

Xena 3K –

Book 4 of 5

by DK Ward & Melissa Smith

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Xena 3K



A dark, monochromatic illustration of two characters, Xena and Gabrielle, with lightning bolts striking their faces. The image is split vertically by a jagged lightning bolt. The top half shows Xena with her characteristic wild, curly hair and a serious expression. The bottom half shows Gabrielle with her hair pulled back and a more serene expression. The background is dark and textured, suggesting a stormy or dramatic atmosphere.

Xena 3K

DevenK & Lissa



Raven & Phoenix

Prologue

Their physical forms, or more precisely what was left of them, twisted, turned, and rolled in every conceivable and inconceivable way, including what at one point felt like inside out. The sensations that coursed over and through their skin during their first journey to the future with Aphrodite were similar; the colors and lights surrounding them not only glowing in a kaleidoscopic manner but going deeper, into their very marrow and their minds.

As they negotiated the mind-bending complexities and onslaught of imagery and perceptual distortion to their serotonin that the vortex evoked, their visual, auditory, and tactile sensations seemed to run into each other -- a sensory crosshatching, if you will -- and soon color appeared as sounds, touches as smells, and visions arose as caresses.

The experience was quite euphoric, to say the least. And where words weren't... allowed? Thoughts reigned supreme.

Xena was linked to Gabrielle's mind and knew the bard was telling her, *Don't let go of me; please don't let go.*

She reassured her anxiety with a smile and reached her one free hand up to embrace Gabrielle's tender cheek, her thoughts calming the younger woman, comforting her, *Never.*

The trip took mere moments in real time, but to the voyagers it seemed as if days had passed inside that whirlpool, and they wondered if it would ever set them free. But until it did, they had to keep their minds from drifting away... far, far away.

Chapter 1

Malik moved with deft speed through the crowd, weaving and bobbing around elbows, shuffling old women, and umbrellas, which she thought were purposely trying to lodge their pointed spines into her scalp.

Bloody people... Doesn't anybody know how to move? Too many people in the world, that's the problem.

She was late as usual, and the sluggish clog of rural locals walking on the avenue with her, as well as those above her, weren't improving her sour mood.

Keeping an eye on the street in the off chance of spotting an empty, landed Hololift, she worked her way to the center, determined. *I hate Thursdays. Damn nowhere day. Doesn't anybody work in this town? Get the heck out of the way!*

Her frustration screwed her face into a series of concentrated lines. Waving her umbrella-- like the mad woman she was becoming-- at a silver lift, it whizzed passed, ignoring her, and adding to her fury with a filthy spray across her knees.

"Thank you. And you can go straight to *H.A.L.*" The cork in her head gave another twist, pressing her brain into her tightening skull.

She didn't look like a famous singer, nor a used-to-be doctor in her slouching, sodden clothing, wet, droopy hair, and angry face, but just another regular somebody on the sidewalk of Lerrette's downtown main boulevard.

Spotting a white Hololift aimed for her corner, she jumped into the street to block its path. It would hit her and stop, or it would stop on it's own. She wasn't too particular about which just then.

"*Stop!*" she shouted with a demanding forearm thrust out, praying the Beemer's tactiles would hold and the road conforming tires wouldn't slip in the rain, as she closed her eyes to await her fate. The sliding screech jerked her eyes open. The lift had spun out just enough to bring the rear hatch inches from her fingers.

Convenient, she thought numbly and pressed her palm to the magnetic lock, causing the hatch to spring open. Filth and rain made a gritty layer of black sludge across her palm. *Lovely. Matches the black splatters on my new jeans. Might as well add on to the design.*

Wiping her hand across her thigh, she dropped onto the seat quickly as the hatch slammed shut, enclosing her in pitch-blackness. The dark swamped around her with complete stillness. In her rush to get inside, she hadn't noticed that every surface except the front view screen was tinted an impenetrable black. Then it hit her, the stink: Acrid, rotting oranges, sickly sweet.

I'm in a tomb- a rotting tomb.

"Open rear view screen," Malik spoke, nearly gagging on the words. When the glass to her left didn't begin descending downward, she groped blindly for the override button before the sickness could break free from her gripping throat. She stopped as a sudden beam of light stung deep into her blue, transparent eyes. A small six by one-inch space opened in the tinted plexi divide. And as her vision recovered from the bolts of white spots, she saw two eyes reflected back at her through the rear-viewer, black as coal, no face.

The limited space of the opening, she reasoned, but the confusion gripping her tired mind had her thinking all sorts of strange things, like there were only those stinging black eyes on the other side of the divider and not a human body attached. Some small part of Malik began screaming, *GET OUT! To heck with this stinking blackness and the bestial eyes of the faceless driver.* But she was late, and she convinced herself to shut out that tiny, nervous voice.

It had been years since she'd heard it, and she was damned if she was going to waste eight years of therapy because of one ass of a Hololift driver. She was 36, had all those degrees in medicine,

friends, and a good singing career now. She was a sane woman, loved by millions of people around the world.

She told herself this over and over as those eyes stared, stern, merciless, unrelenting, dead locked on hers, combing Malik's mind for some unidentifiable information. Her heart slammed at her ribs, shaking her frame with its thudding force.

Finally, getting up enough will, Malik dropped her gaze. Now she could protect herself, she thought. Then asked herself, *from what?*

I don't know.

That cowering voice in her knew, *Get Out! It's the devil! You're in the devil's carriage!*

Malik swallowed the choke of fear and forced herself to speak, "Wellington..." her command fell weakly from her mouth, coming out in a whisper.

The lift lurched forward to the tune of angry horns. Malik found herself thinking, *well, at least this demon had feet to push the levers and hands to monitor the driver's console.* She clutched the seat edges, but too late before her shoulder knocked into the door with a solid thud.

Pain seared to a point at the shoulder tip, blazing her giddiness into the slow recollection of anger, and it finally dawned on her just why she was in such a state of mind.

Gabrielle.

That one word made every cell in her body start yearning and every part of her mind fear the threat of losing her closest friend.

Last night the smaller of the two had told Malik of her plans to go on vacation for the next two months. And not until that very moment, while sitting in that stinking lift, did Malik realize just how bad off she was to hear that news come from her dear scientist friend.

So that, plus the fact her own vehicle was undergoing quarterly maintenance, was why she was sitting in that awful trans, having to deal with the crazy driver up front. And Gabrielle was so busy making sure some last minute projects were completed before her vacation, she didn't have the time to cart Malik around, as she usually

liked to do. So Malik had gotten it into her head to go surprise her friend with a visit to the women's college for which Gabrielle worked. Wellington University.

The M.A.U. snapped on with a sudden blast from the speakers behind her head.

Malik jumped, coming out of her reverie to the thundering bass in quadraphonic hollosound, drums pounding, vocals in a frenzied scream.

Malik slapped her hands over her ears and shouted, "TURN IT DOWN! LOWER IT! CAN YOU LOWER IT?"

Her hands muffled the driver's answer, but Malik thought she heard... "No."

"WHAT?"

A deep, mild voice came back, somehow clear over the din. A woman's voice, "No."

Maybe she doesn't hear me, hell, I hardly hear me. She asked again, "The music, can you LOWER the volume on the mobile audio unit?"

"NO!" The voice came clear as if the driver were right there beside her, voice strong-- comprehensible somehow over the booming emitters. Definitely a woman's voice, and definitely filled with sarcasm, too.

What the... Malik was never able to handle being out of control, and this entirely miserable experience was beginning to boil her already scorched blood.

This being wasn't the devil, as her little voice had told her, she amended, she's His Hellion Bitch!

Malik's head ached in rhythm to the beat of the drum, her stomach doing crisp turns with every squealing cut of the wheel.

Dear Goddess, I'm going to throw up. I'm being punished. Gods, Lord, or whomever or whatever currently rules the universe, please forgive me. Let this torturous day end. I just need to see Gabrielle... Then all my worries and fears will melt away... I'm sorry I'm always late... I'm sorry I've wasted food... I'm sorry I doubt

the Bible, the God and Goddess thing still unresolved in her own mind ... I promise I'll try to be better...

The lift hit a turn at full throttle, sending Malik sliding across the seat with a bang into the far hatch and crushing the other shoulder tip into the glass. Her anger did a caustic dance in her gut. She pushed herself up toward the tiny opening, ready to tear it apart. All bets with any and all Deities were off.

The driver saw her coming and pumped the particle release, slamming Malik back into the pungent seat with a jarring bounce. Her blood raced hard through her temples and she was sure she would faint.

"TAKE IT EASY, DAMN IT! PLENTY OF TIME LEFT TO KILL ME. AND CAN YOU PLEASE GET THE VIEWERS DOWN? WHAT IS THAT STENCH?"

Air, a little light; the living did require these things from time to time. She left the last part off, her throat sore from screaming.

"View screen's open up here." The taunt came clear and cold.

"WELL, THAT'S ALL FINE AND DANDY, BUT HOW ABOUT LETTING *ME* BREATHE?"

"No."

Malik sat up quickly. "Do you have a problem?"

"I don't think I have a problem."

"OH, YOU'RE SO AMUSING! AND WHAT IS THAT SMELL! YOU THROW YOUR GARBAGE BACK HERE OR SOMETHING?"

"I can't help your hygiene. Smart college girl like yourself ought to figure that one out."

"I'M *NOT* A COLLEGE GIRL!" *Oh why was she even bothering?*

The small opening hid the driver's brilliant, straight white smile. Malik slid back; afraid she'd punch through the divider and tear the creature's heart out. *Somebody had to end her miserable existence, she mused, why not me? I'll wait until I'm on solid ground; asphyxiation is best accomplished with both hands securely around the larynx.*

"WHO ARE YOU? WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

The drum said, BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

"Guess, I've guessed yours."

Malik stared her displeasure into the viewer. She supposed the *Devil's Whore* would have some extra-human perception abilities. But then again, there weren't many people who didn't know who *Malik* was on sight. If she could have seen herself right at that moment, she would have had her doubts though.

"You tell me mine and I'll tell you yours."

The music was lowered about ten decibels, and Malik was a bit relieved. But her stomach was turning more volcanic, both from the ride and from the taunting driver. "You take some special course for idiocy?"

"Feel privileged, now we can communicate."

"What is the number of this lift?" The driver's attitude was incredulous. Malik was seething.

