off, didn't I? They won't be trying that again soon. Come now, pizza's getting cold."

They were sitting over their dinner, the radio playing softly in the background. Candlelight flickered with the draft that came through the from the tilted balcony door. The hum and murmur of the city night, way below, drifted faintly to them. It was nice enough once both women's nerves were beginning to settle, but Isabelle's eyes kept flicking to the corner of the living room, where Xena was casually leaning on a chair by the door to the study, watching them with an unreadable expression.

It was amazing to see the uses the warrior found for that particular piece of furniture. Xena never did anything as conventional as sitting on a chair. Sprawling, lounging, straddling, yes, but never just sitting. Mostly, though, she preferred to just stand with one arm resting casually on the chair's back and one foot propped up on the seat. From time to time the dark-haired woman would leave her place, walk to the window or the balcony, and look out, a mystified and wondering expression on her face. Only for a few moments, then she would resume her vigil by the study's door.

Isabelle found herself slowly shedding the horror of the incident as she listened to Lilli recounting in animated detail all that had

happened on her trip, and how they would both have to go there some day. But, Isabelle's attention kept drifting, head still twirling with too many thoughts. One time, a piece of news on the radio caught her attention.

Corina Walker, prime suspect in a number of terrorist activities and one of America's most wanted, had apparently turned herself in pleading mental instability, and after an assessment by several doctors had been admitted into a mental institution an hour or so outside of San Francisco.

Bemused, Isabelle wondered what was going on in the mind of somebody who had allegedly committed more violent crimes than one cared to think about, and who certainly faced a life-long confinement, or worse. Why on earth would she just walk up and ask to be incarcerated? Some people were just plain crazy.

Then she realized Lilli had changed the subject, and was now excitedly talking about the Annie Lennox concert they had bought tickets for, the following weekend. They were both 80's fans, and both women were looking forward to the event and the trip down to L.A. as well. Lilli stopped in mid-sentence, and was watching her intently, having noticed her distracted look.

"Is, are you sure you're all right? Listen, I really think you should see the police about this."

"Lil, I'm not even sure I could recognize them. And I beat them up good. I don't know how badly I've hurt these guys. What if they turn the tables on me? It's their word against mine."

It was clear that Lilli did not quite believe that part of her story. Isabelle caught Xena rolling her eyes when she voiced doubts again, and, inexplicably, felt better all of a sudden. She flashed the warrior a grateful grin.

"What are you smiling at now?" her sister asked her.

Isabelle eyed Lilli seriously. "Sis, I know this sounds weird, but would you believe there's a dark-haired, blue-eyed warrior woman keeping me company? Like, right at this moment?"

"Huh?" Lilli looked at her, not following.

"Never mind," Isabelle said quickly, and they lapsed into an awkward silence.

After a while, Isabelle said, "hey, I've started on a new story. You

wanna see? I think you'll like it!"

Lilli, always a fan of her big sister's writing and a grateful reader of anything Isabelle put out, was charmed. "Sure! So, did you finish 'Fool's Magic?'"

Isabelle shook her head. "No, and I don't think I will. It has no depth, no plot, and no characterization. It sucks." She shrugged and gave her sister a little smile. "C'mon, I have a feeling you're gonna like this."

While Xena didn't seem so enthusiastic about sharing her life's story with the young woman, Lilli was utterly entranced. She was standing behind her sister, elbows propped onto Isabelle's shoulders, chin resting on the strawberry blonde head, and was thoroughly captivated by the words on the computer screen. "Is, that's the best you've ever done. That first-person-narrative, that woman's character, and the innocent little girl with her, it's beautiful." Isabelle shared a pleased smile with her younger sister. When she turned back to give Xena a grin as well, the warrior was gone.

The warrior returned only after Lilli had left at Isabelle's insistence that she would be all right, and just needed a little sleep. Xena lounged against the door frame to the kitchen, watching while the blonde woman put the dishes in the dishwasher, and put on some water to make herself tea. Isabelle was exhausted, but she knew she would not be able to sleep. And she felt she had to say something to ease the tension that had suddenly built up between herself and the silent figure by the door.

"Are you going to tell me what's bothering you?" she asked finally, unable to keep quiet any longer. Not daring to look at the tall woman, she measured out a spoonful of tea, filled it in the teabag and poured boiling water over it into her cup, left it on the counter to steep. That done, she had no choice but to look up, having nothing left to do for the moment. She found the warrior intently studying the wooden door frame, tracing its outline with her index finger.

"Xena, look, I really am sorry I made fun of you about the telephone. I never meant to anger you."

At last, Xena looked at her. Her blue eyes sparkled like ice crystals in the dim artificial light. "I know," she said simply. Another long

silence. Then an abrupt question. "Are you happy with... with your life?"

"Why, of course I... what makes you ask that?" She caught the pause in the other woman's words, but had no idea what to make of it.

"Bah, silly question. Forget I asked." Her attention went back to the task of inspecting the cracks in the door frame's paint.

Isabelle let it go, but the question bothered her. The warrior was frighteningly perceptive. In the last few months, the young woman had indeed found her life lacking, but she wasn't sure what that was.

Turning to take the teabag out of her cup, she sensed Xena coming closer. It was strange how the warrior's presence somehow seemed more tangible when she wasn't looking at her directly. Cup in hand, she turned to face the ethereal form.

"How's your eye?" the tall woman said softly, extending a hand to Isabelle's face. There was a strange, electric tingle when the ghostly fingers made contact with her skin. It was not unpleasant, but Xena seemed a little startled and drew back her hand quickly.

Isabelle sighed ruefully. "I'm afraid it'll be swollen shut tomorrow, and I'm sure it looks positively horrible. But it doesn't hurt too bad now. I think I'll take the day off tomorrow, anyway. It's Friday, so that'll give it three days to clear a little."

"Good," the warrior said, smiling.

They went to the study, where Xena took her by now customary place against the far wall of the little room, in partial darkness. Isabelle went suddenly still, and looked wide-eyed at the other woman. "Hey, wait, I just realized something. Back in that alley, you were calling me 'Gabrielle', weren't you?"

"Yes," came Xena's slow reply, "I suppose I was. I know that must have seemed strange to you. But it brought back a memory or the time when Gabrielle got... attacked, and I guess I just got carried away."

"A memory? Oh goody," Isabelle said, "that's what we need, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I suppose. But it happened a lot later in the story. We really haven't gotten anywhere near that point yet."

"Oh, that's no problem. I'll just put it in the scraps folder for when I need it."

The warrior speaks...

It is a stunningly beautiful late summer day. While Gabrielle is preparing breakfast, I decide to go out on an extensive morning round. We have been lazing around the past few days in this lovely spot, and I am getting restive. I shall do a swift run around the lake, perhaps a little swim and some sword drills to see if I'm still in shape. The sun is kissing my skin, and as I close my eyes, I can feel the shadows of the trees dappling my eyelids, and a light, warm breeze caress my skin. Drawing in the rich air, I break into an easy lope, giving Gabrielle a quick wave, and promising her I'll be back in a little while.

It feels wonderful to be exercising. I can feel the power in my body as I run, and I launch myself into a lazy flip just because I know I can. I make my way across the meadow towards the little lake in the valley, hurdling ditches and rocks rather than making my way around them, and feeling light-headed with the adrenaline rushing through my body after days of inactivity.

It is when I climb out of the water after an invigorating swim that I hear the noises from the direction of our camp. I am pretty far away, and can only hear anything because the wind has turned and I am now downwind. A man's rough voice, and distressed sounds from my friend. I waste no time dressing, I just grab my Chakram and take off towards the camp at a dead run.

I run like mad over the meadows.

I have never run so fast in my life.

It seems it is taking me forever to reach our camp.

I run...

Isabelle's study, after midnight:

"Well...", Isabelle prompted, "why are you stalling? You haven't been so fickle about telling me tales of slaughter so far."

"I don't know," Xena replied, "it just doesn't seem... This is

different. I feel like I'm violating something. And I really don't want to go into how I felt that day."

"Come on, you want me to write this, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"But you're not talking?"

"Maybe some other time."

"Come on, you know I won't break off in the middle of the scene. And if this relates to what happened to me today..." Isabelle knew she shouldn't pry. But the very fact that Xena seemed so reluctant to talk intrigued her beyond bearing. She looked at the warrior, a wicked idea forming in her mind.

"Well, then, I'll just have to wing it, won't I?"

Upon reaching the camp, I can see Gabrielle tied to the base of a tree, with a man about to rip her clothes off. I rush over there, and grab him by his hair.

"Listen," I tell him mildly, "that is a friend of mine you got there, and if you don't stop what you're doing right this instant, I shall have to do something drastic. Do you understand?" I give him my most intimidating stare and hold the Chakram to his throat. He swallows two or three times, then nods slowly. I let him be on his way, and bend down to untie the bard's bonds.

Gabrielle is...

"**Wait!**" Xena protested, "you gotta be kidding! You should know me better by now. I'm not a meek little milk sop!" The Warrior Princess drew herself up to her full height and glowered at the writer. "I'm the Warrior Princess!" Isabelle was beginning to think that perhaps this had been a bad idea.

But then Xena turned suddenly pensive, and studied her hands. "When I saw what he was doing to Gabrielle, I went clear out of my mind with anger. And I pummeled him good, I can tell ya. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's somebody having their way with someone weaker. And this was Gabrielle, I couldn't..."

She suddenly noticed the younger woman's very smug expression,

and broke of, scowling furiously. "You tricked me, you little creep," she snarled.

Isabelle felt suddenly very bad. "I'm sorry, Xena, I shouldn't have done that. I don't know what I was thinking. I... sorry. We can break off here, if you want."

The warrior looked about ready to chew rocks. "That was a sneaky thing to do. But...," she flashed a sheepish grin, "guess I walked right into that, didn't I?"

It was the writer's turn to grin, and with relief. "You sure did."

"Well, you win this one. But it's not easy remembering... It's just that today brought all this back in force. Then, I could have prevented it, if I hadn't been so stupid. Today, I just stood there, unable to do anything. It felt horrible."

"Xena, if it hadn't been for you, I would surely be lying forgotten in that alleyway now, hurt or worse. Until you came, I was too scared to do anything. I would have let them have their way with me." A probing look. "No, no, don't shrug it off. I owe you my life, and you know it."

The warrior looked about to protest, but then she acknowledged with a tiny nod.

"Now that's settled," Isabelle said briskly, "do you think we might rewrite that scene? Because, frankly, I think this sucks."

Upon reaching the camp, the first thing I see is my friend tied against the base of a tree, her hands firmly bound and fastened to a rope that has been slung over a protruding branch, so that they are pulled high above her head. Her eye is swollen shut, and blood is running freely from her nose and lips.

Her blouse has been ripped open, exposing her breasts, and her skirt has been pulled down. At the sight of the burly, big stranger leaning greedily over her, his callused hands fondling her, reason slips from me, and my vision turns red with anger. I never get a chance to force the Huntress back down. She is there in the blink of an eye, pushing my rage back into the depth of my consciousness, and I am now a cold, ruthless killer. I launch myself into the air with a wild cry and fling my Chakram, hearing with satisfaction its shrill whine as it arcs towards my friend's bonds and neatly severs the rope holding her hands up. I hit the ground running and throw myself immediately at

Gabrielle's assailant. With grim amusement I notice that his movements are hampered by the pants he has pulled down to complete his dirty act. Some part of me hopes for Gabrielle's sake that I have come in time. I bunch my fist and extend my elbow and shoulder way back, feeling my arm go taut like a bowstring. My blow hits him in the face with the force of a war-hammer, and I can feel his nose crunch in a spray of warm blood.

"Xena..." Gabrielle's strained voice brings back some semblance of sanity. I promised her once I would not become a monster... I will not let her down. But it is a close call. I decide that just a little bit of Huntress is in order here.

The blow has flung the man against another tree, and he crumples against its trunk. I approach him, and haul him roughly to his feet by his collar.

"You filthy, shit-eating son of a Bacchae!" I growl, "you're lucky my friend has such a soft heart. For her sake, I will let you live, this time."

My hand goes to his throat, and I slam him against the tree-trunk, in the process lifting him clean off his feet. He makes a strangled sound, feet kicking convulsively. I let my grip tighten until his eyes threaten to pop. The fact that I can crush his windpipe with a flick of my wrist seems to dawn on him, because his eyes are widening in terror.

*"I'll just make you hurt, a little," I tell him in my coldest voice. "Because I damn well **don't** have a soft heart. And if you even think about laying a finger on her again, I'll tie your horny balls into knots and throw them to the crows! Got that?" He gives me the barest hint of a nod, which is all he can manage just now. "And after that, I will stop being nice." That feral grin comes unbidden to my face. "Eventually." When I let go of him, not before I have rammed my knee into his groin for good measure, he drops to the ground like a sack of grain. The leer still on my face, I let him feel the pain for a while, and then I add, "got **that?**"*

*He nods frantically, and scrambles awkwardly on all fours to get out of my reach. My eyebrows draw into an even darker scowl. "Now, **get outta here!**"*

I do not have to tell him twice.

"Yeah, that's more like it". Xena smirked suddenly, and wagged a finger at the writer. "But, Isabelle, what happened to that PG13 thing, hmm? Didn't you say you couldn't mention any bad language, or violence, or sexual parts?"

Isabelle shrugged. "I got over it. I don't think I can do that and still give people any idea of how you really are."

"Thanks a lot," the warrior replied dryly.

The blonde woman gave her an apologetic grin. "Well, it's true, we both know that." She gave Xena a cautious look. "Are you ready to go on? It's okay, if you're not, really."

The tall woman closed her eyes for a moment, and sighed. "I might as well..."

I feel a little uncertain what to do. She has not moved since the Chakram cut her bonds, and just sits there, curled into a little ball and biting down on her fist, eyes shut tight. She looks so very fragile, and vulnerable. I am glad her attacker is out of sight, for just now, seeing that terrible anguish, I am quite ready to go back on my promise.

I have never been very good in dealing with emotional distress, not with my own, and certainly not with that of other people.

"Gabrielle," I say softly, trying hard to keep my voice calm, and soothing, though anger is still the strongest emotion I feel. "Gabrielle, it's over. You're safe now. Come here."

She looks at me then, green eyes pleading silently.

"I'm so sorry," I say, "I shouldn't have left you here alone."

She says in a strangled voice. "Xena, he... hurt me."

Heart aching for her, I pull her into my arms and hold her tightly. She is trembling all over and clings to me, suddenly racked by sobs, and I just hug her to me, gently rubbing my hand across her back, wishing I could take all that pain on my own shoulders. I wanted so much to protect her, and I have failed.

I don't know how long we have been sitting there, with her crying and me whispering "I'm sorry" over and over again. She feels soft and vibrant against me, her breath hitting my chest in warm gusts.

Tears fall freely now, tickling my skin with their moist heat. I bury my face in soft, silky hair that smells faintly of hay, and the honey-scented soap she uses.

Finally I feel her relax against me, exhausted. Then she straightens, wipes the back of her hand across her nose, and looks at me with a tiny smile.

"Thanks. I.." she swallows, *"I think I'll be okay now. But you should get some clothes on. This really isn't the place to run around naked, you know."*

I have to chuckle at that. So brave! And I've forgotten completely that I have left my clothes by the lake. I smirk belatedly at the picture I must have presented for that piece of dirt - stark naked and still wet from my swim, blue eyes blazing with the feral light that is the Huntress, popping up out of nowhere with that wild yell and lifting him effortlessly off his feet with just one hand - oh yes, I'm sure I have made quite an impression on him. Good.

Isabelle was silent for a long time. "Now I feel like I've violated something," she said finally. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pried. I feel like such a klutz."

Xena's blue eyes glinted in the darkness. "Don't be sorry. I think you had to know. Matter of fact, I'm beginning to think you have to know every little thing there is to know about Gabrielle and me."

"What makes you say that?"

"I've been sent here for a reason. I'm sure of it. I just don't know what it is yet. Maybe this writing thing will help me get to the bottom of this."

"Why... how do you know?"

Xena fixed her with an intent look. "Isabelle, you are the spitting image of my bard. You look just like Gabrielle would, with funny clothes on, and shorter hair. It's almost scary. There must be something to this."

The writer sat back in her chair, stunned. "Why didn't you ever tell me before?"

Xena arched an eyebrow, and shrugged. "It never came up."

"Yeah, right. And it's not that important, is it?" Isabelle said dryly, "you couldn't have just told me without being asked?" She pulled a cigarette out of the packet lying beside the keyboard, and lit it with trembling fingers.

Xena watched her with a mystified expression. "You know, these things smell awful. What's their purpose?"

The strawberry blonde looked a little sheepish. "They don't only smell awful, they *taste* awful. And they slowly destroy your lungs, and can cause cancer, which is a wasting, torturous, and mostly terminal disease."

She almost laughed at the warrior's puzzled frown. "Then why...?"

"And," Isabelle said pointedly, "they soothe the nerves. Which I sorely need right now."

"We have nutbread for that," Xena remarked, turning to the window and peering into the night

"You know," she went on after a while, "I used to think my world was dangerous, and sometimes a little strange. But compared to yours, it's just a stroll in your own back yard! I mean, just look out of the window. This thing is so high it makes you wonder it doesn't just collapse with the slightest breath of wind. Yet it remains standing, and people live in it, totally unconcerned. And then down there, these millions of...cars. You'd think there was no pattern at all to their movement. It seems thousands should die down there every day, and yet, somehow, people survive in those streets. I don't want to know what all you haven't shown me yet. And here you are, willingly putting a smoldering stick in your mouth that you say might eventually kill you. I can't believe you are actually deliberately putting your health in danger with these... things. Sometimes I think this is just some very weird dream. But I don't think my mind could come up with anything remotely like this. Please tell me I'm not crazy!"

The young writer chuckled. This was the longest speech she had heard the warrior make yet! "Yeah, we've come quite a long way in the last two thousand years or so. This must all be a really surreal experience for you. But I'm sure you'll get used to it. And as to whether you're crazy, I don't think you should let *me* be the judge of that. I'm still trying to figure out how I can align your existence with my sanity." The point of the cigarette glowed and faded as Isabelle took a deep draw, and blew out the smoke with a long breath. "And,

believe me, I *am* trying to cut down my smoking. But this stuff gets you addicted. Once you get into the habit, you need it all the time, or else you just feel lousy, and all strung up." She grinned dryly. "It's a battle."

"Sounds scary."

"Yeah. It is, in a way." Isabelle sat staring at her monitor for a long time, watching the screen saver draw intricate patterns on the screen. When she glanced at the warrior, Xena was watching her, blue eyes shining with an intense light. She met that vibrant gaze for a few moments, then went back to watching the computer screen.

"Xena?" The question was tentative, without looking at the warrior.

"Hmm?"

"Did Gabrielle... I mean, did she get... did he...?"

She heard Xena draw a deep breath. "No, he didn't. Thank the gods, I got there in time to prevent that. But I didn't really know until much later, when we got... closer."

Isabelle caught the tiny hesitation, and looked up at the warrior, whose eyes were still trained on her.

"I never asked her for details," Xena continued, "and she never talked about it much, at first." She shrugged. "I would have liked to be sure, but I'm not one to pry, so...."

"Ouch," Isabelle said with a droll grin.

Xena smiled back at her. "Yeah, ouch." A wicked glint came into her eyes. "Right then, let me tell you about the time she got herself high on nutbread..."

They were both laughing hard by the time Xena had finished relating that episode in that somewhat crude, but wryly humorous way she had.

"Oh, she's going to have fits if she ever learns I spilled that little story," the warrior said finally, wiping her eyes.

"And I bet she has a few up her sleeve to get back at you, doesn't she?" Isabelle asked wickedly.

That got her a mock glare. "Don't go there," the tall woman cautioned with a rumbling growl.

"Gotcha," Isabelle yelled triumphantly. "Okay, Warrior Princess, cough it up! I want to hear every little bit."

"Not on your life," Xena barked. She flowed to her feet and moved to stand behind the writer's chair. "I think you should get some sleep. It's getting late, and you've had a rough day."

The younger woman felt that strange tingle again as Xena put both hands on her shoulders. The sensation made her turn around to look at the tall form. Something in the warrior's calm, blue gaze made her heart lurch suddenly, and her throat go dry. That woman was just incredible! Isabelle swallowed against her suddenly constricting throat, and tried to recover her train of thought.

"You're changing the subject," she accused weakly.

"Yes." The blue eyes never wavered. "So?"

"I'm not tired."

"But I think you are. You're just really wound up. I can help you relax."

"And how would you do that?" Isabelle was not sure in which direction this conversation was going. But her stomach was fluttering something awful at the suggestive tone in Xena's voice. It made her feel uncomfortable.

"Trust me. I have many skills."

"There you go, my love," Xena whispered softly. "Sleep well! You can use it."

She took in the sleeping form of the shorter woman outlined under a thick, fluffy cover, red-gold hair spilling over the pillow, and thought for the thousandth time how very beautiful she was.

The ghostly warrior had sensed the woman's growing uneasiness, and it saddened and puzzled her. She herself had felt the age-old attraction the moment she had looked upon Isabelle, sitting there in her study and mumbling gibberish at the strange contraption she called a computer. Not even the absurdity of the situation or their weird surroundings could have done anything to dampen it.

Xena sighed and got up from where she had perched on the edge of the young writer's bed. It had not taken much to get the blonde woman to unwind, just a few pointers about breathing techniques and muscle relaxation, stuff she herself practiced without giving it much thought.

Nodding a little to herself, she took one last look at Isabelle's soft, relaxed face, and faded out.

- Part 2 -

The warrior speaks...

We have been traveling together for a few moons now. Every time we passed through a place that seemed perfect for Gabrielle to start trying to build a new life, she would somehow find a reason why it would not do. I cannot say I took great pains to convince her otherwise, either. I have gotten used to having her around. A compromising statement, from a declared loner, but there it is.

She says she wants to be a bard. I planned to humor her childish fancy, and let her play at storytelling. She is so adorable when she grows animated, and I have to admit to my chagrin that I never actually listened to her stories in the beginning. I was so captivated by the vibrant sound of her voice and that cute little face flushed with excitement that the actual words just didn't matter.

But now that I have started paying more attention to what she is saying instead of how, it is fast becoming clear to me that she has genuine talent. She has me roaring with laughter, silently contemplating, feeling the heat of long ago battles, anything she chooses. And she seems to have an unerring sense of when I need to be diverted from my brooding. Can it be that she sees through me that easily? I have never considered myself easy to read, and I hardly think others have either.

Just now she is telling a funny little story she is just idly making up to while away our evening. It is about a little gremlin getting into one of her bags, that only she can see and that's causing me all sorts of mischief. I do not appreciate being in the punchline of such things, but it has me grinning all the time in spite of myself. I can just see the little guy peeking out from among our provisions! I actually catch myself looking for his tiny footprints in the dirt, much to my embarrassment. Some fearsome warrior I am!

She has touched something inside me. I did not mean for that to happen. It bothers me. She is so beautiful. I do not think I want her to leave anymore now. No, I know I do not want her to.

For the first time since I can remember, light and hope have come into my life.

The writer's study, 10 a.m.:

Isabelle saved the file and looked to where the warrior was installed in her customary spot. Sunlight was streaming in through the small window at her left, throwing brilliant highlights on one side of Xena's face while leaving the other in darkness, and setting off the dazzling blue of her eyes nicely. The tall woman was gazing at her intently, a lazy smile playing around her lips.

"Hades' boots, Isabelle, but you are good," she said.

She was rewarded by a pleased smile from the young writer, who flushed a little at the praise. "I couldn't do it without you, you know." Xena just shrugged, still smiling.

Isabelle ran a spell checker over the text, and went over the lines again. The scene was beautiful, if she did say so herself. Only one thing nagged her, but she wasn't sure if she was right about it, so she held her peace for now. Could it be that Xena had a more than just friendly interest in the bard...? But no, she was probably jumping at shadows. Yet there was that look the woman gave her at times that made her shake in her boots with - what? Trepidation? Was it *right* for two women to feel *that* way about each other? No, she was probably mistaken. They were just really dear friends.

"You must miss her," she said quietly.

The warrior had been staring off into the distance. Now her eyes focused as she trained her gaze on Isabelle once more.

"I do. But it's funny..."

"What is?"

"I really don't feel like I'm very far from her at the moment. You are so very much like her." She paused, watching Isabelle's blush deepen with a quirk of her lips. "But I have to say that I do miss the life in the open, and my horse," Xena admitted, "These pent-up cubes give me the creeps."

"I guess you do," Isabelle said slowly. "Say, that gives me an idea. We have the whole day to ourselves, don't we? It doesn't look like it's going to rain, so why don't we drive out to the Redwoods today? It's about time that I saw something besides these walls and those of the office. And since I will be spending most of the weekend in a car headed for LA, I guess today's our chance. What do you say?"

"Well," Xena drawled, "I don't know what in the Nine Hells you mean by LA, but anything that has the word 'woods' in it sounds fine to me just now." She flashed a white-toothed grin.

The writer smiled. "I guess it's decided, then."

It took some persuasive efforts on Isabelle's side to convince the suspicious warrior that getting into a car was all right, and that there was no danger of you being choked or squashed inside. The young woman thought it a little funny, seeing that Xena really couldn't be harmed by anything in her present state. But, knowing how touchy the other woman was and realizing that the warrior was more concerned for Isabelle's safety than for her own, she held her peace.

Once inside however, Xena seemed to settle down and took her place in the passenger's seat with a certain studied nonchalance.

When Isabelle turned the key in the ignition and the engine reluctantly coughed into life, Xena started, gave her friend a probing look, and seeing her unconcerned and obviously in control, shrugged before she lounged back in the seat.

"Well," Isabelle said, smiling, "we're all set. Off we go."

The drive was uneventful, the traffic less heavy than Isabelle was used to. From time to time she shot a glance at her silent passenger, trying very hard not to let her lips quirk. Xena's face was a study. The normally completely composed and calm warrior was fighting with little success to keep the many new impressions from showing on her face - the fast movement of the car; houses, people and landscape hurtling by at a speed she must think unreal; other cars passing by at arm's length but somehow not colliding; horns honking impatiently; the cassette player sounding the irresistible rhythms of the 60's. Every now and then, Xena would send a tentative look the writer's way, as if to reassure herself that everything was as it should be. Then she would just shake her head slightly, shrug, and go back to gazing out the window.

Once Isabelle reached out to pat the warrior's arm reassuringly, and made contact before she could catch herself. The tingle that went through her as her hand passed through the warrior's arm sent her head spinning pleasantly, and she almost lost track of her driving. She heard Xena's sharp intake of breath at the contact, and

found those blue eyes looking at her with a tinge of amusement, and something deeper, more intense that she couldn't pinpoint.

The writer smiled sheepishly. "I forgot... That's what you get for being so damned... real."

Xena grinned. "Yeah well... I've always been the solid type. Though a certain bard I could name would probably prefer the word 'dense'."

They looked at each other for a moment, and burst out laughing.

This late in the year, there were relatively few people coming to see the fabled giant trees. The parking lot by the entrance to the park was less than half full, with two school buses parked on the far end.

By the time Isabelle had gotten out of the car and locked the door, Xena was by her side, scanning the surroundings with a watchful eye.

Again, Isabelle had to hide her amusement at that rather touching display of protectiveness. Both herself and the warrior tended to forget all too easily that Xena wasn't the solid and tangible person she looked like.

"Well," the young writer said, and smiled, "shall we?"

Nodding, Xena followed her across the parking lot towards the entrance, where an elderly, spectacled woman was selling the tickets.

They had to wait in line because a school class was in the process of making its noisy way in. Xena leaned in close to Isabelle and asked quietly, "am I getting this right? You have to pay money to go see the *woods*? Tell me it ain't so!"

Isabelle had to chuckle. "Well, usually, you get to see all the woods you like, for free, whenever you want. But these aren't ordinary trees." She pointed. "Look, over there. They don't only *seem* big from here. But you'll see."

When it was their turn, Isabelle put a bill on the counter and said without thinking, "two adults, please."

One of the school kids bumped into her just then, and she turned to give him the evil eye, so that she missed seeing the woman's brows

knit together in puzzlement as she looked past her to see who else was coming, and Xena's incredulous and very amused grin. Isabelle put the two tickets in her coat pocket with the change, and motioned for the warrior to follow her. The woman at the counter stared after her, shaking her head and muttering under her breath.

Making their way across the open area past the little snack bar and souvenir shop, the two friends entered the park proper. Isabelle had been here before, but the sheer size and quiet majesty of the great trees never failed to fill her with awe. Looming sky-high as tall as two hundred feet, some as big as ten feet or more in diameter, the red color of the stringy bark that gave them their name set off nicely by the slant of the early afternoon sun, they were a neck-wrenching, dizzying sight.

Her eyes found the warrior's who, while gazing in ill-disguised wonder at the huge redwood trees, seemed more at ease here than Isabelle had seen her so far. Still, ever the alert warrior, she divided her attention between the giant trees, the people moving around them, and the sparse growth covering the ground off the walkways, in case some threat might be lurking there.

"Well," Isabelle said softly, "they're awesome, aren't they?"

"They are," Xena agreed. "Can't say I've ever seen the like."

"Yeah, makes you feel like an insect doesn't it? Hey, I think some of these trees were around in your time. They put up a slice from the trunk of one to serve as a timetable. Want to go have a look?"

"Sure. Let's."

Being out in the open and actually in touch with nature awakened Isabelle profoundly. Having grown up in a small village in the foothills, she never ceased to feel cooped up and locked in living in the big city. Now, with the autumn sun throwing dappled highlights on the ground and the air fresh and clean after last night's rain, she found herself feeling high-spirited and chatty.

So while they walked, she prattled on to the silently grinning warrior about anything and everything she could think of, attributing the strange looks she got from passers-by to the still vivid bruise over her eye.

If she had taken more time to look at her tall companion, she would have seen Xena's shoulders shake with barely controlled mirth, fighting to keep her laughter down while watching the people watch

her little friend seemingly talk to thin air.

The huge cutting from an ancient redwood could be seen from afar, little colored pins with tags attached to the growth rings marking big events in history.

Xena's face was now carefully blank as Isabelle pointed out a few of the dates - Boston Tea Party; Columbus discovering America; the birth of Christ...

"Christ? Who's he?"

Isabelle smiled. "Big important character in our religious history. In your future though. Never mind. Here's the supposed birth of Cesar..."

At the mention of that name, Xena growled deep in her chest. "The bastard... And does it state the year of his death?"

Isabelle looked at the wood, then at Xena. "No, it doesn't... are you saying you know him? Cesar himself?"

A cold, hard smile appeared on the warrior's face. "Oh yes, we know each other... though I'm sure we both wish we didn't!" Her expression softened, and she traced the wood with her finger, coming to rest on a section of rings including the one marking Cesar's birth, close to the center of the trunk. "So this would be the time I live in...that tree must have been very small then..."

Isabelle's hand went to the wood as well, and she smiled. "Yeah see, and I was born around here... just underneath the bark it seems... isn't this fascinating? I wish..."

She broke off suddenly, paling as something hit home to her in full force. "Xena... I can't believe I've been talking with you all this time... God and all the people..." She glanced at a woman standing close by with a boy of about five holding on to her hand, who was gawking at her with her jaw hanging open. Isabelle flashed her an apologetic grin while she felt a furious blush creeping up her neck. "Drama rehearsal..." she said quickly, eyes wide, before she shot a mortified look at the warrior who was biting her lip to keep from laughing. She gave her a very dark look and hurried on, trying not to actually run. Her face felt like it must shine with a bright light of its own.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Isabelle rounded on a grinning warrior.

"You know, you really should have said something..."

Xena's grin broadened as she shrugged. "Yeah I should have. I'm sorry. But it was too cute! You should have seen that woman's face. It was precious!" She leaned against the trunk of a tree and started laughing silently, shoulders shaking with mirth.

"Oh very funny,"

Still laughing, Xena said, "I'm sorry. You're right, I should have said something."

"You've made me look like a complete idiot." Feeling her throat constrict, Isabelle looked away, scowling. "That was mean," she mumbled.

Sobering, the warrior stepped in behind her, lifting a hand and letting it drop again.

"I... I... didn't mean..."

Furious, Isabelle whirled to face her. "Oh you didn't, huh?" she flared. "You looked like you were enjoying yourself well enough." She felt tears of anger rise, and fought vainly to keep them down.

She heard Xena draw and release a breath before speaking. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. I was just having a little fun. I'm sorry. Don't cry." The warrior reached out to graze Isabelle's cheek with her knuckles. "Please don't cry."

Isabelle shuddered at the by now familiar tingle. Not trusting herself to speak, however, she just gave the other woman an accusing stare.

"Please don't cry," Xena said softly. "Look I just...just... Aww Tartarus. Gabrielle always did say that my rotten sense of humor chose to show itself at the worst possible moment."

Swallowing against the lump in her throat, Isabelle looked away and murmured tonelessly, "I can't believe I did that! I must be going crazy... I never stopped to think about it... Oh god! And to think you were aware of it, and never warned me..."

"I didn't mean for it to happen. I just enjoy hearing the sound of your voice. It's so much like Gabrielle's..."

Isabelle stood silently for a few moments, trying to get a grip on the hurt she felt at Xena's trick, trying to put herself in Xena's shoes.

Finally, she looked up at the warrior, sniffing.

"I guess it WAS rather funny huh?" she said with a weak smile, wiping her eyes.

"Well... you know," the warrior said, fidgeting a little, "it was just..." she was trying to fight a smile, but failing, and she finally let it come to her face. "Yeah it was. But I really am sorry. I just miss her so much sometimes." Isabelle found herself captured and held once again by that intense but gentle blue gaze. "And you're so much like her..."

The writer swallowed against the fluttery feeling that suddenly seemed to rise in her stomach as she took in the warrior's face and that gentle smile. She wondered for the thousandth time what it was that this woman was doing to her.

"Hey, let's go home okay? I don't feel like seeing any more people just now."

Xena flashed her a grin. "Okay. Another trip in that...car...of yours huh?"

"Yup. Unless of course you want to walk... or whatever it is that you do to go places."

For a moment it looked as if that was exactly what Xena wanted to do, but she said, "um, no I'll be okay. Hey..."

"Yes?"

"Thanks for bringing me to the woods."

"You're welcome."

"You know there are just never that many people around in my woods," Xena said as she followed the writer back towards the parking lot.

