

on a flat rock smoothed by a century's worth of such use. Leaning against a date palm she clasped her knees and looked for all the world like some otherworldly mermaid or naid left bereft and sorrowful by a lonely silent pool.

Jan clenched her jaw and floated on her back. Never again. 'Never will I allow myself to get that...way again.' Ever. She was determined.

The young blonde woman pitched the tent by that palm as her companion made dinner. Neither said a word. But ate in silence. Jan retired as the evening star brightened in a deep velvet sky. She'll probably go and sleep in the truck, Jan thought, but soon the tent flap parted and Mel came in and began to undress. Jan wanted to look away but had to watch the shadow play as her lithe form was silhouetted against the pale canvas, back-lit by a fully risen moon. Jan took a deep shuddery breath, shifted gingerly onto her side. The moonlight through the tent flap bathed them both in its pale lunar splendor. Not even when she'd uncovered the golden mask of Mist-ar-kan had she ever seen anything so lovely--or wanted more to touch. She lay down beside Jan who began to roll over, turning her back on Mel. But the other woman caught her bare arm, surprisingly strong.

Jan exhaled forcefully, studied the hand grasping her, "You ask an awful lot, lady."

"I just..."

"You...just... You want to play? At what? You want to start me up again so you can back away like a frightened little girl? I won't tolerate games. I'd rather end this... partnership right here and now--"

"Shut up. Listen. For once. I...I'm sorry. Forgive the misunderstanding--"

"That's what you call it?! Oh, that's very good. You'll be the heartbreaker they'll all love to be teased and tortured by. Well, not me. Now get some sleep. We have work to do tomorrow."

She had the dream again. The one where she was standing on the edge of a precipice afraid to look down. A warm hand on her arm offered salvation, which turned into a gentle shake.

"Jan...wake up. You're dreaming again."

"Sorry. Troubled mind...conscience, I guess. I mean...I'm sorry about what I said. It's what I said before that I really mean. I value your friendship more than anything. I...just get a little carried away sometimes. You're just too damn beautiful to ignore, you know. I'm not made of stone."

"I know. I'm sorry...I over-reacted. Let's just try to get some sleep. And, Jan...no harm done, all right?" She lay back knowing sleep would elude her for certain now. She sighed and put her hands behind her head. "Jan?"

"Hmm?"

"Gabrielle and Xena...you think they were lovers, don't you?"

Jan rolled over onto her stomach and propped her chin on crossed hands. "Yes. But don't let that influence you." She knew Mel could see her Cheshire cat grin in the moonlight. "You are the master of your fate. To paraphrase. Get some sleep."

Jan relaxed into the hot bath with a sigh, self-satisfied and well deserved. She staked out the dig today and the site looked very, very promising. She couldn't wait to get her hands dirty, to dig into the mother earth with a passion she reserved for few other women... 'Stop it,' she chided herself. She could hear Mel fussing about in the other room. They were sharing kip together, cheaper--cozier. Oh, Jan, don't start down that path. You remember what happened the last time. Resolved, you shall not let it get to you--let her get to you. You can live without it. And have.

Think about something else. Xena...and Gabrielle. Well, that leads you right back down the same road. The Xena Scrolls had made it pretty damn evident what the nature of their