"Let's play a game, shall we?"

Wasn't that what they'd been doing this whole ride? Malik wondered, hoping the ride would end soon and she could go on with her normal life. After she'd called in her complaint of course. She just needed the damn number.

"I'll take your silence to mean yes." Black eyes were watching Malik again and she felt completely nude, stripped bare of everything, her bones showing through for this monster. "Now concentrate, I need your full attention." Malik ripped her eyes away. She wouldn't give the woman the pleasure of her glance let alone her interest in some silly game.

"Think of a number." The driver was determined to play whether she had Malik's attention or not. "Multiply it by two, add twenty -- you paying attention back there?" Malik went on ignoring her. Her hands sank into the wet seat and she inwardly cringed. "Then you have to divide by two and finally, subtract the first number you thought of and there you go!" Her cheer was apparent, and Malik heard it that time.

"You're an obnoxious ass." She felt like she could spit venom at that very instant.

"Thank you, I try." The woman smiled at the road ahead. Sometimes life could be sweeter than you could imagine.

Malik's head was sent precariously close to striking the divider when the lift dropped from the sky and came to an abrupt halt. Eyes close to the opening, rage about to be expressed, the driver cut her off.

"That's seven twenty-five."

Malik shivered when the woman turned in her seat, onyx eyes looking directly into her own, closer this time, almost intimately. If the plexi weren't there, Malik would bet anything their faces were just a hair apart. She sat back, momentarily forgetting her murderous impulse. She was stricken once again with the feeling of being bored into. Her soul was now naked as well, revealed for the driver to see, to gorge on if she chose, and Malik knew she was doing just that.

Ok, that's enough of that, Malik decided and gathered her things. She wanted out now! The driver placed a payment pad through the narrow slot, but only enough so her passenger could complete the transaction without actually taking hold of the device. Malik quickly pressed her thumb to the clear gel pack until it glowed green, then she shoved it through the hole and pulled her fingers back as quickly as possible, wanting her hand in the safety of her lap. Normally she would have added a hefty tip; this time the driver could go back to hell where she belonged and take nothing with her.

Her neck was prickling with a dense fear-sweat. She didn't care if they were at the school or in the middle of the dead Mississippi River sludge. Anywhere but in that hellhole with those wicked, fathomless eyes rooting around inside her would have been good enough.

"Here's my card. Next time you're in need, call and ask for me. I'll take good care of you." Ebony-eyes sparked as the object hit the floor, landing in the oblivion around Malik's feet.

Malik clenched her teeth, lightly touching the wet mats in the almost total blackness to search for the information she needed to nail this sinister shrew. Finally finding it, she grabbed for the door's

magnetic release, pushing with all her might. Her only thought was to get the hell out.

It's stuck.

She pushed harder, her heart slamming its force in her chest. She rammed her shoulder hard into the flap, oblivious to the sharp blade of pain in her panic to escape.

Stuck! Trapped... I'm TRAPPED! Her mind exploded in panic.

"Thanks for riding with White Lift. Hope you call again soon, *Malik.*" The driver poked at the hatch lock/release on her side console, and Malik heard the click just as her brain registered the driver's last word.

She was still pushing at the hatch, and it gave, almost toppling her onto the street as it rose out and up. Deciding to get out first and ask questions later, Malik grabbed her bags and bolted, slamming the flap behind.

She was shaking and her legs felt like stretched taffy, but she was out of there. She looked quickly at her surroundings, realizing she was at the locked south gate of Wellington University; fourteen feet from sodden soil to the tip of the spiked wrought-iron gate. The main entrance was half a mile around a sloping hill on which the 16 thousand-acre campus sat.

Being out in the light and fresh air, the stupefied fear receded and anger flared with renewed reason. She stomped around quickly to the driver's hatch, and without thought or hesitation she popped it open with the force of her pent up fury and anxiety.

They stared at each other, each lost in their own separate world of shock and disbelief. The driver's eyes glazed over in her own misconception of Malik's bravery.

Malik gaped wide-eyed at "the creature" before her. Incredible beauty made up her every part; long strawberry-blonde, disheveled, wavy curls shining with health, capped her head and framed a face like Malik had never seen. Delicate high cheeks, strong tapered jaw, and full, wide pink lips completed the vision. The body wasn't large,

but strong, tall; well defined shoulders and biceps under a green silk shirt, thigh muscles hard and perfect under black leather pants.

Malik moved her gaze back up to the unfathomable blackness of the woman's eyes, and with the effect of the driver's surrounding beauty, the fear and dread those dark pools had elicited earlier was now no more than a faint and foolish memory.

"Phoenix! Where are you? Don't you know how to call in when you're takin' a break? And why do ya have the visual turned off?" The voice bellowed loud and clear.

Leaning forward, eyes still on Malik's, Phoenix answered the view screen, "Yes Gerty, I'm here. I hear you. I just dropped off at Wellington." Phoenix inwardly shuddered, *Damn, Gerty, just the sound of that woman's graveled voice was enough to make a lift lose its levitation.*

Malik saw the white brightness of her teeth, knew what a dazzling smile the woman must cast, and felt her knees go weak.

Phoenix flashed Malik a raging, black glare and slammed the hatch, released the tactiles, and roared off, tires ripping smoke and steam off the vinyl top before the Beemer took to the air once again.

"Phoenix... You wait till Gerty gets an earful from me." Malik turned her back and began trudging up the sloping hill to the West gate, cursing the ground and the rain and the White Lift Transportation Service with every stomp of her pounding heels.

* * *

Phoenix made it to the end of the street and stalled the Beemer, turning off every electrical current, and sat in the dark fighting the bitterness that was slowly chewing her senses away to nothing. Malik's image would dance across her mental screen and she would quickly extinguish it, having no idea how to sustain herself and her tenuous sanity with the memories so visually acute.

Selfish, miserable excuse for a human being, that's what I am, her mind stabbed. She suddenly needed to be farther away, *just to think*, she told herself, and she rode home, landing the Beemer on the

top of her apartment building. She stepped from the vehicle onto the surface of the third level roof, sitting down heavily, not wanting any sign of her whereabouts disclosed to anyone below.

She'd been an adopted child from the age of fourteen; before then, foster parents, who could barely handle her for a couple months at a stretch, did her upbringing, and then she was shuffled off to another pair. When she was just in her teens, before she was finally placed into the care of a family for the remainder of her growing years, she wondered what was so wrong with her that she was constantly being returned time and again.

Those thoughts festered, and when she was in her latter teens, even with the love and caring of her final adoptive parents, she felt completely unwanted. The peace she had as a child vanished from her, or so she believed. Her faith in God dwindled, and her faith in herself disappeared all together.

The only time she felt remotely alive was when she used her gift, the one she had been born with, the one no one could take from her. She could "plug-in" to other people, see their lives as they had lived them. She could feel their feelings, ache their pains, and when it all became too much, she would stop for a while. But like any addict, she needed her plug-in fix, and she would return to probing the minds of women who got into her lift, or people on the street with whom she was able to make eye contact. Sometimes it brought her sexual excitement, to see their deepest desires, but most times she probed for the peace and the love that the human mind stored within itself. If her own mind wasn't capable of grasping those emotions, she found no fault in taking them from others.

The only bad part came after the connection had ceased, when the guilt and shame arose. She felt regret about that ride she'd given the blue-eyed woman. Her probing showed her a side of life that she saw too infrequently -- Malik was totally obsessed in love, and it consumed her. That had been a pleasant experience for Phoenix, but then jealousy devoured her. Why can't she ever find love like that -- experience total ecstasy just from hearing someone else's name? And so she had been mean to the woman... and now that woman was

probably terrified of her. And yes, at the time she enjoyed it, when she didn't think about it long enough. But now here she sat, with nothing to do except think.

* * *

Walking the shoulder with no particular interest in the occasional traffic misting past or above her, Malik continued on numbly, her mind wringing out the day's events in droplets, but she still couldn't digest them or even tell one event from another. She was moving in a low-grade state of shock, and she was slowly realizing it.

Quatrar Stress Syndrome, she thought with dazed satisfaction. *I knew having a girlfriend in her last year of psychology would come in handy someday.* She giggled out loud, feeling a little punchy. *A beautiful lift driver has traumatized me.*

The news headline would read:

WOMAN FOUND WANDERING AIMLESSLY IN LARGE LESBIAN COMMUNITY - Story page three.

Malik laughed, a light singsong, and she felt the rise of hysteria tickling in her stomach. Then she thought of Gabrielle and pleasure swarmed throughout her entire being. *Just a few more minutes and I'll see your gorgeous eyes and that lovely face, and all with the world will be well again.*

Chapter 2

Gabrielle Cotrell was standing before a display of re-sequencing chambers and element extractors filled with a variety of chemicals when Malik burst through the double doors of her lab looking like she'd been thrown in a water recycler.

"Don't ask," Malik said when Gabrielle's lips parted to do just that.

"Alrighty then."

"I have to use your viewer, ok?"

"Sure, you know where it's at." Gabrielle smiled and watched Malik toss her bags onto the table, then lean against it, releasing a pent up sigh. She poked the lift company's numbers into the dial pad with an impatient finger.

"I guess I shouldn't ask how your day has gone either, huh?" Gabrielle stifled a giggle when Malik rolled her eyes waiting for an image to appear.

Finally a rather unpleasant looking female -- obviously the same person who had yelled over the lift's view screen-- answered the call. The woman had an unsettling presence, even through the viewer. Malik found it difficult to maintain contact with her cold, dead eyes. After Malik regained her senses, Gerty proceeded to get a royal chewing out from one pissed-off, medically trained, vocalist. She turned out to be the owner and operator of White Lift, and after a short but memorable conversation, she assured Malik that she would have a serious talk with her insolent driver.

Attempting to concentrate on her newest experiment, Gabrielle had tuned out the conversation that was taking place across the room, knowing it was going to be a doozie. Glancing up from her work, the look she saw on Malik's face confirmed her presumption.

When she disconnected the call and turned back around, a fine smile trickled across Malik's lips. She knew *this* was all she needed--that small woman directly across from her with the most startling green eyes and the prettiest face she'd ever seen.

Gabrielle, warmed by the smile, returned it, turning back to her experiment before her face totally flushed on her. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" she asked while Malik made her way back across the room towards her.