"Oh really? Hey, tell me what it's like there... "

"Well, this happened a long time after the last bit you wrote, but anyhow...."

Their voices trailed off into the distance as the warrior and the writer made their way along the walkways, the writer not talking much for once but listening intently to her unseen companion, grinning occasionally and nodding her head.

The warrior speaks...

It seems we share a great fondness for forests. There are more than enough roads running through open country, but somehow we always find ourselves traveling some path or other through the woods. I never realized it until now, but it seems I have been doing this even before I met her. I guess I just needed for her to point out to me how strange and beautiful this tree has grown, how amazingly delicate that little forest flower looks, or how soothing the sound of the wind rushing through the leaves can be. It looks like this little bard has woken me up on more than one level. I do not know that I ever looked around me not out of caution and watchfulness, but simply for the sake of appreciating the surroundings.

We have been through many things. More moons have passed, in fact, it must be over a season now since I met her. She has become an Amazon Queen, and quite good with her new weapon, a staff. It still amazes me that my innocent little bard would be able to find her way into as tight a community as theirs. That bunch tends to be more than a little suspicious of outsiders. And now she is their Queen. It seems she just has this talent to capture everyone's heart. And she has proven herself to be more than worthy of that honor.

There have been troubled times as well. I thought I had lost her for good when she went and got married. By a freak and cruel twist of fate, her marriage only grew a few hours old before her husband was killed. The relief I felt when I realized she would not be leaving me is something I cannot be entirely proud of.

All this has been written down in countless scrolls, and I do not feel inclined now to go into those events again. Just let it be said that overall the good outweighed the bad, and the hard times have only made our bond stronger.

Today we have unexpectedly come across a caravan of traders camping in a large clearing by a stream. They seem sent by the gods, since some of our supplies are running low and I still do not feel entirely comfortable staying in a town. Gabrielle is delighted. She does so enjoy shopping.

Something seems out of place here, but try as I might, I can find nothing wrong with the woman and the four men, or the teams of mules still hitched to the four canvas-covered carts. I force myself to relax. I have been jumping at shadows lately.

There is little time to be surprised as the seemingly peaceful traders suddenly sprout swords, axes and all kinds of weapons, and attack without warning. Canvas lifts from some of the wagons to show more men emerging from their hiding places. A trap!

I am losing my edge. I should have listened to that little nagging feeling in the back of my mind. But upon seeing my little bard's face light up with the prospect of browsing through the wares in those carts, I just shoved it aside. A very stupid mistake, and one that might well get her killed. Myself too, but with her gone, that would not matter. My life is nothing without her. I know that now. Although I do not know if she knows, or if I will ever be able to tell her after this is over.

I cannot be sure when that realization came to me. Perhaps it was the way she faced those slavers in Poteidaia, or when she, a perfect stranger, stepped in for me in Amphipolis, when people I have known since I was a child would not lift a finger on my behalf. Or perhaps it was the way she stood by me when facing that young man at the tavern a few days later. I do not know. But neither can I deny it. I love her. I have for a long time.

"Is that how I should write it?" Isabelle asked a little uncertainly. *Love her, like a sister. Of course that's it...*

They were back in the writer's study, working out the details of the episode the warrior had related during the drive back and had not quite gotten through telling. It seemed car rides had a devastating effect on the ghostly woman's focus!

Xena flashed her one of those wide, bright-eyed grins. "Yeah, it's perfect. You're doing great, Isabelle, really. Now, shall we get on with the action? This is where it gets good..." Her grin turned into wolfish leer.

"Um... yeah. Sure."

These thoughts flash through my head in the time it takes me to whip my sword out of its sheath and send my Chakram flying on its first round, taking out three of those further in the back wielding slings and bows, before it returns to my hand with its shrill whine.

I glance at my little companion, who has taken a stance beside me,

weapon at the ready. I am glad she has learned to use that staff so well. She is a quick study, and has decent control over her movements, I have seen her do some serious damage to many who dared attack her. It makes me proud, though I feel I have marred her innocence by teaching her how to fight. But, traveling with the likes of me, she has need of that skill more often than I would like.

The spirit of the battle claims me before I get the chance to dwell on such thoughts. The Huntress is out, and the shrill, ululating battle cry has left my throat before I have wrestled the beast in me under some semblance of control. I will have to try and keep at least one alive. I want to know who set this trap, and why.

When I throw myself into the fray, I know I will not only be battling against a bunch of marauders, but also for that tiny sliver of control that will keep me from becoming a mindless killer. As I feel myself slowly losing the second battle, the first one turns quickly in my favor - in our favor, I remind myself, sparing a quick glance at my companion, who is holding her own well enough for the moment. I will have to trust in her abilities, for my shaky hold over myself is about to give way to pure battle rage.

A whirl and a kick, I hear the crunch of cartilage as my boot connects with a face, then a pained "oof!" as the second kick sends the air whooshing out of the lungs of another. Finishing off the motion, my trusted Chakram once again leaves my hand in a whining arc. A swipe and a stab from my sword, and the first two attackers go down. The Chakram's whine cuts off as I hear it thud into the ground. I know without looking that it has taken out two more men.

Once more loosing my battle cry, I launch myself into a flip that clears the last three attackers who are now advancing on me, landing lightly behind them. There is hardly enough time for the surprise and confusion to register on their faces before a kick and a double punch sends all three of them staggering backwards.

The Huntress is beginning to enjoy herself. The wild leer spreads across my face as I give the men time to regain their balance and regroup. "Time to play, boys," I hear myself say.

They come at me as a team, two swords and a staff. The staff-wielder takes a low swing designed to knock my legs out from under me, which I jump easily while dealing a blow with the butt of my sword. Using my downward momentum, I curl up and roll to the side, stabbing up into the staff wielder's groin before gliding to my feet. He sinks noiselessly to the ground. "Bet that hurt," says the Huntress.

They really aren't much, as far as fighters go, and the fight is routine. Within seconds, they are lying at my feet. One has managed to slip past my defenses, and I have a gash on the inside of my arm, not very deep but painful. Well, one cut in exchange for both our lives is not a bad deal. I look across to Gabrielle. She seems unhurt. Thank the gods. I will go and have a look through the wagons. For now, I am ignoring the insistent thrumming inside me that comes from battles finished too quickly. That will have to be dealt with later.

Something clicks in my mind. A quick count reveals that there is still one man unaccounted for. My head whips around to Gabrielle, who is standing over the man she has just knocked senseless. The woman is lying close by, and there are ten piled around me. Before I can finish the thought, I hear the telltale creak as a crossbow is loaded several paces behind me. I whirl to see the missing man standing behind a wagon, crossbow raised.

Aiming not at me, but at Gabrielle.

Things become a blur. The twang of the string. She is far away, and the angle is bad. I dive forward desperately. Artemis herself must have given me a shove, for my fingers close on the shaft as it hurtles past me. Gabrielle looks around, our eyes meet for a timeless moment. I hold up the crossbow quarrel to her, before I turn back towards the wielder of the crossbow, cold fury in my heart. White-hot rage makes me hurl his shaft at him with devastating force. It thuds into his chest and he stares at it uncomprehending, then back at me, before he sinks to the ground. Slowly, I cross the battlefield to retrieve my Chakram.

We look around to take stock. Not one of those who crossed blades with me lives, neither do any of the archers and crossbow-wielders, but Gabrielle has taken out the woman and one of the men, and they lie unconscious.

The fight was over before I could really exert myself, and all the energy I've built up without being able to release it is now giving me a different sort of craving. I look over at my companion, notice the athletic curve of her body and the creamy smoothness of her skin. I cannot bear the sight, and drop my gaze. The urge to possess her this instant, violently, has nothing to do with love, and it shames me. I have to take a few very deep breaths to wrestle that side of the Huntress under some sort control. The beast's power over me is strong at such moments.

She can tell, of course, that something is bothering me, and I feel

her soft touch on my arm. I have told her a thousand times not to go near me right after a fight until I've had time to regain my composure, but she never listens. The gods know it does not make it easier for me. If only I could make her understand this need! But I cannot bring myself to explain to her this particular side of the Huntress. She is so innocent. I fear I will lose her if I do.

"Don't touch me," I growl angrily as I jerk my arm away. I can feel her pain at my harshness as if it was my own, and I long to make her understand. Only at this moment I cannot trust myself, so I let her wordlessly draw back from me. I turn slowly and walk into the forest. I must be away from her for a while. I do not want to hurt her.

Isabelle looked up. "Xena..."

The warrior had spoken these last few sentences in a low, monotonous voice that was so unlike her that it gave the young writer pause. That, and the fact that she had no idea what the dark woman was talking about.

Xena heard the unspoken question in the smaller woman's voice. She shifted position, and her gaze that had been turned inward as she spoke now focused once more on the here and now, and on the young woman looking at her with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. She grinned a little.

"It's a warrior thing, Isabelle. I can't explain it any better. Gabrielle didn't begin to understand it until much later, and even then I don't know if she was aware of the true depth of it. Hades, sometimes even I don't know if I understand it at all." The warrior dropped her gaze and found a spot in front of her feet that required her intense scrutiny.

"Hey, are you okay?" Isabelle said softly.

Xena flashed her a smile. "Yeah. Don't worry about it, okay? Let's go on."

Though still a little troubled, Isabelle could not help but be reassured by that irresistible smile and those blue eyes gazing at her with calm confidence. She took a breath, and lit a cigarette, which drew a disapproving frown from the warrior that the writer tried hard to ignore.

"Okay, let's. So you went off and hid away in the forest..."

"Yeah, see, when I'm like this, I need some time by myself so I can do something about it..."

It is not until much later that I find myself able to go back to the camp she has set up in the meantime, a good distance away from the scene of the fight. The beast has subsided, but not after I gave in to it and let it have some of what it craved. I have never been able to understand completely why touching, pleasuring myself seems to be able to diffuse the tension that is the frustrated Huntress, but I suppose they do not call it battle lust for nothing.

Xena watched as the blush crept up Isabelle's neck when the young woman realized what the warrior was talking about. Pale blue eyes glinted with ill-hidden amusement. The writer did not look up from the screen however, and so Xena continued her narrative with a shrug and a grin.

Well, I felt easier, after, but still strung up like a Centaur bow, and Hades kiss me if I was going to give her any of that..."

Still on edge, I spend some more time hidden from her sight and hearing, doing sword drills, before going to check on the fight scene. I have hurt her already with my outburst, and I will not face her again until I am confident that I can keep my emotions in check.

The two survivors are still out cold, and I notice with pride that my little bard has already bound them securely. There is no need for me to check the ties, such has become my confidence in her. Of course she has not touched any of the dead, so I take a few minutes to drag them closer together and throw some canvas over them. I will dig a pit to bury them in, later.

She does not look up right away when I enter the campsite, but when she does, I can see she has been crying. She smiles upon seeing me. "I roasted that fowl you caught this afternoon. Should be just about done now. And we've got some Amazon wine left.

"Sounds great," I tell her with a smile, and I watch her perk up a little.

"I took care of... them... while you..." she stammers. "You may want

to check..."

"No need," I say, "I've covered up the dead. I'll bury them in the morning. We can see about those two in a little bit." I feel suddenly very awkward. I want to tell her I am sorry, but I can't. She has witnessed this so many times, and it has always been like this. Never once has she tried to talk to me about it. I wonder is she trying to spare my feelings, or is she just afraid to ask? "So... how about dinner?"

She nods and goes about preparing our plates, while I sit down with my medical kit to take care of that little gash I received on my arm. It is not serious, but it requires stitching. The spot is not easy to reach, just on the underside of my right arm. I find myself fumbling with the needle and cursing softly under my breath, until I notice that the clatter of pottery from across the camp has stopped. I look up to see her standing close, watching me with one corner of her mouth turned up.

"Here, let me," she says softly as she kneels by my side and holds her hand out for the threaded needle. Lost in a sea of green eyes, I comply wordlessly.

I close my eyes and clench my teeth as she begins the task of stitching the cut. Her touch is gentle, her fingers cool and soothing. I know she hates doing this, but she has sewn me up more times than I can count. Without looking I know she is flinching in sympathy every time she passes the needle through my skin.

"Xena?"

"Hmm..." I answer without opening my eyes.

She speaks softly. "Did you have to kill them all?"

I open my eyes and look at her when I hear the slight tremor in her voice. It's the question I dread, because I never really know how to answer it. I take a deep breath. "Gabrielle..."

"I know, I know. They would have killed us, and we only defended ourselves. It's just..." She takes some time to place the last stitch, and dust the wound with powdered herbs to prevent infection. "I don't know, Xena, sometimes... you're like a different person when you're fighting. It's a little... I mean... oh crumbs, I don't know what I mean!"

"But I do, Gabrielle. It's scaring you isn't it?" She answers with a little nod and averts her eyes, focuses on the wound she is dressing.

I reach out and touch my fingertips to her cheek, gently coaxing her into looking at me again. "I do what I must to keep us safe. You don't have to like it. But you have to know that I would never, ever want you hurt." I did not know I was going to say that, but I am glad I did, somehow.

She smiles and gives my hand a quick squeeze. "I know, Xena."

Dinner is a quiet affair, my talkative bard uncharacteristically subdued. I cannot bear to look at her and find the contents of my plate infinitely more interesting. When I do glance at her, I find her staring at the ground, brooding. I know I should say something, anything, but I am certain that all that I'll manage will be some lame comment on something inconsequential, so I keep quiet until well after the meal. Now all that is breaking the silence is the rhythmic, soothing whisk of the whetstone against my blade, and the occasional snap and crackle of the campfire.

Finally, I am unable to stand it any longer. I know this sounds ridiculous from someone as reluctant to talk as myself. But I just know that for my bard being quiet is not natural. And as much as her incessant chatter grates on my nerves sometimes, her silence now tears at my heart.

I know I should go to check on our prisoners, and for one as unequipped to deal with emotional tension as myself, it would be the natural thing to do, if only to get away for a while. It is not as if I have never done it before, quite the contrary. I was ever quick to come up with an excuse to flee camp whenever things became too much for me to handle. I can take any battle wound without turning a hair, but where feelings are concerned, I am a pitiful coward.

Absently I run my fingers over the neatly bandaged wound. She has done a good job. There is no sign of infection, and with her tiny, neat stitches I know there will be no scarring.

No, I will not run from her today. Gathering my courage, I rise to my feet.

I walk over to where she is sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees and staring into the fire, her scrolls and quill lying forgotten by her side.

I crouch down beside her, rest one hand on her shoulder and gently brush a strand of hair from her face with the other. I feel her stiffen, and I start to pull back, afraid I may have scared her and silently cursing myself for approaching her at all.

Her hand closes over mine and she pulls it to her mouth. A jolt runs through me as I feel her lips press against my palm. She looks up at me, and in her eyes there is something I had never hoped to see there. She is trembling. So am I, suddenly. I am certain it is not from fear, nor from being cold.

Unaware that the clatter of the keyboard had stopped, Xena continued her tale. "The thing I had dreamed about for so long, and never dared to speak of for fear of losing her... To find that suddenly mirrored in her eyes was... pure bliss. So I kissed her."

Isabelle was looking over her monitor at the warrior. "Hold it! You mean you kissed her, like, on the cheek."

Xena gave her a quizzical look. "No, I mean kiss, as in tender, searing, mouth-to-mouth, full-of-passion, no-holds-barred take-your-breath-away kind of kiss." She grinned at the memory. "Boy, was I weak in the knees afterwards!"

Isabelle stared at her, unable to find words.

Xena shrugged. "I won't say I'd planned this, but it seemed we both weren't able to keep back our true feelings any longer. We'd been in love with each other for so long, afraid to admit it..." She trailed off, and stared out the window, an unwarriorlike dreamy expression on her face.

"And... and then... after that... you...?"

Xena nodded, and grinned. "We became lovers. But it took time. We both needed to adjust."

"You mean you've actually... you... and Gabrielle...???"

"Uh huh."

"You were... together...? I mean, you've ... done... *it*? With her?"

Xena smirked. "Yes, we certainly have. She's very sweet and... imaginative"

"Oh, my god! But that's..."

"What?" An eyebrow raised in inquiry.

"That's not... I mean it... shouldn't be!"

The second eyebrow joined the first. "What would make you think that?"

"I mean, it's not natural, is it? It's ... weird! All my life I was taught...", he stammered and trailed off.

Blue eyes found Isabelle's green ones, and held them. "Isabelle, I love her, and she loves me. What can there be wrong with that?"

"I just can't imagine... Oh, Xena, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to anger or hurt you. It's just, I mean, I've seen couples... there are quite a few around here... but I've never... I mean, I've always... I've always been told it's wrong, wrong, wrong to... to feel that way about another woman. And I really can't imagine myself and... I mean..." She blushed and did not continue. "I *am* sorry," she finished lamely.

Xena had risen to her feet and was now standing by Isabelle's chair. She looked at the writer sadly. "You really don't remember, do you," she asked so softly that Isabelle wasn't sure if the question was meant for her at all.

Isabelle met the tall woman's gaze. Drowned in a pool of pale blue. And suddenly realized that maybe, just maybe, all the truths that she had been carefully fed all her life might not be the only truths. What *could* there be wrong about love? "I don't know," she whispered.

After a few moments, Xena drew a breath and squared her shoulders. She gave Isabelle a lopsided grin. "Well? Are you gonna write that?"

Isabelle smiled and turned back to the screen. Soon the clacking of the keyboard once more filled the little study.

Later that evening, they lounged on the couch in the living room, in front of the TV, watching sitcoms. Some of the humor was lost on Xena, and sometimes she guffawed - Isabelle thought - in the wrong places. Obviously the humor of ancient Greece was quite different from that of modern day San Francisco. But all in all they both enjoyed themselves immensely.

The closing credits of *Growing Pains* were flickering across the screen, and Xena was trying to explain between fits of laughter why she thought Maggie yelling at her husband for denting a frying pan on a burglar's head was so damned funny, when the phone rang.

Isabelle made no move to get up, which earned her a raised eyebrow from a still chuckling warrior.

The writer shrugged. It's Lilli. I don't want to talk to anyone now.

"How do you-"

The answering machine came to life, relaying Isabelle's message that she couldn't come to the phone, and would the caller please leave name and number. And sure enough, it was Lilli's voice that was on the other end. Xena's eyes widened and then narrowed suspiciously as she stared at the writer. Isabelle gave her another shrug and rolled her eyes at Lilli's message.

"Isa, where the hell are you? I called you at the office and they said you'd taken the day off. I tried to call you all morning. Call me soon, we need to plan for tomorrow. Call me, okay?" There was a click, and a beep as the machine subsided.

"How did you know it was her?" Xena asked.

Isabelle barked a laugh. "There were three messages from her on the machine when we got back from the Redwoods. Besides, who else is going to call me? It's not as if I have tons of friends around here. And mom only calls on Sundays."

"Well, aren't you going to talk to her?"

"Oh, not now. I don't know... I just can't be bothered now. But you know what? I'm starving. I think I'm gonna run down to Wong's real quick and grab some Chinese food to go." She got up and picked up her coat. "Will you be okay here, Xena?"

That got her a lazy smile. "Sure. Why don't you leave that TV thing running, and I'll see if I can figure out some more of that weird humor of yours." She rose smoothly to her feet and approached Isabelle. "But you be careful, okay? It's dark out."

"Don't worry. Wong's place is just next door. I'll be fine. I may be gone for a half hour or so. Wong is such a chatterbox, and I really don't have the heart to cut him off once he gets started."

"I wish you'd just stay here and take something out of that ice box of yours."

"Oh, Xena I'm sick of pizza. I'll be fine, I promise. I just need to get out of here for a few minutes. Okay?"

"Stubborn. Just like her," the warrior muttered. Aloud she said. "Please be careful. You know I can't pummel anyone to help you if you get in trouble. But if you're not back in half a mark, I'll come looking for you."

Isabelle smiled at her. "You do that. See you in a bit."

After the door had closed behind the writer, Xena flopped down on the couch and looked at the TV screen. To her faint disappointment, there was no comedy show on now, but the eight o'clock news. Slightly bored, she watched the commentator rattle off the latest occurrences. The woman might as well have spoken Germanic, for all the surly warrior could understand.

She gasped when the scene changed to show a woman that looked strikingly familiar. Tall, clad in black, striking blue eyes and a mane of jet black hair, the woman was the spitting image of herself. She was being led out of a big building by two burly men in uniform, and she was wearing handcuffs. Her finely chiseled face was a mask of cold pride.

"... been released into the custody of a mental institution this morning," the commentator was saying. "Corina Walker turned herself in on Tuesday. Apparently Walker is suffering from a severe mental disturbance, stating that the God of War is trying to take over the world, using her as a tool."

"Ares," Xena breathed. "So he's in this, too. I could have known."

The report continued to state that Corina Walker had been deemed insane, and would be put away and kept heavily medicated until the time of her trial.

Thoughts whirled in the warrior's head. Being convinced that the young woman she was with was none other than her beloved bard reborn, this left Xena with only one conclusion. This woman that was being put away somewhere and drugged must then be an incarnation of herself. Xena had heard Isabelle mention the terrorist. Obviously, though, the writer had not yet seen any pictures of the woman, or the resemblance between Corina and the warrior would have hit her like a hammer.

Xena's own place in this story was finally starting to come clear. And she did not like it at all.

"Gods no! Don't make me do that to her," the warrior whispered, horrified. But her strategic mind set to work even as her heart hoped fervently that she was wrong. Quickly she considered her options. First, she would have to find out where Corina Walker was being held. And then she'd have to try and find a way... She did not want to continue that line of thought right now. "I'm so sorry, Isabelle," she said softly.

Her mind turned inward, she did not notice right away that the screen had gone dark. Thinking the news were over, and hoping that another comedy was coming on, she focused her attention on the TV. She needed to lighten her mood before Isabelle got back. No sense in upsetting the young woman unnecessarily. There would be more than enough of that if Xena was to succeed, she mused bitterly.

Instead of going on to the next show, however, the screen stayed dark, except for three tiny letters written in golden print in the upper left corner, and a lazy swirl of red close to the center that gradually grew in intensity. *Damn thing must be broken*, she thought. She hoped Isabelle would be back soon to fix it. She was starting to get used to all the weird gadgets of this strange new world, but she still did not trust them completely.

"What the..." she exclaimed as a figure materialized from the red swirl. A painfully familiar figure, glaring at her from behind the glass of the TV set. He was darkly handsome, all dressed in black leather, dark hair falling in waves around his bearded face.

"I don't know who or what you are, woman, or how you got here, but you'd better stay out of my plans."

"Ares!" The warrior's eyes narrowed. "It figures."

The figure on the screen bristled. "Who are you calling a ram, woman? The name's Mars."

"Whatever," Xena agreed dryly. "I have to say that was a nice touch, appearing in the middle of a TV show. Really imaginative. Wouldn't have thought it of you."

"Do you have any idea who you're talking to?"

Xena was taken aback. He gave every indication of having no memory of her, something that she could not quite believe. She remembered the divine troublemaker well enough, after all! "Well," the warrior replied slowly. "Do *you* have any idea who you're talking

to, Ares? You can't go around thinking of using my alter ego for your wicked machinations and not consider the fact that I just might have something against that."

"That's 'Mars'." A God of War does not pout, but this one came close.

"Mars, huh? Why, I believe they have a... whaddya call'em... a *candy bar* here by that name. How cute," Xena drawled.

Mars glared at her from the TV screen. His face was filling the picture now, larger than life. A vein stood out on his right temple, showing clearly that, despite the relative calm of his features, the God of War was not amused. "You don't only look like her, you're every bit as annoying, too, with some to spare," he growled. And then he muttered something she did not quite get, involving "delicious" and "sexy", while his face took on a lusty leer.

"Yeah well, even considering she's cuckoo, she has a long way to go until she's anywhere in my league. Isn't that right, Ares?"

His eyes narrowed dangerously as he advanced yet further, until it seemed the his nose must be touching the inside of the television screen. And indeed, a little flattened spot appeared on the tip of the divine nose. This close up, Xena could have counted the pores on his face, had she had a mind to. The letters in the upper corner changed to a dark red.

"Well, her state of mind need not concern you. But if I see that irritating blonde you're such friends with anywhere near her, I swear on My sword you are going to regret it. Both of you."

"Oh, so that's it Ares, huh? Afraid Gabrielle is going to take your precious toy from you yet again? The way she did with me? Great Zeus, that must have chafed, huh? The mighty God of War, beaten by a girl bard. Very bad form, Ares."

Xena's eyes flashed daggers at the TV set. Inside, her stomach was churning something awful. While she wasn't afraid for herself - what could he possibly do to her in her present form? - the threat to Isabelle was very real. She only hoped she would be able to bluff her way through, and keep Isabelle out of trouble. There was now no longer a question about why she was here - she had to get Corina out of Ares' clutches, and Isabelle was the key. That meant she had to put the young writer into considerable danger, while she herself would be unable to protect her, being a ghost. *Well, Corina Walker, you had better be the warrior I believe you to be, she*

thought fervently.

"The..."

Mars retreated into the screen until his whole shapely body was visible. He was positively steaming. The letters in the top corner pulsed angrily.

"...name..."

The blackness behind him took on an eerie glow, outlining his dark form clearly as he drew himself up, looking very godly.

"...is..."

His rage was almost palpable as he raised his arm and pointed a finger in Xena's direction.

"MAAAARSSS," he roared, just as a flash of white-hot energy shot forth from his fingertip, passing unhindered through the glass of the screen and hitting the ghostly warrior squarely in the chest. Electricity crackled as a powerful jolt made her limbs go stiff.

The pain was excruciating. Xena felt herself lift into the air and fly backwards, slamming full force against a wall that should have been insubstantial to her, and sliding to the floor in a crumpled heap. But she knew she had gotten the better of him in this discussion, and it brought a small, self-satisfied smile to her lips despite the painful tingles that shot through her.

Unable to move from the shock to her system, she could only stare as the figure in the TV set faded, and the letters in the top corner expanded to cover the screen, golden in color once more and rotating prettily, while a sweet female voice announced, "This broadcast of TV Olymp was brought to you by 'Ambrosia - the snack that really lifts you up'. And now back to our regular program."

The letters rotated into blackness, and then the opening credits of Seinfeld flashed across the screen. Just then the sound of a key in the door alerted Xena to the writer coming back. She picked herself up awkwardly, trying to work the stiffness out of her body. Her hair was sticking up around her head like a black halo, charged with electricity. Every movement was pure white-hot agony, but she gritted her teeth and forced her protesting ethereal body to cooperate.

Thus Isabelle found her walking stiffly from the wall back to the couch, her face a rigid mask, jaw clenched tightly. Belatedly it occurred to the ghost warrior that she could have faded out until she recovered, but already Isabelle was by her side, concern in her gentle green eyes.

"Goodness, Xena, what happened to you?" She sat the cardboard box containing the food on the table and examined the dark woman with her eyes.

Thinking quickly, the warrior decided to stick as close to the truth as possible. "I don't know... I must have gotten too close to that TV thing. Something shocked me."

Isabelle nodded. "That happens. The screen's got some static, and when you touch it, you get charged." She smirked suddenly. "And I guess it has a lot more effect on you when you're insubstantial." The writer bit her lip, taking in the hair snaking up from the warrior's head, and the rigidity of her movements. "You know, you're quite a sight," she said fighting the giggles.

"Oh very funny," Xena muttered darkly.

Isabelle sobered a little. "I'm sorry. It's just... does it hurt?"

"Not really," the warrior lied, forcing a smile. "Tingles a little."

"Okay." Isabelle's face twitched madly, amusement battling with concern. Xena's grin was a little too wooden for her words to be entirely true. "I'm going to touch you - to discharge the electricity. This might be uncomfortable for a sec. Ready?" When Xena nodded, Isabelle reached out and touched a fingertip to the warrior's forearm. The jolt that shot through them was a lot stronger than she had anticipated, and the young woman gasped as she staggered backward.

Xena was similarly affected, and now it was her turn to be concerned as she looked over at the young woman. Isabelle, however, recovered quickly. She shook her head to clear it and wriggled her fingers to get rid of the tingles. "Wow," she breathed, "that was a sizzler. Feel better now?"

The warrior's hair settled down slowly, and an experimental flexing of her muscles revealed only a slight stiffness and a tremor that was rapidly fading. She looked at Isabelle in wonder. "Yeah. You must have a healer's touch."

"Nah," Isabelle said smugly, "just elementary physics. You've been grounded."

"Whatever," Xena agreed, the pun lost on her.

"Xena?"

"What?"

"Keep away from the TV screen from now on, okay?"

The warrior barked a laugh. "No problem there, bard!"

Despite Isabelle's reservations, Xena insisted that she would be fine as long as she stayed at a safe distance from the TV set, and so they sat watching shows while Isabelle consumed an incredible amount of chicken chop suey.

Xena watched her as she ate. She chuckled and shook her head. "Two thousand years have done nothing to lessen your appetite, my friend," she said with a smile. Isabelle gave her a puzzled look. Xena just shrugged and flashed those white teeth at her.

"Well, Wong seems to be convinced that I'm too skinny, and he takes every opportunity to fatten me up," she said around a mouthful. "Can't say I mind him slipping me all those extras, though."

After finishing her food, Isabelle took the empty plate into the kitchen, just as another news flash came on. It took a supreme effort of will on Xena's part not to gasp aloud as the pictures of Corina Walker were shown once more. Holding her breath, she listened to the writer bustle in the kitchen. If only she were solid enough to manipulate that control thingy, and do that 'zap' stuff! It would never do for Isabelle to see the terrorist's face now!

When she heard Walker's name mentioned, Isabelle's honey-haired head poked out from the door frame, just in time to see the rather shapely jeans-clad posterior of the infamous terrorist disappear into a squad car.

Unaware of one warrior sinking back onto the couch in weak relief, Isabelle said, "I wonder what kind of a person she is. I mean, do you really think she's mad? But if she isn't, what would make her turn herself in?"

Xena sighed. "I'm sure she's not nearly as mad as they think she

is," she said quietly.

"Even though she says she's talked to the War God, Mars?"

"Yup. Even so."

Isabelle sighed. "Well, I'm sure we'll be seeing more of her. Anyway, I suppose I'd better go see what Lilli has to say."

The reluctance in the young writer's voice did not go unnoticed by a certain ghostly Warrior Princess. She sauntered over to the little study's door and sprawled on her favorite chair as she watched Isabelle punch Lilli's number into the cordless phone. Then Isabelle held the device to her ear, and waited.

And waited.

"Oh well. Got your machine on, do you," she murmured into the device. "...you can leave me a message after the beep," she mimicked her sister's voice with rolled eyes, "BEEP!" She put down the receiver.

"You know, it's strange," Xena remarked wryly, "people look at you funny for talking to invisible friends, but nobody turns a hair when you speak gibberish into a little hand-held 'phone'. What was that about?"

"Nothing. It's just that she turned on her answering machine. I don't like talking to the thing. I don't like the thought that she might be home and just listening in to see who's calling before she decides to answer."

The warrior cocked an eyebrow.

"Whaat?"

She was answered by a meaningful look at Isabelle's own answering machine that was still blinking with Lilli's last message, and a wiggle of said eyebrow.

"Um, well," Isabelle said defensively, "that was *different*."

"If you say so," Xena said with a shrug.

"Yeah well, anyway, I-"

She was cut off by the ringing of the doorbell. She sighed softly. "I guess that would be her," she surmised as she went to answer the door.

"Lilli, you are becoming obsessive," Isabelle told the young woman when she walked through the door.

Lilli was taken aback. "Obsessive? What's wrong with coming to see my big sister? Don't I at least get a hello?"

"Hi," Isabelle pouted. Xena stood leaning against the door frame of the kitchen, watching them.

"Well, I'm sorry, but when you weren't at work, and I couldn't reach you here, I got worried. You know, the thugs and all..."

"Well, I decided to take the day off, because I needed a break. I went for a drive."

"A drive? All by yourself?"

"Well.. yes. You got a problem with that?"

"Of course not."

"So?"

"Well, but you could have left me a message or something. Jesus, Isabelle! We were supposed to meet up and plan our trip!"

Xena's voice came to her from the kitchen door. "She's treating you like a baby. Tell her to stop it. You're a grown woman."

"Stop treating me like a baby, Lilli. I'm a grown woman," Isabelle said heatedly. Her eyes flicked to the ghostly warrior, who was lounging in the doorway, studying her fingernails.

"Listen, I'm not... I mean of course you're a grown woman, Isa," Lilli said, sounding hurt. "I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Yeah, well, I am." Isabelle felt an unreasonable anger at her sister. Sure, she had a tendency to sulk when she thought she was being neglected, but then that was what little sisters did, wasn't it? She tried to soften a little. "Look, Lil, I've had a couple of hard days. I just need a break, okay?"

Lilli sighed. "Did you at least call the police?"

Xena strolled over to where Lilli was standing. "She's doing it again, Isabelle," she said, studying the young woman with a certain

detached arrogance. "Trying to mother you."

"Lilli," Isabelle said, with a lot more patience than she felt, "we already had that discussion. Stop telling me what to do."

"What is wrong with you, Isabelle? You're acting so strangely lately, I hardly know you anymore."

Xena started to circle Isabelle's sister, never taking her eyes off her. She made the writer think of a cat stalking a caged bird. Isabelle found it rather disturbing to watch, especially since Lilli was quite unaware of the predatory attention bestowed upon her.

"Well, lady" the warrior said in a silky tone, "It's about time she showed you who's boss. You never dreamed she'd kick your sorry little ass this w-"

"Xena!" Isabelle exclaimed, shocked.

"What?" Xena and Lilli said together.

Isabelle looked from one to the other. The warrior ghost with that somewhat fixed smile on her face, her sister looking at her as if in doubt whether she still had all her marbles. The situation was so absurd it made her want to cry.

She took several deep, slow breaths before speaking. "Look, Lil, I'm sorry. Let's just drop it, okay? Why don't we go sit down and have some tea? I was just going to make me a cup."

Lilli gave her an odd look, and took a breath to speak. But instead she just shrugged, with Xena mirroring the gesture as they made their way into the living room.

Glad for the temporary respite, Isabelle went into the kitchen to put the kettle to boil. God, she had done it again! Spoken out loud to the warrior when there was someone there to hear. She could only hope Lilli hadn't caught on.

