

completely new to her. She'd always been a cynic about love. 'The times I tried to leave you. What a fool I was. I could never leave you.' Xena lay back and stared at the deep vast darknesses above her, unfathomable. Was it eternal and endless as some claimed? If so, she smiled, with no false hubris, it mirrored her feeling, her love for this special heart that beat steadfastly by her side. And always would. She knew it. They both did. Phenomenal, really. To be granted that further...vision. That they would always find each other--in one form or another--from one time to the next. Comforting. And frightening. And wondrous.

'Why me? How did I deserve this? After all I've done.' The splendor of the Milky Way spilled across the depth of sky. Such... immensity. All of that...how far...how great? She should feel so small a part of it all and yet this feeling inside her was so expansive, so all-encompassing...she could stride the heavens like any colossus set there by the gods. As long as they were together she could conquer anything--death itself.

"Gabrielle," she whispered and her lover stirred then subsided into sleep. She'd learned of the concept of a mantra, a sacred word, known only to the soul, that resonated within, that one chanted in love, caressed with the tongue. "You are my mantra," she breathed.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You sure Jack isn't holding back? It seems...it's just that something...some.... proper chronology seems to be missing."

"He assured me--"

"What's that worth?" Jan huffed angrily.

"Well--if you'd been paying more attention he wouldn't have gotten away with the majority of the scrolls to begin with!"

"Uh...huh. We getting ready to fight over this?" She watched as Mel sat on the bed and removed her glasses. "Besides, I was distracted. When he got away with the goods, baby, it was because you were standing so close to me..."

Mel smiled with a reluctant knowing indulgence for her friend, "How much did you give him last time? We can't afford this indefinitely. Why do I get the feeling he'll follow us around like a bad smell and hit us up for hard cash every time he needs to feather his bed?"

"Mel, honey, darlin', you've been spending too much time with me."

The taller woman smiled again and Jan sat beside her, gently touched her hair.

"My little tough guy..." Mel said fondly. "Ya want I should take the veil and play Mata Hari, vamp the bastard into giving it up--whatever he's concealing?"

"Over my very dead body. Just let me get out the brass knuckles and work him over a little."

"You will do no such thing."

Jan sighed. "Just thinking off the top of my noggin. Wishful thinking."

"Look, he could have a laundry list for all he knows about it. He'll have to come to us for any concise reading and evaluation. And context too for that matter."

"Or...he could have the key."

\*\*\*\*\*

"I notice you haven't been signing your name to those," Xena observed.

"Have to keep a semblance of decorum. Wouldn't want them to fall into the wrong hands, right?" Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. "Would we now?"

"I'd shout it from Mount Olympus. If you let me. But you're right. This is between us." Xena lay back and let the fire's warmth lick at her bare skin. "Whose care will you entrust them too? Eventually?"

"I've been thinking about that," Gabrielle set the scroll aside and lay back next to the dark haired beauty. "Xena?"

"Hmm?" The warrior lazily ran a finger over the bard's arm.

"Those caves up north...they stay pretty dry, don't they?"

"Uh-huh," she rolled on her side and slid her fire warmed hand up Gabrielle's thigh, "at the