Malik wanted to say simply, *I missed you*, but instead she grumbled, "Just came by to keep you company. You *will* be gone for two whole months. I'm going to be bored out of my mind."

Gabrielle's lips turned down, almost into a pout. She had hoped telling Malik she was leaving would have spurred the woman into action finally, maybe have her fall to her knees and beg Gabrielle not to leave her side. But in the real world, that hadn't happened, and Gabrielle regretted ever calling the journey broker in the first place. She didn't want to go anywhere Malik wasn't, but now she was stuck with the fallacy.

"I'll miss you," Gabrielle said softly, not looking back at Malik. She could have cried.

"Ditto. So what are you up to?" Malik was her brisk, no-nonsense self again. She was nearly over her earlier trauma. Reporting that gorgeous witch of a woman to the lift company helped, but thoughts of that driver were still at the edges of her mind.

"Raven left some samples for me to go over," she shrugged. "Boring stuff really, but, well you know Rave, if I don't at least try she'll make herself sick with impatience. She'll be back any minute, so here I stand, piddling around with this stuff when I'd much rather be hitting that new teleportation experiment."

"Hmmm." Malik stepped up beside her friend, looking over her shoulder at the green liquid she was measuring. She could smell Gabrielle's perfume, a light hint of *Eternity* that floated up and caressed her nose. She inhaled deeply. Then moving away from her, she told herself, *okay, enough of that*.

Gabrielle was frozen to the spot, still feeling the heat of Malik's body even though she was no longer anywhere near.

"They're tearing down the roads again, took longer to get here than normal," Malik said, making conversation as she poked at some kind of sample lying on Gabrielle's cluttered desk.

The mention of road construction brought on a flood of memories. Gabrielle closed her eyes. It was one year ago to the day they had met...

"Will you stop reading and listen to me, Gabby!"

Avoiding the road construction, Gabrielle and her second closest friend (her first being Raven), Roxanne Monroe, crossed Third Avenue quickly, heading for the shortcut through the park to save time they didn't have to get back to the school.

Gabrielle was deep into an article on Time Travel and so immersed in her reading that she hardly paid any attention to her friend at all. She hadn't even been aware that she'd just crossed a major landing strip.

Gabrielle made a noise of comprehension for her friend's benefit and continued reading. She knew this would satiate Roxy for another ten minutes or so and she'd continue to prattle on obliviously.

She could smell the newly cut grass all around her, feel it's soft pelt under her thin sandals, even hear the auto-mower off in the distance over Roxy's latest news wire about what she and her current girlfriend had done over the weekend. There was something else though -- not a smell, not the grass, nor a sound in the background -- it was a feeling of being watched.

For once Gabrielle's attention was caught, and she lifted her eyes to scan the area around her. She saw nothing but a few kids off to her right, some picnickers playing hooky from work behind her, and straight ahead was a couple kissing under an elm tree.

When she glanced to her left, Gabrielle felt like she'd walked into a lateral fusion reactor and someone had just cranked it up several notches. She looked straight ahead again, away from that vigilant blue gaze, but she could still see the person sitting up on the

base of the statue-- erected to that brave law enforcement officer Darian Redmond who had put an end to an awful madman's reign on Lerrette ages ago-- leaning back, relaxed, hands behind her head, and that ever steady tutelage on the blonde.

Gabrielle couldn't help another look, a quick one, and she swung her head back around, lips smiling just a little when she saw the stranger still watching her pass, a small smile on her mouth, too.

"Get a load of that one!" Roxanne blurted, seemingly not too engrossed in telling her tale to also notice the woman sitting there, openly admiring her friend. "The nerve, gawking at you. She's almost as bad as those burly construction dyke's on Third."

"Shush, Roxy," Gabrielle firmly ordered and glanced back over her shoulder to see if her beautiful admirer was still interested. She was. Gabrielle swung around, her smile growing broader.

"They get some real weirdo's in this park. Why you have to cut through here every day for lunch still amazes me..."

She rattled on, and Gabrielle went on ignoring her, ignoring the article, ignoring how the grass felt and smelled, and every sound around her. She didn't see anything but the woman's face, her dimples, that intense stare aimed at her. She'd caught a mere glimpse at the stack of S-Books beside the stranger but paid it little attention. There had been a solar reading pad open on her lap, face down. The stranger had on black pants and a silvery white shirt with the first three buttons open. She wore a gold chain, its medallion settled comfortably at the base of her throat. She was built, probably worked out a lot, Gabrielle surmised, pleased with the memory of the woman's overall appearance.

Just out of pure curiosity she looked back once more, and to her surprise -- and delight -- the woman was still watching her. Gabrielle hastily looked away, feeling her face infusing with color.

Do I turn around and go back? Whatever would I say? Suppose she's just looking? Perhaps she was simply tired from reading and just wanted to lean back and rest for a moment and I come along -- not your typical Christie Crawford though she'd gotten no complaints so far -- and I just happened to catch her attention.

No need to go picking out wedding rings yet, *she warned herself and decided if the stranger was interested enough she would make it her job to come after her.*

The rest of Gabrielle's day was miserable. It probably would have gone well if she'd just retained the feeling of being stared at and left it at that, but no, she had to go and make demands out of a perfectly innocent involvement between two people who would probably never see each other again.

Still, she waited for the next day when she would cut through the park, and maybe, just maybe, her stranger would be there, and for sure Gabrielle would not make the same mistake twice.

"Hey, watch it!" Malik blurted, startling Gabrielle from her past memories. She looked down and saw she had continued her work, not even realizing it, and had begun to pour one chemical into another, causing it to spill all over the counter top. She stepped back, grabbed the nearest cleaning unit, and began to neutralize the mess.

She noticed her hands were trembling and made a fist of each one to still them. One year, twelve whole months of wanting and waiting; close, but never close enough. She didn't know what was wrong with Malik. It wasn't like she hadn't nearly thrown herself at the woman that first night Malik had come to visit her, but still Malik kept her distance. It was a true mystery to Gabrielle.

"Here, let me do that." Malik took the unit from Gabrielle's clenched fist and finished cleaning up her spill. "You ok, Gabby?" she asked, worry lines breaking along her forehead.

"Yes, just lost my concentration a bit. Trip and all, you know..." She shrugged and moved away from Malik. It did her no good to stand there, that close, and not fall into those arms and be kissed half senseless.

Raven Mahoney sauntered into the room; they both lifted their eyes in greeting. She was tall, at least 6 feet, solidly built; your typical *Butch* is what Malik liked to think of her. She constantly wore that darn white cowboy hat, even to the virtufliks, which annoyed a

few of the other patrons when she decided to plop her tall self down in front of them.

She had a kind face, *tender*, as Gabrielle frequently referred to it, and the most dashing smile when she decided to use it on someone. Her eyes were the same green color as Gabrielle's, and just as compassionate.

Malik caught her glance and busied herself, pretending to clean up the mess, hiding her consuming want of Gabrielle from those searching eyes of Raven's. She knew Raven regarded Gabrielle like an endangered species, and if she got wind that Malik had this thing for her, sure enough Raven would run and blab the whole situation to Gabrielle.

"Hey there, you," Raven greeted her little friend, hopping up onto the counter beside Gabrielle. She noticed Malik's averted gaze but ignored it. "So, find anything?"

Gabrielle stared up at her and shook her head. "You have me do the most boring things, Raven." Malik held back a snort. "Can we test some of that new batch of dirt from Pluto that came in? Anything but *this*..." she gestured to the sludgy green concoction she had made. They prattled back and forth, seemingly unaware they had left Malik to her own devices.

Chapter 3

Today was *The* day, their one-year *anniversary*, as Malik liked to think of it. And what was she doing for it? She was rained on by the heaven's themselves, it seemed, then harassed by an irate lift driver, and now, when she was finally alone with Gabrielle to share this special day, just *who* comes in to ruin it?

While Raven and Gabrielle were lost in their chambers and extractors, Malik dejectedly took herself to the window and remembered...

It had been a harried day for Malik McCormick at the hospital. It seemed everyone and their mother was in need of medical care and Malik was in way over her head. She moved here to there in her jeans and black shirt, giving orders, receiving cellular reports, looking over thermogenic scans, setting broken bones. Because they were short staffed - once again, with only she and Dr. O'Neal, and not even a handful of nurses, menial jobs that needed doing, she did, because it had to be done.

Into this chaos came another emergency, probably another broken leg. Today seems to be 'break a leg day,' Malik thought as she whipped the curtain back and came face to face with the captivating woman from the park... She couldn't help but smile as she stepped up to the bedside of Gabrielle Cotrell.

Gabrielle knew it would be inappropriate to clasp her hands together and lift them up as if praying, and thank the almighty, so she kept them safely under her hips and let her eyes do the real talking as she said, "Isn't this interesting?"

"What happened?"

Gabrielle's cheeks reddened slightly as she told her tale. "I like to read as I walk-"

"I noticed." Malik cleared her throat and busied herself with pulling the sheet off of the one leg. She didn't look at her patient, as Gabrielle went on.

"Well..." Gabrielle couldn't stop staring at her, and as she did, all her thoughts crashed into one another, like a pileup she'd seen and almost been involved in three years ago. "To make a long story short, I wasn't watching where I was going and ended up in a precariously awkward position. So here I am, the result of falling over a log. Is it bad?"

Malik did not touch the leg, just hovered her hands above it and moved them up and down its entire length, then she pulled the sheet over and dropped her hands to her sides. She said matter-of-factly, "It's fractured."

Gabrielle burst out laughing, expressing during the fit, "Okay, someone get me a Real Doctor."

Malik turned her body fully towards Gabrielle, leaning a hip against the bed. "There are two simple fractures, one in the tibia and one in the lateral cuneiform bone of the foot." She turned on her heel and left.

Gabrielle heard her voice a minute later, far off - but close enough that she could still place it.

"You want a what?" asked a startled voice.

"When you're done with her, bring her back, and get O'Neal in there to confirm. Call me when she's prepped for the cast."

Malik should have been prepared for the woman's skepticism, as well as the orderly's disbelief that she would order a scan, heck sometimes she couldn't believe she had the insight that she'd been blessed with at birth. But she had it, and she used it for the betterment of mankind.