"What the hell were you thinking, Xena," she murmured to no-one in particular. "Are you trying to *make* me look like a loon?" She rummaged loudly in her cupboard to get the cups and saucers, banging doors and drawers with somewhat more force than strictly necessary. It was probably that rotten sense of humor again. And yet, the way the warrior kept looking at Lilli, one could almost think she was jealous. But that made no sense!

"Oh my God," she murmured, "tell me this ain't happening! I must be so off my rocker. An invisible woman warrior ghost wanting me all to herself..." She shook her head and chuckled mirthlessly. The funny thing was, the ghost had a pretty good chance of getting her wish if she kept this up. Because everybody else was just going to steer clear of her.

"You okay?" Xena's soft voice rumbled from the doorway.

Flushing, she turned to look at the warrior. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," Xena smirked. Then she sobered. Her jaw clenched and she was chewing her tongue as she groped for words. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... Hades, I was being a bitch out there." The warrior crossed the distance between them and leaned against the counter, while Isabelle arranged the cups and the tea on a tablet, and waited for the water to boil.

Isabelle kept her voice a low murmur as she replied. "She's my sister, Xena. And my best friend. I've never been closer to *anyone*, ever"

Xena attempted a smile, but it came out as a somewhat sickly grimace. "Well..."

"Yeah," Isabelle chided gently, "next time, don't make me yell at you in front of her! Or anyone else for that matter."

"All right," Xena agreed, the grin seeming forced on her angled features. "I'll try to behave when little Miss Perky's around."

"Xena," Isabelle hissed.

Xena shrugged and rolled her eyes.

Isabelle threw up her hands.

The evening went well enough once tea was served, with Xena keeping fairly quiet and even grinning at times in the right places. Though, truth be told, she looked ready to do mayhem any moment even so. Isabelle had regained her equilibrium, and Lilli was quick to forgive her her earlier outburst. Not one word was lost about the calling of Xena's name. Things slowly went back to normal.

And then Lilli asked if he could see how her story was coming along.

"Um... Lil, I don't know... I'm not sure it's ready." For some reason, the thought of her baby sister seeing the rather graphic description of Xena's and Gabrielle's 'first time' together made her stomach churn. She had been reluctant to write it, and had only done so at Xena's insistence. She fought a slight grin when she remembered how the surly warrior had described the scene, the tenderness she'd glimpsed hidden behind Xena's usual gruff, clipped speech. And Isabelle had to admit she'd found herself enjoying it in the end. Well, sort of. In a detached, purely artistic sort of way. No more.

"Why not, Isa? You've got a terrific start there. I'd really like to see where it's going.

"I know you would, it's just that... it's very... personal..."

"Isabelle, we are talking about a character you invented here. How can it be 'personal'?"

Isabelle blushed a little, her gaze going to the warrior once again seated on the chair by the study's door. "I know, but..."

"Aw, come on," Xena said, "let her read it. I don't mind. Much." Her eyes glittered.

Isabelle was about to reply, but caught herself before the first word left her lips. Instead, she turned to Lilli. "If you're sure..."

If Lilli had caught her questioning look to the chair by the door, she didn't let on.

"Sure I'm sure," Lilli and Xena said together. Isabelle bit her lip to keep from screaming hysterically.

- Part 3 -

The warrior speaks...

"Oh Gods, Xena! Yes!"

Her cry echoes into the night as her body tenses and rocks with a powerful climax. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, but I don't feel the pain. After a few moments, I feel her hold weaken, and her body go limp.

As she sinks into my welcoming arms, panting and flushed with pleasure and exertion, I feel a sense of joy that I have never before experienced. I hold her close to me, wanting to feel the warmth of her against every inch of my body. Her chest ripples with her heavy breathing, and her moist warm breath tickles my neck. My own breathing is strained, too, from taking her to heights she has never before experienced. I am aware of the arrogance in that statement, but I know it to be true by the look of sheer rapturous wonder on her face.

My big, callous fingers feel somehow inappropriate as I gently brush the damp strands of hair out of her face. As if sensing my thoughts, she catches my hand in hers and kisses it. "So gentle," she murmurs as she strokes it softly.

I wrap my arms more firmly around her, and feel her respond by snuggling closer. Her hand idly wanders along my neckline and collarbone. I can feel my pulse beat clear and strong against her fingertips. "You feel so soft," she whispers.

I place my hand over hers. "If I catch you saying that where anyone can hear, you're history, bard," I rumble deep in my throat and give her a quick tickle in the ribs. Her whole body ripples with her giggle.

She props herself up on an elbow to look at me. Her smile pierces my soul. Slowly, tenderly, she places a small kiss on the corner of my mouth before settling back down against me. Very soon her breathing evens out as Morpheus eases her gently into his realm.

For me, however, there will be no sleep for now.

The writer's study, 11:00 pm...

Lilli licked her lips. She re-read a passage. Looked at Isabelle. Cleared her throat several times. "Whoa..." was all she said.

Isabelle tried to sound nonchalant, but failed. "Why, is there something wrong?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Xena drawled, arching a brow. Isabelle glanced at her with a harried expression. Xena, seated in her usual spot against the wall at the back of the study, had remained rather too still as Lilli read through the story, her lips curled in a tiny, unreadable smile. When she caught Isabelle's eyes, a warm smile lit up her face momentarily, startlingly.

"N-nothing. I guess," Lilli stammered, a flush creeping up her neck.

"Nothing?" Isabelle's own raised brow uncannily mirrored the warrior's.

"Well.... somehow I'd have expected your warrior to hook up with a more.... welll... *Gabriel*-type person."

"Gabriel??" Xena cried, going from unreadable and benign to exasperated indignation in the time it took to jump to her feet. "Zeus give me strength, or I swear I'll pummel that twerp to Tartarus and back." Her sword came whisking out of its sheath in a smooth motion.

"Well, I really don't think Xena would appreciate a gender change of her partner. As you can see, she loves Gabrielle just the way she is," Isabelle said with a warning glare in the warrior's direction, who just glowered darkly at the young woman.

"You know, I think you're going overboard a little here. It's just a *story*, Isabelle, but you keep talking about that warrior hussy as if she was standing here with her sword drawn."

Isabelle took in Xena's towering form, and the angry glint in her ice blue eyes. "A hussy, am I," the warrior growled dangerously.

"I was just beginning to like her, and now you.. she... I mean," Lilli spread her hands. "You write her as an oddball."

"Oddball??" Xena's voice took on an almost hysterical pitch. In spite of herself, Isabelle had to chuckle. *Bet no-one's ever called you these things in your hearing before*, she thought in wry amusement.

"Come on, Lil, drop it. It's a plot point."

But Lilli had the bit between her teeth - and the spurs of a somewhat homophobic bringing-up to drive her forward. "I still don't get it. Pair them off with a couple of decent men. Hercules was a Greek hero, right? How about this: Hercules traveling with a friend, meeting the warrior and her bard wench, they get together and have a good time, the four of them. Whaddya think?"

The young woman winced as Xena's sword whistled towards Lilli's head in a powerful downward stroke. The blade passed harmlessly through the length of her body. She thought she saw her sister flinch and shudder slightly, as if taken by a sudden chill. "One more word," Xena hissed, "and I swear I'll put the Pinch on the little chit." She was practically frothing at the mouth.

"Um... Hercules and Iolaus are from a different story," Isabelle said weakly.

"I don't know why she's being such an ass about this," Xena rumbled, putting her sword away and frowning. "From the glaze in her eyes when she read it, she was enjoying it well enough. Maybe it's just hitting too close to home, eh? Make her tell you to her face that reading it didn't get her all ho-"

"Enough," Isabelle hissed through clenched teeth.

Lilli turned in her chair to look at her sister. "What was that?"

"Nothing. I had something caught between my teeth," Isabelle offered, trying hard to ignore Lilli's doubtful look. "And by the way, I didn't notice you scream in outrage and yell blasphemy while you were reading that love scene." She looked up to see Xena's satisfied smirk. "So it can't have been that much of a shock for you." She crossed her arms, curious about the answer she would get.

"Uh.. hey, it was very well written, I'll give you that much," Lilli answered, and scratched her neck.

"Uh, huh," Isabelle agreed, "turned you on, huh?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Lilli said quickly, but her deepening blush betrayed her.

"Come on, admit it... you're fascinated every bit as much as I am. Wouldn't have been half as exciting if it had been Xena and, say, Hercules. You can-"

"Did you have to bring that up?" Xena cut in. "That was long ago."

The writer gave her an apologetic grin.

"You're being silly, Isa, and you know it," Lilli replied sullenly. "What are you grinning at, anyway?"

"Me? Oh, nothing I... nothing at all."

Lilli gave her sister a look. "Is, I don't know what happened while I was away on that trip, but ever since I'm back, you've been... weird. I mean, you've been staring at empty air and behaving just like there was someone standing there, you're talking about this warrior chick as if she was real..." She waited for a reply, and when Isabelle just kept looking at her, she continued. "Well, at first I thought you were trying to make fun of me, but now I'm not so sure... And your *writing!* Not saying it's not inspired, but..."

"Oh, why can't the twerp just drop it," Xena mumbled to herself.

"She's right, you know," Isabelle told the warrior, "I've certainly found my mu- *Oh my god!*" Mortified, she clapped her hand over her mouth. But the damage was done.

Xena squeezed her eyes shut. "Sorry," she whispered. "Gods, I'm so sorry."

Isabelle looked from Xena to Lilli. They were both looking at her with pained and confused expressions. She herself did not know whether to be more angry at the warrior, for not keeping quiet, at herself, for letting her guard down this badly, or at her sister, for that condescending, pitying look she was getting from her.

She tried to swallow the lump that threatened to block her throat. "Well, since you already seem to think I've lost my marbles," she said tonelessly, "I guess it won't hurt to tell you."

And so she did. She spilled out the whole story from the moment the ghost warrior had first appeared in her study, how she had come to Isabelle's rescue in the alleyway, and how Xena had told her the story of her life for her to write down. She did not mention the little incident in the Redwoods, however. Lilli listened in stunned silence.

"And you say she's here in the room with us?" Lilli asked finally, when Isabelle had finished. It was obvious that her younger sister believed her to be clear out of her mind. Not that Isabelle could blame her.

"Yes. She's standing there beside the computer. When you called

her an oddball earlier, she ran you through with her sword." She sighed, and cast a despairing look at the tall woman. Xena, however, somehow looked just as helpless as Isabelle felt. The young writer could not help thinking that it looked incongruous in the stoic warrior. It made her want to giggle hysterically.

Lilli traced her fingers over the keyboard. She picked up the mouse, twirled its cable between her fingers. She examined it closely. Finally, she spoke, but she did not look at her sister.

"Isa... have you thought about... seeing somebody? I mean... getting professional help?"

"No." Isabelle said firmly.

"Isa, you do realize you have a problem, right? I mean, come on, an invisible friend? That's for little kids who don't get enough attention from their parents."

There was some truth in that. It was just close enough to the memories of her own childhood to sting. But Isabelle ignored the remark. Xena was no imaginary childhood companion!

"Lil, think about it. You said yourself I've changed. I've changed because she made me look at things from another angle, and because I've had insight into a soul that's so different from mine that I could never have made it up." She paused, and glanced at Xena, who was now leaning against the desk and staring out of the window, her face expressionless. The only indication that she was even alive was that telltale twitch of her jaw muscle.

"Do you really think I could make a character come to life in a story the way I did with Xena? I'm not much of a writer, let's face it. All my stories so far have just been flat and boring. But not this one, Lil, because I had help. Because *she* gave it depth." *God, Lilli, please believe me!*

Lilli, however, looked doubtful. "Isabelle, sometimes inspiration just strikes. It can happen without help from anybody. And I know you have talent. But this is just... ridiculous!"

Isabelle was well aware of how ludicrous it must sound to anyone else. If only she had proof! "And when those thugs attacked me, do you think I would have had a chance in Tartarus against them? I have no idea how to fight, you know that. If she hadn't helped me, I wouldn't be standing here arguing with you."

"And just how did she do that, if she's a ghost? Did she go and beat

them up, the way she ran me through with her sword? Listen to yourself, Isa!"

"Well, for once, she believed in me, which apparently you don't," Isabelle said sullenly. "I would have let them have their way with me, if she hadn't popped up and told me to fight."

"Well, then maybe we have it," Lilli said excitedly. "You were under severe emotional strain, and this was your way of dealing with it. So your subconscious made the warrior appear, and made you start defending yourself. And since it was such a traumatic experience, your mind still plays tricks on you."

"Nice theory, Ms. Freud." Lilli's condescending tone irritated Isabelle no end. "But a couple of things are wrong with that. One, Xena was there before that. Two, that doesn't explain why I suddenly knew how to fight. Well, nothing really explains that, I guess," she amended quietly.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Presently Lilli said, "Isabelle, you know I love you to bits, but I still think you should go see a therapist. It's really no biggie these days, a lot of people-"

"I said no! I'm not mad, and I'm not seeing a shrink, forget it!"

"Oh fine, have it your way."

Isabelle's voice dripped with venom. "Just leave it alone, okay? I never should have told you. I could have known you wouldn't believe me."

"Isabelle, Sis..."

"Don't 'sis' me, Lilli! I think you'd better go home now."

"But..."

"Go! Please! I'll talk to you later. Just leave me alone." She added as an afterthought, "and maybe you'd better find someone to go to L.A. with you. I'm not coming."

"But..." Lilli's shoulders slumped as she got up from the chair and started for the door. She looked a question at the other woman.

"I mean it, Lil, please. I'll talk to you when we've both settled down, okay?"

"Okay, Isa. Listen, I'm sorry..."

She sighed. "Yeah. So am I."

Dejected, Lilli gave Isabelle a quick hug, and left.

Isabelle sank down onto the couch in the living room, and began staring at a blank TV screen. She felt the ghostly presence before she saw her, but she did not look up as Xena hesitantly approached her.

"Isabelle..." the warrior said softly as she knelt down by the couch.

"You've done it again," Isabelle said with quiet reproach. "That's twice now, after you promised you wouldn't."

"I'm sorry. Really, I am. I don't know what got into me. But she treated you like a baby, and the way she talked about Gabrielle... I just got so angry."

"I noticed," Isabelle said tonelessly, with an image of that sword cleaving Lilli in half. She shuddered.

As if guessing the writer's thoughts, Xena said with a tiny smile, "I knew I wouldn't be able to touch her when I passed my sword through her." Her grin broadened. "But it made me feel better."

Isabelle made no reply, just continued staring sullenly into nothing, which wiped the grin right off the warrior's face.

"You've got a right to be mad," Xena said quietly.

"Nice choice of words," Isabelle murmured bitterly, still not looking at the tall woman, who was clearly at a loss.

Xena ran a nervous hand through her dark hair, and scratched her neck. "Listen Isabelle, I'm not good at this... I... Oh Hades, I didn't..." She paused. "Anyway, I wish this had gone differently."

"Yeah, so do I," the writer said curtly. She picked up the remote, and the TV buzzed to life. Without really looking, she started flipping through the channels.

Effectively dismissed, a dejected warrior got to her feet and faded out.

Only then did Isabelle let the barely contained tears fall. Soon they turned into hysterical sobs that went on until she heard the National

Anthem playing as that particular channel went off the air for the night.

The tears were still flowing, though, as she switched off the TV and went into her study, where the computer was still running.

Xena, having squatted in her customary spot by the wall, flowed gracefully to her feet as she entered, but Isabelle pointedly ignored her and sat down at the desk. Her stomach was roiling from anger and hurt and all that crying. She wasn't even sure who she was angry with - herself, Xena, Lilli, or just the world in general.

Maybe her sister was right. Maybe she really *was* imagining Xena. In that case, she really did need help.

"The Lord help me, I'm a basket case," she murmured, as she idly clicked the mouse across the screen, and soon opened the folder where the "Warrior's Tale" resided. After considering the icon for a moment, she took a deep breath, and hit "Delete".

"What's a basket case?"

Even though she knew the warrior was there, the sound of Xena's low voice made her start.

"I am, for still talking to you. A lunatic. A nut. Talking to an invisible warrior friend that only I can see. What does that sound like to you?"

"Like the crazed ramblings of a madwoman?" Xena offered. Her feeble attempt at humor was lost on the writer, however.

Isabelle buried her face in her hands and groaned. "God, and I'm still doing it! Why did you have to come to me, of all people? Why won't you go away? All you do is get me in trouble."

The warrior was silent for so long that Isabelle almost thought she had left again. "I came to you, of all people, because you need me, even if you don't know it yet. I can't tell you more than that." She paused to clear her throat. "And if you truly, truly wish me to leave you, I will have no choice but to go."

A slight tremor in her voice made Isabelle look up into blue eyes gazing at her with a guarded expression.

"So, do you?"

Isabelle opened her mouth a few times, angrily, but she could not

make the words come. Finally, she sighed and shook her head.

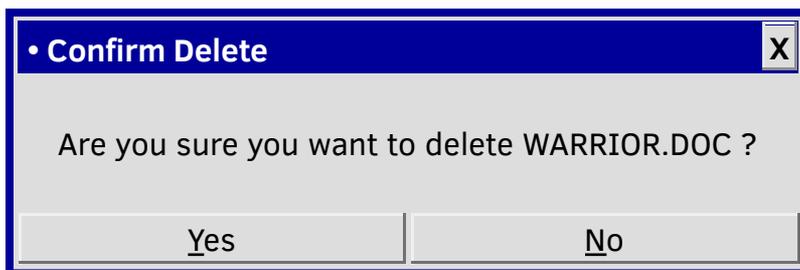
Xena relaxed visibly at that. Her eyes fluttered closed as she released a breath she must have been holding for some time (her thoughts on the edge of hysteria, Isabelle wondered what a ghost was doing breathing). It was a measure of the warrior's relief that she allowed herself this moment of weakness.

An instant later, she was her calm, composed self again. "I don't think you're crazy, Isabelle," she said with a half-smile. Her voice had that low, tingling quality again that never failed to make the younger woman's stomach flutter. Isabelle returned the smile with a shaky grin of her own. Their eyes locked for a timeless moment. When the writer finally blinked, her pulse was beating a mad gallop against the skin of her throat. She cleared her throat and in a nervous gesture pushed her unruly bangs back from her brow, surprised to find a few beads of sweat there.

"By the way, what was that you did on the computer just now?" the warrior asked her.

"I deleted the... Oh no!" She spun in her chair to look at the screen, a colorful curse escaping her that brought a startled grin to her ghostly companion's face.

There, on the screen, a requester window was patiently awaiting her answer.



Weak with relief, Isabelle hastily clicked the "No"-button before leaning back in her chair. "God, I sure am glad you interrupted me when you did. I was about to do a really stupid thing there."

Xena shrugged. She had learned not to bother asking about details concerning the things Isabelle did on that machine. "I'm here to keep you out of trouble, after all," she said with a straight face.

The writer turned and shot her a somber look. Xena looked back at her, pure, cherubic innocence written all over her face. It was so out-of-place in the fierce warrior that Isabelle burst out laughing and forgot all about the cutting remark she had been about to

make.

"Well now," the warrior said presently, "if you're not too tired, I believe we have a story waiting to be written." Her tone was casual, but there was a silent plea in those blue eyes that Isabelle somehow found herself unable to ignore.

"Well, I think I'm good for another hour or so. Let's get working."

The radiant smile she got for an answer almost made the writer forget what she had been angry at the warrior for.

The warrior speaks...

She is sleeping like a baby in my arms, and I find myself wondering as I hold her close what I ever did to deserve such trust.

I have indeed been gentle with her, more than I ever thought I could be. I know I have been far from gentle with my consorts in the past. But this is so very different. I have made love quite a few times, and yet she makes me feel inexperienced. The way she responds to my slightest touch, the way a mere brush of her fingertips makes me tremble with need, is both exciting and a little frightening. This from one who supposedly does not know fear.

She brings out a side in me that I did not know I had, and it feels right. I may be rougher with her in the future, because it is my nature, and indeed it almost seemed that she would have wanted me to. But not before I make sure she is ready for that. I will not risk the trust she has placed in me.

My hand idly toys with a strand of her silky, honey-colored hair as I watch her sleep. She looks younger, when all the hard lines that life at my side has put on her youthful face are softened by her peaceful slumber. Now only the tiny creases around her eyes remain, a testimony to her ready smile. I brush my knuckles across her cheek, unable to keep myself from touching her soft skin. Far from waking, a tiny, contented smile curves the corners of her mouth as she snuggles closer with a little sigh.

I wonder if she has any idea how much she has changed my life.

I still cannot quite believe I am not dreaming. But this is better than anything my dark mind could come up with, I am sure. She is so wonderful. She is the one who can make my soul complete. All I have to do is let her.

I squeeze my eyes shut and clench my jaw. I cannot. Not yet. I need more time.

The writer's study, way past midnight...

"I think this is coming along real nicely," Isabelle mused as she saved the file. She also made a backup copy on her hard drive, and another one on disk, just to be on the safe side.

The paragraph had taken longer to write than usual, because Xena would speak a few words, then trail off and just sit there with a dreamy expression until Isabelle nudged her back into the present with a wry grin. Later the ethereal warrior had gotten to her feet and approached the young woman's chair, where she now sat on the armrest, one arm draped over the chair's back, watching the writer's fingers flit across the keyboard.

From then on, it had been Isabelle's turn to trail off. The closeness of the ghostly shape had made her fumble with the keyboard, and she had repeatedly had to go back and correct typos, or rewrite whole sentences because she just couldn't seem to fit the words together properly. She had grumbled under her breath and scowled furiously every time she had hit a wrong key. At the same time she could not help hoping that the warrior would stay right where she was because having her there just made her feel nice inside. Even Xena's knowing smirk whenever their eyes met hadn't been able to dampen that.

She turned to smile at her insubstantial friend. "Well, I think I'm about ready for..." Something in the warrior's eyes made her forget completely what she had been about to say. She cleared her throat as once more the butterflies claimed her stomach.

"I can't get over how much you're like her," Xena whispered hoarsely. She reached up a hand to brush Isabelle's hair, who closed her eyes at the tingling almost-contact. A shudder ran through her.

"Cold?" the warrior murmured softly.

Isabelle swallowed again. "Not really," she breathed, while her hands fumbled with the mouse to shut down the computer. "But I think I'll go to bed."

"Okay with me," Xena said as she watched her young friend flip the

power switch and get to her feet.

Before she turned off the light, Isabelle paused at the door and looked back at the warrior, who was still sitting on the armrest of the chair by the computer.

"I'm really upset with you," she told Xena in a quiet voice. She wasn't sure why she said it at all. Probably just to convince herself. Somehow, the steady, luminous blue eyes meeting her gaze made being angry almost impossible. And it certainly wasn't anger that was twisting her guts into knots now.

"And I really am sorry," Xena said, just as quietly. She popped out, and reappeared an instant later by the warrior's side, making the young woman jump.

"I hate it when you do that!"

"Sorry," Xena said with a sheepish grin, and scratched her neck. "I figured as long as I was getting you upset with me, I might as well be thorough about it."

Isabelle had to laugh, some of the nervous tension draining from her. "That's right. You're not one to leave a job unfinished, are you," she teased.

The warrior took a breath. Her smile looked just a tiny bit forced for an instant. "No, I guess not."

They stood there looking at each other uncertainly for a while, until Isabelle said, "Well, um... good night, Xena."

"Yeah. Good night, Isabelle," the warrior said softly, touching her fingertips to the young woman's cheek, letting herself feel the deep connection and the electric tingle.

Isabelle smiled. Then a silly mood took her, and she suddenly had to giggle. "Good night, John-Boy," she said, and giggled even harder at Xena's thoroughly puzzled expression.

"Never mind, Xena," she told the ghostly woman, still chuckling, "I think I'm losing it. See you tomorrow, huh?"

The tall woman nodded, though she looked doubtful. She was still shaking her head in puzzled confusion when she faded slowly from view.

Still smiling, Isabelle washed up and went to bed. She could not

help that feeling of having passed up some big chance.

For what must be the thousandth time, Isabelle kicked off the covers, skin damp with sweat. It was just too darn hot! Restless, she tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable.

Usually she went to sleep lying on her side facing the wall. But with her black eye, that position was uncomfortable, as the bruise began to throb with a dull ache as soon as it touched the pillow.

Frustrated, she rolled onto her back. The cooling sweat on her skin gave her goose bumps, and she groped for her blanket.

As she lay there staring at the ceiling, eyes wide open, she watched the flicker of light from the traffic below, and listened to the various noises of nighttime in the big city that drifted up through the partly open balcony door. Sounds that she heard every night, but she had never realized they were so loud! And she could have sworn the lights were flickering brighter, too, just to annoy her further.

"Damn," she muttered as she flung back the blanket once more and flopped onto her belly. She closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe evenly.

Xena was doing *something* to her, but Isabelle couldn't put her finger on it. Her mere presence made her feel like a high school girl.

A high school girl with a major crush on the captain of the football team.

It was ludicrous!

And it was also quite true.

Every time she saw those incredible blue eyes before her mind's eye, her pulse quickened, and her stomach became infested with butterflies.

"Might as well face it," she murmured to herself. "I'm nuts. But it feels so... right."

Sighing heavily, she rolled onto her side, to find herself looking into that set of steel blue eyes for real.

Isabelle almost jumped out of her skin.

"For Chrissake, Xena! Don't *do* that! You scared the dickens out of

me!"

"I'm sorry," the warrior said, but a quirk of her mouth gave her the lie. The woman was becoming entirely too fond of these little pranks!

"Can't sleep?" Xena asked softly.

Only now did Isabelle notice that the warrior had exchanged her leathers and armor for a blue silk gown that matched her eyes and set off her tanned skin beautifully. The shimmering fabric fell loosely about her lithe body, suggestive of rippling muscle underneath. The low neckline revealed enough cleavage to make any mouth water. Isabelle cleared her throat. What *was* she thinking!?

"Looks like I'm having a little trouble relaxing," Isabelle admitted. *And you're certainly not helping any in this outfit, warrior,* she thought wryly. "But what's with you? You look... different."

Xena shrugged. "Oh, that? I saw one like it on the TV thingy. Do you like it?"

"Yes, yes! It's... very nice." *Way to understate, Isa!*, she thought dryly. *'Nice' isn't in it. More like 'drop dead gorgeous'!*

The warrior grinned that crooked half-grin that Isabelle found so attractive. "Sort of reminds me of the time I had to pose as a princess. Boy, did I feel out of place in that dress! But I sure feel a lot more...exposed in this." She ran her hands over the fabric to straighten it.

The warrior laughed nervously. "No, you're fine. Just fine. It's not like your normal apparel isn't sexy, too." *Oh my God, did I just say that out loud???*

Xena actually blushed!

"I don't know why I'm feeling so self-conscious," she murmured. "I've done my share of seducing, and I certainly wasn't wearing high necks when I did it." She took a breath. "Well, do you want me to help you relax, so you can go to sleep?"

Their eyes met, and Isabelle's stomach turned somersaults. The funny thing was, if she hadn't known the warrior better, she would have thought Xena was just as nervous as she was herself. "Not really," she breathed, before she quite knew what she was saying.

From the look on Xena's face, that was exactly the answer the ghostly warrior had been hoping for.

She slowly extended her hand as if to touch Isabelle's, but stopped short. Instead, she whispered, "Come here," as she took a step back and spread her arms.

Dazed, Isabelle rose from the bed and closed the distance to the warrior until they stood face to face.

"So, you've never done it with a woman, have you?"

Isabelle, suddenly breathless, shook her head. Xena stepped into her, their bodies only a hair's breadth apart. "Let me show you", she breathed.

Isabelle swallowed hard. "I'm not sure... Anyway, I thought you couldn't touch me, so how do you...?" She let that trail away.

"There are ways to do this that don't involve touching, Isabelle", Xena whispered suggestively.

Isabelle found herself unable to look into eyes burning with barely controlled passion. Instead, she dropped her gaze shyly to the ground, just in time to see the sky blue gown drop in a puddle around the Warrior Princess' ankles, and disappear.

"You are so much like her, it hurts", Xena murmured huskily, "Down to that little bashful grin that always drives me crazy. Now, look at me!"

Hesitantly, Isabelle complied. "You're beautiful!" she gasped before she could stop herself.

Xena's hands reached for her, hovered just shy of her cheeks. The tingle of the ghostly touch was almost painfully pleasant. A giddy warmth spread through her and washed in a shock wave to the pit of her stomach.

"Come on, let me look at you." A low, insistent whisper from Xena that made the writer shudder to the core, "take off your clothes for me!"

Little spots started dancing before Isabelle's eyes as she did as asked, hands shaking so hard she had to try three times to undo the buttons of her pajama top. After that, the young writer's last coherent thought for a very long time was that she was about to

make love with a ghost. A *woman* ghost. And that she wouldn't be able to stop herself even if her father walked in on her right that minute. And that she didn't give a damn. She must be even crazier than she thought.

Later that night - *much* later - as she lay on her bed, utterly spent, Xena asked her, smiling, "Well, do you still think this is - what did you call it? - Unnatural?"

Isabelle laughed softly. "No. Oh god, I never thought I could feel this way. I mean, no-one has ever... I can't believe what you did to me! And you never even laid a finger on me! I don't think I want to know what it would be like if we could actually touch each other."

"Don't ever think this was one-way," Xena replied softly. "And I DO know how it could be..." She flashed Isabelle a warm smile.

The writer turned suddenly serious. "Doesn't it bother you? I mean, you and me, and Gabrielle..."

Xena silenced her with an ethereal finger to her lips. "You ARE Gabrielle. If I hadn't been sure before, I would be after what we just experienced. You're her, there's not a doubt in my mind. I could never have come to you at all, otherwise. And it wouldn't have felt so...right. It was meant that we get together again."

"Yeah. That's really romantic, isn't it?" Isabelle said dreamily, "If only it could be more...real." Then she realized what she had said, "I'm sorry, Xena. Of course it was real. It's just..."

"Hush. I know what you mean. And believe me, I want it to be real for you, too. I'll just have to find a way."

And somehow, Isabelle knew that she would.

The warrior speaks...

Never before has anything like this happened to me. I am weak like a kitten where she is concerned, and yet I have never felt so strong.

I am idly going through the pages of this journal, and it strikes me that its very existence is testimony enough to the changes I am going through because she has come into my life. A warrior such as I, who has never had a talent for expressing anything with words, a

woman of action, groping, struggling to put into words that which she cannot even fully grasp!

I am sure the Gods are getting a good chuckle out of this.

I have kept the journal's existence from her, for I do not think I could take her laying eyes upon my feeble attempts at expressing myself, her, whose colorful narratives have held me captive for hours on end. I cannot bear the thought that my writing might not find her approval. I would hate for her image of me to be thus flawed. I feel terribly silly admitting this even in the privacy of these pages! But there it is.

I give a start at a sound close behind me. So engrossed have I been with my journal - and with my daydreams - that I never heard her approaching. I can feel the heat rising to my face, unsure how long she has been standing there watching me.

I know I must have been wearing the silliest grin.

Worse, the question begins nagging at me whether I would have heard an enemy approach just now, if I would have been able to react quickly and efficiently to protect us. I cannot continue in this way. It is not safe for us. But what can I do?

"Hey," she says softly.

Hades, the mere sound of her voice makes me shudder with longing! Without haste, I put the pages back into my pack and start rummaging, pretending to be looking for my whetstone. I hope she can't see my hands shaking, they feel as if they might drop that pack any moment.

"Hey," I reply, giving her a weak smile.

I am sure my voice is shaking so hard that she must know instantly the turmoil I am in, but she gives no sign of noticing anything out of the ordinary. At least I still seem to be able to conceal my emotional weaknesses to some extent. Even from one who knows me as well as she does.

"I've been down by the lakeshore," she tells me, a twinkle of barely contained excitement in her eyes, "and guess what I found there?"

Calm returning quickly, I put down my pack and smile up at her from where I am crouching. "I'm sure you're going to tell me," I say.

"Aw, you're no fun," she says, that twinkle never leaving her eyes.

In a fluid motion, I get to my feet and turn around so I am now standing in front of her, close, before murmuring softly, "Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so, Warrior Princess," she whispers, and once again her voice sends pleasant little shivers to the pit of my stomach.

That slight brush of her fingers on my arm as she turns - she makes it seem like coincidence. She is playing with me. I am more than happy to let her, and I follow her willingly. I wonder what she has come across this time. She is so excitable. It's quite fetching.

Although bubbling with excitement, she turns briefly and puts her finger to her lips, before leading the way through the bushes towards the lake. She is getting rather good at moving silently; I am impressed. I follow her, smiling to myself, fairly glowing with quiet pride.

And then, arriving at the edge of the woods, I see what has her so excited. It is a doe and her two fawns, come out into the open to enjoy the early morning sun. Despite our efforts, she must have scented us. She is looking our way, but she makes no move to escape, or warn her young, who are frolicking in the tall grass, doing clumsy kicks and capers that have my little bard grabbing on to me with suppressed delight.

Some of Gabrielle's excited wonder must have rubbed off on me, for I am finding myself lost in the magic of the moment, when under most circumstances, I would have seen these three as just another potential meal. My perceptions are changing, and I like it.

I gently pat the hand that is clutching my arm. She beams up at me, and I smile.

Slowly, steadily, in the days to follow, Isabelle found herself more and more living in one reality and *existing* in another. And just as gradually, her difficulties in keeping the two apart grew. More than ever, the warrior's tale captivated her, pulled her in. At times it was hard to tell if she was the bard or the writer, so deeply was she drawn into the story that Xena was telling her. She almost felt as if she should remember those moments herself...

Since that passionate night, Xena seemed to have become even more protective of her, hovering in sight almost constantly everywhere Isabelle went. It wasn't that she actually interacted with her - embarrassing moments like the incident in the Redwoods did

happen, but rarely. Much to the young writer's chagrin, however, they had a knack for occurring at the most inconvenient times.

Her tendency to talk to thin air was becoming a constant source of amusement at work, so much so that her co-workers were starting to call her "Elwood" in reference to the famous play "Harvey" by Mary Chase. She started to step lightly, and avoided looking the others in the eye. Anything to avoid drawing attention. But it did not always work.

At the same time, though, the warrior seemed to have withdrawn some part of herself, as if scared at having gone this far, this fast. She had not mentioned their passionate lovemaking again, and Isabelle could not even think about bringing it up without that feeling of running into some invisible barrier around the dark, ghostly woman.

