

relationship had been. At times the Bard waxed so eloquent and poetic about her muse that it seemed almost indecent to be eavesdropping on such intimate emotion. It still kept its vibrancy, even in translation, after all these centuries. What a grande passione that must've been. Rivals the ages. Transcends time and space. How nice it would've been if, when Mel was possessed by the spirit of Xena...she could've played Gabrielle to that fiery amazon.

She sighed again. No, that wouldn't do. She could never allow herself to be... vulnerable...not with anyone. Especially not with...her. Not again. That was how you got hurt...and she was determined never to let that happen again. Anyway, she liked her tough guy image, equal parts Bogie and Coop, Gable and Duke. She'd cultivated it carefully. It was part of who she was now. Good offense, best defense. No one would mess with her. If they knew what was good for 'em. "How long do you think you'll be?" Mel's sweet southern accented voice lilted in on a warm breeze from the open balcony.

She reached for the soap, "You're welcome to join me."

No response. Then, "I can wait."

"So can I," Jan shot back, good-naturedly. By the gods, that woman made her smile. They'd eased into such a natural comradeship. You could almost believe in some kind of...destiny. And meant to be. She heard Mel tuning the radio. "Oh...just perfect."

It was Dietrich, and she'd heard some bawdy stories about her, and the company she kept; she too, it seemed, liked the ladies. "Marlene's sewing circle." That deep throaty shameless hussy caress sang, "Falling in love again, never wanted to, don't know what to do, can't help it."

"Oh, shut up," Jan murmured and submerged her head in the bathwater.

When she emerged from the bathroom, drying her hair with a towel she smiled to find her fresh blouse and trousers, and her etc.s laid out nicely, neatly on the bed. Mel was nowhere to be seen. But Jan knew as sure as she got all spiffed up and made her way downstairs, the proper Miss Pappas would have a lovely luncheon waiting for her. Hmmm, Jan thought, I always wanted a wife.

She added a khaki tie to her ensemble, ran her hand over the brim of her fedora and winked at her own reflection in the mirror. She thought Mel could do a lot worse. That idiot Jack, for instance.

She was right. More brunchy, than lunchy though. Eggs Benedict. Oh, yes, this was going to be a working partnership. And thank the gods she found the one moderately priced accommodation with a french chef.

"Thought you wanted to use the bath?"

Mel looked fresh as ever. "I made other....arrangements."

"Oh?" Jan ticked an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Take off your hat. Didn't your mama teach you better than that?"

"No, actually, she didn't."

"Sorry. I didn't mean--"

"Don't change the subject."

"I don't really see where it's any of your business," Melinda's lovely features colored slightly.

"Oh....that's how it is."

"You may not think so, but he really is a gentleman."

"Unlike some of us," Jan muttered. They finished their meal in silence.

"You coming to the consulate with me this afternoon?" Jan asked.

"If you need me."

"I'd say that goes without saying--I mean... you can ply the old bugger with your southern charm while I get the dig extended indefinitely."

"I do have other talents, you know. I should resent that you...use me like that."

"And I thought I was being complimentary."