*She liked to call it **the touch**, but in actual fact, she never laid a finger on a patient; she just placed her hands near their aches, and knew what was ailing them. And she was used to the ridicule -- all through college, then grad school, she'd been teased about it, but*

when people finally saw her in action, the skeptics turned believers - or so she thought. When she saw the look on Gabrielle's face, all those years of ridicule from her colleagues came back at her, and that made her angry at the younger woman.

Well, that little beauty would soon see for herself that she wasn't a simple con artist. Those thermogenic scans would tell her the exact same thing Malik had, and would she enjoy the look of remorse on her face when she did.

** * **

"Enjoying your stay?"

Gabrielle jumped at the male voice and opened her eyes. She'd drifted off for a few minutes. Hospital visits are the worst, she was musing as she sat up, pulling the cover over herself. "I'd enjoy it more if it were over."

Taken aback, and slightly unnerved by the closed-off attitude, he entered the room and let the curtain drop behind him. "Okay... Well, we'll get you out of here as soon as we can. I'm Dr. O'Neal by the way."

"Broken tibia and lateral cuneiform?" Gabrielle abruptly cut him off. It was apparent Gabrielle had no patience for this person.

O'Neal laughed. "You've seen Malik, I see."

Gabrielle ignored his light humor, "She said to get her when I was through, would you mind?" Her eyes just reached his chin and would go no further. I hope you don't commit murder later -- I'll be one hell of a bad eyewitness.

O'Neal didn't know whether to be annoyed by her attitude, or captivated by her beauty. "Ah, yeah, right, nice meeting you Ms. Cotrell. I hope you're up and walking in no time." He tried not to appear unnerved as he scanned the affected area.

"Thank you."

He left before his ego shrank any more and found Malik in booth six. "She's done," he announced after popping his head in. "And she's got one heck of an attitude. Good luck."

Malik patted the seven-year-old's head and looked at the mother. "Just a case of the sniffles, Sarah. Her lungs are clear, but if she should get any worse give me a call, I'll make a home visit if need be." She spent a couple more minutes talking with mother and playing with child, then she bade them farewell and went to have a look see at Ms. Cotrell.

Gabrielle was lying there snoozing again. The pain she was feeling was etched between her brows, yet she still looked beautiful. Malik entered the curtained square as quietly as she could and moved closer to the bed, staring down at her curiously.

Someone shouted and then another shout in answer, and Gabrielle's eyes flew open. Malik stepped back from the bed, looking up at the curtain, then back down at her. The commotion outside the examination room covered the tension, and Malik went to see what was going on. She saw two med tech's guiding in a leviform; a child of no more than eighteen months was lying on top, face blue. Malik's own features paled, and she moved quickly to the child, her hand going to the neck.

"There's nothing, Doc," one of the techs said. "We've established there's nothing blocking the esophagus."

"Yes there is," Malik frowned at him. "O'Neal!" she barked, and the resident came rushing from booth three. "Cotton balls, right here." She pressed the flesh at the base of the neck and let O'Neal take it from there.

"What's going on?" Gabrielle asked as soon as she saw Malik again.

"It's under control now, don't worry. And how about you? Shall I still get you a real doctor?" Malik asked, secretly digging for an apology.

"Sorry about that." Gabrielle felt awful about her unwarranted comment, especially after witnessing this doctor's gift first hand. The guilt showed clearly on her face, and Malik took notice.

"That's ok, lot's of people can't swallow-" She didn't finish her sentence, her mind going to the child. "Anyway, I see everything's been prepared, so what say we get you set and wrapped?" Funny,

turning the tables on the younger woman didn't feel as rewarding as it usually does.

Gabrielle's mind was elsewhere. "Why do they let you roam around in your street clothes?" she asked, eyeing Malik.

"You'd be amazed at what I get away with."

Gabrielle smiled, thinking of the things she would let Dr. McCormick get away with. She giggled involuntarily, causing Malik to look up. She covered up her outburst the best she could and began a topic of conversation that she hoped would bring her the desired result.

"Do you believe in fate, Doctor?"

Malik began working on the cast again, seemingly concentrating on her task, and answered, "I do now..."

"Malik?" Gabrielle asked yet again. She wondered what had snatched her friend's attention so.

Finally, Malik heard her. She blinked a few times to clear the residue of those memories, and turned toward her. *Fate*, she thought resentfully. *Indeed*. She noted Raven was nowhere in sight. "I had the funniest memory, when we first met, and you breaking your leg three days later..." She hoped that would spring to mind that important day for Gabrielle, but the smaller woman only smiled at her.

"Where's Raven?"

"She left. You were off in your own world."

"Hmmm. Think I'll go grab us some sodas -- the usual?"

Gabrielle nodded and watched her go through the swinging doors. She sighed and let her mind wander back in time, after Malik had sent her home from the hospital...

Chapter 4

When the announcer chimed at eight p.m., three days after the accident, Gabrielle hobbled through the house, crashed into a plant stand, scowled at it and continued to the door, cursing the entire medical profession for not being able to meld broken bones back together, yet. Her pulse leapt once she reached the door, looked at the peepscreen, and opened it promptly.

"Dr. McCormick!"

"What are you doing walking around?" Malik demanded easily, as was her way: almost never raising her voice, always calm, cool and collected -- at least back then.

"Do I even get a Hello?"

Malik's impassive expression shifted slightly and she smiled.

"Hi."

"That's better." She hobbled backwards to let Malik through and explained, "I had to get the door, Doctor." She smiled amusingly at Malik's back after Malik passed by with a guilty look. She was not prepared when she felt the doctor's arm slide around her waist, and if it hadn't been for the door she still held, she'd have dropped to the floor at their first physical contact outside a hospital emergency room.

"Lead the way," Malik explained her action and lifted an arm over Gabrielle's head to push the door closed. She helped Gabrielle through the house and down onto the couch, moving to prop her leg up on a stack of pillows.

"Whatever are you doing out this late?" Gabrielle watched her, once again breathless by the emotions Malik could arouse inside her.

"I came by to sign your cast." Malik stood up, retracted a pen from her jacket pocket for Gabrielle's view, and wiggled it.

Do not make a stupid move with this one, *Gabrielle warned herself, smiling easily in light of Malik's obvious excuse to come see her again and the way she had slickly pulled it off, too.*

"Also, I live close by -- over on Valentine."

"Imagine that, three blocks away all this time..." Gabrielle's tone was thoughtful. She gestured to the chair beside her where she'd set her reading pad and drink. "Have a seat."

Lifting Gabrielle's S-Book, Malik said, "Sondra McDowell. Are you a student of psychology?"

"No, I just enjoy learning about the human animal." She watched Malik sit, stretching her legs out, and was once again warped by tangled emotions. She figured she'd grab the bull by the horns and ask, "Is there someone at home who'll be concerned for your whereabouts, Doctor?"

Malik looked up at her as she set the pad on her thigh, holding the drink in her other hand. Brandy, she could smell. "No." She changed the subject quickly, "You're not supposed to be drinking with the medicine I prescribed."

A guilty look flashed across Gabrielle's features and left a smile. "Oops. I hardly touched it though, really. I always have a brandy when I get home after work. Habit, I suppose. Besides, I haven't taken any of the medication yet."

Malik leaned over sideways and set the glass down on the floor; she didn't see the orange tabby slither up behind her and start poking around, its interest piqued. "Okay, I forgive you this time, but that leg will take forever to heal if you don't take those growth acceleration capsules." She leaned back, like that day in the park, only she had her arms resting along the chair arms, her finger tips just touching her thighs.

"What were you doing at the park that afternoon?" Gabrielle still had hold of the bull.

"Just taking a break from it all, clearing my head."

"You sure had an awful lot of S-Books with you."

"I read a lot."

"I guess."

"I would have finished the one I was reading if you hadn't come along."

They sat in idle silence for a minute or so, and then Gabrielle asked, "How do you feel about cooking some dinner for us?"

Malik was totally thrown by the unexpected question. "Dinner?"

"Yes. You do eat, I presume?"

"You want me to cook?"

"Can you cook, Doctor?"

"I have many skills." Malik stood, confused, but intrigued. "What would you like?"

A smile walked across Gabrielle's mouth. "Whatever you're having."

Malik's blank look fractured in amusement. "Well then, point the way."

Gabrielle pointed over her shoulder, staring up at Malik with pleasure. So tall and beautiful. Gabrielle could probably swallow her whole if she willed herself enough. What is happening to me? To get her mind from the gutter she lifted the remote and raised the volume on the stereo. Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata followed Malik down the hall as she went on her journey with just a pointing finger as her guide.

** * **

"Did you purposefully set out to get me drunk, Malik McCormick?" Gabrielle nearly slurred, just barely able to keep some form of hold on her power of speech. It was a good thing she hadn't taken her meds, otherwise, she could be in real trouble -- drug and alcohol interaction, and all -- especially considering she and the luscious doctor had just polished off their second bottle of wine.

Malik's eyes smiled beautifully for her and the half finished Tarami Sue she'd made for dessert. "Not at all."

"And you're going to get me pudgy if you continue feeding me like this."

Malik's eyes looked like they were burning a hole through the table to see the rest of Gabrielle, but she had the woman etched on her memory already. "You're a far cry from that, Gabrielle. Are you done?"

"Yes, but I hate throwing food away." She leaned on her palm, her arm wobbling a little, and she tried to look serious. "Maybe I'll give it to Dash."

Malik looked down at the half passed out cat and back up at Gabrielle. "Oh, I think he's had quite enough." She had found the brandy snifter empty and had accused Gabrielle, half seriously, until they both spotted the cat wobbling around, clearly having been the culprit.

"Poor kitty, kitty," Gabrielle oozed, leaning over to scratch the ignorant cat behind one ear. Her equilibrium in as poor a shape as her vocal cords, she misjudged how far she could lean and would have crashed if Malik hadn't seen it coming and been ready.

Malik grabbed the inebriated scientist and set her back in her chair, kneeling in front of her until she was certain she had regained her balance. Gabrielle sat, and stared open mouthed at the doctor.

"What?" was Malik's question, after she could take the emerald-eyed gaze no longer.

Gabrielle, rather loudly, blurted out, accentuating every word, "You... are... Bea-uuuuuuuu-tiiiiiiii-fulllllll!"

Malik raised an eyebrow. "Uh-huh... I'll clear this mess, you stay right there, okay?"