This did not help her crumbling relations with her sister very much, to put it mildly. They argued often, and Xena was always quick to put in her two cents, which did not make the situation any better.

But faithful Lilli, convinced that her big sister needed her now more than ever, and equally certain that Isabelle was slowly losing her marbles, refused to be daunted. She began to hover to the point of annoyance, until the day Isabelle exploded at her and almost bodily threw her out of her apartment.

During all this, however, Isabelle had no sense of "losing it". She merely felt that a certain ghostly warrior was complicating her life something awful, in more ways than one. Yet she would not have traded the experience for anything.

And then, just when she thought she finally had things back under some semblance of control, disaster struck, in the form of a voice mail on Isabelle's answering machine.

"Hi, it's mom. How are you, hon? You haven't called in ages. You know, dad is going on a business trip to the East Coast next week, so I thought I'd drop by and spend a few days at your place if that's okay with you. Let me know, okay? Love you. Bye."

The young woman rolled her eyes. The last thing she needed now was her overprotective mother, not with an overprotective ghostly warrior around, that only she could see, and an overprotective and severely put out younger sister who was sure Isabelle wasn't playing with a full deck.

But she couldn't very well tell her mother not to come, because, ah, that ghost warrior was not too keen on strangers, and didn't she want to visit her son, Jonathan, instead? But then Jon and his roommates at UCLA were hardly the place for a woman of mother's caliber.

Besides, she did get on well with her mother, mostly. If only it wasn't for this terrible sense of foreboding...

With a sigh, the blonde woman accepted her fate, glancing at the silent warrior, who was once again glued to the TV. Cartoons fascinated her beyond reason, especially "The Mask", although she rather tended to laugh in the wrong places. She also had a tendency to avoid the news, for some reason. She always asked Isabelle to change the channel whenever a they were being aired.

Xena sensed Isabelle watching her, and flashed the blonde a quick, absent-minded grin, before returning her attention to the flickering screen.

Isabelle shook her head and smiled. The warrior had about two thousand years of so-called civilization to catch up on, but she seemed to be adapting fine. TV, Radio, appliances, she seemed to be taking in stride in most cases. Car rides still held a morbid fascination. But she was eager to learn, and full of questions about any new thing she saw. Her quick mind caught on readily enough, and Isabelle found herself enjoying the chance to teach the dark warrior about this world.

Much to Isabelle's amusement, it annoyed Xena no end that she lacked the substance to try out those *microwave dinners* that the young woman was so fond of. The fact that a full meal of meat and vegetables could be prepared and sit steaming on your plate, without shooting a single arrow, or building a fire, and in a matter of minutes, never ceased to amaze her, even after Isabelle had explained some of the magic behind it.

She stood there watching Xena's rapt face for a while, thinking how much that woman had come to mean to her. Then, taking a deep breath, she spoke.

"Ah, Xena?"

"Yes, Isabelle?" said Xena, without looking up.

"We may be having company soon."

"Oh?" Now the warrior turned her head, and fixed her with that set of blue eyes, that Isabelle somehow felt she had known forever.

"Yeah. Mom wants to come visit."

"Your mother?"

"Uh huh, of all the times... I really don't need this right now."

"Why, what's so bad about your mother coming to see you?"

"For one thing, I have an invisible warrior staying with me that only I can see. You've managed to embarrass me with Lilli, with my coworkers and just about everybody else I know around here, I shudder to think what will happen when you have to be around my mother for several days."

For a moment, it looked like Xena was going to give an angry retort, but then she just looked away with a pained expression, and said nothing.

It was with extremely mixed feelings that Isabelle awaited the arrival of her mother at the train station a few days later. Xena had promised to keep a low profile, but Xena being who she was, Isabelle doubted whether the warrior even knew the meaning of that expression.

Today was another fog-filled, wet day, as if the weather was determined to match her lack of enthusiasm at the impending visit. The heavy mist consisted of droplets that were not quite large enough to actually be considered rain, happily seeping through clothing and defying the umbrellas some people were bravely, uselessly, holding over their heads.

In the mist, the headlights of the approaching train looked like an eerie, disembodied thing floating silently closer. The grinding screech of the brakes came almost as a shock when the engine shuddered to a stop and the doors flew open with a sneeze of pneumatics and a whoosh of hot air.

As the people poured out, Isabelle scanned the crowd, hoping against hope that she had come here in vain. Her shoulders drooped when she saw the familiar figure of her mother weave her way through a mass of people mostly taller than herself. Just as well Xena had agreed to stay home, she was nervous enough

already.

Heaving a sigh, she put a smile on her face and barged forward to meet her mother halfway.

"Hello darling," her mother greeted her as she pulled her into a hug. And then, in that annoying way mothers sometimes have when they have not seen their child in a while, Mrs. Barnes pulled back, held her daughter at arm's length, and looked her up and down. "You're pale, and you've lost weight," she accused. Before Isabelle had a chance to roll her eyes and grumble a reply, she added. "But it's so good to see you again, Hon."

Smiling, Isabelle picked up her mother's suitcase and led the way back to the car.

"So, um, mom... how is dad?"

Isabelle only half listened to the latest news from home, just enough to know that everything was fine. Nothing much new had happened, but then, nothing much *ever* happened out there. She and Lilli had gone away to live and work in the big city because they both had been bored out of her minds, but lately, Isabelle found herself missing the peace and quiet of the countryside, sometimes.

It was not a long drive back to her apartment, and it seemed to pass even more quickly with Isabelle fretting over what was going to happen once they got there. Maybe her mother wouldn't notice anything out of the ordinary. She almost laughed out loud at the thought.

Her thoughts wandered to the ghostly warrior waiting for her back home. The days to come would be... interesting, to say the least. She shuddered a little, picturing all sorts of utterly embarrassing scenarios. But then she had to smile as suddenly a vision came unbidden to her mind of the fierce, taciturn woman skipping through the meadows back home, with daisies in her hair and a smile of pure bliss on her face... She giggled and shook her head. Then, realizing her mother had stopped talking, she turned her head to catch the other woman's extremely puzzled look. She felt the blood rush into her ears. She was doing it already, and Xena wasn't even here!

Mortified, she cleared her throat a few times. "I... uh, it's nothing. I just remembered something funny, is all."

Her mother raised an eyebrow, but did not comment.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. This visit was off to a bad start, thought Isabelle with a sinking feeling.

The flickering of the TV greeted them when Isabelle opened the door to her apartment. Xena was lounging on the couch, her legs crossed casually over one armrest, her head propped against the other. Boots and bronze breast plate sat stacked against the back of the armchair. Considering the warrior was used to the ascetic life of constant travel on horseback, she was adapting remarkably well to the comforts of the 20th century. Isabelle smiled and shook her head.

The electrocuting incident did not seem to worry Xena much anymore, although she always insisted on watching cartoon channels, of all things, whenever Isabelle left her alone for any length of time. And as soon as the news came on, she nervously asked for a channel change. Some time, Isabelle would have to ask the warrior about this. Maybe Xena just wasn't ready after all to face all the scary facets of modern day life.

Now, however, she had other things to worry about...

"Dear, do always leave the TV running? Such a waste of energy!"

"I, er, forgot all about it. I was running late, mom, didn't want to miss your train or anything."

Her mother just gave her a flat stare. On the couch, Xena was twisting around to face her, an identical look on her face.

Isabelle wasn't sure whether to laugh hysterically, or start crying.

The real trouble started on the second day. And, as big trouble often does, it started in subtle ways.

In the morning, Isabelle gulped down her coffee and hurried off to work, leaving her mother to her obsession with cleanliness (she had not *asked* to have her flat cleaned twice a day, but she wasn't going to complain, either), and Xena to do whatever it was ghosts did when they were not hovering around people or criticizing one's writing.

Today, as she had several times before, Xena materialized beside

Isabelle's chair when her attention was focused on the latest work assignment, startling the young woman nearly out of her skin by suddenly speaking close to her ear.

"Your mother is driving me nuts," she said in a clipped tone.

"Don't *do* that," Isabelle hissed with a glance at Hank, who was on the telephone with the sales department, caught up - she hoped! - in a discussion about release dates. He was the leader in the recent 'make-fun-of-Miss-Barnes'-campaign, and he really did not need more fodder for his quips.

"She is rummaging about the place like a maniac," the ghostly woman complained, ignoring Isabelle. Do you know how creepy it is when people walk right through you all the time? And that wet cloth is really disgusting. Do you know how many *hairs* there are on your bathroom floor? They snag my armor, for some reason."

"Well, can't you just, like, fade out?" Isabelle whispered urgently, never taking her eyes off her co-worker. He didn't seem to have heard. "And I can't help it if I loose hair, it happens," she added sullenly.

Xena sighed, and put on that too patient look that always accompanied her attempts at explaining her ghostly state. Isabelle, however, suspected long since, that Xena really did not know all that much about it herself. There were too many holes and contradictions in the little the warrior would speak of at all.

"I can fade out, but that doesn't mean I'm gone," the warrior said. "I am capable of being either where you are, or where you live. I can't go any place else. You know that." For a moment, a strange expression flitted across her face, but it hardly registered with Isabelle, who was too anxiously watching Hank to pay much heed.

"Yeah yeah," the young woman murmured.

"How much longer will she be here? She gives me the jitters. Goddamn woman can't sit still long enough to finish a cup of coffee. It's making me nervous." After a pause for effect, she added, "You *don't* want to be around a nervous warrior."

Isabelle cleared her throat. "It's only four more days, Xena, so just give her a break, okay? She's not a bad sort."

"Maybe not, but she's been treating you like a child. I don't like that."

Isabelle had to smile. "Yeah, I know, it gets to me, too. But I guess when you really think about it, I *am* her child."

"Whatever," said the warrior. "I do know that I don't want to be alone with her." She had such a look of desperate pleading on her face that Isabelle's shoulders sagged in defeat.

"Well I guess you can stay here, but keep quiet, for God's sake. And don't touch anything." She didn't realize she had made a bad joke until she heard Xena's mirthless snort.

She barely bit back an answer when she realized Hank was no longer on the telephone. How much he had caught, she had no way of telling, but he was watching her, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

That evening, after her mother had gone to sleep, she sat down with Xena to work on the Warrior's Tale. But, even though she treasured those moments, they were getting more and more strained as the initial thrill of working with a ghost faded, and the two women began to know each other better. Oh, she loved the warrior to bits, but sometimes the woman was just so... insufferably arrogant!

"So you ran up the wall, gave the three of them swift kicks in the nose, vaulted over them and knocked out two others, all during that one jump... Yeah, right. Gimme a break."

Xena dropped into a light crouch. "You want a demonstration?" she snarled.

Isabelle drew back involuntarily, before she realized the ghostly woman was, of course, bluffing. She hated to think of what a solid warrior might have done, had her temper been aroused. But *that* move was of course impossible. It had to be.

"Come on, Xena, nobody can do tricks like that. You've got to admit it's a little far-fetched. I thought the last bit was overdoing it a bit, catching an arrow out of the air, and all those back-flips. But this ..."

Xena gave her a look. "You wanna write this or not?" she asked crossly. Isabelle drew up her hands in a placating gesture. "Okay, okay. Just asking."

The warrior speaks...

I land smoothly, half of our attackers taken care of. I hate it when these young chaps think they should have a go at me just to make a name for themselves in the scrolls. At least this lot has had enough sense not to try and take me and my bard on singly. Those who try that do not usually stay on their feet long enough to call out their challenge.

I have not killed any of these bumbling fools since Gabrielle joined me; they are young, and most learn more from an encounter with me than they have bargained for. No, I only kill when I feel I must, now. Even then, those gentle eyes, looking at me in that sad way whenever I do, are almost too much to bear. We never talk about it much, though. the time just never seems to be right for it.

Of the men who attacked us, the five who have remained standing are fast losing their nerve. I can tell by the way their sweating hands clutch their weapons until their knuckles turn white, and by the surreptitious glances passing between them, which they probably think I am not aware of.

I shoulder my sword and give them one of my looks, that Gabrielle has become so fond of describing in detail in her stories. Although, sometimes I admit I find myself wishing it was even half as effective as her scrolls claim.

In this case, though, I need not worry. The boys get the idea and quickly drag their downed comrades out of our sight. It might have been the 'look', but then again, maybe it was that evil leer that I cannot seem to keep off my face when I get to beat people up.

"Well, how's that?" Isabelle leaned back with a smile.

Xena scowled. "That's not the way Gabrielle would tell the story."

The smile died on Isabelle's face. "What's wrong with it? I've always told it this way, you haven't complained before."

"Yeah well..." Xena chewed the inside of her cheek. "Just occurred to me, is all."

"I'm NOT Gabrielle, okay? Will you get off my back already?"

"Fine." The warrior turned her back and crossed her arms.

"Fine." What *was* with the woman lately? She had become more and more unreasonable when it came to that story.

Silence.

Presently, Xena spoke, softly. "What's wrong with you, Isabelle? I haven't seen you this touchy before." She still had her back turned.

"I have been touchy?" Isabelle flared. "When you're the one who's been jumping all over the place behaving like a bear with a sore tooth. And you wonder why it's getting my back up? When you keep picking at my work without telling me what to do better? When I keep making an idiot of myself in front of people, because of you? Is it your time of the month, or something?"

Xena whirled to face her and drew a breath to speak. Her face looked too smooth, except for a twitch in her cheek, her eyes seemed too large. However, the warrior had no chance to make a reply.

"Isabelle, you are yelling at a blank wall and gesticulating at empty air. And you seem to be losing the argument. Is there something I should be worried about?"

Isabelle turned to see her mother standing in the doorway, looking sleepy and dishevelled. Her face started burning furiously. "I'm just acting out a scene," she improvised. She looked back at the warrior, but Xena had vanished.

Things were just as bad as Isabelle had feared, if not worse. The more she tried to appear casual, or struggled to ignore the ghostly presence who did not particularly like being ignored, the more closely she felt her mother watching her, measuring. Isabelle shuddered to think what might be going on behind those uncomfortably probing eyes.

The fact that her mother sometimes seemed to know her better than she knew herself did not ease her worries one bit.

Quite the contrary, that evening, when they were sitting in the living room watching sitcoms and sipping hot cocoa - with one ghostly warrior's nose hovering perpetually close to one cup or the other, a wistful expression on her face - her mother asked abruptly, "Isabelle... are you a lesbian?"

The younger woman choked and very nearly sprayed cocoa all over the coffee table.

"Why... why do you ask that?" she replied, gathering her composure. Xena sniggered.

"Well, Lilli told me about that story you are writing, and she..."

"You spoke with Lilli about me?" Isabelle was incredulous.

"Well," her mother said, scratching her neck, "I hadn't really heard from you in a while," she said uncomfortably, "I... I was worried about you." When Isabelle drew a breath to reply, she continued quickly. "And from what she tells me, I have a good reason to be."

Isabelle's gaze flicked to the warrior, who suddenly found a blotch of cocoa on the table immensely interesting.

"Why, what did she tell you?"

"Well, she said you'd been acting strangely lately, and that you were writing this... this story about... about two women." She paused, swirling the cocoa inside the cup before draining it. "So... are you?"

"Are you?" Xena echoed her.

Isabelle shot a covert dark look at the warrior before speaking. "I'm not sure."

"Not sure?" Xena leered. "Well, I'll say..."

"Oh, quiet, you," Isabelle muttered. She was fully aware that her mother was watching her sharply, but somehow, something had snapped. She just didn't care. She was just... angry. She saw Xena bite her lip.

Rounding on the warrior, she grated, "You keep doing that! But you promised, Xena!"

A brief, pained look flashed across Xena's face, but it was gone so quickly that Isabelle was not sure she hadn't imagined it.

"Honey, are you okay?" her mother asked, watching her.

Isabelle did not take her eyes off the ghostly presence. "Yes, I..."

"Why don't you tell her the truth?" asked Xena quietly.

"You've got to be kidding!"

"Well, look at her, she's already convinced you've got a problem, so what have you got to lose?"

"I guess you've got a point..." But she looked doubtful.

Worried, her mother grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her around, facing her "I said, are you okay?"

"I would be," Isabelle snapped, "if Miss 'Too-Funny-For-Her-Boots' here wouldn't keep making an idiot out of me."

"Who?"

"Oh, just my invisible warrior friend," the young woman replied with sudden, icy calm. "I take it Lilli hasn't told you about her? Mom, this is Xena, she's a Greek warrior. Only no-one besides me can see or hear her, you see." Smiling sweetly, she ignored her mother's dropping jaw. "Xena, say hi to my mother."

"YOU and your bright ideas," Isabelle mumbled on the following morning, as they sat in a cold, stark room waiting to be called into Mrs Branigan's office.

A psychiatrist! Her mother was dragging her to a psychiatrist. That was all she needed right now. What on earth was she going to tell the woman?

"Well, you didn't have to listen to me, did you?" Xena mumbled without looking at the young woman. "Not like you *ever* do," she added in a lower tone. She was drawing little patterns into the palm of her hand with her dagger, scratching the skin without actually drawing blood.

"Would you mind *not* doing that?" Isabelle grated. "I'm nervous enough as it is."

"What, honey?" said her mother. Then she did a double take, opened her mouth once as if to speak, but decided against it.

Xena, meanwhile, gave Isabelle an unreadable look, and started cleaning her fingernails instead. Isabelle rolled her eyes and, scowling, made a throat-cutting motion with her hand. The warrior shrugged apologetically.

Both the warrior and her mother got up to follow when Isabelle's name was finally called; however, the assistant told her mother

firmly that the doctor was seeing her patient *alone*. Her mother protested, but finally sat back down, indignant and mildly sullen. Xena, however, followed along unhindered. Isabelle was not sure she was so happy about that, but after all, it was Xena who had gotten her into this fix, she might as well try and see what a shrink might have to say about the ghostly warrior. The *invisible* ghostly warrior.

What to do? Should she tell that doctor about her mysterious companion, running the risk of being certified nut case of the year? How far could she trust these people?

Finally, she decided to go with the truth, as much of it as she knew. After all, things could not possibly get any crazier, could they?

How wrong she was.

"What? Don't start on me again! You know darn well that I... I will do nothing of the sort, and you know it. Now get out of here and let me finish this thing here, will ya? I... Oh yeah? ... Fine. Be that way."

Gail Branigan was at a loss. She had gone through Isabelle Barnes' family and medical history several times, and found nothing out of the ordinary - normal childhood, no indication of abuse or serious injury, in school a fair student though always considered a dreamer, and somewhat of a loner.

It seemed she had passed through high school effortlessly, except for repeatedly being chastised for writing stories during class. She had gone through college and university with similar ease, and was now an established software engineer in a renowned enterprise. It had to be the most boring and mediocre biography Gail had ever seen. No drug history (except for cigarettes), no brain or neural diseases.

Nothing to merit her present condition.

And yet, there it was. Isabelle Barnes was sitting in front of the psychiatrist, deep in heated argument with... an invisible warrior woman. Clad in dark armor and armed to the teeth with knives, a sword and something called a shakra, or whatever. Ludicrous. But inventive, she had to admit. And the young woman did have a way with words. Gail thought she could imagine this warrior standing there in a menacing posture- utterly ludicrous.

And it had all started with a simple question about the story the

woman was working on.

Considering the intrepid warrior kept up a constant stream of comment throughout the session, Isabelle held on to her temper for a remarkably long time.

However, by the end of it she found herself facing a rather shattering prospect. With things getting just slightly out of hand between Xena and herself, Gail Branigan unsuccessfully trying to calm the seething young woman, and a sudden slap that landed on entirely the wrong cheek, Isabelle eventually found herself in a straightjacket without quite recalling how she had ended up there. Xena, giving her a hunted, mortified look and mumbling something about having caused enough trouble for today, had faded into thin air, after watching a doctor plunge an enormous syringe into the writer's arm with rather more pallor in her face than one would expect from a former warlord.

Thus abandoned, Isabelle's last thoughts as the tranquilizer kicked in were centered on the possible ways to make a ghost utterly miserable.

- Part 4 -

The warrior speaks...

Bloody Tartarus and all the freakin' Gods on Olymp, I guess I've done it now. I feel rotten. Lost her again, and by my own doing. I keep doing all those terrible things. Who am I without her? I can't even bloody speak right without her smoothing my words, sheesh. But I had to do it, didn't I? Gods, I hope it was what I had to do. If I was wrong...

Just goes to show again, nothing like not being with someone to show you how much more you are when they are with you.

Please, let this be the right thing!

A hospital room, some time later ...

Isabelle awoke squinting at a bright white ceiling. She smacked her lips drowsily; her tongue felt like a pelt-covered rock. A rotten taste in her mouth made her jerk to a sitting position, dry-heaving several times before she sank back into the cushions with a groan. Her head felt rather too large for her shoulders, throbbing insistently.

She had no clue where she was. Her last memory was of this Gail Branigan person asking questions about her childhood, and Xena being unusually obnoxious, even considering the past events.

She groaned softly when she realized she was in some sort of hospital. However, try as she might, memory would not return to her.

A wordless moan off to her side made her turn her head. There was another occupied bed, and beyond that several more that were empty, starched white sheets shining whitely.

The woman next to her moaned again, a throaty sound like gravel grinding against gravel. She was awfully pale. With dark rings under her closed eyes and sunken cheeks, she looked like death walking. Straggly, off-blonde hair completed the picture. She might have been a few years older than Isabelle; it was hard to say with her face quite obviously lined beyond her years. It seemed she was only half-conscious. All but her face was covered by a light, white sheet.

"Hello," Isabelle said after clearing her throat several times. Her voice sounded just like the inside of her mouth felt - like dry parchment. She saw the woman flinch at being spoken to, watched sunken eyes flicker open, large dark eyes with a look of hunted deer in them.

The woman did not return her greeting. Instead, she lay there muttering under her breath. Isabelle thought she caught the words "she's here, oh, fuckin' Christ, she's here", but she was not sure that was what the woman had actually said. Shortly after, the stranger sank back into a restless stupor.

"Good to see you, too," Isabelle muttered wryly, but the woman might have been a corpse for all the reaction she showed.

Isabelle scanned the room for any sign of where she might be. Carefully, she tried sitting up again, and this time it was only her head that protested, although she still felt nauseous.

Before she could twist around enough to swing her legs out of the bed, a nurse came bustling into the room, carrying a tray, looking for all the world as if she was just doing her round, although something on her face made Isabelle suspect she had come in here to check on her patients, seeing that one of them was trying to get up.

"What happened? Where am I?"

"You're safe," the nurse said, not unkindly. "No-one is going to hurt you here. No warriors allowed in this place, you see."

Isabelle groaned again, but not from pain. What *had* happened? And, more importantly, where was Xena? Why wasn't she here? Well, she might be afraid of the tongue-lashing Isabelle had ready for her. She knew all this was somehow the warrior's fault. She just could not remember how.

And yet, she desperately craved her ghostly companion's presence. It was a longing that somehow went deeper than her anger, deeper than life itself. But how could she explain that to anyone, even herself? If anything, the feeling was taking an even firmer hold on her.

"Xena never hurt me," she told the nurse, and for once she did not flinch and blush, even when she realized what she had said. It just did not seem to matter right now.

"I'm sure, dear." When she was certain Isabelle would not jump up and cause more trouble, the nurse's attention turned to Isabelle's bed neighbor, who had her eyes open and was staring sightlessly. Her chest twitched erratically with gasps of labored breath.

"What's with her?" Isabelle asked cautiously, and was half surprised when the nurse replied.

"Severe traumatic stress condition. She's been bad before, never like this until-" She never finished the sentence. "Poor thing lost her folks in a terrorist strike. They bombed the restaurant they were eating in. But I shouldn't be telling you this." She adjusted the other woman's blanket briskly, and muttered something to her that seemed to calm her down briefly.

She set the tray holding a covered plate and a small pitcher of tea onto the table next to Isabelle's bed. A little gruffly, she said, "You must be hungry. Eat, and then get some more sleep. You've had a rough time."

With that, she left them.

Oh my god, they've put me in a nuthouse, Isabelle thought, I can't believe it!

She closed her eyes briefly, wishing Xena was here. She must have said something out loud, because the strange, pale woman suddenly moaned loudly. Her eyes were wide, as if seeing the horrors of a thousand nightmares, her mouth moving wordlessly.

Isabelle suddenly remembered an incident a few years ago, when she had first moved to San Francisco. Some terror organization had bombed a restaurant just outside of Chinatown, a specialty place called the Cirra Buffet, if she remembered correctly. Many people had been injured, and more than ten, including the owner, had been killed. She wondered if that was the place the nurse had talked about.

But, since she could not hope to get a coherent response, she shrugged and reached for the tray, resigning herself to following the nurse's advice.

Where was Xena?

She wanted to go home.

Isabelle's living room, same time ...

A somewhat dejected but definitely frustrated warrior sat on Isabelle's living room couch, fingers almost caressing the remote control that was as insubstantial to her as Argo passing wind, and every bit as annoying with its tantalizing presence.

She sensed Isabelle's distress, wanted very much to go to her, even if it meant facing her friend's well-justified ire. Not that she hadn't tried. *Something*, some unseen force, prevented her from entering the room where they had put the bard.

If Xena could have kicked something at that moment, she would have. But it was useless kicking objects your foot passed right through, nor did it help vent her frustration in the slightest. While living in this insubstantial place did have its perks, there was no end to the pitfalls, either.

Just when she was making up her mind to go back to that place and just sort of hover about until a way in presented itself, a flicker on the TV screen caught her eye.

The brief hope that she had somehow been able to manipulate that remote control after all died instantly when she saw a dull red glow appear in the center of the screen, throbbing lazily. She did not need to see the three small letters appear in the upper left corner to experience a quite unwelcome *dejà vu*.

Nor did she wait for the familiar face to materialize on screen before she grimaced and growled, "What do you want now, Ares?"

"That's 'Mars'," the War God's voice boomed fuzzily, his outline still a blur. Gaining clarity, he continued, "You realize you have angered me, don't you? I told you to keep out of my way, but you had to go and interfere. I am trying to keep my Chosen *away* from that irritating blonde and her influence."

"Oh, really?" Xena drawled, a slow smile spreading on her face despite the danger she knew herself to be in from this pseudo-Ares being. If he did not approve of what she was doing, it must be right.

Unfortunately, her grin did not exactly lighten the War God's mood.

"Why you arrogant little..."

An insane urge drove Xena to taunt Mars further, even though she was well aware of the fact that he could cause her intense pain at

the very least, and quite possibly more permanent damage, too. She arched an eyebrow. "Amazing, how I, a mere mortal, can prove to be such a challenge for you and all your godly powers. But then I suppose you've always had that blind spot where tall, dark, female warriors are concerned, haven't you... *Ares?*"

Mars growled wordlessly. With a visible effort, he smoothed his features. "Don't be so sure," he said. "Consider this your final warning. If I find you've been meddling one more time, I'll make you sorry your mother ever laid eyes on your father." The hard glint in his eyes belied the mildness of his tone.

"Interesting you'd bring up my father," Xena murmured.

"What's that?"

"Never mind. You realize I have to do what I was sent here to do, right? It's the only way I can get back to my own life. And believe me, I can hardly wait to be out of here."

"Whatever," Mars said crossly.

"You know, this would have been so much easier if you'd just let things go the way they were destined to be. You didn't have much luck keeping us apart in my life, either."

"I don't know whether you think you can confuse me with your strange allusions, but it's not working. I am the God of War, strumpet, not some idiot mortal."

Realization struck. *But of course! He doesn't know! He has no clue about me and my reality... I was wondering about that before. Not all-powerful after all.... Well, that might come in handy some time.*

Xena smiled crookedly. "Just as well you're not the God of Brains," she murmured to herself, making sure he caught the words. "That would be the bane of civilization."

The warrior squared her shoulders. It was time to go back to the hospital and do some more hovering. She quickly slipped out of the room, leaving an irate god to hurl angry bolts of electricity through the screen at an empty living room.

He did not see her draw a relieved breath when it was clear that she was out of his range. For now, anyway.

The hospital room...

Relief was nowhere in sight for Isabelle, however. It was not long before she found out that the doors to the room were locked, and a surveillance camera mounted in a corner above their heads. No doubt about it - she was trapped. Her neighbor never stirred beyond an occasional burst of panic, but appeared too weak to do more than rise up briefly only to collapse again like an empty sack.

Thankfully, though, the nurse had let drop that she was to be released from sick ward later today. Not for home, but to wherever she would be staying. On second thought, that did not seem any more promising. At least it would get her away from the unnerving blonde and her gaunt, haunted eyes.

The drug they had given her was still effective, blurring her vision and filling her limbs with molasses. Because of this, and because she had nothing else to do, Isabelle slept.

She woke up with the nurse's face hovering over her. Opening her eyes was painful. The room still seemed too bright somehow, but maybe it was just from all that wool that her head seemed to be stuffed with. She smacked her lips experimentally; the rotten taste was less, but still there.

In the bed next to hers, the other woman was now moaning continuously. Was that what had woken her up?

"She's awake, Doctor."

Doctor? What doctor? What am I doing here. Xena?

"Ah, good." The voice was male.

"How are you feeling, Miss Barnes?" This was the nurse again.

We all die eventually.

Not today.

"Lousy," Isabelle croaked. "What did you give me, rat poison?"

The nurse giggled uneasily.

"As I understand, you made quite a spectacle of yourself in Mrs. Branigan's office," the doctor, a lean young man with tousled hair,

told her as he approached her bed. A small label sewn to his lab coat proclaimed 'Dr. J. Nikolaidis, MD'. "It seems they had to give you enough tranquilizer to take out a rhino." He winked.

"When do I get out of here?" Isabelle did not respond to his attempted humor, even though her subconscious registered the fact that he appeared a nice enough guy.

Dr. Nikolaidis cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact, that's what we're here to find out." He proceeded to take her pulse, check her pupils, and test her reflexes, until finally he was satisfied that she could, indeed, leave the sick ward.

Not for home, though.

From just outside sick ward, Xena watched Isabelle being taken to the room she was to occupy for the time being.

For some reason, she was unable to enter the hospital room, or get near enough to make herself known to Isabelle. Every time she tried, she encountered some sort of intangible barrier that was nothing like a wall, but just as effective in its own way.

The dull, throbbing pain that seemed to suffuse every one of her ghostly nerves, she would have taken willingly. But, whenever she crossed that barrier, an unspeakable lethargy took hold of her. It began like a tingle in her limbs, and intensified until she seemed wrapped in solidifying water, cold and sluggish.

As much as she wanted to, she was simply unable to get any closer to Isabelle than about a hundred paces. Even Isabelle's accusing stare would not have kept her away. In fact, she would have welcomed seeing it.

The warrior did not understand exactly what was to happen to her friend, except that she was to remain in this place to be treated for a psychological condition only Xena knew she was not suffering from.

Of course, if she was correct, things were going as planned, but Xena did not have to like it.

"Well, I suppose I could have been worse off," Isabelle mumbled bitterly to herself as she flopped down on the squeaky bed that had

been allotted to her along with a night table and a tall, gray, metal closet. The bag full of clothes and accessories, which her mother had thoughtfully packed for her in the meantime, sat on the floor in front of it. She hardly glanced at it.

Hers wasn't the only bed. It appeared she was sharing the room with more people, although she suspected that one of the two other beds was unoccupied, being stripped to the worn gray and white mattress. A couple of linen sheets and a pillow were stacked neatly at one end. The closet next to it was open, and empty. Just as well. A plain table, two chairs and a wooden stand holding an ancient-looking TV-set completed the furnishings.

Still in a kind of numb stupor, she got up and walked to the window at the far end of the longish room. Barred. For the protection of the patients, she surmised. At least they had put some curtains on it, making the room look a little less like a cell. Of course, it was not a cell, she had been told. Nothing like the single rooms in the high security wing. In this section, she was free to walk about the entire floor, visit with people, watch TV, that sort of thing.

With a slight shudder, Isabelle tried to picture what type of people would be kept in a 'high security wing'. Slavering lunatics rattling the bars of their rickety cages? Maniacs having to be chained to their beds and kept under heavy sedation? An old movie came to mind - "A Nun's Story" starring Audrey Hepburn. Surely they kept their "arch angels" safely secluded?

Her giggle had a hysterical tinge. "Well, isn't that great," she said aloud, "I've barely arrived here and already my mind is running amuck. Sheesh, chains and rattling bars... I really *am* nuts." She shook her head, noting with passing satisfaction that the slush that was her brain seemed firmer now; the sedative they had given her must be wearing off at last.

"Who are *you* talking to?"

The voice, so close behind her, nearly startled Isabelle out of her skin, and she whirled to look into a familiar set of eyes. "You."

"Hey," said Xena. Her outline seemed to waver, a little like a bad TV transmission. Once, she even winked out for the blink of an eye.

"You've got a lot of nerve to show up now." Isabelle crossed her arms and looked away.

"Well, I-"

"What took you so long?"

"I couldn't-"

"And how *could* you?"

"I had to-"

"Do you have any idea what it means to be in here?" For emphasis, Isabelle gave the bars on the window a rattle. "I'm a goddamn prisoner here!"

Xena growled. "Will you let me *finish* what I'm trying to say, for Tartarus' sake?"

"Okay, fine, go on."

Xena chewed the inside of her cheek.

"Well?"

"It's... complicated."

"Oh really? As far as I see it, you made a fool of me several times even after promising you wouldn't anymore, which ended up getting me here, and then you just went away and left me on my own in this... *place!* Doesn't sound all that complicated to me."

"I'm sorry." Xena's voice was almost too soft to hear. "Besides, I sort of figured you wouldn't be terribly pleased to see me."

"I wish I could say that," Isabelle said, sighing. "But, I *am* glad to see you. It must be that drug messing with my brain." She smiled wryly.

Xena's face lit up in a surprised half-grin. "I missed you, too, you know."

"But still..." said Isabelle.

"Yeah, I know." The warrior sounded pained. "I wish I could make you understand."

"What's there to understand? You have the most awful sense of humor I've ever seen."

"It's not funny."

"No, it's not," Isabelle agreed and turned to look out of the window.

An awkward silence followed.

When Xena spoke, her voice was strangely harsh. "I hope some day you'll understand why I did what I did."

"Why don't you tell me, then?" Isabelle did not turn around.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"It's forbidden."

"Forbidden?"

"Yes. And I'm not even supposed to say that much."

"Oh great, now you're going to go all secretive on me?"

"I'm sorry. I don't have a choice." She walked closer to the smaller woman, until their arms were almost touching. "And hey..."

"What?"

"You know, one good thing about being here..."

Isabelle scowled. "And that would be what?"

Xena grinned crookedly. "No-one around here will think anything of it if you talk out loud to me."

Isabelle threw up her hands. "Just what I've always wanted," she exclaimed.

"Yeah well.." The warrior flickered in and out again.

"What's wrong with you? You seem... unstable."

Xena grimaced. "I don't know. But it's still hard for me to even be here. I couldn't come near you at all for a while. There was some sort of barrier..."

"That's weird."

Xena nodded. "At first I thought it was something about this place... maybe I'm getting used to whatever it is." She shrugged. "Well, I'm here now."

Isabelle frowned, concerned. "You're sure you're okay, though?"

Xena nodded. "Nothing like a few obstacles and a little pain to make a warrior's life interesting, right?"

"Uh huh," Isabelle was doubtful.

"Now... I believe your mother put some scro- some paper into that bag over there... do we still have a story to write...?"

Isabelle considered for a long time, her simmering anger clearly warring with her love for the warrior and the desire to tell a good story. Xena's face was carefully blank while she waited for the other woman to reply.

"I guess we do," said Isabelle finally.

The warrior speaks...

Of all the bad things that can happen to a warlord on her way to redemption, easily the worst is having an angry bard to deal with. And when she is justifiably angry, then fighting all the demons in the Underworld at once would be a welcome reprieve.

Unfortunately, at the moment, she has every right to be angry.

The week has started out fairly well, really, despite a slight drizzle that seems to have a habit of appearing whenever our spirits are in danger of rising during this dreary sea voyage back from Chin.

Gabrielle, of course, would have preferred to make the journey by land. But I, being my pragmatic and insensitive self, quickly overruled her and got us on a boat. I have always found travel by sea to be a lot less strenuous, not to mention faster and more convenient, than going by cart or horseback, let alone on foot. Even a warrior likes a few comforts every now and then.

As I so often seem to do when it comes to her, I was not thinking. My bard sees things differently. I suppose that is understandable, considering she has spent the better part of a mostly calm trip - surprisingly calm, actually - bent double at the railing with green face and pallid lips. The sight brings back uncomfortably why she protested in the first place.

Once this morning, I walked up to her and took her flaccid little hand, meaning to tell her I was sorry, but no words would come. She stared me down with bloodshot eyes and yanked her hand away with

more force than I would have thought possible, considering her condition. She never even gave me a chance to offer using Pressure Points to relieve her misery. Yes, this is me, the Destroyer of Nations, unable yet again to prevail against the silent reproach of one little girl. Woman, I should say. I still catch myself tripping over that, strangely enough.

So, what to do to make up? After all, going by sea will shave off several weeks of our journey home. I felt that it was the right thing to do. At this time, however, I am not so sure. Not when she looks at me that way.

Isabelle looked up from her writing and raised an eyebrow at the warrior. "This is not related to recent events, by any chance?"

"Yep," said Xena sheepishly, pointing "That would be the kind of look I'm talking about."

Isabelle rolled her eyes and went back to writing.

I very much fear that this time, it is going to take a while until she will speak with me again. I suppose I deserve it.

Gail Branigan's consultation room, the next morning...

"All right then, Isabelle. Tell me how you first met your 'warrior'"

The way Gail Branigan said the word 'warrior' made Isabelle bristle. She leaned back in her armchair with a flat stare. "You're mocking me."

Gail smiled benignly, but the knuckles on the hand that gripped her pen looked white. This had been going on for some time.

"I know she is real to you, Isabelle."

"You have **no** idea," Isabelle mumbled, glancing at the tall figure that stood poised behind the other woman's chair.

"I am not mocking you, Isabelle." Gail Branigan followed her patient's gaze. "You are looking at her right now, right? She is standing here beside me, isn't she?"

"Damn right I am, woman." Xena drew her Chakram.

"Yes," said Isabelle, flinching.

"And what is she doing?"

Xena growled.

Isabelle giggled hysterically. "You don't wanna know."

"Tell me. Is she talking to you?"

"Not really."

"Then what?" said Gail. "You aren't very cooperative, you know."

Isabelle's jaw dropped as she watched the ghostly warrior draw the Chakram through Gail's throat. It left no mark, of course.

"What did you do that for?" She asked Xena, before she could catch herself.

"Do what?" Gail asked, scratching her throat where the insubstantial blade had just touched it. Isabelle shuddered.

"Never mind."

"Isabelle, what did she do? You'll have to tell me, or we will be here for a very long time."

"She just slit your throat, if you must know," Isabelle said a touch sullenly.

Gail leaned back and twiddled the pen between her fingers. "So, you want to be rid of me?"

"No, woman, **I** want to be rid of you," Xena snarled.

"I don't," Isabelle said, trying not to notice that Xena had put her Chakram away and was now honing her sword. The screeching noise of the metal against the whetstone grated one's nerves. Isabelle rubbed her arms briskly; goose bumps were rising on her skin.

Gail raised an eyebrow.

"**Xena** wants to be rid of you," Isabelle said. "But then, maybe she's just doing it because she knows it freaks me out," she added with a dangerous glare at her invisible companion.

Xena gave her an apologetic grin, but continued sharpening her sword.

"Honestly, Miss Branigan--"

"Gail. Call me Gail."

"Gail. Honestly, you should see her, *she* is the one who is behaving like a complete nut, not me."

Gail nodded thoughtfully, and made some notes in a folder on her desk. Isabelle would have loved to know what those notes were; what did these people think her problem was? For God's sake, what *was* her problem anyway?

Xena craned her neck and peered over the therapist's shoulder. "I thought *your* writing was bad," she remarked to Isabelle, and got a scowl in response. "Let's see now... 'patient calm, if uncooperative' - she means you," Xena looked up briefly and grinned. "'projecting own emotions and aggressions onto imaginary companion. Apparently way to keep own emotions in check, as appears mellow and mildly indignant with said companion. No imminent violence.'"

"What utter rubbish," Isabelle replied. "I'm not projecting anything. I'm not even feeling aggressive - well, I'm getting there, and I'm certainly 'indignant', but-" She broke off.

Gail did a double take and slammed the folder shut. The force of the movement sent the pen clattering to the wooden floor, where it spun around noisily a few times before coming to rest at the therapist's feet.

The warrior was irate. "I don't need 'projections' to know a nuisance when I see one!"

The therapist looked slightly pale. Eyeing the pen on the floor but not bending down to pick it up, she said, "How did you -" she looked over her shoulder, then back at Isabelle, who tried to keep her face as blank as she could make it.

Gail cleared her throat. Opening the folder with one hand, she took a spare pen from her drawer and scribbled some more, every now and then shooting a glance at Isabelle, who looked back at her innocently. Her left arm was shielding the paper from her patient's view.

The invisible warrior behind her was another matter, though.

"Oooh," said Xena, "she wants to get you tested... she thinks you may be a psychic."

Isabelle snorted, causing Gail to look up at her with a mix of apprehension and professional curiosity.

"Lady, I am no more a psychic than you are. She is reading out loud to me, that's how I know."

Gail looked around again, shaken.

"Although it surprises me sometimes that she can read at all," Isabelle murmured, getting an indignant "hmpf" from the warrior in reply.

"I think we're going to call it a day, Isabelle," Gail said, looking at her watch. "I want you to take the pills the nurse gave you, three times a day, and I will see you again in two days." She cleared her throat and smoothed her trousers.

Isabelle checked the time on the large clock on the wall behind Gail's desk. "We've got fifteen minutes left," she said, and leaned back in her chair, draping an arm lazily over the armrest.

"Yes, I realize that, " said Gail. She leaned back in her chair and drew a shaky breath. "However," she added (with a little too much force, Isabelle thought) "I think this has been a rather... difficult session, and you could use a reprieve. Take that medication, it will do you good. I hear you like writing? Why don't you write down your feelings about all this, and we can talk about what you've written next time?" Her eyes flicked to the phone; she would be calling a few people about this session, Isabelle thought.

"I'll think about it." Isabelle grinned inwardly. Her stay in this place might yet prove to be a bit more interesting than she had thought.

A few days later...

"Isabelle, it seems you have not been taking your medication." The nurse in charge of her looked at her sternly.

Isabelle, although feeling as if she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, tried to look scandalized. "But I have!"

"You're getting pretty good at acting," Xena, standing by the window in Isabelle's room, said wryly. "I almost bought it."

Meanwhile, Isabelle's roommate, Tara, sniffed and pointed a finger at her. "Down the sink is where she poured them! I saw!"

"Quiet you," Isabelle muttered grumpily. It was not entirely clear who she meant, but Tara stuck out her tongue.

A comely girl in her late teens, Tara had been classified as a schizophrenic. Many times, she would just sit or stand there speaking gibberish - she had called Isabelle "Mavis" on their first meeting. However, during those moments when she was more or less firmly grounded in *this* world, she was positively insufferable. Like right now.

The nurse, a plump young woman named Nell with a no-nonsense look about her, quirked an eyebrow. "Well?"

Isabelle said nothing.

"Listen, dearie," said Nell, not unkindly "if you want to go home soon, you will have to cooperate. This medication will help you get back on track in no time." The motherly smile she gave Isabelle looked odd in a face that was about the same age as Isabelle herself. "Send that warrior woman back where she came from, and make your life get back to normal, it will be a breeze. Just you be good. Right?"

"Now wait a minute..." Xena said, drawing herself up to full warrior posture.

Isabelle, holding out her hand to her friend in a placating gesture, gave the nurse a nod. "Right," she said without enthusiasm, and was relieved to see the Warrior Princess relax her stance. Marginally.

The nurse gave her a box with a new dose of the drug, two nondescript white pills the size of a Tic Tac. "Here you go, then."

To Isabelle's utter dismay, the nurse would not leave until she was convinced that this time the drug had been taken; she even went so far as to make Isabelle open her mouth and lift her tongue to make sure the pills hadn't been stowed away somewhere.

Xena stood by, watching with a half-puzzled, half-amused look that she tried very hard to hide.

"Happy now?" Isabelle mumbled, washing down the filthy taste of the drug with more water.

"Yes, dearie," the woman said, and actually patted her cheek before leaving!

"That's one tough broad," Xena said appreciatively. "She would've made a good tavern keeper."

"Yes, but unfortunately, she is not," Isabelle growled at the door where the nurse had just left. "I hate taking this stuff. I don't want to know what it does to me. I feel woozy already."

Xena's lack of response made her look up, just in time to see the tall ghost fade out.

"Great," she murmured. "Good to know you're there for me always, Xena."

Later that day, Isabelle's mother came to visit. Isabelle, who was allowed to move freely inside the institution, met her in the cafeteria at the far end of the wing. She had mixed feelings about seeing her, but any break from her routine was welcome.

"Hello, baby," her mother greeted her warmly. She looked drawn and genuinely worried, but try as she might, Isabelle could find little sympathy. After all, *her mom* wasn't the one the one who had to be in here.

"Hi mom." After they hugged briefly, they each ordered a latte, and proceeded to sit in awkward silence. Isabelle glanced furtively around, but she could see no sign of Xena anywhere. She was not sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

"So." Finally, her mother could stand the silence no longer. "I hear they have run some... paranormal... tests on you?"

Isabelle chuckled mirthlessly. "They think I may be a psychic, yes."

Seeing her mother lean forward attentively, she decided to volunteer some more.

"It was funny, actually. They had all these specialists come in and show me cards face down, made me guess what's on them."

"And did you get it right?"

Isabelle giggled. "Not once, but I could always tell them what they were scribbling on their notepads, no matter how sure they made I

could not peek. Unnerved them no end."

"And how did you do that? You read their minds?"

"Mom, I can't read minds anymore than I can see what's hidden from view. I'm no psychic, and I'm not crazy. Xena read it to me."

Her mother buried her face in her hands. "Oh, baby..."

"Why can't you believe me? Is it that much more difficult to believe I have a ghost for company than it is for me to be able to look into someone else's head? Think about that, mom!"

"Honey, this is all so confusing for me. I don't know what to believe anymore."

"And how do you think *I* feel?" Isabelle said softly.

The waiter brought their coffee, giving them a temporary reprieve.

"Did they tell you how long they mean to keep you here?" Her mother dropped four sugar cubes into her cup, added a few drops of cream and stirred noisily.

"Don't stir, or it'll get too sweet," Isabelle murmured dryly, receiving a chuckle in reply at the old joke.

"So, how long?"

Isabelle shrugged. "I think they don't know what to make of me. They want very much to prove I'm a true psychic, but can't. At the same time, they want me to let Xena go. Without Xena, I won't even know what they're jotting down on their notepads, and that will take care of that." She smiled bitterly.

"Well that's the solution then, honey. Let that specter go. What good has it done you anyway?"

"More than you can ever know," Isabelle said quietly.

"Oh child, have we failed you so badly? Have we neglected you so much you need an imaginary friend to cope?" Her mother sniffled, agitated.

"Of course not! Mom, I may have had imaginary friends as a kid. I think just about every kid has, at some point. It's got nothing to do with being neglected, and you know it. And if you think Xena is imaginary, after what I've just told you, then I don't know what else I can do to convince you." She added a generous amount of cream

to her own cup.

The older woman made no reply. She was still stirring her coffee, violently.

"I don't think they'd keep me here if you'd tell them you wanted me out of here," Isabelle said casually, taking a sip from her coffee and making a face at how strong it was.

Her mother sighed. "You know I can't do that. I want you to get better."

Isabelle opened her mouth for an indignant retort, but was forestalled by a raised hand. "I don't care what caused it, but you've changed, and you know it. I just want my baby back. Is that so very hard to understand?"

"And is it so hard to understand that I have not gone out of my mind? If anything, my stay here has convinced me more than ever that Xena is for real. I was starting to think I'd lost it, but with the way she's been reading those notes to me..."

Her mother looked at her sharply, as if a thought had just hit her. "You say this... Xena is Greek?"

"Yes."

Suddenly animated, the older woman pressed on. "And she's reading *English* notes, speaking our language, even. Clever ghost."

"Yes..."

"And that doesn't bother you in any way? I mean, from what you tell me, English doesn't even exist in her time frame... Tell me, dear, has she ever, *ever* told you anything that you didn't know yourself, somehow?"

"What about the therapist's notes? She read them to me."

"And you're sure there is no other way you might have known? Mirrors? Hand movements? I don't know... *something*...?"

Isabelle had no ready answer.

Days turned into weeks, and before long Isabelle would have lost track of time, if not for the sheet of notebook paper stuck to her closet, where she compulsively marked each day in black ink.

Thirty-One marks, grouped by weeks made a depressing tally. It was almost November, and there was no end in sight.

Whenever she could get away with it, she avoided taking the pills they gave her. They made her tired and apathetic, and sometimes her stomach was a roiling mass of protest.

Her therapy did not go well, since she refused to give in and tell Gail what she wanted to hear, that there was no dark haired-blue-eyed warrior woman keeping her company.

And yet, her mind was troubled. Her mother's words, although only voicing thoughts she herself had had long before, had sparked enough doubt to make her question. Sometimes at night, she would lie awake and wonder, but whenever Xena was with her, she forgot her misgivings, thinking that not even her rampant imagination could come up with a character this detailed, and this deep.

In truth, the ghostly warrior was with her less and less; when asked, Xena said it must be the surroundings. She found it difficult to materialize close to Isabelle for any length of time, on some days.

During one of those rare times when Xena was there and Tara was not, they were lounging on Isabelle's bed going through their story for a final edit.

"So, they think you're only imagining me, do they?" Xena said, craning her neck to look over the smaller woman's shoulder at the text they were poring over.

"Apparently," said Isabelle absently as she scratched out a short passage and scribbled a rewrite on the margin, shaking her head at the clumsy wording.

"Well, I've been called many things, but imaginary was never one of them," the warrior said wryly.

Isabelle sat up and smiled dreamily, her thoughts turning inward. "You know, somehow I always used to have an imaginary friend. Only none of them have been as... interesting as you are."

Xena raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yeah. When I was very little, there was a talking horse named Bell. I never went out to play much with the kids in the neighborhood - never liked to play house with the other girls, that really cracked me up. And the boys wouldn't have a girl playing with them. Well, not until after the incident with Miss Griswell's nutbread." She chuckled

to herself, and found Xena's gentle gaze.

"Nutbread?" the warrior asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Long story," Isabelle said, grinning with the memory. "She never did find out who did it. Anyway, Bell was always there with me, and she'd comfort me when I was down, she'd give me courage when I needed it, help me with my math, and tell me stories that I would write down." She paused and quirked her lips. "Well, it seems she was a lot like you."

The warrior chuckled dryly. "I don't know, I think I may just have been insulted."

"Hey, she was very pretty," Isabelle took up the banter, "A Palomino with four white socks and a blaze."

"Palomino, huh? It just keeps getting better and better."

"Smart too," Isabelle quipped. "Smarter even than Harvey, the stuffed white hare toy I had as a baby."

"Wonderful. I've got more sense than a toy hare." Xena grinned.

Isabelle was silent for a long time, remembering how real she had made Bell seem back then. A thought came to her, and when she spoke, her voice was shaky.

"Xena, please tell me something."

"Yes?"

"Are you real? Please tell me you're not just something I've made up. Tell me I'm not crazy! I don't care what THEY say, but I need to know. I don't want to... be in love with... some crazed ranting of my own disturbed mind "

"You know", Xena said slowly, "I've been asking myself the same thing. This... your world is so different from what I know, and I have been trying and trying to explain to myself how it is that I am here... And not able to really do anything. I know I'm not part of this world, but maybe it's me who made it all up." She paused, groping for words.

"You've done a lot", Isabelle whispered, "boy, have you ever!"

Xena smiled wistfully at her. "Anyway. The gods know there is much insanity and darkness hidden away in me. What if YOU are just a dream I'm having?"

Isabelle stared at her, stricken. What if she was? Could she really say with certainty that she herself was real, and not a piece of Xena's mind? An interesting perspective. There was an expression on the warrior's face that told the blonde woman she was thinking much along the same lines.

She reached out a hand and let it hover by the ethereal cheek. Xena closed her eyes, and let the warm electricity suffuse them both.

"I'm real," she whispered. "I must be."

"And I am, too", was the warrior's reply, "I am more real now than I ever was before, Gabrielle." She said the name with a curious emphasis. Her own hand came up to mirror Isabelle's gesture.

"You know what?" the writer asked in a hoarse whisper, "I really love it when you call me that."

One week later ...

Isabelle sat on her bed, having just dutifully swallowed the cursed pills under Nell's watchful eye. She knew she'd feel fuzz-brained once they kicked in fully, but she had every intention of finishing another chapter of her story, with Xena.

The ghostly shape by the barred window looked more insubstantial than usual. She seemed to have trouble articulating, on top of her increasing tendency to phase out completely from time to time. It was enough to make Isabelle's brain hurt. This seemed to be getting worse lately, but why, neither of them had a clue. It was as inexplicable as Xena's inability to come near her on her first day here.

Notepad on her knees, biting her lip determinedly, Isabelle wrote.

The day is sunny. I walk along a path with my bard. It is windy and clouds hang in the sky.

Frowning, Isabelle reread what she'd written, then scratched it out and began again.

It is a bright day. We head towards Athens. My bard tells me stories and I listen. As I listen, I do a few back-flips, because I can.

She laughs softly. "Show-off. How can you keep a lookout for trouble when you goof around like this?"

"I have many skills" I drawl.

"Hrm, nope." She scratched that out, as well. Tara, her roommate, sat on the bed nearest the door, her back pressed into the corner, knees hugged close to her body. She was staring emptily, as she did often in between her lucid and annoying moments, withdrawn to whatever other world she lived in. Her lips moved soundlessly. Xena was eyeing the girl, tilting her head as if listening.

Isabelle rubbed her forehead before trying again.

A horse is a horse, of course, of course...

"Oh, bloody hell, this isn't getting anywhere!" With an angry sigh, Isabelle tore off the entire page and crumpled it in her fist, muttering under her breath. She tossed the balled paper towards the opposite wall, where it bounced off the rim of the trash can and rolled under the small table next to it, forcing her to get up and retrieve it.

"You're no help, either," she accused the wavering ghost-shape, as she threw the paper into the trash. Xena mouthed something containing a lot of 'O' sounds, gesticulating vaguely. Then, grimacing, the warrior faded out.

"Screw this, I'm going outside," Isabelle told Tara, who made a wordless sound in response as Isabelle flounced past. Isabelle rolled her eyes and left, closing the heavy door with somewhat more force than was strictly necessary.

Meanwhile, in the high security wing...

She sat on the floor, knees propped up, back resting against the rickety bunk. The sun shining through the bars of her cell cast

shadowy stripes onto faded gray linen pants and a bare arm. The rest of her lay in shadow, her chiseled profile silhouetted against the glare of the window. She had not bothered to switch on the dingy lamp that was the only other light source in the room.

The darkness suited a certain ghostly warrior just fine. Hidden in shadows, she studied the tall, athletic form intently. At some point after that scene on TV, the woman must have cut her hair short, an unruly mop which by the looks of it defied all combs. The plain clothing the inmates of this place were given to wear did little to diminish her formidable appearance. In fact, the sleeveless dark blue top quite nicely showed off the woman's muscular arms. Xena flexed and squeezed her own biceps, comparing. Frowning, she flexed harder, until her face went red, while her eyes flicked back and forth a few times. *A trick of the light*, she told herself firmly, before resuming her study of the other woman.

Oddly enough, Xena had no difficulty being here, one story up from Isabelle's room, beyond a slight tingling in her fingers and toes, when being in a room with Isabelle made her insides want to tie themselves into knots and her body feel made of lead at the best of times. Well, perhaps not so oddly, given her theories on her presence in this strange world.

She stepped deeper into the shadow of a shelf stacked with clothes and belongings when Corina Walker stirred and gracefully flowed to her feet. Xena was not sure what made her stay out of sight, but instinct kept her from trying to reveal herself. Not that she was sure the woman would be able to see her. She watched - and winced inwardly - as Corina popped her neck, cracked her knuckles and walked over to the table, where her midday meal stood untouched, as far as Xena could tell. She picked up a slice of bread and plunked down onto the chair, where she began to pick it apart and form little doughy balls from it with her fingertips.

What a piece of work, Xena thought wryly. *If I ever saw anyone fighting inner demons, it's that one. If she's anything like me, next she'll be trying to fix it with-*

Abruptly, Corina scraped back the chair and rose again, a frustrated sound coming from her throat. The clothes that had been hung over the chair's backrest flew in an ungraceful arc towards the shelf, making Xena duck and wince as they passed through her before coming to rest half on top of a stack of towels.

For an instant, it looked like Corina was going to throw the chair at the massive - and solidly locked - wooden door, but then she just

assumed a firm stance and began using the chair like a barbell, pumping weight.

... physical exertion, Xena finished her thought. In spite of herself, she had to appreciate the way Corina's biceps rippled as the woman worked up a sweat. *What in Tartarus am I supposed to do about her?*

The recreational area, somewhat later...

The air was balmy, the autumn-colored leaves of tall oaks in the small park out back reducing the afternoon sun to a pleasant, tingling warmth that cast dappled shadows onto the ground. Pines and fir trees added the rich scent of their needles to the air. Isabelle walked idly along the path that led around the park's entire width, past a paved basketball court where a few men and women were playing a game.

She'd already made two circuits, and her nerves felt much soothed by the time she began her third. After a while she found herself stopping near the basketball court, watching. She had played basketball in high school, and had fond memories of the sport. Briefly, she was tempted to ask if she could join in, until she saw that one of the players was Bruno, a burly youth with a few anger management issues. He was deemed safe enough with whatever drugs they made him take, but Isabelle was wary of him. He just had a look about him.

There was no surprise in seeing his two friends playing on his team, a short, slender young man with wavy brown hair and a pinched face that everybody called Rat, and an unremarkable boy with the fuzz of a beginning beard and incredibly thick eyebrows, whose name she had not bothered to learn. As she watched, she thought she heard someone call him 'Fluffy'. But surely she had misheard.

A pine cone hit the back of her head, and she spun around to look at Tara, who had a second one in hand, already aiming another throw.

"Hey! What's your problem?" she called. Tara was often obnoxious, but this was new.

"Your face," said Tara.

"Then don't look at i- AAAH," she yelled as she barely ducked the second missile. "What the hell...?"

"You're with *her*!" Tara hissed as she came closer.

"Come again?"

Tara brought her face so close to Isabelle's that their noses nearly touched. "You're useless, Blondie!"

Isabelle blinked. Outwardly, the girl looked perfectly lucid, but what was that nonsense coming out of her mouth?

"I'm here to replace you. I'm better than you anyway. You don't even want to fight. You're a coward."

"Now listen here you little- ACK!" This time, Isabelle was too slow to evade as the full armed slap made her ears ring. The girl was slight, but she had a strong arm!

"Why you little-", Isabelle spluttered, holding her cheek.

She could only stare as her schizophrenic roommate danced on the balls of her feet, fists raised. "What kind of wimp are you?! I just threw stuff at on you, and all you do is stand there! You and I are gonna settle this right here."

"We're doing no such thing." Isabelle was experiencing the strangest sense of *déjà vu*. She did not have time to dwell on it, because the next instant she found herself pressed hard to fend off a flurry of blows raining down on her from what seemed nineteen directions at once - the woman was *fast*! She tasted blood where one of those chops had scored on her lip, and dull aches in her left side and arm spoke of bruising in other places as well. What the hell had gotten into the girl?

She never realized that the sounds of the basketball game had stopped, until a high pitched male voice spoke up right behind her. "Ooooooh, cat fight!" it crowed. The distraction was enough for Tara to get past Isabelle's frantic defenses.

"Ow! Not my ear!" Isabelle howled. Reflexively, she gave a shove with both arms, and yelped louder when the girl was flung back with her teeth still clamped shut firmly on Isabelle's earlobe. The onlookers gasped appreciatively.

Hissing like a cat, Tara closed in again. Isabelle could see what must be her own blood on the girl's lips, and she shuddered. This was surreal!

Their spectators oohed as Isabelle managed to fend off another onslaught. Then abruptly, they fell silent.

From out of nowhere it seemed, a hand grabbed the back of her shirt, and she found herself being yanked backward, away from the other girl with enough force to make her stagger. She could only stare, dumbfounded, at the shape looming over her, the afternoon sun a glowing halo around the form.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you to play nice?" The voice was so eerily familiar that the hair on Isabelle's neck wanted to stand up. Squinting, she tried to make out the tall figure against the back-light.

There stood roughly two hundred pounds of coiled power, all muscle and sinew, dark hair cut short and tousled-looking, blue eyes fixing her and Tara in turn with a feral stare.

It was not the evidence of the woman's obvious strength that made Isabelle's jaw go slack - despite the fact she felt about as helpless as a week-old kitten in that grasp. This, if one forgot about what everyone here called the "prison garb", and the short hair, was the spitting image of her ghostly friend, Xena. Right down to that feral gleam in her glacier eyes.

"Well?" the stranger demanded, giving each of them a small shake.

Tara began to whimper, and struggled to free herself feebly. "No! No! I don't want to die! Please!"

Rapid footfalls in the distance announced a pair of male orderlies hurrying to the scene. It seemed the group of spectators the fight had attracted had suddenly found important things to be busy with elsewhere - they had scuttled away like roaches when the light comes on. The orderlies approached, slightly out of breath from running, but the woman made no move to release either one of her captives.

"Miss Walker," one of them said, sounding calm. "Please, let them go. They aren't going to hurt you."

Walker? Corina Walker? Holy crap, here?! Isabelle felt her knees go weak. A terrorist had her by the scruff of the neck. A terrorist.... who looked like her invisible warrior friend. Holy crap, indeed!

Corina snorted. "Hurt me? Of course not." She shook her head at the man, then turned back to Tara and Isabelle, giving them each a

good, long once-over. Apparently she was satisfied that they would behave now, for she finally released her hold on the two. It was an effort not to sag with relief. Tara did sag, plopping to the ground and hugging her knees. She began rocking back and forth silently, once again lost in her own world.

"Miss Walker?" the orderly tried again. "We're going to have to-" Corina ignored him.

The terrorist stepped slowly towards a still stunned Isabelle, brushed an imaginary speck of dust off the smaller woman's blouse, and told her with a smile, "You can close your mouth now, girl. Otherwise I'm gonna start thinking I may have made an impression on you."

The poor man cleared his throat and tried again, louder. "- take you into custody for assaulting these two women," he finished anxiously.

"No!" Isabelle protested, "that's not how it was at all. She only-"

Corina's chuckle cut her off, a startling, throaty sound. "You and what army?" the woman drawled. The orderly and his colleague looked taken aback. At the looks on their faces, Corina snickered. "Very well then, do your thing. I'll come in peace." Her voice was mocking. From the ground, Tara gave a whimper.

Her eyes riveted on those glacier blue eyes, Isabelle found herself unable to speak. The resemblance was uncanny. She began to have an inkling of what Xena must have felt when she first saw her. Before she had a chance to say another word, the orderlies began to walk Corina back towards the building.

Isabelle was still staring after the woman and her escort when more attendants came rushing up to take care of Tara, taking her pulse and guiding the girl to her feet. She was like clay, not resisting but also not moving unless coaxed. Isabelle, in turn, was ordered to the medical wing to have her ear looked at - which she had to be told three times until it registered. Only then did she become aware of the smear of blood drying on the side of her neck, and the throbbing pain from the bite wound. Touching the wound gingerly, she winced. The coming days were going to be uncomfortable.

With a sigh, she headed back inside to see a doctor.

Had Isabelle looked over her shoulder, she might have seen a

wavering shape, half-hidden in the shadow of the trees, watching as the orderlies somewhat nervously flanked Corina, even though the woman showed no sign of aggression. Well, except for that looming that seemed to be second nature. And the general sense of a panther ready to pounce. Well, perhaps she did look somewhat menacing at that, Xena amended her assessment.

"Right, come along now, Miss Walker, easy now," the orderly's voice sounded a little strained, perhaps due to the death-grip he had on Corina's arm (which the woman was enduring stoically). "How did you get that door open, anyway? I know I locked it."

"I have many skills," Corina said sardonically.

Sneering, Xena, shook her head. "Tch, what arrogance. You'd think she was a bloody warlord, or something."

Well, she'd orchestrated the first meeting - with the incidental help of Tara's sudden flare-up. It seemed unlikely that Tara was aware of her, but Xena thought part of that must have been some sort of reaction to her presence. The entire scene had been too eerily familiar for a complete coincidence. *Hades, the kid even carries the same name!*

Getting Corina out of that cell had been the greater challenge. She was quite proud of herself there. One of her more brilliant accomplishments, if she did say so herself.

Either way, it was done. She hoped it was enough.

- Part 5 -

The warrior speaks...

My poor little bard. Here she is, her hands covered in blood. Blood that she's shed, taking a life. She should never have had to live through this, not her. I told her once that everything changes the moment you deliberately take your first life, and I meant it. It's hard to put into words the bottomless pit this act opens up under your soul. I've lived with this, and I've learned to ride the currents of this perpetual fall.

But she shouldn't have to. And now it's marred her, I'm ashamed to say, even in my eyes. She's no longer the pure, innocent little thing that I've come to rely on as my conscience and counterpart.

We'll get through this - we always have. But oh, I ache for her!

If only I had been more adamant about sending her away that day outside Poteidaia. She would have been better off for it. I don't know where I would be now if not for her, but sparing her this moment would have been worth the price.

*I'm doing it all over again, Xena thought to herself, perching on a branch high up in one of the park's trees overlooking the dignified but age-worn building that held the institution. It had been hours since Isabelle and Corina had been led away, and the warrior had not moved except place herself at this excellent vantage point. *With all I know I still can't stop meddling with her fate. Why can't I just leave her be? If my life is any indication, she'll be better off that way. But there has to be a reason for me to be here! What, if not to meddle? Or is this all some crazy vision inside my head? I hardly know anything anymore.**

Meanwhile, in the Hospital Wing...

Isabelle's teeth were clenched as the nurse cleaned and disinfected her earlobe - it seemed Tara had quite literally taken a bite out of it! Luckily though, the doctor had decided that she did not need stitches.

"Ow! Dammit!"

"Sorry!" Despite the apology, the nurse continued to work on the wound. "It's the disinfectant, 'fraid it'll sting for a bit. No helping that. I'll put some band aid over it and we're done." Her voice was brisk and businesslike.

Isabelle gritted her teeth and nodded. "What's going to happen with Tara?" she asked, to get her mind off the pain. "Is she going to stay my room mate?"

The nurse barely paused. "Not for now," was all she said. Isabelle sighed. Her thoughts wandered on to Corina Walker. The terrorist. She had never suspected the woman would be held here, of all places. And that resemblance! How was this possible? And was Xena aware of this? Surely not, she would have said.

Wouldn't she? After all this time, all of a sudden Isabelle felt like she didn't know the ghostly warrior at all anymore.

Either way, she was going to do her damndest to stay the hell away from that terrorist. The woman scared the living daylights out of her!

High Security Wing, the next morning...

I must be mad, Isabelle thought to herself, the irony of the thought, given her current surroundings, completely escaping her. And yet, here she was. She did not really know why.

As the ward door thumped shut behind her, and Isabelle heard the key turn in the lock, she suddenly felt very much alone, despite the orderly on duty walking quietly beside her, the soft clink of his keyring seeming impossibly loud. The hall with its numerous cell doors on both sides seemed empty, and huge, and very oppressing. Her shoes made a hollow echo on the hard floor tiles.

The orderly guided Isabelle to the room she sought, and for a while she just stood looking through the little square barred hole in the heavy door.

Corina was standing by the window staring unseeingly out into the yard, her profile outlined clearly against the backdrop of afternoon sky through the barred pane. She seemed to be speaking quietly to herself.

Isabelle took a breath. Then another. She very nearly turned to leave again, but at that moment, Corina seemed to sense her watching and spun around, looking directly at her through the door's glassless window. It was an effort for Isabelle not to take a step back.

"What?" Corina said in a flat voice.

Isabelle cleared her throat. *Don't show weakness*, she told herself, *she can probably smell weakness*. She felt a little hysterical.

"I came to thank you," she said, proud of how steady her voice sounded. Except for that squeak she could not seem to control.