The momentary fog, caused by excessive beauty, lifted. "You don't have to, I'll get it in the morning. I don't have to be at the lab until noon tomorrow; they've closed off our wing for repairs."

"I want to do it, so don't argue with me."

"You're terribly sweet, Malik. Why aren't you caught yet? I mean you're absolutely perfect, at least that's what I think." She traced the circular pattern in the tablecloth not looking the doctor in

the eye, knowing she would have been less frank if she had less alcohol in her, but as it stood...

Shrugging, Malik replied, "Right one hadn't come along."

Gabrielle watched her place the dishes in the particle vacuum. Had she heard right? Had Malik said hadn't or hasn't? Well, if you weren't such a dang slosh-head you'd have heard her clearly, she admonished herself.

"Do you bowl?" Gabrielle asked, just checking compatibility.

"Two eighty on a bad day, three on a good."

"Okay, that settles it, let's get married," she half joked.

Malik's eyes were gleaming as she came for the rest of the tableware. "After I finish the dishes."

"My leg hurts, why don't you and I retire to the living room?" She started pulling her leg from the chair next to her. Malik caught Gabrielle up in her arms before Gabrielle's leg hit the floor and carried her into the living room.

"You're too good to me, Dr. McCormick." Gabrielle cooed into Malik's neck, causing the woman to break out into a rash of goose bumps.

"Comfy?" Malik asked, adjusting pillows and Gabrielle's leg.

"Perfect. Well... Almost." She could think of another place she would be a lot more comfortable with Malik, but she was content with things as they were for the moment. It was really nice, and Malik was terrific.

"Almost?" Malik stood with hands on hips, brow narrowed.

"This is okay. Really. Don't worry." She smiled and patted Malik's thigh. "Great muscle definition, Doctor." Gabrielle blushed deeply at her boldness.

Malik sat in the chair beside her. "Is your leg hurting any worse?"

"Stop worrying." She lay back, staring at the ceiling; everything was starting to spin and she'd rather be in bed, she decided. "Would you mind giving me a lift upstairs, Malik?"

"No problem." Malik scooped her up again as if she were a mere child. Once upstairs, she asked, "Where to?"

"The bedroom, third door on the left."

Malik followed her directions without comment, set Gabrielle down on her four-poster bed, and sat down beside her after she'd tucked her in.

"Anything else?"

Already half asleep, she dreamily whispered, "Mm-Hmm. A kiss goodnight would be nice." I should drink more often, she mused; I'm a pretty brave gal when I'm not sober.

She watched through a daze as Malik leaned closer without a moment of thought about it. Gabrielle's eyelids fell softly closed when she felt Malik's lips touch her forehead. She pulled Malik closer, ignoring the pressure on her chest caused by Malik's heavier body.

Malik pulled back when she felt Gabrielle's hand circling her neck and she leaned over her body, her weight resting on one hand. "How about fresh baked muffins tomorrow?"

"What?" Gabrielle's heavy lids lifted and she stifled a groan of displeasure at the abrupt ending of what could have turned into a real kiss if she had pulled a little harder on her neck.

"For breakfast. I make my own, you know."

"I guess... I'm not really a morning person." Disappointment tinged her voice.

"Well lucky for you, I am." She gave Gabrielle's forehead another gentle kiss. "Sleep well, Gabrielle."

"You could stay a bit? It usually takes me a while to fall out."

As she spoke, her eyes began to close and she drifted off with a soft sigh. Malik stood over her, watching her in sleep with twinkling eyes.

** * **

Contrary to what she'd said the previous evening, Gabrielle was up bright and early. She used her holoiders on the stairs and abandoned them after to bump and clank around the first floor.

She couldn't find any hint that Malik had ever been there last night, except for the tingle still on her forehead from her kiss. She was in a near daze as she called the cat to feed it, noticing it hadn't rushed out for its breakfast from wherever it had stashed itself away.

She searched the downstairs rooms, pushed open the guest room door, and stopped breathing when she saw Malik sleeping peacefully, the cat curled up next to her side under Malik's left arm. Gabrielle's brows lifted more and more as she tried to sneak up to the bed as quietly as possible.

Yes, as she had started to suspect, Malik was sleeping au natural, and a flush lit up Gabrielle's face. She stared hard at Malik, eyes following and bouncing here to there along the line of her perfectly rounded shoulders, her pecs, her beautiful throat, her biceps, and down further, to the body covered by the thin sheet. She thanked her mother silently for the present and vowed to call her once she got the chance to verbally bless the woman's taste in bed apparel.

The sheet settled nicely in each dip of Malik's body, accentuating the muscles of Malik's stomach, the perfectly rounded breasts, those legs... those absolutely beautiful, long, graceful legs that were fortunate enough to be attached to one hell of a woman.

"Well, you certainly passed the wet test," she whispered, flushing hotly at her brave words, and Dash lifted his head and stared at her for a moment, as if he, too, was shocked at her, then went back to sleep.

"I like her, too," she said to the cat and added enviously, "Lucky ducky."

She hadn't considered the alarm clock, and when it began to shrill, making Malik grunt and open her eyes, Gabrielle just stood there staring down at her, running a million excuses through her mind about why she was there gawking. Malik smiled at her and turned onto her side, leaning on an elbow.

"Morning."

Shivering, Gabrielle nodded, and then said sheepishly, "Good morning."

"You're probably wondering why I'm sleeping in your guest room?"

"It's ok. It was late. If I had stayed up, I would have asked you to sleep over anyway." Oh God, she's so heavenly. Her eyes are so blue, her skin so smooth. Would it be too inappropriate to touch her, to just stroke my fingers down that sexy arm? She shook her head, Bad Gabrielle, bad.

"Just give me ten minutes and breakfast will be on the way."

"Oh, don't worry about that -- I'm not holding you to any promises."

"I want to do this for you, so go on and get yourself out of here so I can get ready. And get off that leg. Where are your aides?"

"I see I'll have to rethink this marriage thing," Gabrielle said, deadpan, as she backed to the door.

"And take this furball with you." She lifted the cat and set him down on the floor. Gabrielle watched him orienting himself and she couldn't help smiling.

"Well, he's certainly none the worse for wear."

"A bloody miracle." Malik whipped the covers off. Gabrielle's mouth flew open and her eyes rounded. She turned away, faced the open door, and quickly took herself out of the room.

She was cursing her rash decision as she plopped cat food into Dash's dish. "I should have stayed and gawked," she mumbled to the cat.

Dash looked up at her. "Meow."

Gabrielle nodded, "Exactly..."

* * *

Three months after they had met, Gabrielle had stayed over at Malik's place for the first time, and had heard her singing in the shower. When Malik emerged, she was standing there looking at her as if she'd grown wings and flown around the room.

"My God you have a beautiful voice, what are you doing in medicine!?" Gabrielle had wondered.

Malik shrugged, "Guess I like helping people."

"You could do both, you know." And from there an idea had been born, and from it, a musical career. Malik's reasoning? Whatever Gabrielle wanted, Gabrielle got.

Malik reduced her hours doctoring and increased her time writing songs, putting all of her pent up desires for Gabrielle into each and every word. A rather famous record producer heard one of her demos and here she was, a little less than one year later, known around the world simply as 'Malik,' singer extraordinaire.

Malik reentered the lab, carrying two sodas and a candy bar. She hopped up onto the counter beside Gabrielle and grinned down at her. Gabrielle was lost somewhere far, far away. She didn't even notice Malik was back.

Malik leaned down, nose-to-nose with the fazed woman and whispered, "Boo!" And when Gabrielle finally came out of her stupor, Malik drew back giggling.

"Oh, cut it out..." Gabrielle could feel the heated flush creeping upwards from her chest, to neck, to face, and she grabbed one of the sodas from Malik's grasp, then quickly plucked the candy bar from her other hand and turned away from her.

"Hey, that was mine! I haven't eaten all day. Gabby!"

Gabrielle's chuckle trailed behind her as she strolled over to her messy desk. She sat down heavily, spun around to face Malik, and lifted her feet onto the top of the desk. Something had to happen, and soon. Gabrielle knew she couldn't continue this charade. She wanted Malik as her partner, as her lover, as her mate for life, and if Malik didn't want that, too, then to hell with it all, she would just have to forget she ever met this alluring, infuriating woman. *Yeah, right...* What she didn't know was that something was about to happen in both their lives that would change them forever.

Chapter 5

They decided Gabrielle would spend the night at Malik's since the scientist would be driving her home anyway. Gabrielle was going to take the morning off, and since she and Malik sought to spend every minute of their collective days in each other's company before she left on her trip, Gabrielle's spending the night didn't seem like a bad plan at all.

It started to rain half way to Malik's dwelling, and Gabrielle was again thrown into thoughts of their past. She flipped the auto drive switch just in case she drifted off too far and let her mind remember...

Gabrielle rode her terra-ped through the splattering rain. The care she took with keeping her body in shape was revealed in her white clothing that the rain had drenched clear through. She wasn't even out of breath as she turned down Clarendon from Lenox and rode through puddles already formed since she'd been out there riding along, no intended destination, until she remembered she was near Malik's and decided to pay her a visit when it had begun to pour.

She pulled into the driveway of the fifth house on Valentine and rested the ped up against a black Beemer in the drive. Great trans, she thought. It always reminded her of a piece of weaponry she'd seen on display in a museum, a dagger, she believed it was called. And what maneuverability; this thing could go anywhere. She took a moment to glide her hand along its slick surface, and then she turned and jogged up the set of stairs to the front door.

After three knocks and one press of the auto announcer, the door opened and Malik stood there, eyes widening when she saw Gabrielle and the condition she was in. She ushered Gabrielle in quickly out of the downpour and ordered her to stay put, as she hurried away, down the hall.

Of course, Gabrielle didn't pay her any mind as she went off, exploring. It was the very first time she'd stepped inside Malik's home -- a Wednesday, she clearly remembered. She walked into the large room to her left and smiled. "Now this is a living room," she praised, eyes darting around the beautifully designed room. The decorator in her came alive and her face was shining as she moved further inside, fingers grazing over one piece of furniture or another.