"Thank me." Corina stood looking at her. The woman's face was in partial darkness, highlighted from one side by the small window, but those incredible eyes shone like two icy beacons in the dark.

"I'm sorry," Isabelle said quickly, wilting under that stare, "I didn't mean to... intrude. I... Do... do you mind if I come in?" Now what the hell had made her say *that*? She wanted nothing *less* than to be alone in a room with the woman.

Corina gave her a long, unreadable stare, then she motioned her in with a curt flick of her head.

Holy crap, was all Isabelle could think as she stepped inside, keenly aware of the heavy door thudding into its lock behind her. The knowledge that an orderly was waiting just outside did little to ease the knot between her shoulder blades.

"So!" Isabelle said, looking around the small room so she did not have to look at Corina (though she wanted to!). This place was even more spartan than her own room, containing a table, a chair, a TV on a stand much like hers - she noticed the plug was pulled - a metal frame pallet, a shelf against the wall with some personal items and clothing stacked haphazardly, a washbasin that was barely large enough to deserve the name. The floor was unadorned gray linoleum, and a cobwebbed lamp hung from the ceiling. "This is ni- I mean... why... er..". She felt herself blushing.

Corina snorted. "Yeah, very nice. Amazing what I've done with the place, I know."

Isabelle giggled. Why did her voice sound so high-pitched? She risked a glance at the other woman.

Corina had not moved from the window, and it was hard to tell much about her facial expression. "I'd offer you a cold drink, but I am told my manners are worse than a badger's. Also, I'm fresh out of ice."

"Yeah thanks," Isabelle managed. "I'm good."

"So you are."

And that made Isabelle's cheeks feel even hotter. There was no way she could blame this flush on the feeble rays of the afternoon sun that shone through the small window.

Now that she was sitting here, Isabelle felt an utter fool for having come. She had no clue what to say to this woman, who by all accounts had more than a few lives on her conscience. Seeing her loom there, dark form outlined by the fading light like a creature out of hell, Isabelle could believe it.

Corina, on the other hand, appeared completely unfazed by the invasion of her private space (or what passed for it in a place like this).

"Looks like the little shit actually managed to take a bite out of you," the tall woman noted.

"What?" Isabelle's hand went up to her bandaged ear. "Oh! Yeah, that she did." She inhaled sharply when the taller woman suddenly came towards her and, before Isabelle could react, jabbed middle and ring fingers into a spot below Isabelle's clavicle, then again nearer her shoulder, in rapid succession.

Isabelle felt a weird sort of tingling for a moment, then it was gone. She looked up into Corina's eyes, too startled to remember that she really did not want to look into Corina's eyes.

"Pressure points," the other woman explained. "Will help with the healing."

"Th-thanks," Isabelle managed, her hand moving to the spots where she had been jabbed. She could feel a dull pressure there, as if Corina's fingers were still touching her. She found it quite impossible to look away from those blue eyes - the eyes of a stranger and yet so hauntingly familiar.

Corina did not look away either. After a few moments, one corner of her mouth began to draw back, and one of her lower eyelids to

twitch.

Uh oh... that can't be good, Isabelle thought. Aloud she said, "Uh... I should get going." She had to make herself look away.

"Yeah, maybe you should." Corina turned away and walked back to the window.

"Thanks again. I mean, for earlier."

"Don't mention it."

Heart pounding, Isabelle knocked on the cell door for the orderly to let her out. She looked back over her shoulder, calling herself nine kinds of fool.

As soon as the door opened for her, she fled.

"So, how'd it go?" Xena drawled.

Isabelle jumped - the ghostly warrior was just suddenly there as the young woman was walking back to her own wing, mind still whirling.

"Don't *do* that," she muttered.

"Sorry," Xena said insincerely.

Isabelle drew a breath. "How did what go?"

"Your visit to Miss Stone-Face."

Isabelle stopped in her tracks, staring at Xena, who walked another few steps before realizing Isabelle was no longer beside her.

"You *know* about her?"

"Well, sort of." Xena scratched her neck.

"When were you going to tell me?"

"Technically you already knew about her..."

"Oh, don't give me that! You know what I mean."

Xena looked away. "It's complicated."

"I'm reasonably intelligent. Try me."

A young man passed them - Ned, Isabelle thought, looking rather

oddly at her for speaking to what of course looked like empty air to him. Isabelle gave him a dark glare. The man jumped, and abruptly changed direction, dashing down a side corridor. Isabelle felt an irrational surge of satisfaction. When she turned back to Xena, the warrior was gone.

"Bloody wonderful. Just. Bloody. Wonderful."

The big, raven-haired woman lay flat on her belly in the center of her little cell, wearing a sleeveless black top and shorts, her body glistening with sweat, her breathing strained.

Okay, Corina, she silently commanded herself, *up you go, one more time!* Powerful shoulder muscles bunched as she pushed herself up for yet another round of fifty pushups, with a feeling of betrayal. So far, the exercise had not done its usual trick of stilling her mind. The solution, of course, was to keep on.

Push. One. Push. Two. Just yesterday, the ex-terrorist had been ready to go through with her final plan. The tranquilizing pills she had managed to secret away - they gave them to the more restive patients, and if nothing else, Corina knew how to fake being restive - those pills would be enough to put an elephant out of its misery. She knew they'd put her peacefully away, never to wake up. *Push. Twelve. Push. Thirteen.* It would have been the easy way out. She knew that, no matter what the outcome of her trial might be, she would never get the chance to redeem herself for all the terrible things she'd done.

Push. Nineteen. Push. Faster. Twenty. She was just so tired of fighting. Fighting herself, fighting to ignore the hate she saw in people's faces. *Faster.* And worse, the terror. As her body began to work up a sweat, she reflected on her sorry life. Her childhood dream of becoming a SEAL, pushing herself hard practicing in secret, long before she even applied for the training. Passing the gruelling test, barely, against everybody's expectations. Being turned down in the end because a woman had no business being a SEAL. Her subsequent embitterment and spiral out of control. Drugs, Alcohol, the works.

Still not fast enough.

Mars conscripting her into his world domination plan, saving her from becoming a complete physical wreck. Turning her into a monster.

Even looking back, it all seemed so logical; every one of her choices had made perfect sense at the time. And yet, here she was, stuck in an asylum - by her own design, admittedly - hoping that she was managing to keep under Mars' radar. Hiding away like a damned coward.

So why did a pair of green eyes continue to intrude upon her self pity? What was the deal with that? When Corina had stepped between the two girls to break up their fight the day before, that girl had looked as terrified as anyone aware of Corina's identity. Why the hell had she come to visit this morning? Wasn't she happy to have survived her encounter with the monster?

Most amazingly, whatever had been in the girl's face during her later visit - it had not been fear, or hatred, or disgust. She found herself admiring the courage it must have taken to show up here, all things considered. She silently thanked the fact that people had a hard time reading her. Her emotions had been a nervous mess, but she doubted the girl had noticed. That was all she needed, the little thing trying to become her *friend*, of all things!

She wondered what the strawberry blonde was doing in this institution. She seemed a very intelligent, spirited, and quite normal young woman. This certainly was no place for her. But of course, mental illness took many forms, some of them not at all obvious. She should know. She had seen insanity come to more people than she cared to count, and not a few of them by her own doing. Hell, she wasn't sure her own "pretend" mental condition was all that fake.

She also realized she didn't know the young woman's name. It surprised her to feel regret at this.

All of a sudden, though, the thought of taking those pills did not seem so attractive anymore. She *liked* living!

The pushups done, she flopped onto her back, bent her knees a little, laced her hands behind her head, and launched into a series of one hundred situps. And another. No rest for her yet. Still too much thinking going on in her head.

She was quite unaware of the ghostly leather-clad shape standing in the corner of the little room, watching her, a compassionate fire burning in luminous, steel blue eyes.

Back at Isabelle's home...

When Xena phased into Isabelle's apartment a short time later - it really felt quite like home now, even without the young writer there - she found Isabelle's mother in the living room, watching TV. The woman had stayed around, minding the apartment and wanting to be close to her daughter for the time being, something that Xena could have done without.

The program running on TV was something Xena could only describe as some sort of bazaar, where a sleazy looking presenter (in fact, he looked a lot like Salmoneus) was rhapsodizing about a strange looking implement, that supposedly would make one fit and trim simply by applying it to one's rump. To Xena, the thing looked more like one of the many instruments she had used to extract information from her prisoners during her time as warlord.

It was so ludicrous that at first Xena took it to be some sort of farce, a comedic play, but Isabelle's mother was not laughing. Instead the woman picked up the telephone - amazing how commonplace the device felt to Xena now - and dialed a number.

Frowning in confusion, Xena continued to watch the screen.

"And we have a caller!" the presenter was saying. "Why don't you tell us your name and where you're from?"

In the living room, Isabelle's mother gasped. "Oh dear! I got through! I actually got through!!" Her face was flushed, and sweat sprang out on her forehead. Clearly, the woman was in distress.

And then something very strange happened.

"I'm Cecilia Barnes, calling from the Bay area," the older woman said hoarsely into the telephone receiver. But the strange thing was, Xena could hear the words coming both from the woman herself and the TV screen, with a slight delay in between. What madness was this?

"Hello Cecilia, great of you to join us," the presenter said. His voice did not echo.

A sense of foreboding grabbed Xena - having that box talk back to you, in her experience, was never a good sign. It might not be the God of War they were facing, but she wasn't willing to take any chances. This was Isabelle's mother, after all.

Luckily, she knew something that would disrupt the box so much that Isabelle had to go out onto her balcony and do something to a wire there to get it to work again. It was excruciatingly uncomfortable to Xena and she *never* did it on purpose, but if that was what it took... Taking a breath to steel herself, she deliberately stepped forward until she stood right inside the TV set.

The static crackle jolted her enough to make her teeth rattle. Despite jerking uncontrollably, she stood firm, watching the signal first distort, then go to white noise. She gave it another few seconds just to be sure, before lurching back out of harm's way, hair charged and standing on end.

"What? Oh *bother*," Isabelle's mother exclaimed, still speaking to the telephone, but walking through Xena (which gave her another jolt) to slap the TV a few times. It had no effect. "I'm sorry, my screen just went dead." The woman got up and walked into the kitchen with its door to the balcony, still talking. "But I have to tell you how amazing I found the Thighbuster 2020. I can't wait to get my hands on the Gut-B-Gone, I've already..." her voice faded to an indistinct murmur as she left the room.

Xena gaped. What the Hells had that been about? Had the woman's mind been snared somehow? She hoped she had not been too late, but there was very little else she could do now. She had to hope for the best. She waited for the program to come back on, which it invariably did as soon said wire outside was fiddled with.

Instead, the screen went dark except for a quite familiar red dot pulsing in its center.

"Hades' Nuts, just who I need," Xena grumbled.

"You rang?" The God of War's voice was accompanied by a catchy jingle that Xena was coming to really, really dislike.

"You wish."

"You're beginning to seriously annoy me, wench."

"It's one of my many skills, Ares." Xena began preening her fingernails.

Ares' face reddened. "You will call me by my proper name!"

"Or you'll do what, Ares? I'm insubstantial, you know."

He growled. "I can still hurt you, and you know it."

Xena made herself shrug and look bored. "Been there, done that." She yawned ostentatiously.

"Really." A twitch of his eyelid was all the warning Xena had. Instinctively, she flung herself to the side, but the shock wave that fanned out from the screen, causing the air to waver and swirl, still shoved her violently to the ground. Annoyingly, all it did to her surroundings was a faint stirring of leaves on Isabelle's potted benjamin tree, while Xena's entire insubstantial form burned with pain.

"For someone who claims pain means nothing, you certainly put up a good show of avoiding it," Ares noted.

"Force of habit," Xena said against gritted teeth.

Ares chortled. "Obviously."

Xena shoved the pain aside and took up the battle again. "I bet you have a harder time shoving around my look-alike," she sneered, "she may not have my class, but that's one solid bitch."

The god's eyes narrowed. "Funny you would mention that, but I have her well enough in hand."

"So you have a way to get to her in the crazy place," she half said to herself. "Strange, since her TV is never plugged into the wall. I understand that's needed to make it work."

"Ahhh, so *that* is the problem. " Ares' eyes glinted. "Interesting."

Xena cursed under her breath. "Hera's tits... you didn't know that, did you."

Ares sniggered in that aggravating way he had. He'd played this well, she grudgingly admitted. But that didn't exactly ease her sudden anger. Without thinking, she reached for a nearby chair, meaning to fling it at the War God in the hopes of delaying whatever he was going to do next.

Her hands, of course, passed right through. Ares cackled as he faded out, accompanied by a sweet female voice.

"This broadcast of TV Olymp was brought to you by 'Ambrosia - the snack that really lifts you up'. And now back to our regular program."

Growling in frustration, Xena turned to deliver a kick to the offending piece of furniture. Again, of course, her foot passed through, the sudden imbalance dropping her unceremoniously onto her backside.

To add insult to injury, Cecilia picked that moment to return to the living room, phone still in hand, walking right through her and giving her another jolt.

The TV screen flickered; but Xena only glanced at it long enough to see it wasn't red on black. Growling, she phased out and fled.

The High Security Wing, a few hours later...

Corina had lost track of time, but the sun had already set by the time her body finally started to give in to exhaustion. Brain pleasantly fuzzy with fatigue, she forced herself through another thirty pushups - just to be sure - before flopping onto her back, panting.

She lay there, enjoying the feeling of a blank mind and fatigued muscles, until the breeze wafting through the open window pebbled her sweat-covered skin with goose bumps and made her shiver. With a grunt, she pushed herself up and headed to her clothes shelf to grab a towel.

She took off her T-shirt, she wiped sweat off her chest and arms, then laid it over her shoulders for warmth as she turned towards the door to get an orderly's attention for an escort to the showers.

That was when she heard the static crackle behind her. With a strangled oath, she whirled towards the old TV set.

An image flickered to life there, a red dot of light pulsing in the center, expanding.

Shit, shit, shit... But how?

Her first instinct was to turn around and pummel on the door until someone came for her, but a stubborn streak inside her made her stay and watch as the red dot wobbled and finally expanded into the face of the War God, Mars.

"Do you have *any* idea how hard it is to make this thing work when it's unplugged?" Mars looked oddly transparent, and static

repeatedly obscured his outline. His voice, however, came through loud and clear.

"That was the idea." Corina took a step back. She was now as far away from the TV as she could be while still inside the room. She had no intention of letting Mars touch her with his powers. Her hands clenched involuntarily; she wished she had some kind of weapon, even though she knew it would be utterly useless in this situation. It was just that the feel of one in her hands was... a comfort.

"You have no idea what you're throwing away. You disappoint me, Corina."

"I try." Breathing slowly, Corina performed the concentration exercise that would calm her nerves and keep her voice from trembling. She was a tranquil forest pond, surface reflecting the leaves above, her breath the soft waves lapping against the bank.

"What's happened between us, Corina? You have such promise. You're destined to be one of my greatest too- my greatest warriors."

In spite of herself, Corina could feel the allure of his words. She found herself wanting nothing more than to please this wonderful, powerful, majestic creature. Before she knew it, she had taken a step towards the TV, fists no longer balled but raised palm up in a placating gesture.

Mars smiled confidently. It was not a pretty smile.

The hell! You can't be pulled into this again, a tiny voice inside Corina's mind warned. Growling, she snatched her hands to her sides and stopped herself from advancing further.

"You know you can't resist me, precious."

"Precious, my ass," Corina said through clenched teeth. She was the pond. Calm. Unruffled.

Mars' eyes glinted dangerously, though the effect was somewhat spoiled by an ill-timed static flare that made his image ripple.

"Oh, how you wound me, " he said dramatically. "It's that trull in the leather, isn't it? She put this flea in your ear."

"The what in the what now?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me. Ever since she appeared, you've

been..." His eyes narrowed. "Or is it the other way round? You made her? How the hell..."

"You're insane," Corina told him. *Breathe deeply. You are the pond.*

The War God, meanwhile, was focusing on a spot behind Corina. "Speak of the devil," he growled. "You again!"

"Oh, please, that has *got* to be the oldest trick in the boo- ack!"

Corina jerked as a mild static shock shot through her. It did no damage apart from a few raised hairs, but for a moment she thought she heard a curse from behind, almost like an echo of her own frustration. She whirled.

She was just in time to catch an instant's flare of static, as one might get from pulling off a synthetic sweater in darkness. The tiny blue flashes described the outline of a human figure, about Corina's height. There was no-one there, of course, so Corina assumed it was an aftereffect of her own body having been in the way of whatever Mars had hurled at her.

"You. Are. Mad." Calm eroded; the pond was suffering the impact of a fierce thunderstorm. She didn't care. What the hell did he still want with her?

"Just go away. You can't do *shit* to me from an unplugged TV."

"Obviously I can." He gave Corina what must be the most insufferable grin in his considerable repertoire. It made her fingers itch to close around a throat. His, preferably.

"Oh.. oh yeah?" Corina balled her fist. The small voice inside her whispered. *Really? That's your comeback?* Corina firmly told it to shut up.

"Ohh yeah." Mars drew out the words and leered.

"How's *this* for a comeback?" Corina flung herself at the TV, hands outstretched.

"What the hell are you-?"

Mars got no further, before Corina's hands closed on the old TV set's antenna and began to twist. It jolted her with electricity at first, but much weaker than what she had already experienced.

"Really?" Mars sneered. "You think *that* will make-"

With a loud snap, the thin metal gave way, and she tossed it aside. The image flickered in and out a few times, then, annoyingly, it steadied, if not quite as strong as before.

"... a difference?" Mars chuckled. "The signal here is rotten to begin with."

Corina growled wordlessly.

"Yeees, let it go, give in to your dark side," Mars crooned. "Release your anger, only your hatred can destroy me."

Corina froze for a moment, then a feral grin split her face. With a high-pitched cry, she administered a well-aimed kick right at Mars' face at the center of the screen. The last she saw of him was the widening of his eyes as the screen caved in and the device crashed first into the wall, then to the ground, where the tube imploded with a dull boom.

"You watch too many movies," she told the heap of trash at her feet. She could feel the sting from several cuts and bruises where debris from the implosion had hit her, but the pain was nothing compared to the grim satisfaction that the kick had given her.

A key rattled in the lock, and it opened to three orderlies rushing inside, one with a syringe at the ready.

They stopped, gaping, at the sight before them; the tall woman in a sweat-drenched sports bra and linen slacks, her short hair a tousled mess, one bare foot resting on the blackened husk of the old TV set, the other standing in a sea of shards, a cut above her right eyebrow dripping blood down her cheek.

"I really don't like talk shows," she told them mildly.

Xena floated in that strange place outside worlds, panting. Well, not really panting, seeing how she had no form here, not even an insubstantial one. But it *felt* like panting.

That had been entirely too close! Not only had Ares - or Mars, however he wanted to call himself - completely caught her off guard with his capability to attack in his weakened state, but Corina Walker had nearly seen her. She was certain the woman had reacted to her cursing.

Fool! Running off like a startled goose! Who knew, perhaps it would have been a good thing for Corina to see her. But the thought of someone else besides Isabelle laying eyes on her made her feel incredibly skittish.

And, speaking of Isabelle... Xena concentrated for a moment, picturing that beloved face, and an instant later, she materialized near the young writer.

Well, tried to.

It was like swimming in honey, with Isabelle a blurred shape in the distance, near and yet far as if one was peering into the wrong end of a spy glass.

"Zeus' unwashed britches, but this is getting annoying," she growled as she struggled forward, straining to take that last step that would allow her to appear to Isabelle.

It looked like the young woman was on her way to the common room, presumably to take her evening meal with the other inmates of the wing, as she usually did.

Gritting her teeth, Xena took a steadying breath, then *pushed* with all her willpower. There was a feel of something tearing, then she was out, managing not to gasp and stumble as she materialized beside her corporeal friend.

Isabelle, intent on reaching her destination (she did love her meals, no matter in which incarnation), did not immediately notice Xena at her side. The warrior knew she shouldn't, but now as then, it seemed Gabrielle would always bring out the Prankster in her (much to Gabrielle's inevitable dismay). Staying outside the other woman's field of vision, Xena approached very closely, bent down towards Isabelle's ear, and murmured, "Boo".

She was rewarded with a startled yelp and a jump that would have done Icarus proud, then a glare that made her clear her throat and put on her most angelic face.

"Goddammit, don't *do* that!" Isabelle's growl startled a lanky girl who was heading the same direction, walking a few paces ahead. The girl gave her a probing look, then shook her head and increased her pace.

"Sorry," said Xena insincerely. The corners of her mouth threatened to betray her by twitching.

"No, you're not."

Xena let out a breath that turned into a chortle. "Well, maybe not. But you should see your face. It's priceless." She attempted a grin.

Isabelle did not look amused.

"Sorry?" She tried again, this time she didn't have to fake the pleading look. It had taken Gabrielle years to come to terms with Xena's brand of humor - if she ever had - and she could hardly expect Isabelle to get it in the short time they had known one another in this existence.

Besides, she had to admit to herself, such pranks hardly helped Isabelle's situation as a perceived basket case. Then again... that was sort of the idea. Hera's tits, but she hated this!

"Whatever," Isabelle said crossly. "I'm late for supper. And after that, I'm off to see Corina Walk-" she cut off, looking stubborn.

Xena felt a flare of jealousy at the comment. But, this was good, she tried to tell herself. Except that she knew the ex-terrorist probably was in no mood, or position, to receive guests just now. "Well, about that-" she began.

Isabelle rounded on her, oblivious to the odd looks she was once again collecting from passersby.

"What about it? You got something else you should have told me long ago?" She made a frustrated sound. "Why am I even still talking to you? All you ever seem to do these days is get me into deeper trouble."

Xena spoke quietly. She did not even try to keep trepidation out of her voice. "You talk to me because I'm your friend?" *The friend who got you into all of this, no less. Why, indeed.*

Isabelle took an irritated breath, no doubt with a withering reply on her tongue. But then their eyes met, and the breath came out in a sigh.

"Yeah, well, I- what now, are you fading again? That figures!"

"What? Aww, not again," Xena tried to say, but she could tell her words were swallowed as that strange wall of thick-honey-force swelled in strength, shoving her insubstantial form back into that dark place.

"Well, duh," Isabelle grumbled. "I swear, sometimes I think she does that on purp- Oh! Hi, Ms. Branigan!"

The therapist had appeared from a side corridor, presumably on her evening rounds. Isabelle felt a flush creep up her neck. Of all people to witness her arguments with Xena, this one bothered her the most. She needed to appear to improve after all, or she'd never be allowed out of this place.

"Hello, Isabelle," Gail said in that annoyingly pleasant voice she adopted when speaking with her patients. "How are you this evening?"

Isabelle shrugged uncomfortably. "All right."

"And you took the pills this time, like you promised?"

"Yep, about twenty minutes ago." *It was that or have them shoved down my throat by Nell*, she thought bitterly.

"Excellent. They should be kicking in right about now. You'll have a warrior-free evening."

"Awesome," Isabelle said.

"Well, dear, I have to get going. I will see you tomorrow!" Gail gave her a pat on the shoulder and continued on her way.

Supper was nondescript as usual, but Isabelle had never been a picky eater, so she ate the steamed vegetables, potatoes and meat loaf with enthusiasm. This earned her some disbelieving looks which she ignored. Instead, she idly cast around for anything interesting in the way of ward gossip.

"... managed to hold my temper all day! I bet Ms. Branigan will be pleased."

"Yeah, I bet you'd like that..."

"... say she was raging and screaming so much it took five men to hold her down!"

"Lennie was sent home this morning. Wonder how long I've still got..."

"Are you gonna eat that?"

Her attention snapped back to one of the conversations when she heard a familiar name.

"She's one scary lady, that Walker woman. Did you see how she handled that fight the other day? Wouldn't wanna be one of them girls." The speaker was male. "Just picked them up by the scruff of the neck like they were kittens!"

"Well, nothing compared to those wardens she took on today. They say she threw a TV out the window!" This second voice was female.

"The windows are barred, dummy."

"Just what I heard." The female voice sounded sullen. "Anyway, apparently she's been knocked out and is now in sick ward under chains. I hope I don't get sick..."

Isabelle stopped listening, dropping her meat-filled fork carelessly by her half-eaten plate. Could this be true? It sounded absolutely crazy! She snorted a laugh as the irony of that thought struck her.

"Something funny, bitch?" a man sitting a few yards across from her asked, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

Isabelle said quickly, "what? No! No, not you!" She dimly remembered the man. Jake had a spectacularly short fuse, coupled with the firm belief that everything was about him.

"Easy, Jake," his seat neighbor said, even as Jake began scraping back his chair. "Remember how you want to please Ms. Branigan?"

Isabelle decided it was better not to wait for Jake's response. She fled the dining hall.

She walked without a particular goal, aware of her surroundings only once when she passed an open window and the blare of a siren passing close by outside startled her. She was not really surprised when she eventually wound up at the doors to the sick ward. "Probably a wild rumor anyway," she murmured to herself as she entered.

It turned out it wasn't quite the wild rumor she had surmised, but even so, her visit was somewhat anticlimactic. Corina lay in a drug-induced stupor, her eyes closed and her face unflatteringly

slack, completely still except for the occasional flutter of an eyelid. It came as a mild shock to see the woman's wrists were bound to the bed at her sides.

"Isn't as dramatic as it looks," the nurse on duty said placidly when she noticed Isabelle's start. The stout, middle-aged woman was fluffing the pillow on the other, unoccupied bed in the room. "She actually *asked* to be put under. Came as quietly as a lamb, the orderlies said."

"But the-"

"The bonds? Ah, for her own safety more than anything else. She'll be right disoriented when she comes out of that sleep. Don't want her to hurt herself now, do we?" Isabelle was mildly irritated at the nurse's patronizing tone, but she just murmured agreement, her eyes on the slumbering woman. She felt a wild urge to trace a finger along that chiseled face. How could someone be so comfortably familiar and at the same time so frightening? Right now though, Corina just looked incredibly vulnerable, and Isabelle's heart went out to her.

"Better run along, Missie," the nurse told her, "this one isn't going anywhere for some time."

There seemed to be nothing to do but comply, so Isabelle left.

Outside the ward, she immediately sensed a dramatic change in the mood. It was less evident in the patients, but she saw staff faces that were pale with shock, and others with their heads together in subdued but urgent murmurs. She stood for a moment, wavering, before approaching a nurse she knew vaguely, who was dabbing at her eyes with a paper tissue.

"What happened?" she asked quietly. A reassuring lie clearly on her tongue, the nurse gave Isabelle another look, then appeared to change her mind. "It's nurse Nell. Her car was hit by a speeding truck as she pulled out of the rear parking lot."

Isabelle felt the blood drain from her face. "Nell? But I saw her just before lunch? Oh my god, is she okay?"

"She was rushed to the emergency room. We don't know yet. She's badly hurt I think." The last came in a strangled voice. "She has two little boys... those poor kids." She took a shuddering breath. "Well, nothing for it but to keep her in our prayers, dear. And I suppose

we'll be needing to hire a temp. We're understaffed as it is." She blinked her eyes a few times and dabbed at them again before turning and walking away, leaving Isabelle to stare after her dumbly.

Less than a day later, a new temp was in place. His name was Marc, and he looked like he had escaped from a fashion model shoot. Blue eyes looked out beneath long lashes that nevertheless had nothing feminine about them, sandy hair and a carefully trimmed stubble of beard growth framed his lightly tanned face. The picture was completed by an athletic build sporting wide shoulders and unmistakably strong hands... it should not be legal for one single person to look so attractive.

And that was before he smiled at you.

Needless to say, the entire female staff - and a good portion of the males as well - were staring doe-eyed at the man, who seemed utterly unaware of the fact.

His looks not enough, it was evident early on that Marc also knew his job, going about the new tasks handed to him with friendly efficiency, always with a ready smile, quip, or pat on the back both for his colleagues and the patients.

In short, everybody agreed that this guy must have fallen from heaven.

Except for Xena, of course.

"Look at that popinjay", she sneered when a somewhat dreamy-eyed Isabelle pointed him out, "strutting about like he was Zeus' gift to humanity. Hades, if not for the hair color, he'd be just like A- ah, someone I know back in my world." She chewed the inside of her cheek, watching Marc with narrowed eyes.

Isabelle ignored the slip. She found she missed the moments such as this one, which had been filled with a perfect mix of friendly banter and companionable silence. She did not want to ruin it now. Too much was interfering with them these days, not least the fact that logically, considering the nature of her companion, these moments ought not to be happening in the first place.

"Well," said Isabelle defensively, "he's doing a great job at any rate. Such a lucky break that he happened to be in the market for a job just now."

"Isn't it just," muttered Xena.

"Oh, don't be this way!" Quickly, Isabelle groped for a new subject. "Anyway, they say Nell was really, really lucky. She has a few broken ribs, a strained shoulder and a concussion, but she'll be going home very soon."

"That's nice."

"And then some rehab. I guess that means M- I guess that means she won't be coming back for some time."

"And godly Marc gets to stay a while."

Isabelle colored.

"You sound like you plan on sticking around here," said Xena. "What changed?"

"What? No!" Quickly Isabelle looked around to see if anyone had heard her rather indignant exclamation, but nobody seemed near enough. "And also, I shouldn't be seen talking to you."

"Quite fond of you too," Xena grunted.

Isabelle sighed, turning a corner that would take her to the park. "I know, I'm sorry."

They walked along in awkward silence until Isabelle pushed open the heavy oak door leading outside.

"So, been to see Miss Grumpy-Pants lately?" Xena finally asked.

"Don't call her that." Isabelle smirked. "She's so much like you, you may as well call *yourself* names."

"I'm not grumpy", said Xena, grumpily.

Isabelle snorted.

"If you must know, yes, I've been to the sick ward two more times. She was asleep each time. I wonder what's up with that - could they have drugged her so heavily? I mean, it's been almost two days.

Xena shrugged. "Probably faking it."

"Why would she do that?"

"Who knows what her agenda is? A good way to get your enemies

to underestimate you is to make them think you're helpless."

"Enemies? She has no enemies here, she came for help."

"Trust me. A woman like her's *always* got enemies."

Isabelle supposed Xena would know such things. But she still had a bad feeling about it.

Meanwhile, in the Hospital Wing...

Corina stirred and smacked her lips, trying to rid her mouth of the foul dryness that lay like a rotting pelt on her tongue. Blinking, she looked around. It took her fuzzy senses a while to realize where she was.

Not in her room. Right. Mars in the TV and her outburst. Orderlies giving her a shot to calm her down, before taking her here to sleep it off. How long had she slept? She had the sense of having been deeply under, and the angle of light from outside the window indicated it was earlier in the day than when she had been taken. So, at least a day had passed.

They'd be needing this bed again soon, so she was bound to be allowed back to her room soon.

She made a mental note to request a radio in place o the ruined TV set.

She tried to sit up, meaning to swing her feet out of bed, and immediately the room began to swim and tilt alarmingly.

She also found she could not lift her arms very far. Nauseated, she sank back, muscles burning from the brief exhaustion. Her head felt about to explode.

What the hell? That's not caused by any drug they use here. The fuck is going on?

"Easy, Miss Walker", said a whispered voice. "You had a reaction to the tranquilizer we gave you. You'll feel weak for a while."

Corina strained to hear, to see who had spoken - why the whisper? She could barely hear - but all she could make out was a dark shape framed by the light streaming through the window. In fact, the light was so bright it hurt her head, so she closed her eyes again.

"Here now, this will make everything better."

Why wasn't the person speaking up? She tried to ask, but all that came out of her throat was a hoarse croak. A nagging sense of alarm began to take hold, and she made use of the surge of adrenaline to try and sit up again.

Just then a calloused hand reached for her wrist, and she felt a needle being plunged into her flesh, followed by a searing hotness that shot up her arm. Before she could howl in pain, a latex-gloved hand clapped over her mouth. Moments later, everything went dark.

Xena hovered in her weird place, pondering the situation. All her years of experience as warlord and tactician were absolutely no help, and it annoyed her incredibly.

You'd think that something good should have come from all of that.

She'd discovered that she could watch a number of people more or less simultaneously by hopping back and forth between places. So she spent much of her idle time "zapping" through various wards, Isabelle's home where Isabelle's mother was still staying, Isabelle in her room here at the institution - Isabelle was grumbling over a still empty piece of writing paper, so the warrior did not even try to materialize - a shadowy figure walking along a darkened ward corridor, and finally the Walker woman sleeping in the waning light.

The woman's pale, drawn face made her look extremely vulnerable. It felt like looking into a skewed mirror. Xena did not particularly like what it showed her, but she made herself study that face closely. Corina's stupor seemed absolute as she lay on her back with her head tilted to one side and her mouth open. The covers around her form were a crumpled mess, leaving both legs visible. One pajama leg had ridden up to above the knee where it bunched in untidy folds.

"Creepy," Xena mumbled, and was about to head on, but hesitated. Something about the picture bothered her. She turned back to study the scene once more, carefully. When she could not put a finger on it, she eventually headed on.

I wonder how many nights I had like that, tossing and turning, not a wink of sleep...

And yet, Corina's slumber seemed so peaceful. Also, if the woman

truly was faking her weakness, the clear signs of having struggled violently against her restraints did not quite seem to fit the picture. Perhaps Isabelle was correct, and they were keeping the woman under drugs. But why?

She willed herself back to Corina's bedside for yet another, closer look.

That was when she noticed the puncture marks on the woman's arms. There was no evidence on the contraption called an IV (she had watched hospital shows with Isabelle's mother), and so they struck her as out of place.

Her eyes suddenly narrowed as a thought came to her.

"Wait a minute," she murmured aloud. "What in Tartarus was that person doing skulking about in the darkness all hooded and secretive?" Concentrating briefly, she returned to the corridor where she had seen the shadowy figure earlier. Realized the spot was just outside the door behind which lay Corina. Night lights barely outlined the walls and darker recesses where there were more doors. She zoomed along it in both directions, but the only person there was the nurse on duty, spectacularly un-hooded, sitting at her post at the far end where this corridor met another at right angles.

Xena cursed. Then, her Warrior-Senses tingling, she returned to Corina's bed and settled in to lurk.

The next morning...

"Good morning, Isabelle, I've got your morning medication." The male voice was accompanied by a brisk knock. Isabelle glanced into the mirror and adjusted a strand of her reddish-blond hair, then inwardly called herself nine kinds of fool for it.

"Come in," she called, keenly aware of the utter drabness of her institution clothing, which no amount of tugging and straightening could render in any way attractive.

Xena's snort made her jump and squeak uncontrollably, just as the door opened and Marc stepped inside, bearing a box of multi-colored pills.

"Be carefu-" Xena began, but Isabelle spoke right over her.

"Marc! Ah, so nice of you to come by with those!" The instant she said it, the foolishness of her words struck her, but between her irritation at Xena's once again ill-timed appearance and... well... Marc being Marc, she could not seem to stop the words from coming out of her mouth. Throwing a withering look over her shoulder, she saw the warrior draw breath again, no doubt for another snide comment about the young man.

"Not another word," she snapped furiously. "Just go away."

"But I just got here," said Marc, sounding confused.

"Isabelle," Xena said urgently, "it's him, he's the one who-"

"I said. Go. Away." To Isabelle's mild surprise, the warrior popped out of sight. The look of utter alarm on Xena's face was disquieting - for normally the woman would just slowly fade. However, Isabelle was too mortified just then to give this much thought.

"Not you," she added quickly, turning to Marc, who was studying her.

"Seems the pills you've been taking aren't doing the trick for you," he said slowly.

Isabelle thought of all the times she'd managed to flush the hated pills down the toilet, and colored. "I suppose not."

"Well, I guess if had such a cool invisible friend, I'd have a hard time letting her go, too."

"You *know* about Xena?" Isabelle gasped. After a pause, she added, "of course you do. You're my caretaker now."

"You make that sound like such a bad thing."

"Well..." Isabelle scratched her neck.

"Well, she seems like a kick-ass person to have around."

Meanwhile, on the "other" side...

"Well, she seems like a kick-ass person to have around."

Xena seethed. Isabelle's dismissal had flung her out of the material world like a physical blow, leaving her head ringing and her spirits

despairing with its sense of finality. Now she was forced to watch it all through an invisible, impenetrable wall. Sound, it seemed, travelled through from there to here, tauntingly, while no amount of her raging and cursing appeared to reach her substantial friend on the far side. *Either that, or she's just ignoring me.*

She'd spent most of the night on watch at Corina's bedside, and so had been witness when the cloaked figure had returned this morning, just as Corina was starting to come around. She'd watched from a shadowed corner as the figure jabbed a syringe into the feebly struggling woman's arm. The manner of the stranger's movement had been enough to identify him to the warrior, but at one point, he had turned and stared into her general direction, squinting, as if he had somehow sensed the incorporeal presence. That had removed any vestige of doubt about his identity.

"She is," Isabelle said. "But you know I'm not supposed to talk about her, or acknowledge her in any way." She eyed Marc. "And I doubt you're supposed to encourage me."

Marc gave her a conspiratorial wink. "It can be our little secret."

Xena ground her teeth.

Marc continued. "So... how do you feel about being here then? Seems you're not really ready to give up your friend. That's sort of counter-productive if you're looking to be 'cured' here."

Xena held her breath. Isabelle appeared to take an awfully long time to reply.

The young woman sighed. "Ever since she came into my life, I've had this feeling that there's so much more I can be. I mean, here I was, slaving away in a mediocre job going about my day and planning my life around the TV shows I like to watch... okay, I had some hopes of hitting it big with a book I was writing, but that was wishful thinking more than anything else." She paused. "And I can't believe I just told you about my writing."

"Neither can I," mumbled Xena.

"Why not? You're a woman of imagination. It's a good thing," Marc said.

Isabelle colored, and went on. "And Xena.... she just shook me out of that rut I was in. She shared the story of her life with me, she made me look at myself and want to change what I saw there. She *inspired me.*" Quietly, she added, "I love her for that."

"Silly girl," Xena muttered, deeply touched.

"But then there are those moments when I just want to strangle her. I mean, she *knows* I'm the only one who sees her, and sometimes it seems she likes nothing better than to make me look a complete idiot by talking to empty air, with dozens of people watching. It's as if she meant for me to end up in a place like this."

"Then again, here in San Francisco, I'm surprised anyone thought your behavior all that remarkable," Marc put in dryly.

Isabelle laughed mirthlessly. "My overprotective mother and my sister, the Queen of Worry."

"Ah." There was a silence, in which Isabelle went to get a glass of water from the tap.

Eventually, Marc continued. "She sounds like the perfect mate for you." He was rewarded by a spray of water as Isabelle spewed forth the drink she'd just taken from her glass.

"I'm beginning to *really* hate that guy," Xena growled, balling her fists impotently.

Isabelle spluttered. "She's a ghost! I haven't heard of anyone, ever, who could make that work. Have you?"

He shrugged. "Not so long ago people were convinced that inter-racial relationships shouldn't be possible. And we're working on same-sex partnerships. Why not ghosts?" He eyed her.

"Now you're just messing with me," she accused. "You're trying to trick me into getting myself into High Security, aren't you?"

"Not bloody likely," Xena muttered. "But what by Ares' unwashed undies *are* you up to, you freak?"

"Naw, I just try to be open-minded," he said.

"Don't trust him!" Xena called out, uselessly.

"I mean, who are we to judge if all those people who claim to hear voices, or see things, are really crazy? Perhaps they're just the chosen ones, and we 'normal' people are the ones who miss out?"

"And what if she *is* all in my mind?"

"What if she is? You've said it yourself, she has given you new

purpose. How is that a bad thing?"

"For one thing, it landed me here." Isabelle said bitterly.

"Well, that's true," Marc admitted. "But I may be able to help you there."

"Oh?" He definitely had Isabelle's attention now.

"Don't trust him!" Xena cried again, louder than before.

"Well, those meds you've been taking.... they are designed to limit the spirit. The way I see it they clamp down on your imagination - and that includes voices and images in your head, real or not. And... well, spirits. Like your friend."

"Ares' arse, that piece of shit may be on to something," Xena exclaimed. "That would explain so much..."

"That would explain so much," Isabelle echoed the warrior. "Are you sure of this?"

Marc shrugged. "No. It's just a theory. I haven't been here for very long, but I *have* seen some of your ward-mates. Their faces are empty - there's nothing there. As if all their imagination has been erased. When - *if* - they get out, they'll be perfect little sheep fitting nicely into a society of perfect little sheep."

"It makes sense." Isabelle hesitated a moment. Xena could tell she was debating whether or not to talk about something. Whatever it was, it looked like the young woman decided against it. "So, what do you suggest?"

"Well, for one thing, I suggest flushing as many of these - " he indicated the morning dose of pills - "down the toilet as you can get away with. If you aren't already doing that." He grinned at Isabelle's look of pure guilt. "Thought so."

He pulled a small vial out of his pocket. "This," he held it up before her, "will put you right back into Wonderland." The viscous liquid inside glowed a rich crimson color with the early morning sunlight shining through it from the window. There was no label on it, and it was stoppered with a small crystal plug.

"What is that?"

"It will strengthen your bond with... Xena, was it? At the same time, your frame of mind will enable you to convince your therapist that

you're ready to be released."

Isabelle tilted her head. "That sounds a bit too good to be true."

"Good girl," said Xena. "Don't trust him. I bet it's some sort of poison, with what he's been doing to Corina. Of course they'll release you when you're *dead*."

Marc gave that smile that Xena was sure never failed him. "But it is that good! It's brand new, not yet approved here, but I swear it's a miracle drug. Just five drops onto your tongue mornings and nights, and I guarantee you'll be out of here in no time. With your warrior friend by your side."

"Really?"

"Really! I mean, I'll leave it here and you can think about it. Just don't flush it down the toilet." He grinned, indicating the small vial. "There aren't a lot of these around."

She eyed him again. "And how does a temp get a hold of such a drug? Who are you really?"

"I wasn't always a temp. I'm just sort of between jobs at the moment," Marc said. "I worked for a research lab before this... let's just say they owe me."

"You stole this?"

"It's complicated. But does it really matter? It will help you." He let his eyes rest on Isabelle's until the young woman cleared her throat and looked down bashfully. Then he let his hand brush hers lightly. "I want you to get better, Isabelle."

"Get your filthy paws off her you freak!" Xena growled, reaching over her shoulder for her sword before she remembered her situation. "Damn it to all Hells!"

"I'll think about it," Isabelle promised.

Marc smiled. "That's my girl."

"No, she's not," Xena snapped.

"Well," he continued, "I have to get on with my rounds. Keep that out of sight. But do try it. I guarantee you it will change your life."

"I'll think about it," Isabelle said again, as Marc left, closing the door behind him. Then she sat down at her small table, turning the

vial over in her hands.

"Don't do it..." Xena warned. Isabelle, of course, did not hear her. With horror, Xena watched as Isabelle unstoppered the vial and tilted it up to her face.

"Noooooooooooo!"_

Unable to watch, and unable to do anything about it, Xena fled.

Meanwhile, in the sick ward...

Her brain felt like mouldy wool, matching the shocking taste in her mouth. It was a miracle that she could taste anything at all, as dry as her mouth was. Aside from that, only vague shreds of thought made their way into Corina's consciousness. Her body was once again fighting that battle against the drug that in the past had proved so futile. But giving up was not something Corina did, and so even without conscious thought, she battled.

With an unearthly effort, she made herself clench and unclench her fists, flex her muscles, wiggle her toes. Anything to get her blood circulating, so that the drug could get out of her system that much faster. She would probably fail again - she did not know how many times that needle had jabbed her just as hope was dawning that this time she would manage to wake herself up fully - but there was nothing else to do, so she kept at it doggedly.

Eventually, she was able to lift her head off the pillow for a few moments. She glanced around, her vision still blurry, and found the room in twilight. Was it dawn, or dusk? At least she could see no movement, which meant she probably still had time.

Slowly, her mind cleared enough to allow more coherent thinking. Mars had found her. That probably explained why she was being kept under. It probably explained that poor woman's accident and the timely arrival of a conveniently competent temp.

Her right foot rose up and strained against its bond

With her recent actions, she had betrayed the War God, and he certainly did not appreciate that. So this infiltrator had been put on her trail. But then why wasn't she already dead?

The foot plunked down heavily as her strength gave out. The left one went up instead.

It seemed unlike Mars to spare someone who had become a liability. She was sure she had been a favorite of his, but that must make her betrayal all the more infuriating to him. It was illogical for him to leave her alive.

Trembling with the effort, she let her left foot sink onto the mattress. She could feel her circulation pick up. She'd only need a few more moments to-

The door to her room creaked open. Corina wanted to cry.

Back in Isabelle's room...

"Sweetheart, you may want to reconsider that," said a dulcet voice from the back of the room. Isabelle nearly dropped the vial in shock. Fumbling, she caught it and managed to put the stopper back in place before more than a drop had splattered onto her cheek. She hastily slipped the small flask into her trouser pocket before looking around the room in search of the speaker.

"I'm over here, darlin'," the voice said.

Isabelle caught the flicker of her TV screen from the corner of her eye. The screen glowed darkly, a pink dot pulsing in the center. As she watched, it expanded into the shapely form of a pouty-mouthed blonde woman in front of a backdrop of dark rock and burning fires. "Oh, this won't do," the woman said, and waved her hands. The scene was replaced by pink-heart-shaped clouds with white doves fluttering about. "Much better." She breathed deeply, showing a fascinating amount of cleavage, although her gauzy dress - pink, of course - did very little to cover up the rest of her.

"What the- who? And how?" Isabelle stammered. She knew she'd switched the thing off!

"Venus," said the woman. "And don't waste time worrying about how and what. You're not crazy, I'm really here. And I don't have much time, so listen."

"But-" Isabelle protested.

"Listen, whatever that hunk gave you to drink, throw it away."

"But he said it would help me get out of here."

"Of course he did. And maybe it will. One way or another."

"One way or- you mean it's poison?" Isabelle rubbed at her cheek.

"How would I know? I'm just here to stop whatever my deranged sweetheart's trying to do." She said lightly.

"Your... what?"

"Mars? You know, God of War? What *do* they teach them these days? We had a thing for a while, but he's going a bit overboard with his schemes right now." When Isabelle just stood there slack-jawed, groping for a response (of course she knew who Venus and Mars were, who the hell did the woman think she was?), Venus went on. "He obviously wants you out of here, so I, obviously, don't."

"But... I haven't met any Mars. The new temp gave this to me! His name's Marc, and he's a very nice guy."

Venus sniffed and waved a hand. "His lackey - he has so many of them. They turn out to be not all that nice when you get to know them better."

"But, you're inside a TV." Isabelle scratched her cheek harder. "Talking to me. From inside the TV that nobody switched on."

"Thank you, Miss Obvious, I wouldn't have known. Listen, as I said, I don't have much time. Whatever you do, don't drink from that vial. There's something you need to do here before-" She looked over her shoulder, then turned back to Isabelle. "Listen, Toots, I gotta go."

"Wait, what were you saying?"

"No time!" said Venus, blowing her a kiss. "Toodles!" And she was gone. Isabelle could see the scenery go back from sickly-sweet pink bliss to dark red fires before the screen went black. A golden logo in the top corner expanded and rotated, and a strong male voice announced, "This broadcast of TV Olymp was brought to you by 'Ambrosia - the snack that really-'" There was a crackle, and a different male voice said angrily. "Who the Hells messed with my equipment? How many times do I have to tell you morons to keep the place locked?" Then there was a flicker, and the TV went dead.

Isabelle stood looking at the black screen a while longer, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Absently she scratched her

cheek again. Something must have bitten her there, it itched like crazy.

"Okay, well, *now* I'm willing to believe them that I'm a nut case," she murmured quietly.

In darkness, Xena paused, hovering. What a coward she was, just running off like that. Giving up wasn't something she did! No, she must return, she must make herself watch. Perhaps there was a way that somehow, she could still stop this catastrophe from happening. Quick as a thought, she returned to the young woman's side. Experimentally, she tried pushing against that wall that had separated her from the material world and Isabelle earlier.

It was gone.

She found Isabelle staring at her little TV's blank screen, one hand to her face.

"Okay, well, *now* I'm willing to believe them that I'm a nut case," the young woman murmured quietly.

"I agree," said Xena. Making her voice light was an effort, when all she wanted was to make sure her bard was okay. "I've learned that it's more entertaining if it's turned on." The total lack of a jump and yelp at her sudden appearance was mildly disturbing.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," said Isabelle automatically.

"Sorry," said Xena, studying her. "So, what happened?"

Isabelle pointed. "It turned itself on. I swear, I wasn't seeing things."

Xena paled. "Ares?"

"What?"

"Mars, I guess he calls himself here."

Isabelle eyed her. "Venus. You don't look surprised. You've had this happen before?"

"Isabelle, nothing in this world really surprises me anymore," the warrior said airily.

"Xena," there was a warning tone in that, and Xena tried on her best

disarming grin. "So... Venus. Who is he? And what did he want of you? Did he threaten you?"

Isabelle's giggle was startling. "*She* is supposed to be the Roman Goddess of Love. And no, she didn't threaten me. And now spill, warrior. How do you know my TV can do that? And what the hell are Roman gods doing inside it? And do you even realize how completely bonkers that sounds?"

"Goddess of Love... Aphrodite?"

"Nope, Venus. Roman, not Greek. And you're not answering my question."

"So wait... 'Mars' must be the *Roman* God of War? Interesting..."

Isabelle just looked at her.

"All right!" Xena threw up her hands. "Yeah, I may have had this Mars guy threaten me in your TV once or twice. And that one time in Corina's room. I'm sorry, I should have told you, but I didn't think I should worry you with it. Besides... I kinda thought I was going crazy." The warrior looked away.

Isabelle stared at the TV screen, which looked nothing out of the ordinary now, dark dray and dead as it should be. "I get that. I mean, I've had reason enough to question my sanity lately." She gave Xena a wry look, and got a sheepish grin in response. "But this is something else."

Xena snorted. "You got that right. So.. what did the Goddess say to you?"

Isabelle rubbed at her cheek again. "She warned me not to take that medication Marc gave me," she said. "She suggested that the way the stuff was going to get me out of here may not be the way I imagine." She sighed.

So did Xena, feeling weak-kneed with relief. "You didn't take it then?"

Isabelle shook her head, then scratched vigorously at her cheek again. "Not sure what it is and I guess I shouldn't take any chances."

"Holy Athena, Isabelle, what's wrong with your cheek? It's a mess!"

Isabelle stared at the fingers she had used to scratch. They were

smearred with blood. "What the hell...?" She went to her little mirror and gasped when she saw the ugly red welts her fingernails had left over a patch of blistering skin. "I think some of that stuff splashed on me when that TV spooked me. Holy crap, Xena, I was going to put that down my throat." She walked to her bed and sat down heavily.

"Just as well you didn't," the warrior said quietly, hoping Isabelle wouldn't catch the tremor in her voice.

"I should have listened to you. I'm sorry."

"Forget it," said Xena gruffly. "I'm not the only one who has good hunches. You were right about Corina too. Our new best *friend* is keeping her drugged."

Isabelle jumped to her feet. "What?? I have to get there, we have to tell someone!"

"Wait!" said Xena. "I doubt anyone will believe you. I mean... you *are* a patient... who hears voices and all that..."

"Damn it, you're right. But at least I have to get to her. He won't try anything if she's not alone." And she was out the door before Xena could caution her again." Cursing softly (but potently), the warrior followed.

The hospital wing, moments later..

Corina took a deep breath, and experimentally strained against her bonds again. They were firm but not uncomfortable; without the drug in her system, they would hardly have slowed her down. She sighed, and turned her head towards the opening door. So close!

Silently, her tormentor came in, closing the door behind him after looking over his back once. During bright daylight, of course, he was not hooded, but wore a lab coat and blue pants like the rest of the hospital staff. Corina supposed he even had clearance to be here, which was why she could not expect anyone to come to her aid.

"I trust your stay here is pleasant, Miss Walker," said the whispering voice as the figure bent over her. She tried to spit, but her mouth was too dry. The man chuckled as he held up the syringe and pressed the plunger lightly to remove the air bubble inside. "Just a little prick, and you'll be back in wonderland. Can't have you

running around until the boss decides what to do about you."

"Why not just kill me and be done with it?" It was terribly hard to form the words, with her tongue feeling like a foreign object.

She would never know how well she managed, for at that moment, running footfalls sounded outside, and her unwelcome visitor straightened hastily, and shoved the syringe into his lab coat pocket. "Damnit, " he snarled, moving to stand behind a patient screen with his hand inside the pocket that held the syringe. Heartbeats later, the door banged open, and the little blonde stormed in. Corina could only stare.

"Oh, thank goodness, you're awake," the young woman said, rushing to the bed and beginning to fumble with the bonds. "I'm gonna get you out of here."

They were, quite easily, the sweetest words Corina had heard in her entire life. But there was no time to enjoy them.

"No... you... have to go," she protested, feeling out of breath from even that much effort.

"Hold still," the blonde said, and it was only then that Corina realized that her body was struggling. She tried to relax, and repeated her warning while the other woman continued to worry at the straps.

"Look out, behind you!" Corina had the oddest feeling as if her words were magnified somehow, as if someone else was speaking them at the same time. And she thought she saw a flicker of shadowy movement from the corner of her eye, but it was gone when she looked. It must be the effects of coming out of her drug-stupor.

Most importantly though, it seemed her warning had gotten through, for the woman whirled, just in time to see the man with the syringe rush toward her. With a yelp, she dropped down and barely evaded the needle, but the man was quick to respond, grabbing the much smaller woman by the wrist and flinging her back against the wall.

Isabelle felt the breath go out of her as Marc shoved her back brutally. "You should have taken the drops," he told her, his grip iron-hard around her wrist, the other hand holding the syringe that was no doubt meant for Corina. "This will be less pleasant." He

used his body to pin her against the wall, so hard that she could barely breathe. The smell of musk-scented after-shave assaulted her nostrils.

"Head-butt," Xena snapped.

Isabelle squeezed her eyes shut and steeled herself, then slammed her forehead into Marc's face with all her might. She heard the sickening crunch of cartilage as the man stumbled backwards, releasing her wrist to hold his suddenly bleeding nose. Her own head rang from the impact, and she blinked a few times to reorient herself.

"Shin!" Xena barked, and Isabelle kicked, but Marc's backward movement offset her aim, and she caught air instead. The man recovered, and now his face wasn't all that handsome anymore as rage (and not to forget a swollen, bleeding nose) disfigured it. "Bitch!" He growled, throwing away the syringe and coming at her with his bare hands.

"Crouch and roll right!"

Isabelle crouched, and rolled left. Her shoulder slammed into the second, empty bed in the room. "Oof!"

The other right, she chided herself silently as her momentum carried her and the bed a few feet further.

Xena cursed. "He's had training, Isabelle. He's not just some street tough. Quickly, on your feet."

Somewhat dazed, her shoulder smarting, Isabelle scrambled up, using the bed for support. Marc was there, and before she quite knew what was happening, he had her in a strangle hold, one of her arms twisted painfully behind her, one of his arms around her neck.

"Kick him again, go for the shin," Xena's call sounded desperate now. Isabelle kicked backward, and was rewarded with a flinch and a grunt of pain as the heel of her shoe connected. Marc's hold on her, however, did not lessen. "I'm going to hurt you so badly," Marc growled, his voice thick and nasal.

"No, no, no, you've got to *mean* it, Bard. Kick him again!"

"Ow!" Isabelle yelped as Marc twisted her arm some more, forcing her on tiptoe. "Kinda hard right now," she grunted. "Got anything else?"

"Shut up, bitch."

"Try and grab one of his fingers, bend it backward."

Feebly, Isabelle fumbled, but Marc's arm around her neck flexed, making it hard to breathe. She suddenly felt very weak.

"*Gabrielle!* You have to fight! Don't let him win. You have to stay with me!"

"Can't," Isabelle gurgled. She could feel the strength leave her legs, her consciousness slipping. *So, is this how it's going to end? In a nut house, strangled by a crazy impostor? And I didn't even finish my book...* White spots began to dance in front of her eyes as her brain was cut off from oxygen. "Sorry..." she tried to say, but she could only croak.

- Part 6 -

The warrior speaks...

She cannot die. She cannot! But oh, how pale she is. And how her face contorts with the pain. Any of my soldiers, I would have granted a swift stab to the heart long before this. How selfish have I become that I cannot bring myself to give her the same mercy? I've seen this poison at work enough times to be familiar with its excruciating effects.

But planting a dagger into that creamy-skinned chest is just completely beyond me.

This village was our last hope, and it's been put to the torch. The chance of finding the right antidote in the rubble are remote, if there is even any left that is usable. But I have to try. There is no alternative. She has to hold on. If anyone can, it is her. In many ways she is so much stronger than I have ever been.

But I'm her only chance, so I've got to get it done, and it doesn't matter that there is an army out there for me to fight. Well, I'm good at that. What I'm not at all good at is leaving her behind.

"Xena, if I can't make it, I want you to save yourself." Cold sweat glistens on her forehead. I'm shocked at how feeble her voice sounds, but there is determination in it.

I refuse to promise such a thing, and I tell her so.

"We're all gonna die eventually."

"Not today," I tell her as firmly as my voice will permit.

Gods, I hope not today. And if I have to stop an army for it, then I'll just have to put my back into it.

In the hospital room...

Her heart twisting, Xena watched her bard fight a losing battle for her life, helpless in her insubstantial form. When she could take it no longer, she screamed her battle cry and launched herself, feet first, at her bard's assailant. She of course sailed right through him. Again, she screamed, though this time, it was a cry of despair.

Desperately, Isabelle tried to breathe, but Marc's exquisitely muscled arm was like iron around her neck, and even her feeble scratching did nothing to dislodge it. She tried, as Xena had suggested, to find a finger on his hand to twist, but in her dazed state, she had trouble remembering enough of the human anatomy to have any success. She kicked again, but it was no use. She was going to die.

Suddenly there was a huge crash and clatter, and the vice-like hold around her throat loosened. With a jerk, Marc also let go of her arm that he had been twisting, but not before giving a painful wrench to her shoulder. Gasping for air (and in pain), Isabelle dropped to the floor.

Eyes swimming, she saw that the bed that had held Corina had slammed into Marc's side, toppling him. Right behind came a staggering Corina, delivering a fierce kick to the downed man. Or was it Xena? She thought she had heard that Battle Cry. It was hard to tell.

Marc scrambled to his feet, darting behind the bed in an attempt to keep it between himself and the drug-dazed Corina. The tall woman was blinking her eyes and did not look entirely stable on her feet, but seeing her loom there, muscular form outlined by a halo of sunlight from the window like an angel of vengeance, Isabelle thought she was seeing the most magnificent sight that she ever would.

Marc must have seen something there too, for rather than try to battle with the towering, half-drugged woman, he made a dash for the door. He was limping, Isabelle noted absently. They heard the bolt slam into place from the outside, trapping them. Then came the sound of running footsteps, receding quickly.

"Isabelle!" Xena hovered at the young woman's side, reaching out uselessly as the young woman struggled to her feet, throat burning and shoulder throbbing.

"Well, that could've gone better," Corina slurred, then staggered a few steps and caught herself against the sink. Isabelle tottered to her side, putting a hand to the other woman's back to support her.

"At least you're awake."

"Ugh.... wish I wasn't," Corina said fuzzily. "Head hurts. Need

water."

Helpfully, Isabelle reached to turn on the faucet, but flinched in pain as her twisted shoulder protested. Before she could use her good arm, Corina had beaten her to it and was gulping water by the handfuls, slopping copious quantities onto her face and surroundings.

Her head came up, hair dripping. She still looked woozy, but Isabelle could see the alertness return to the woman's features as that blue-eyed gaze settled on her.

"I don't know why you're here, and what the hell you thought you were doing trying to take on that piece of trash, but... thank you." The tiniest of smiles curved Corina's lips.

Isabelle opted for not mentioning that her plans had gone along slightly different lines, that did not involve physical exertion or injury on her part. Instead, she returned the smile, feeling suddenly timid. "Thought you might need a hand."

Corina chuckled mirthlessly. "I suppose I did, at that."

"What did Marc wa- ow!" Unthinkingly, Isabelle had tried to scratch that itch on her cheek, and the movement met with disapproval from her injured shoulder. She hissed in pain and cradled her right arm.

"Let me see that," Corina offered. She made no move towards her until Isabelle nodded faintly. Then her strong hands began to gently run along the injured shoulder, fingers feeling for damage.

"Try and relax your muscles, I'm going to check mobility." Again, Isabelle nodded, drawing deep breaths.

Xena watched the procedure closely, hovering so near that she sometimes seemed to melt into Corina's form. It was a trifle disconcerting.

"She's done this sort of thing before," the warrior observed. It might hurt a bit, she has to see what exactly is wrong with it. Just try and do as she says."

Corina paused in her actions, and looked around, eyes narrowing. Xena flitted out of the tall woman's line of sight.

"And here I thought you didn't like- " she began, then cut off immediately. For some reason, she did not want this woman to think

of her as insane. She shot a half-heartedly accusing look at the insubstantial warrior.

"I don't, really," said Xena. "But she's all you got, and she seems to know what she's doing," she added grudgingly.

It was difficult to make out Xena's words, for Corina spoke right on top of her. "In my line of work, you can't afford 'like'," she said without much emotion. "Puts people in danger."

"Well, whatever your line of work was... it's not, anymore, is it?" She hissed softly as a jab of pain shot through her shoulder. Corina immediately changed where she was moving the joint, and the pain eased.

"You never leave that particular line of work," said Corina. "Not really." She released Isabelle's arm - somewhat to Isabelle's regret. "Well, it's not dislocated. Seems just a bit of a strain. Don't move it around too much, and you'll be fine in a few days. Now, what happened to your cheek? You didn't get that from the scuffle."

"No... but it's not important."

Corina grinned, startlingly. "Yeah it is. Wouldn't want that pretty face to be scarred." Isabelle could feel the blush creeping up her neck. By the way Corina's grin broadened into almost a leer, it must be a spectacular one.

"We really don't have a lot of time though. Why don't you clean it off with water. I'll see what I can do about the door." Xena followed behind, watching Corina's every move.

Obediently, Isabelle headed to the sink. "Think you can kick it down?"

Corina grunted. "It opens inward, so I can't break the bolt, and cracking a steel-enforced oak door without tools, just isn't done. I may be able to get it open with a bit of fiddling - or something to use as a crow bar." She glanced around, evidently dismissing the various pieces of furniture as unhelpful, until she spotted the wedge that was occasionally used to hold the door open. "But right now, what I need is time to regroup, and if we can't get out, I sure as hell am not going to let anyone *in*, either. Not until I'm ready for them."

She firmly shoved the wedge under the door, then jammed it in more tightly by lifting the door up as far as it would move on its hinges and pushing the wedge with her bare foot. She rattled at it experimentally. "That'll have to do. Shame they don't use door

levers here."

Xena nodded in grudging approval. "Suppose it's the best she can do with what's here. At least we'll know if someone wants in." She walked back to Isabelle's side, leaving Corina to examine her handiwork.

"Make sure you wash that properly. We've no idea what it was, but it's already done enough damage."

"Yes, mother," Isabelle said softly as she gingerly dabbed at her cheek with a washcloth. Not softly enough, for Corina had turned to regard her curiously. Xena hastily popped out of sight.

"What's that?" said Corina, looking around suspiciously.

Isabelle gaped at her. Could it be that she could see Xena? Cautiously, she asked, "What is it?"

"Must be the drug," Corina muttered. "Don't worry about it." She rubbed a hand across her face. "How's the cheek?"

"Squeaky clean."

"Good. Let's try and find some salve to put on it." She began rummaging in a cabinet that sat against one wall.

"You seem to know a lot about treating injuries," Isabelle remarked.

Corina's jaw clenched. "Comes with the job. Here." She tossed her a tube of gel. "This will help with the itching."

The salve was cooling and felt good on Isabelle's tortured skin. "Thanks, much better. So... what do we do now? I wonder what's going on outside..."

"That's what I'd like to know." Corina went to stand next to the door and pressed an ear to it. "I expect our friend went to get some reinforcements."

Xena appeared again. In an almost soundless whisper, Isabelle asked, "why are you so jumpy around her? I've never seen you bothered if there's someone else with me."

Xena's eyes went to the tall ex-terrorist. "I think she can see me," she whispered just as quietly.

"And what if she can? Would that be so bad?"

"I... she's... I don't know. I don't like the idea."

"If I'm going to hear anything out there, I'll need you to stop talking to yourself," Corina turned, and Xena vanished again. Corina squinted, then shook her head in confusion.

"What?" Isabelle tried to look innocent.

Clearly, she failed, for Corina narrowed her eyes dangerously. "Okay, something is going on here. Something is off, I can feel it."

"I... well, this is a nut house, right? We're here because we see things in shadows and all that? It's not something we like to advertise."

"No games," Corina growled, making Isabelle shrink back. "If you know something I don't, then spill it. We're in a bit of a bind here, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Sorry, I... don't... "

The tall woman retreated, shaking her head. "We really don't have time for this."

Isabelle breathed deeply. "Right. It's a little complicated."

"Whatever." Corina headed to the faucet for another drink.

As soon as her back was turned, Xena appeared again. Isabelle wanted to scream.

She looked between the two near-identical women, and it occurred to her that, if Xena's bard friend Gabrielle really did look that much like Isabelle herself, as Xena so often pointed out, then this uncanny resemblance must mean something profound. The thought was ludicrous... or was it? She couldn't deny her fascination with the ex-terrorist. But Corina was a killer! Then again, Xena had been, too, before Gabrielle. Her head began to swim with the ramifications.

"We really should find out what's going on," Isabelle said softly to Xena.

"I'll get on it," Xena said, and vanished.

Corina murmured, "I'm working on it." Her eyes scanned the room suspiciously, then settled on Isabelle.

"Are you feeling at all better?" the young woman asked, hoping to divert Corina's attention.

Corina nodded curtly. "Moving around helps get the drug out. I'll be ready when I need to be."

A commotion in the distance caught both their attention. There was a murmur of voices, both male and female, then the sound of the alarm bell. An orderly's voice blared through a megaphone. "All patients are to return to their rooms. This is a security drill. All patients are to return to their rooms."

"Security drill my ass," muttered Corina. She tipped over one of the beds, so that its top faced the door at an angle, then shoved it further away from the door.

Isabelle's heart skipped a couple of beats, before taking up a thunderous thumping. "What are you doing?"

"Getting ready for a siege. You're going to get down behind that and keep very quiet."

Xena reappeared, right in front of Corina's eyes. "Listen up, you don't have a lot of time. Our friend's brought the cavalry. Four orderlies with him, armed with one of those odd binding jackets and rubber clubs. He's told them Grumpy-Pants is out of control and has taken a hostage." She glanced at Corina, who once again was looking around the room. "I guess she can't see me after all. But she senses *something*"

Corina took a step forward, which placed her right inside Xena, whose form wavered and reformed disconcertingly.

"Stop that," Xena snapped. "I'm not that kinda woman."

"... the fuck?" Corina muttered, rubbing her arms.

Isabelle took a deep breath, thinking quickly. "Sounds like Mars's henchman Marc is bringing reinforcements," she said. "I'm sure they'll have their batons on them. If they manage to put you into a straightjacket...."

Corina started to turn back towards the door, but paused. "Wait, you know about Mars? Who the hell are you?" Her head whirled at the sound of footfalls approaching outside. "Someone with good hearing, it seems. Get down behind that bed. Now! And stay down." She gave Isabelle an appraising look.

"But..."

"Do it!" Xena and Corina said simultaneously.

Corina glanced in Xena's general direction with a frown, before she added. "This may get ugly. And we can't be sure what he's told those orderlies to get them to come along, or if they're also on Mars' payroll. Either way, they'll be trouble." She stepped close - very close - her eyes holding Isabelle's gaze like a magnet. Light as a feather, she touched Isabelle's cheek with a forefinger. "I'm not sure what your deal is, but you're the first person in god knows how long who has looked at me and not seen a monster. I don't know that I deserve that, but I sure as hell won't let anything happen to you. Now go hide behind that bed."

Isabelle stood electrified. For so long, she had wished that Xena was this real, was able to touch her in this way. But perhaps it was just as well. She suddenly realized that Xena was not for her, for Xena had Gabrielle. And Isabelle had-

Corina gave her a firm nudge towards the toppled bed, shaking her out of her thoughts. "Go! When all this is over and I'm still alive, I may even ask your name some time." She turned and headed towards the door on silent, bare feet.