"Oh my, an L-shaped couch," she murmured, caressing the dove white fabric. The sofa seemed to divide the room in half, facing a huge entertainment console where Gabrielle could hear Manheim Steamrollers playing softly, and a giant screen TV that was on, but appeared to be muted. The walls were covered half way with shelves stuffed with S-Books, and as she drew closer, she noticed they were all medical mumbo jumbo and technical mumbo jumbo and some horror thrown in, with a sprinkle of lesbian romance novels like the kind that adorned her own shelves at home.

"You're lucky I'm not one of those nuts that freaks out when someone sopping rain walks all over their wood floors, leaving little puddles in their wake."

Gabrielle turned, "Sorry."

Malik was smiling beautifully at her, and she handed Gabrielle several towels as a peace offering. "Nice night for a ped ride..."

Gabrielle wagged a finger, apparently not in the mood for a nagging session, changing the subject quickly. "I love this room, but all of this wasted energy has got to go." She gestured to the TV and the six lowly lit illuminators scattered here and there, lending the room its soft glow.

"Hey, last time I checked the sun was free." Malik teased her guest.

"That's still no reason to overuse it. Plus, you better be careful what you say, or someone will discover the sun's a profitable resource and make us pay for the privilege of using its rays."

Malik admitted defeat by turning off four of the illuminators and ordering the TV off. The room took on a more romantic atmosphere. She gave Gabrielle a cocky smile, asking, "Better?"

"Much." She wrapped one of the larger towels around her body, missing Malik's eyes falling to the dark circles surrounding her nipples before she covered them from view.

Malik lifted her eyes, looked away, and stuffed her hands into her pockets. She had nothing other than "how nice your breasts look, especially wet" as a topic for conversation.

Gabrielle came to the rescue, "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Malik waved her worry off with the pass of her hand through the air, then it went right back into her pocket. "I was only reading and glancing up at the tube now and then to see what trouble the world was getting itself into."

"Could I trouble you for some tea? I'm freezing my patooties off."

"Sure." Malik jumped to attention. "I already have water on to boil, I didn't know what your preference was."

Tall, Dark, and good looking Doctors...

"That was sweet of you." Obviously Malik had won some points.

"Maybe you should get out of those..." Malik's face grew darker with a flush.

"The rain makes me jumpy, too." Gabrielle smiled, noticing her new friend's nervousness, and dropped the towel to her elbows. Malik's eyes went right to the apparent impression of Gabrielle's erect nipples. "I'd appreciate a robe if you have one." She began undoing her shirt buttons, and after the fourth button and too much exposed flesh, Malik backed from the room, mumbling she'd return.

She came back five minutes later, tray of tea in one hand and bathrobe slung over her left forearm.

Gabrielle had only a towel wrapped around her, and she hesitated a moment before dropping it when Malik was close enough to hand her the robe.

Malik bent to set the tea server down on the low coffee table before she dropped it and held the robe open for Gabrielle as she backed into its warmth. When her arms were slipped into the sleeves,

Malik drew the cloth around Gabrielle's body and tied the sash in front. She remained silent as Gabrielle turned to face her.

"Thank you," Gabrielle said and smiled slightly.

The micro disks changed position and "In The Still Of The Night" came on. Gabrielle swayed closer to Malik and bent for her tea. "Ditto for the tea." Her smile deepened and she watched Malik's eyes watching her mouth, her gaze intrigued by its beauty.

"Are you warmed yet?" Malik's voice was deep, her mind cloudy. They were so close; she could taste the cinnamon tea on Gabrielle's breath.

"A bit." Gabrielle carried her tea to the couch and sat, positioning herself over the cushions, getting as comfortable as she could along the larger part of it.

"Well, I'm hotter than a fusion reactor!" To prove her words, Malik removed her sweater vest and rolled up the sleeves of her finely pressed buttoned down, black silk shirt. Her wide shoulders stretched against the fabric, and Gabrielle's eyes seemed to follow the outline of her muscular chest as Malik picked up the tray and set it down on the middle of the slatted coffee table so they both could reach it. She stood after, as if not knowing what to do. Gabrielle patted the sofa beside her.

Malik fought inwardly to either obey or run as fast and as far as she could. She purposefully strode over to the farther end of the couch and planted herself there and proceeded to tap her fingers on the thickly upholstered couch arm.

"There's enough room over here."

"Oh, that's ok, more room for you to stretch out. I'm fine, don't worry."

"Could you turn out that illuminator by you?"

Malik reached for it without hesitation, and the room was cast in an even dimmer hue with only that one illuminator lit way over there across the room by the double windows.

"Thank you." Gabrielle placed the cup on the tray and leaned back again, her eyes trying to catch Malik's. Another song played

softly around them. "You have good taste in music, I meant to mention that a few weeks ago; guess it slipped my mind."

Malik felt her micropager go off and was relieved. "I'm on call," she said as way of an apology and stood. "I'll leave a recognition key here for you to lock up. Stay as long as you'd like. The kitchen's stocked, and I'd bet anything you'd love a nice warm bath about now." She beamed a grin down at the younger woman.

Leaving? But... Gabrielle felt her heart sink. "Sure. Okay, thanks. I may just take you up on that offer." Her voice mimicked her disposition.

Malik nodded, then nearly bolted for the door.

Once outside, she leaned against the thick cherry wood frame and sighed. She didn't even notice the rain pelting down on her. After a few minutes, she decided she should look at who had paged her so she could ring them from the viewer in her Beemer. When she plucked the small device from her watch, she noted it wasn't from any of the doctors at the hospital, it was just her mother.

Malik went to the hospital anyway and camped out there for two days. When she returned home, to her relief and disappointment, Gabrielle had gone.

"Hey," Malik said gently, reaching out to touch Gabrielle's cheek. "You sleeping?"

Gabrielle came fully aware of her surroundings and remembered where she was and what she was doing, or rather supposed to be doing. She flicked the auto drive off and took over control.

"Gabrielle?" Malik queried again.

"I'm *fine*." She noted a bitterness about the tone of her voice and looked at Malik, smiling. "Sorry, just a little on edge these days. I think this vacation's long overdue."

Malik's arm dropped to the divider between them. Just like in real life, she thought, always that wall keeping her away from Gabrielle. "Well, in a couple days you'll be having the adventure of

your life!" She tried to sound happy about it, but she failed miserably. They fell into a moody silence for the remainder of the drive.

Chapter 6

"I ain't puttin' up with this any more, Phoenix. This here's a business, an' if you can't seem ta remember that, you can get on at somebody else's!" Gerty's bulbous face was turning a dangerous shade of bluing crimson. Her neck was jiggling with the force of every word, and thick cords were forming at the sides of her neck. One engorged vein was rising down the center of her forehead with a decidedly frightening throb.

Afraid Gerty would explode right before her very eyes, Phoenix stopped staring at her. She stood leaning on the doorframe of the dispatch office, waiting for Gerty to release her steam.

"I don't like them rich, snooty bitches any more n' you do, but their money keeps this pisshole place going year on year. Ya need ta prove something, well do it at some other place! And stop usin' that trashed hologram! People thinking ya got dead cats stuffed in them seats for cryin' out loud." She noted Phoenix's averted gaze and shook a finger in her direction. "You payin' any mind to me girl? I ain't talking for my own hearin'!"

It really didn't matter what Gerty said; the outcome would be the same. Phoenix would harass the customers, one would eventually complain, Gerty would chew her out for it, and Phoenix would be an angel for a few days, and then back to the same ole routine a day after that.

"Go on outta here, yer tirin' out mah lungs." She waved her off, turning to the flashing LED screen. "White Lift," she stated calmly into the viewer. Phoenix turned her back to her employer and headed out to her lift, not seeing the smile spread slowly and evenly across Gerty's face.

Letting the screen door slam behind her, Phoenix worked her boot heels hard into the newly spread gravel, crunching and flinging

pebbles behind her every step. She slapped the release pad of Beemer #10 and slid in when the hatch popped open at her command.

"Well, I guess I earned that," she told herself in the viewer, easing the Beemer off the launch pad and high over Gerty's little rundown office. And even if she knew and felt she was deserving of Gerty's reprimand, she couldn't stop from harboring some resentment at that tall, blue-eyed beauty.

She mentally chanted, *I will be nice -- I will be nice*. "The very next passenger I pick up will think they're being carted around by a true blue angel," she swore and plucked a few buttons in front of her, changing her lifts' appearance into more of what Gerty had in mind.

* * *

The two beings in the warp were near the end of their journey and could feel the effects of that colorful world slowly ebbing away when their feet finally touched solid ground and they could again speak to one another not through their thoughts but through their mouths.

"Are you ok?" were the first words from Xena's.

Gabrielle nodded, smiling, relieved to be aware of what was up and what was down. Her legs were a little shaky still, and she sat on the grass. Her eyes followed Xena as she, too, took a seat beside her friend and lover. They didn't even mind the gentle rain.

"Now what?" Gabrielle asked, turning her head to look at Xena.

"A warm, dry place for starters." A smile trickled down over Xena's mouth. "And a hot soak in a tub would be absolute perfection right about now."

"Since we have neither and no money?" Gabrielle hinted.

"If we wait long enough, that hole over there," she pointed to it, "might fill enough to be considered a bath... "

Gabrielle couldn't stop a laugh at Xena's attempt to humor her in what was a really bad situation; they were broke, they didn't know

where they were, they didn't know *when* they were, and they didn't know a soul.

"*Taxi!*" someone called from behind them. They looked over their shoulders, then back to each other.

Smirking at one another, they stood, each helping the other up. They saw the woman slouching against her cab as if it was a clear summer day, shook their heads, but made their way over to her regardless.

"Case you ladies haven't noticed, now's not exactly the time for a picnic," Phoenix Carlson quipped when they drew close enough so she didn't have to shout again.

Gabrielle noted how lovely she was when they were finally standing before her. *Hmmm*, she wondered if Teddy over the years could have been remade into this sure and stunning beauty. Last time she remembered, Teddy had been this cute, lil adorable thing that you just wanted to place in your pocket and take out now and then to appreciate.

Xena saved the day once again, "We're kind of new here, and lost."

Phoenix eyeballed the taller woman, and then the blond next to her, about four inches shorter than herself, and slighter in build. "Is that so?" She pushed herself off the cab and turned to open the hatch for them. "Get in."

Gabrielle glanced at Xena, and then ducked into the cab. She was pleasantly surprised when she sank into the plush seat and an aroma with faint hints of lilacs and fruits filled her senses. The windows were made of the most unusual glass, and tinted so that when she looked through the one on her own side, its display resembled the middle of a sunny day. She smiled her appreciation and turned to watch Xena slide in beside her.

Xena set the bag with their old clothing and weapons down on the floor. "I miss my staff," Gabrielle said, a longing look in the far reaches of her eyes.

"Dari will keep it safe and sound." Xena patted her shoulder, trying to assure her friend.

"Yeah, but I can still miss it."

The driver plopped down into the front then turned around to glance back at them. "So, what's your pleasure?" she asked.

"Huh?" Xena frowned.

"Hologram, what's your pleasure?"

"Pardon?" Gabrielle nearly laughed. It sounded kinky -- her new word for the day-- to her.

Phoenix gestured around the interior of the Beemer. "This, it's a hologram, a digital image created to pleasure the senses. Did you guys have any other preference in mind? You know, back of a horse-drawn carriage, or a yacht?"

The two in back looked at one another, raising their brows. Gabrielle turned, blurting out, "Hot tub. Can you do hot tubs?"

Xena burst out laughing, until the automobile slowly changed form, and moments later she and Gabrielle were soaking in hot, wavy water.

Xena blinked, a bit unnerved with it all. "Well, it's not exactly what I had in mind." She glanced at Gabrielle.

"Say no more!" Phoenix broke in, and again the back began shifting shape. They found themselves lying in a big, brass bed.

It was too much for Gabrielle's mind to comprehend. Xena quickly saw the look on her face and asked the driver to just change it back to normal again.

Phoenix shrugged, pressed another button, and everything went back to normal. She turned around in her seat to face front. "So, where to?"

Indeed, where to?

Chapter 7

Malik gathered up a couple of sheets, a blanket, and some pillows to make up her bed on the couch that night. She sat on the edge of the sofa, kicking off her loafers, thinking how things couldn't get much worse. She was giving Gabrielle her bed, yet again to sleep in alone.

Damn it, what's wrong with me? she asked herself, already knowing the answer before the question had even circled her mind once. *Why do I keep torturing myself, and her? Because you're a chicken, Malik McCormick, that's why. You think she's some precious piece of crystal that'll break if you so much as touch her. Not everyone is like Simone; they won't take your heart and rip it from your body.* Malik shook her head, closing her eyes as Simone's memory flooded in. She had loved the woman fast and hard, and had fallen even harder when she woke up one morning and Simone was gone.

I just want a simple life, a relationship where I can love and be loved; I don't want to have to deal with these heartaches. My heart can't take another crash...

Gabrielle can give that to you, a tiny voice reminded her. Malik scowled at it in anger, *What do **you** know?* she returned. ***You're** the one that said Simone was the best thing that would happen to me and urged me to go after her, and look what happened?* She waited impatiently for an answer; the tiny voice had no reply.

Malik scoffed at it. *And what about **her**?* she asked it. *Every time I seemingly get up some form of nerve to **Do** something, **anything**, or say something, she turns and walks away...* She fought the tears back. It was a harsh encounter, but she arose a winner from the battle. She could only think of one thing that clearly described

their relationship: two magnets, one in the same, but pushing back from one another when they drew too close.

Malik was so deep inside her own thoughts that she didn't hear the oak floorboards creak as Gabby entered the living room.

The young scientist tried not to scare her friend as she stood in the entryway, but to no avail. As if she sensed her presence, Malik suddenly jumped up from her position on the couch, much to the shock of both women. Gabby had always been reminded of a cat when watching Malik move; sleek, sexy, quiet, confident, but deceptively quick in her reaction time and steps.

"Sorry," was all Malik spoke of the matter. She quickly returned to re-making up her *bed* for the night.

"Wasn't your fault. I startled you." She moved closer to the arm of the sofa, "I'm the one who's sorry." *Why is it always so hard to get her to look me in the eye?* Gabby leaned onto the sofa arm, in an attempt to get Malik's attention. What the smaller woman didn't realize was that she already had her attention, her *full* attention. Every cell in Malik's body was buzzing with electricity.

Why did she have to wear that negligee'? It was more of a nightgown, really, but everything Gabby wore looked like a piece of lingerie. Malik had the item memorized; permanently branded into her memory from the first time she had seen her in it.

The gown was pure silk, mint-green in color, and came down to the middle of her thighs. Not quite baby doll length, but close enough. It had spaghetti straps, which criss-crossed over her shoulder blades, and a vee-neck that ended in the hollow of her breasts. And when she wore that particular piece of night wear, she always wore a pair of matching, silk tap pants underneath it; the kind with a split on both sides that traveled from the hem up to the waistband. That outfit drove her -- for lack of a better word -- mad.

Malik's inner core turned to liquid every time she saw the blonde temptress in it.

"I just came down to say goodnight." Gabby finally had to lay her hand on Malik's bicep to get her to quit fussing with the pillows.

Malik braced herself and stood, looking Gabby only in the eyes, and said, "Goodnight, Gabrielle. Sweet dreams." A tight-lipped smile was the best she could manage under the circumstances.

God, it got worse each time she saw her in that thing.

Malik began to turn away and was mentally thrown off balance when Gabby kept the pressure on her arm so she couldn't. And before the taller woman could think clearly, Gabby leaned into her body, wrapping her arms around her waist, her hands, palms flat against her back.

"Goodnight, Malik."

Malik stood there stiff, not able to breathe. And when she finally did inhale, the sweet smell of the woman in her arms surrounded her. She couldn't even blame it on perfume this time, it was her scent, her freshly bathed, hair still damp, scent.

Slowly, Malik's arms encircled Gabby's smaller frame, her hands resting lightly on her bare shoulders.

If I die now, I would die happy. The thought rang through both minds.

Malik opened her lips to say something, anything, to reveal what she was feeling, when un-expectantly, Gabby broke the contact, pulling herself free from Malik's unwilling arms. She turned her back to her friend, not wanting the tears to show.

"See ya in the morning," were the last words spoken by Gabby before she ran into the bedroom, not looking back. If she had, she would have seen more tears, streaming out from sparkling blue eyes, and the aching arms of a diva in the making still extended in her direction.

* * *

When the two in back gave no reply, Phoenix looked into her rearview at Xena and caught those light baby blues of hers and held onto them tightly as she probed her mind. What she found clearly disturbed her, and she broke the eye contact, closing her eyes, even

shaking her head a bit. She turned the Beemer engine off and sat there.

Gabrielle looked at Xena, who just shrugged as a reply. "Something wrong?" she finally queried.

Phoenix only then turned, looked deep into Gabrielle's eyes, seeing the truth in them, and the same scenes she'd gained from Xena's mind. "Xena and Gabrielle," she stated their names as if they'd just introduced themselves to her. "Prehistoric beings in the year 3K." *Maybe all that mind exploring had finally taken its toll on her?* she wondered. It was bound to happen one day. You couldn't screw around with so many women and not have it come back to haunt you at some point in time.

"How do you know our names?" Xena asked, reaching slowly into the bag for her chakram.

"Even better yet," Phoenix grinned at her, "Where do you think you're going to find a Goddess dressed in a pink nightie to make your time in this future life easier?"

She knew far too much about them. Gabrielle was beginning to feel a little on edge. What with what just happened their last time in a future life back with Dari and Sondra, she couldn't be too sure it wouldn't happen here.

"I think we'll just walk..." Xena said, reaching for the door handle that had disappeared on her when she wasn't looking. *Or had it ever been there?* she wondered, looking at the palm plate with narrowed eyes.

"Now, now, don't get all uptight on me." She flashed them a brilliant smile, quite dizzying in its full blown beauty. She beckoned Gabrielle closer with a tanned finger, and Gabrielle's eyes skirted to Xena, then back to those black depths. She leaned forward, and to her complete surprise, Phoenix kissed her full on the lips.

They broke apart, Gabrielle falling back into her seat, dazed, Phoenix flinging herself back again in her own seat to stare with blind eyes through the windshield. She did have the presence of mind to quickly raise the divider between the front and back before that dark haired beauty took her head off for kissing her bard.

Didn't expect that, her mind screamed out.

Phoenix needed time to think, time to go over what had passed between her and Gabrielle. She set the Beemer on auto drive, just plucking at the console "any destination" and let it drive itself, while she tried to sort through the confusion.

Xena was just staring at her bard, afraid to touch her, too confused really to do anything but sit there, dumbstruck.

Gabrielle was shaking, and it was with great effort she turned her head towards her companion to try and assure her she was ok.

When their eyes met, Xena finally broke from her frozen state and moved closer to her woman, gathering her up into her arms, encircling her in love. "What happened?" she wanted to know.

Gabrielle just shook her head. She couldn't deal with the abrupt actions of the lift driver, -let alone what she experienced during their brief kiss. "I'm not sure, Xena. I need to give this some thought."

"Give *what* some thought?" Anger tinged her words. Not anger toward the warrior in her arms, but directed at the black-eyed offspring of Orthros in the drivers' seat.

Gabrielle patted her love's arm and replied, "Not now, Xena." She moved her head up so she could look into Xena's glorious eyes. "Please, believe me when I say it was nothing for you to worry about..." Xena moved her stare away from Gabrielle and onto the back of the cabby's head, her face growing darker. Gabrielle lifted her fingers under the warrior's chin and Xena moved her gaze back to her bard's loving face. "...or to be jealous of."

Xena's face flushed when Gabrielle guessed part of the cause for her attitude. She smiled down at her warrior-bard and pulled her closer into her embrace. "All right, my Love." But even as Gabrielle snuggled into Xena's chest, the ex-warlord's eyes returned to their previous location.

Phoenix, still sorting out the latest development in her life, suddenly felt the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand straight at attention, and a shudder whipped itself down her spinal column.

* * *

Malik awoke during the night to music coming from somewhere in the house. She rolled from the couch, untangling herself from the clinging sheet that had stuck to her. She had been dreaming of Gabrielle again, and as usual, awakened in a cold sweat.

She poked her head into a few of the rooms, and then realized the music was coming from her studio. Interest piqued, she hurried down the dark hall, stopping up short when she saw the door was slightly ajar.

Gabrielle was in there, sitting at her piano, and she was plucking at the keys a sad song...