Isabelle found herself grinning despite the dire situation. "I'm Isabelle."

Corina smirked over her shoulder. "Corina."

"I know."

There was a scrape and a click as the bolt was thrown back from the outside. Corina pressed herself against the wall next to the door handle, and spoke softly. "Thought you might. Now, down!"

"Do it," Xena said again. "She's going to need to focus, and doesn't want to worry about you getting in the way."

"I'm not a child," Isabelle muttered, but she got down behind the bed, peeking out past one side.

"Hush." Again, it was Corina speaking at the same time as Xena. Xena narrowed her eyes at the tall ex-terrorist.

"Be careful," Isabelle said softly.

Corina looked back at her with a half-smile, and winked. A feral light

entered the tall woman's eyes when she turned her attention back to the door. The handle rattled as someone attempted to open it. The wedge trembled, but held. Corina readied herself, flexing her muscular arms, and putting her weight on the balls of her feet.

"I'll go check what's going on outside," Xena announced, strolled over to the door and walked right through it.

"Open the door, Miss Walker." The voice came from outside. It wasn't Marc's. "Let's end this before someone gets hurt."

"Why don't you ask your friend Marc to tell you what really happened in here?" Corina replied.

There was a brief silence outside. "At least let Miss Barnes go. You'd better not have harmed her."

"I think I'll keep her around for a bit. It's going to keep you boys from getting too frisky."

The door rattled again, and the wedge moved a fraction of an inch. "Come on, Corina, you know it's no use. We'll get this open eventually." The dark, rich voice clearly belonged to Marc. It was not fair for a villain to have such a compelling voice. Corina, obviously, was not that impressed.

"Can't wait," the tall woman drawled. "We can all have a party."

Xena returned through the door. "Okay, Marc and two others have small firearms hidden under their coats. I'm guessing those two are with Mars. The others seem clean."

"Corina!" Isabelle whispered urgently. "Some of them have guns. Please be careful."

"And how the hell would you know that?"

"You don't want to know," said Xena, grimacing.

"I think I saw one on Marc earlier," Isabelle lied. "You have to believe me!"

Corina gave her a long, probing look, then shrugged. "Can't hurt to be prepared."

A heavy weight thudded against the door, and the door groaned open for about a foot, wedge and all.

Corina's arm snaked through the opening, grabbing the arm of the

man outside and pulled, slamming him brutally against the door. The arm - all that Isabelle saw from her vantage point - slowly slid down and lay flaccid. Corina had already released it and peered through the gap. Abruptly, she threw herself to one side, and a gunshot sounded, the bullet thumping into the far wall. "Shit!"

Isabelle crouched down behind the bed as a second gunshot cracked. Corina grunted in pain, and threw her body against the door. The extra weight of the senseless man on the other side made it hard to budge it, and in addition, his one arm still lay inside the room. Corina shoved it back outside and continued to push at the door in an attempt to close it. The sleeve of her pajama top was growing a red stain.

"Don't do it, Isabelle!" Xena warned.

For, throwing caution into the wind, Isabelle had left her cover and was hurrying to Corina's side to help with the door. There was a third shot, and one of the steel bands on the door bulged outward right by Isabelle's face, just as the two women managed to force the door shut again. Blood draining from her face, Isabelle fumbled for the wedge, her shoulder making its protest known, and together they shoved it under the door.

"Thought I told you to stay down," Corina growled.

"You've been hit," Isabelle countered.

"Just grazed. I've had worse cutting up vegetables," the tall woman snapped.

"But the blood..."

"Shh!" They went still, both leaning against the door, listening.

There were raised voices outside. "What the hell do you think you're doing shooting around here? And where did you get that gun?" "She's a danger, she has to be stopped." "She is an inmate! And she has a hostage. Do you want to shoot her too?" "Shut up." "We'll have to take that, and you're going to have to answer to-" The last voice was cut off by another gun shot. Isabelle flinched as a heavy weight dropped to the floor.

"I guess that means we start plan B," said another voice. "Yes." This was Marc. "Round up everybody in the mess hall." The bolt slid shut again. "The women aren't going anywhere, and these guys are no threat anymore. Let's go." Footsteps retreated. Then all was silent outside.

Corina got to her feet, holding her bleeding arm. "Get some gauze from that cabinet," she ordered through clenched teeth. After a moment, she added, "please." But Isabelle was already on her way, trying not to think about what had just happened on the other side of that door.

"I'll go see what they are up to," Xena announced, and disappeared.

"Come here," said Isabelle, motioning the tall woman to the sink. She rolled up the sleeve of Corina's pajama top. The bullet had sliced through the skin just above the woman's left elbow. "Doesn't look too bad, I guess," said Isabelle.

"Told you."

Isabelle very carefully cleaned the wound, flinching in sympathy every time she had to touch the bleeding flesh. Corina, however, stood stoically without twitching an eye lash, until the arm was firmly bandaged, the bleeding stopped. She looked at Isabelle's work appraisingly. "That's nicely done," she said.

"Mandatory first aid course at work," said Isabelle. "You'll still have to get it looked at, or it might get infected."

"Sure."

A soft groan outside the door caught their attention. "Guess I didn't knock him out as bad as they thought," murmured Corina.

"Tony? Tony, what the... oh crap," said a man's voice.

Isabelle went to the door, and knocked softly. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

"The hell do you think you're doing?" Corina hissed.

"Maybe he will help us. It's worth a try," Isabelle whispered back.

There was a brief silence. "Who is this?" The voice sounded groggy.

"It's Isabelle Barnes. Are you all right?"

"Tony... someone shot Tony. He's bleeding like crazy!"

Isabelle drew a deep breath. "That was Marc. Listen, I'm not a hostage. Nobody was harmed in here except Miss Walker herself. Marc is the one you should be worried about. He and his buddies are up to something."

"Oh yeah? I got a lump on my head that says otherwise."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Look, why don't you open the door and come in? I promise we won't attack you. And your friend needs help. There are bandages in here."

Corina snarled. "Are you nuts?"

The silence on the other side was long enough to make Isabelle think the man had left. "All right," he finally said. Shortly after, the bolt was thrown back. Isabelle pried the wedge out from under the door and opened it wide enough to allow the orderly to drag in his bleeding, unconscious colleague.

As soon as he was inside, Isabelle shut and wedged the door again. Then she looked pleadingly at Corina. She had a feeling the other woman knew much more about this sort of thing than she herself.

"Oh, what the hell," Corina growled. "Help me stretch him out here, on the ground. Not sure I can do much for him though."

"You a doctor?" the man asked.

"Nope, but I've been shot a few times. Chest wound and he's lost a lot of blood. Bullet probably went right through. I can stop some of the bleeding, but he needs a hospital, and fast." She got to work - there was too much blood for Isabelle's taste, so she turned away. At that moment, Xena returned.

"I see you've already found the two outside. Surprised the one still lives. Guess I don't have to tell you they were the ones *without* the fire weapons." Before Isabelle could reply, the warrior continued. "They've made everybody, except a handful who are tied to beds here, staff and patients, head to the mess hall, and have locked up the entrances. There must be at least four that work with Marc, and they seem awfully eager to use those firearms. I think he means to force Corina out in some way, but he hasn't said how. This is bad, really bad."

"We need to get out of here," Isabelle said. "Marc is up to something bad to get at you, Corina."

"How do you- oh, never mind." She straightened from the motionless man on the ground. "That's all I can do. With luck he'll pull through. Now, about you." She eyed the orderly, who looked alarmed. "Vince." Corina said, reading the name tag that every staff member had sewn onto his or her uniform.

"I'm going to need that baton you're carrying." Vince blinked at her, but handed her the weapon without comment. "Do you have any training with hostage situations?"

He nodded. "Only basic though, in case one of our more dangerous patients-" he gulped, looking at Corina, who certainly qualified as 'more dangerous'. "Well, only basic."

Corina smiled a dangerous smile. "And are there any more effective weapons in your staff room?"

"You know I can't let you have those," he said bravely.

Isabelle decided to step in, because Corina was getting a particularly dangerous look. "Listen... we're not the bad guys here. Marc is the one who started with the shooting, and he brought friends. It looks like they're going to take this entire institution hostage. He nearly killed that man over there. This woman here was kept under drugs by him for days, and nobody wondered about it. She's done everything she could to keep *me* safe when this all started. You *know* she's a trained fighter. And it has to mean something that she came here of her own free will after all she's done in the past. She's our best chance of getting through this, so I think you should trust her. It's not like things could get any worse, right?"

Both the orderly and Corina were gaping at her. Even Xena looked impressed at the flood of words. At last, the man nodded. "Come with me," he told Corina. Isabelle started to follow.

"Not you," said Corina. Of course, she was once again echoed by Xena.

"But..."

"Please." Corina said.

Isabelle sighed, and bit her lip. "All right. Please don't get killed."

Corina pressed her lips together, and turned to follow the orderly. "Close up behind us," she said.

Isabelle sat down heavily on the upright bed after she had secured the door behind them. "She's going to her death, isn't she," she said dispiritedly.

Xena sighed. "'Fraid so. At least she thinks so."

Isabelle buried her face in her hands.

Xena stepped close to her, reaching out a hand. "Hey. It doesn't mean it has to happen the way she imagines. She's not gone yet, and she doesn't strike me as someone easy to kill." She smiled half-heartedly. "I should know."

"You think I did the right thing in involving that orderly? He won't turn on her, will he?"

Xena chuckled. "Don't worry. Even if you didn't convince him with your little speech, I'm sure he's too afraid of her to try and cross her. His help may make the difference in this. You did great."

Isabelle smiled weakly. "Thanks."

She glanced at the man on the ground - Tony, she reminded herself - but she saw nothing else that could be done for him, short of getting him an ambulance. She strained to hear anything beyond the door, but there was dead silence.

Getting an ambulance... getting help... Isabelle kneaded her lower lip thoughtfully.

Xena peered at her. "I know that look. I'm not going to like what you're up to."

"Somebody should try calling for help," Isabelle said slowly. "And since everybody but me is locked up in the mess hall..." She knelt beside the injured man, and removed his key ring and baton. "I don't think you'll be needing those."

Xena threw up her hands. "I knew it. I guess it's no use trying to convince you to stay put like Corina asked you to?"

"She said I couldn't come with her. She never told me to stay here," Isabelle said smugly. "I just have to get to a telephone. There's one in the nurse station."

"At least let me check if the coast is clear." At Isabelle's nod, the warrior stuck her head through the door - it still gave Isabelle the creeps - then disappeared altogether. She returned moments later.

"All clear here - just don't exit this wing. And for Zeus' sake, move quietly."

Isabelle nodded, and slipped off her shoes. Her heart was thundering in her throat as she slowly opened the door and stepped

into the corridor in her socks. As quietly as she could, followed by the ghostly warrior, she padded to the nurse station at the far end of the corridor. It was deserted. Gratefully, she slipped inside, and lifted the station phone's receiver.

The line was dead. She cursed softly, causing Xena to raise an eyebrow in interest.

"We have to find another phone. Maybe they aren't all dead." It was a scant hope, but all she had. She headed towards the wing exit.

"Careful," Xena warned, "Mars' people are patrolling out there."

Isabelle paused, thinking through her options. "Therapy rooms are close to the mess hall, then patients' quarters. High Security and staff quarters are on the first floor, administration at the top. Tell me when it's safe!"

Xena looked about to protest, then shook her head in defeat and went through the door. After what seemed an eternity, she heard the warrior's voice. "You've got about a minute. That door had better not squeal".

Isabelle tried the door - it was locked. With trembling fingers, she fumbled for the key ring she had pocketed, and tried one after the other. Finally, one fit, and the lock clicked softly.

"Hold!" Xena called, and Isabelle froze. After another eternity, Xena gave the all clear again, and Isabelle slipped through the door as quietly as she could, then hurried towards the stairs. There was a tense moment when one of the steps creaked softly.

"Hurry," Xena called urgently, and Isabelle didn't question her.

She made it to the landing of first floor just as a Marc, carrying a shotgun, stepped into the entry hall. Holding her breath, she peered over the edge of the landing, watched him walk the length of the hall with measured steps, right past Xena, and into the hospital wing. When he disappeared from view, she nearly fainted with relief. She hoped he hadn't realized the door was no longer locked.

"Come on, no time," Xena urged. "In a moment, he'll discover that you and Corina have left."

Isabelle quickly headed up the second flight of stairs and entered the administrative wing. It wasn't locked, and it appeared quite deserted. She froze as she heard Marc's muffled cursing. Then she ran along the corridor of the admin wing, bypassing printer rooms

and offices. On impulse, she made straight for the director's office. This too, was unlocked and empty. She lifted the phone's receiver, and almost wept with relief when she heard the buzz of the line. Quickly, she dialled 9-1-1.

When the operator answered, she blurted. "There is a hostage situation at the mental hospital. There has been shooting, and at least one person is badly wounded."

"Who is speaking, please?"

"I'm Gail Branigan. I'm a therapist here, I managed to hide away in a closet when they rounded everybody up. There are at least five of them, and they all have guns. Please send someone!"

"Good thinking." Xena remarked.

"Are you sure you're not another patient? Last time it was fire in the mess hall. We also had a UFO invasion, once."

"I'm not a patient! If you want lives on your conscience, then fine, ignore me."

Just then, they heard Marc's voice through that megaphone. Acoustics carried the voice up the stairs clearly. "Come on out, Corina, wherever you are. You know I'll find you eventually." Quickly, Isabelle held out the receiver, just in time to catch the sound of a gun shot and a bullet ricocheting off a wall. "Don't make me get impatient."

Isabelle put the receiver back to her ear. "Did you catch that?"

"Was that... gunfire?"

"Yes, damnit!"

"Okay, okay, I'll send police and an ambulance. You'd best stay where you are, ma'am."

"Right," Isabelle said, dropping the receiver and heading back outside.

"Isabelle! Stay put, you've done all you can."

"I won't let them see me. I just want to see what's going on down there!"

She crept back to the second floor landing. "Can you check on the mess hall for me? Please? And find out where Corina is?"

Xena sighed, and vanished.

Scouting really was not something Xena enjoyed. As a warlord, she had had her people for it, while she herself preferred the more direct approach. She appreciated the usefulness, however, and had done enough sneaking around while travelling with Gabrielle. But she really was more of a hands-on type person. Of course, "hands-on" was out of the question here and now, and by the same token, she was uniquely qualified for gathering information unseen.

She would just have to trust that Isabelle could stay out of trouble long enough. Not that she could be of much help to her against physical violence, anyway.

She materialized in the mess hall, looking around. The place was crammed with pretty much everybody that had been in the building. She recognized a few nurses and Gail Branigan, the therapist. They all looked cowed, some where hugging one another and some were weeping silently. The door to the hallway stood open; two of Mars' men stood there, while two more were walking among the hostages, their guns pointing this way and that. Marc was not in sight; he was probably out in the hallway looking for Corina.

There was blood on the floor near the closed back door. She followed the trail, and was shocked when it led to Isabelle's former roommate, Tara. The girl was bleeding from a gunshot wound to her foot, but her sullen stare at her captors showed no pain. "She's going to kick your asses," Tara murmured under her breath. "I'm telling you, she is going to make you regret your mothers ever laid eyes on your fathers."

"Please be quiet," Xena muttered. To her stunned surprise, Tara stopped her muttering instantly. Instead she hugged her knees and started rocking back and forth.

"Well, guess I'm off to find Lady Grumpy-Pants," Xena murmured, and moved back into the Other Place to regroup. From there, she checked out the various wings - found Marc pacing in the hallway as expected, muttering to himself, Isabelle, who had prudently retreated somewhat from the landing's edge - breezed through the staff quarters but found no trace of Corina. The orderly, Vince, was crouched on the landing almost below Isabelle, licking his lips nervously and carrying a blow gun, of all things. Xena squatted beside him, peering down at the ground floor.

Marc raised his megaphone again. "Come on, doll. If you don't come out, I'll have to start shooting people." He paused for effect. "And I'll start with your little blonde friend." He fired a shot at the ceiling to emphasize his words. "You know all we're here for is you."

There was a soft gasp from the second landing. Isabelle, still safe up there, thank the Gods. So the man was bluffing. But where was Corina? She watched him set down the megaphone, and continue to pace.

"Why do you think I care?" Corina's quiet voice came from somewhere on the ground floor. "You seem to forget who I am."

"Were," Marc said gleefully. "You were great once, but now you're less than nothing. And you're at the top of his shitlist." He cast around for the origin of the voice, and finally approached the therapy wing with a predatory gleam in his eyes.

"I'm honored," Corina drawled.

Several things then happened at once. Outside, sirens blared, Isabelle was rushing down the stairs, and there was a 'fwoomph'-sound next to Xena's ear as Vince fired the blow gun. It turned out he was a fair shot with it. A small, feathered dart lodged firmly in Marc's rear. Marc whirled to see where the shot had come from, pulling out the dart and throwing it to the floor.

"Gotcha," Vince muttered. "That one's for Tony." He fitted a second dart as he spoke.

Meanwhile, despite her efforts to duck out of sight, Marc had spotted Isabelle and started for the stairs.

"Attention, we have the premises surrounded," blared a voice from outside. "Come out with your hands up, and nobody will get hurt."

"Well then, it seems someone called in the cops," Marc sneered. "See, that's not good." He flinched as dart number two lodged in his thigh. He pulled that out, too. He frowned, as if trying to remember what he had been about to do.

"That's enough to bring down an elephant," Vince muttered in satisfaction.

"Boss?" One of Marc's men looked around the corner from the door he was guarding. Marc waved at him, and the man disappeared out of sight again, gun drawn.

The orderly retreated inside the staff quarters while Marc was staring somewhat dumbly at the dart. "You think that's going to stop me? You know these things thake thime..." his speech slurred and he began to totter. Stubbornly, he shook his head, then raised his gun towards Isabelle. "So now, you die, blondie. Tolchoo, Corina."

"I'm here." Corina stood at the entrance to the therapy wing. She had exchanged her pajamas for an orderly uniform, too short and somewhat wide for her, and wore black sneakers. Marc grinned, and turned. Without another word, he raised his gun and fired several shots towards Corina. The tall woman jerked, and staggered, catching herself against the door frame. Crimson stains bloomed on her chest and leg.

Isabelle screamed in wordless agony, and hurtled down the stairs two at a time, but Marc ignored her. He continued to pull the trigger, even when after the fourth time, it merely clicked, the clip spent.

Without slowing, she bared into the man from behind and he crashed to the ground, where he lay twitching and struggling against the tranquilizer that was now kicking in. *That's my girl*, Xena silently cheered.

Just then, all hell broke loose as policemen were storming the building. Voices shouted, a few shots were fired, Isabelle struggled to reach Corina, but Marc's hand clamped around her ankle, tripping her. With her injured shoulder, Isabelle could not get up her hands in time to break the fall. Xena flinched as the young woman's head crashed hard into the floor tiles, and she lay still. "You... bitch," Marc gasped. "All... your... fault." Then he, also, fell limp.

Isabelle's vision was blurry as she regained her senses. The commotion around her was dizzying, but she had only one thought. Corina. Frantically, she staggered to her feet, ignoring the screeching headache that wanted to pull her back to the ground, and tottered to where she had seen the tall woman. She saw a motionless shape on the ground, surrounded by a team of paramedics. Fleeting, she thought there was something odd about that, but she continued towards them. "She'll be okay, right?"

One of the women gathered around Corina's lifeless form rose and turned towards her with a sober expression. "I am sorry, Miss. Was she a friend of yours?"

"What?" Isabelle felt weak. "No... there must be some mistake. She's been shot before... it was only... she can't be dead!" With horror, she saw two of the paramedics gently zip up a rose-colored body-bag around Corina's still face. This had to be a bad dream. "Please... there has to be something..."

The woman gently patted Isabelle's shoulder. "I am very sorry. But I hear that it's her sacrifice that saved everybody else here. She died a hero."

With dumb incomprehension, she watched four of the paramedics - all women - bear the bag outside. She stumbled after them as they carefully loaded the body into a waiting rescue vehicle and drove off, unnoticed in the pandemonium around them.

Isabelle was discharged from the hospital a few days later, where they had treated her for a mild concussion, and stabilized her shoulder. They couldn't treat the lasting shock, and the bottomless emptiness inside her.

She had barely even known this woman, really, she kept telling herself, and it made no sense that a virtual stranger's death would hit her so hard. Corina had not even been a very nice person by all accounts - and that was putting it mildly. But she had let Isabelle glimpse a different side to her, however fleetingly. Isabelle felt special for it. And then of course there was that strange juxtaposition with a certain ghostly warrior - it made her feel like she had known the tall, dangerous woman all that more intimately. Isabelle had probably been the closest thing to a friend the woman had known in quite some time. For some reason, that only added to Isabelle's grief.

Xena was there for her, of course, offering what comfort she could in that grumpy, clumsy way of hers. It did help, though, oddly enough.

Through nurses' gossip, and Xena's account, she had learned that, apart from 'that one woman', nobody had died that day. Even Tony, the orderly, and that scumbag Marc had pulled through, though apparently Marc had suffered some lasting damage from the generous dose of tranquilizer that Vince had managed to empty into him. The police squad had been efficient in suppressing Mars' men, and soon after, the paramedics had arrived to treat the injured.

The incident had been attributed to the same terrorist organization that Corina had recently turned her back on.

She had also received a visit from Gail Branigan, during which, for the first time ever, Xena had left her alone. They had talked for a bit, mostly Gail seemed to try to determine how she was coping with the trauma. Isabelle also learned that the institution would be closed down for the time being, the more severely affected patients transferred elsewhere, while the milder cases, like Isabelle herself, were allowed to return home.

Home, of course, was where her mother was. She woman refused to return to her own home, and insisted on keeping Isabelle company through this trying time. She loved her mom, and knew she meant well, but mostly she wanted to be alone. But neither her mother, nor her over-protective little sister Lilli, would have any of it. They dragged her to museums, to musicals and movies, they even went to bars with her. She had to admit, reluctantly, that their efforts were having some effect.

After a few weeks, she resumed her old job, and that also helped. In the time she had been gone, a lot had changed there, but she found she was able to slide right back into a mind-numbing routine, broken occasionally by Xena's visits. The warrior now only spoke when they were alone, a fact that Isabelle appreciated very much.

She completed her book during her first fortnight at home - it only needed a few more chapters - and to her surprise, found a publisher who agreed to print it.

She took comfort in Xena's presence, for the warrior was steadfastly at her side, a solid friend despite her insubstantial shape. She could not help but think that Xena didn't feel entirely happy, but the warrior appeared to stick around for her sake, and she was grateful.

And so, eventually, it was that Isabelle learned to cope. Corina Walker, the terrorist turned hero, was going to be the inspiration for her next novel. She would become immortal; Isabelle would see to it.

It would have to do.

Epilogue

Isabelle stole across the parking lot, her coat pulled up over her head against the driving rain, then squinted to find the correct door number in the dim light from the cloud-laden sky. Timidly, she knocked.

The door opened a crack, which widened just enough to admit the young woman. The room's occupant closed the door and helped Isabelle out of her coat, hanging it on a peg near the entrance.

"Did your mother give you trouble? I don't think she bought my disguise as the mail man."

Isabelle resisted the urge to throw her arms around the tall woman. Or to slap her. "I couldn't believe it when I got your message. I saw them wrap you up and carry you off in that body-bag..."

Corina chuckled mirthlessly. "Turns out I don't die that easily."

"They couldn't tell me anything, not where you were taken, not where you were buried. I couldn't even say good-bye."

"Now you know why."

Isabelle angrily wiped at her eyes. "It wasn't easy, moving on. What took you so long? It's been months."

Corina ran a hand through her hair. "I had little say in what went down after they carted me off with three bullets in me. I contacted you as soon as I could." She smiled somewhat bitterly. "It's nice to know *someone* missed me. Not something I expected."

"No?"

Corina studied her. "Hoped, maybe. Expected... no."

Isabelle found it hard to hold on to anger or hurt with those intent blue eyes on her. What did it matter, Corina lived. She *lived!* At last, she smiled slowly, though her eyes still burned. "So... what happens now?"

In reply, Corina picked up a wallet from the night stand, and pulled out an ID card and a driver's license. She handed both to Isabelle.

Isabelle snorted "Coralee Fitzgerald? Really?"

Corina made a face. "Someone has a sense of humor. But, it's all there, spotless background - except for a speeding ticket or two for realism - social security number, college and high school records. I was born in Ireland, and my parents moved back there while I was in college. My college performance was mediocre," she rolled her eyes at that, "which is why I worked at the harbor loading containers until the company went out of business a few months ago. I have a savings account that will tide me along for a few months. I have no idea who's behind it, though. Must be someone really powerful - and really secretive."

"Wow. That 'someone' pulled some serious strings." Isabelle found herself thinking of a certain woman appearing to her inside a TV. "Maybe Mars isn't the only one messing with the world," she offered.

Corina considered that. "It's possible. I can only assume that at some point, someone is going to call in a few favors, and I hope I'll be ready to deliver. But for now - it's a fresh start for me. Maybe I can work on opening that biker bar I've always dreamed about."

Impulsively, Isabelle reached for Corina's hand. "You deserve it."

Corina glanced out the grimy window. "I was specifically told I can't contact anyone from my old life. But I just couldn't let you keep thinking I was dead." She squeezed Isabelle's hand, and gently tugged her closer. "I owe you that much. You saved me."

"I didn't do anything," Isabelle protested, "You're the one who died." Her breath caught as Corina's free arm went around her.

"You did more than you think," Corina murmured. "Thank you, Isabelle."

"Any time." Isabelle hesitantly returned the embrace, and buried her face against the tall woman's shoulder. "I'm just so glad you're still alive."

The moment didn't last nearly long enough. Corina pulled back and regarded her seriously. She seemed to be struggling to speak, pressing her lips together. A muscle in her jaw twitched.

Isabelle found her throat constricting as comprehension dawned. "Uh oh. Is this good-bye, then? Again?"

Corina looked away. "Yes. It's safer that way. For you. I just wanted you to know the truth before heading out."

Isabelle squeezed her eyes shut.

"Safer, my ass." The young woman surprised herself with her vehemence. But she knew that she wanted nothing more than to keep this woman in her life. She wasn't just going to walk away from this.

"What gave you the crack-brained idea that you can't have anyone care about you? Well, I do! All that bull about keeping me safe, of all things? What could be safer than having someone as bad-ass as you around to protect me? You can't just die, then walk back into my life and say 'surprise, I'm not dead', and then tell me you're going to walk out of it again. I'm not letting you! Do you really think I can just return to the way things were before? I can't go back home and pretend this never hap-" She was cut off as Corina leaned in and kissed her, startlingly and quite thoroughly.

Afterwards, light-headed and breathless, Isabelle leaned against the tall woman's chest. "What was that for?"

"Seemed the best way to stop you talking," Corina grinned gently. "You had me at 'well, I do'." Tenderly, she brushed Isabelle's cheek, then her lips, with calloused fingertips. "To be honest, I don't think I'd care to leave you behind, either."

"I guess that means we're agreed." Isabelle was sure her suddenly hoarse voice belied the lightness of her words. But, she did not care. All she could think of was how *good* it felt to be resting against this woman.

"I guess it does." Corina hugged her closer. "So, you think I'm bad-ass, do you? Let me show you." The promise in that murmur sent giddy tingles all through Isabelle's body. The tall woman encountered no resistance when she slowly coaxed a weak-kneed Isabelle towards the shabby motel bed. That was the end of rational thought for quite some time.

She was gentle, her touches light, as if afraid she might shatter this freshly-woven bond. But the tender caresses certainly did not miss their mark; Corina knew what she was about. It made Isabelle feel inadequate for a while, until the responses of the other's body to her own touches completely dispersed her doubts.

When she awoke, it was pitch dark. Isabelle found Xena's form, softly glowing, looking down at her, a broad smile on her face. "That

looks like it went well."

Isabelle colored. "You... saw? Heard, even?" She mouthed the words almost silently, though it was hard not squeal in mortification. Corina's deep, steady breathing close by said the other woman was still asleep. At least, Isabelle hoped so.

"Don't worry."

Isabelle noted that Xena had not denied anything, but a look at the stoic face before her let the response die on her lips. The warrior's eyes were glistening suspiciously. She suddenly knew that the Warrior Princess' stay was, at last, at an end, her mission here done. A look of silent understanding passed between ghost and woman.

"I can't ever thank you enough, Xena. I'll never forget you."

"Of course you won't." Xena winked, dislodging a single tear that slid down her cheek. "Well, I'm off. Not much for good-byes. You take good care of Miss Grumpy-Pants - she needs it more than she'll ever be able to admit."

Isabelle grinned. Her eyes, too, were suddenly stinging. "I intend to. Say hi to Gabrielle for me."

But Xena was already gone.

Isabelle leaned against her car, letting the sea breeze tousle her hair and tug at her jacket as she looked around the weed-infested parking-lot and at the ramshackle building at its end. It had obviously once been a truck stop or something similar, but the windows had boards nailed across them, the front door was missing, and the paint was so flaky that it was hard to tell what the color had once been. The structure was flanked by a rickety shed on one side, and a rusted caravan missing its tires on the other.

She turned at the deep rumble of another approaching car, and watched Corina in her rented Lexus stop beside her in a spray of dust. The tall woman rolled down the window and removed her shades, tucking them into her shirt pocket.

"How's the job hunt?" asked Isabelle.

Corina shrugged. "Got a few leads. Nothing I'm crazy about, but I'll have to decide on something soon." She turned off the ignition, and

got out of the car. "So this is it?"

"Yep. This is it."

They were about half an hour south of Pacifica, up on a cliff near Highway One with a spectacular view out onto the Pacific Ocean. It was a few weeks after their meeting at the motel, where Corina was still staying. Isabelle's mother had eventually been satisfied that her daughter would be okay, and returned back home.

"And your late aunt left you this place in her will?" Corina scanned the area with interest.

"That's what the letter said. The notary said it's all in order. I decided not to tell him that I don't know I even *had* an aunt."

"I see. Guess the Mysterious Benefactor strikes again. Let's have a closer look." Corina reached for Isabelle's hand, and they walked towards the building.

They dislodged a thick sheet of spider-webs as they stepped inside. The furniture was a jumble, most pieces rotted and broken. Isabelle picked up a chair that was missing a leg, and a second one dropped off it with a dry crack. A number of dust-covered beer glasses still sat in a crooked shelf behind the worn counter. The place smelled of dust and disuse. The walls, however, looked sturdy, and the stiff wind from the sea side did not reach inside.

"It needs lots of work," Isabelle remarked.

"It's beautiful," said Corina. "Come on, let's check out the shed." Isabelle followed, smiling at this unaccustomed enthusiasm.

"Holy shit," the tall woman exclaimed, as she tore the frayed linen cover off a motorcycle that stood inside the old shed, taking up most of the space inside. The tires were flat, and the entire machine covered in a thick layer of dust and bird droppings despite the covering. Isabelle knew little about motorcycles, but she could make out the writing on the dirt-encrusted tank.

"A Harley Davidson?"

"That's a Knucklehead. 1947, I think," Corina said reverently. "My dad used to drive one just like it. I think I could fix this up..." Her eyes shone as she looked at Isabelle. "Unless..."

"What?"

Corina wiped some dirt off the mottled leather seat. "Well... it's your place now. You haven't said what you plan to do with it. And if I'm to be a part of it."

Isabelle shook her head. "Really? You have to ask?"

Corina smiled slowly. "I'm a jobless tramp. It's going to be a challenge to house-break me."

"I'll take you on as my bouncer. Besides, I'll need someone with some muscle to clear out all the rubble if I want to make this place presentable again."

"Bouncer, eh?" Corina advanced on the smaller woman.

Giggling, Isabelle retreated, until her back hit the brittle boards of the shed's wall. "Free room and board?"

Corina growled. "Cheap." She pinned the smaller woman against the wall. The unstable boards creaked alarmingly.

Isabelle went on blithely. "I'll throw in that bike. I can't drive it anyway."

"Mmh. Almost tempting."

"So, what do you think we should name the place? Biker's Retreat? Seaside Waystation? Or," the small woman grinned impishly. "Coralee's Diner?"

Corina brought her face close. "The Nut House," she murmured. She gave Isabelle no chance to reply.

The warrior's eyes fly open. Without moving a muscle, she scans the surroundings. She is inside what appears to be a small hut, a fire crackling in a hearth out of her line of sight. A smell of old cooking, mingled with the sharp sting of medicinal salve, hangs in the air.

Images flash through her mind. An ambush by some peculiarly dressed bandits. Her bard, at her side, fighting like a lioness. The sharp pain as one of their spears goes into her side - the realization that the weapon is poisoned. The attackers' inexplicable flight just as it seems they gained the upper hand. She had forgotten that entire episode until now. Then, finding herself in a strange, unreal place - Isabelle's study - upon waking.

"Gabrielle?" she whispers, trying to rise.

There is a gasp. "Xena! Finally! You recovered from that wound ages ago. But I just couldn't wake you. I tried and tried!"

Dazed, she lets Gabrielle help her to sit. Then the bard wraps her into a fierce hug.

"I thought for sure I'd lose you this time," Gabrielle says in a strangled voice.

"Turns out I don't die that easily," Xena murmurs. She returns she hug, smelling the sweet scent of her bard's hair, feeling strength slowly return to her limbs. She kisses the top of Gabrielle's head.

"I was right where I needed to be, Bard," she says softly. "And, Athena's Arse, do I have a crazy story for you!"

THE END

Author's Note:

I began this piece over fifteen years ago, and for over ten, it was written into a corner and sitting unfinished. Two years ago, I finally decided to fix it by writing one of the characters out of the story. I think this helped, but the plot was still slow in developing, even though I was finally getting an idea of where I wanted it to go.

I can hardly believe that it is now well and truly finished (I'm sure I must have broken some record, right?), but here it is. Perhaps you can tell how my writing evolved over the years, for better or worse. I hope it does not distract too much from the story.

I have to thank **Norsebard** for agreeing to have a thorough read-through, making sure there are no glaring inconsistencies and spotting a host of pesky little typos. Other than that, I thank Corina, Isabelle, and last but not least, Xena, for not giving up on me ;)

Comments? I'm at verrath@gmx.de