*"I wanna be the face you see,
when you close your eyes
I wanna be the touch you need,
every single night.*

*I wanna be your fantasy-
and be your reality...
and everything between.*

*I want you to need me,
like the air you breathe.
I want you to feel me,
In everything.
I want you to see me,
In your every dream.*

They way that I -

*Taste you.
Feel you.
Breathe you.
Need you.*

*I want you to need me...
Like I need you..."*

When she was done, she dropped her hands to her lap, head hanging, and sighed. "Oh, Raven..."

Malik's wistful expression dropped like a ton of bricks and she turned on her heel, not waiting around to hear the end of what Gabrielle had to say.

"...my friend, where are you when I need to cry on your shoulder..."

Chapter 8

Phoenix knew there was a reason for her rash and unexpected behavior; she just didn't understand what it was. The one thing of which the young woman was certain was the fact that she couldn't let these two out of the back of her lift. She couldn't risk that she might never lay eyes on them again, and that thought left her in a near panic. She had to act, and she had to do so now.

First and foremost, Phoenix apologized for her actions, explaining her "gift" of sight to the two unsure and suspicious women behind her. And as a further peace offering, she extended an invitation to her home, where they could take a hot bath, get some dry clothing, and a good night's sleep. She would even take them, in the morning, to a store where they could get some decent garments, using the extra credits she'd accumulated for her writing.

After her display of generosity was over and silence once again loomed in the interior of the vehicle, Phoenix sat, in shock about the recent turn of events. What had made her need to have a physical connection to the blonde woman, and why did she just open her home to these two total strangers? She felt the numbing coldness of confusion grip her senses, and she fought to shake it off, to battle the uncertainty of her emotions and her actions, not knowing what she would do if they turned her down.

With an offer like that, Gabrielle found herself forgiving the young woman her err. And the bard's look told Xena not to throw the offer back in her face, or not only would she be sleeping on the street tonight; she'd be doing so alone.

All right, so maybe not alone, but she'd definitely be without the warmth or comfort of her woman's body lying next to her. The intimacy between the two of them was still too new, too powerful for

Xena to allow that to happen, so she relented. It wasn't like she really had anything to worry about, was it?

* * *

Just as the Beemer touched down in front of Phoenix's apartment complex, the viewer sounded. "Phoenix where are ya?" Gerty's deep voice hollered out. Xena and Gabrielle had exited the lift and were standing in the building's doorway.

The lift driver sighed, really not in the mood for another altercation with *this* woman. "I'm at home, Gerty. My shift ended 15 minutes ago, remember?"

"Don't talk down to me girl, or your ass'll be lookin' for a new line a work," the owner of White Lift hissed at the screen.

A shudder traveled up Phoenix's neck, but she couldn't tell if it was anger or fear, or maybe a mixture of the two. *I will be nice*, sped through her thoughts. "Sorry, Gerty," she spoke through clenched jaws, trying not to seethe out the disdain she held for this individual through the view screen.

"Yeah, right," was Gerty's only reply before flicking the screen off on her end.

* * *

The apartment was small, but not charmless, Gabrielle immediately surmised when she and Xena were led up the stairs to the floor on which Phoenix lived. There were incense sticks scattered throughout the room in their own wooden holders, each perfect in their design. Gabrielle made a mental note to explore each one with more detail later. For now, the wicker furniture caught her eye and she went to go run her hands along the surfaces, fingering the textures of wicker and fabric.

Phoenix and Xena exchanged a look. Phoenix could sense the woman's caution within her steely gaze, still unsure of her reason behind inviting them there. But Xena could feel no calculated

motives behind the red head's black eyes, so she shrugged in response to Phoenix's knowing smile and decided to relax, as much as was possible for the Warrior Princess.

"This is a beautiful little place you have here, Phoenix." Gabrielle beamed with excitement, always finding joy in experiencing the unknown.

"Thanks. Here have a seat and I'll program us some cocoa." She left them to seat themselves and hurried to her tiny kitchen. She absentmindedly poked at the imitator and hoped it made something resembling hot cocoa.

Gabrielle had spotted Phoenix's crystal display and was enthralled with it, watching the kaleidoscope of colors bouncing off each surface. Xena plopped down in one of the wicker chairs and watched her bard. Soon after they first met, she had been taken with how Gabrielle's eyes would dance with wonder at the simplest things: a sunset; a rainbow, even, on occasion, the broken down ex-warlord she traveled with. Xena smiled at the thought, and Phoenix smiled too. Sometimes it wasn't necessary for her to use her power in order to know what a woman was thinking; all she had to do was look at Xena's face to see the love she had for the smaller woman. She glowed with it.

Phoenix turned back inside her kitchen, shadows consuming her features. *I'd like to feel that way once before I die... to look at someone and be overtaken with love, or -- an even more incredulous idea seeped into her subconscious -- to have another see me through such adoring eyes.* She snorted in disbelief and bitterness. *Get your head out of the clouds, Phoenix. It never has happened, and it never will. Deal with it.*

Phoenix appeared from the kitchen with a wicker tray carrying three mugs of cocoa and an assortment of cookies. "I have an awful sweet-tooth," she stated as she placed the tray on the narrow, rectangular glass coffee table.

"Me, too." Gabrielle concurred while gathering a plethora of goodies on a napkin. Once she had one of every kind, she bit down into the most unfamiliar and interesting looking of the lot. It was

white with multi-color pieces of some sort sprinkled across the top . . . *chocolate*, she thought, closing her eyes to savor the flavor. She had never tasted white chocolate before. It had a different texture than the regular brown variety, but she could get used to the differences, she thought as she finished the cookie with another bite. *Yes, she could indeed get used to it.*

Xena once again was watching Gabrielle with intense eyes, and Phoenix caught herself watching Xena, drawn to the unconditional love that passed between them. "Tell us about yourself," Xena asked, still watching her bard. She felt the energy in the room suddenly change and the need for a diversion from inner turmoil beckon to her. Xena's fixed gaze moved off her bard and went right to Phoenix's ebony stare. She knew of Phoenix's ability to look into her past, and although she found it intriguing, it didn't faze her; didn't keep her from staring the younger woman down either -- an occurrence that was obviously not one Phoenix was used to.

When Xena didn't look away, Phoenix allowed herself a quick probing. And when she was hit by the onslaught of death and violence that had filled most of the life of this warrior woman, she flinched and looked away. The emotions that Gabrielle inspired were there, but so buried beneath years of blood that she was afraid to sift through them to find the love. When next she turned and looked back into the icy blue depths, she saw the smile and realized what Xena had done.

She had sensed, somehow, Phoenix's squeamishness at witnessing the more *colorful* aspects of the warrior's life and flooded her memory with those images, knowing she would search no farther.

Damn, she's good. Somehow, being bested relieved Phoenix. And maybe the softness she found in the other set of eyes in the room helped as well. She felt pin-sized holes begin to form in the walls of her defensive program. And before she knew what was happening, her life's events came flooding out; her parents deaths, move after move to new foster homes, her addiction to finding the love and acceptance she needed through other's minds. She hadn't meant for it

all to tumble out of her, and when she opened her eyes, suddenly aware of what she had revealed, she felt utterly exposed.

She looked at the floor, not wanting to read the pity that had to be evident on her guests' faces. When Phoenix felt a hand take one of her own, she slowly glanced up to see Gabrielle's concerned smile and tear-filled eyes in front of her. She didn't know what to do. Half of her wanted to run, and the other half wanted nothing more than for this caring and concerned woman to take her into her arms.

Gabrielle could read the anxiety in Phoenix's face, maybe it was all those years of living with another walled-up woman, and pulled her stiff body into her strong embrace. After a few moments, Phoenix began to relax and allowed herself to be held. And for the first time, since the death of her mother, Phoenix took comfort in another's arms.

Xena, too, had seen the pain sweep over and around this newest friend of theirs and was glad Gabrielle had been there to lend aid. *It's just not your forte,* Gabrielle would exclaim when Xena didn't have the slightest idea how to assist in an emotional crisis. *I thank the gods for you every day, Gabrielle,* she silently whispered. Xena would tell her bard that, on the rare occasions she did find the softer side of her vocabulary.

Gabrielle released Phoenix after a while, feeling that the young woman needed her personal space back to regroup. "I believe I promised you both a bath." The lift driver spoke more so to break the spell the two travelers had weaved over her than her wish to fulfill that promise. "If you'll follow me." Phoenix stood, a little shakily, with Gabrielle close behind and Xena taking up the rear.

After their bath, Gabrielle made her way to the living room. There was a fire lit and music coming from the same direction. Gabrielle heard her warrior as she came down the staircase. She stood in the doorway; saw Xena on the floor before the fire, lying on her stomach doing a crossword puzzle, listening to Brahms.

Feeling her presence, Xena looked up, smiled, and asked, "Nine letter word for estranged, starts with an 'A'?"

"Alienated," Gabrielle answered promptly and entered the room. She sat down beside her and snatched the book before Xena

had a chance to pencil in the word. She did it herself and looked at Xena. "You had the A- E- N- E- and D and you couldn't figure that one out!" She held the book from Xena's reach, laughing lightly when the warrior's face twisted in impatience.

"Here-- look-- one just for you -- nine letter word for "foolish person?"

She let Xena take a look, and then jerked the book away when Xena went to grab it. "Simpleton."

"I'll show you simpleton..." Xena poked and prodded at Gabrielle's tickle points, hitting each and every one on target. She'd had lots of practice finding them over the years they'd been together.

"Okay. Stop!" Gabrielle surrendered, handing the book over, pacing her breath to an even rate again. Once her breathing was under control, she asked, "What's the next one?"

Feeling that the stress of the last few hours were weighing heavily on them both, Xena smiled, knowing that this game with words would hook her bard. Gabrielle needed some fun, a release to the worry Xena saw clouding her clear, green eyes; the fear of not knowing how they would ever find a way home.

"A nine letter word for impatient." Xena glanced at Gabrielle and it came to her -- "Impetuous-- just like you," the warrior added and flicked the tip of her bard's nose with the pencil's eraser.

"You..." Gabrielle snorted playfully, while reaching under the tee-shirt Phoenix had given Xena as bed clothes, and scraped the small of her back with her fingernails, knowing it to be one of the few places on the warrior's body that she hadn't been able to condition to *not* respond to an attack.

Upon contact, Xena arched forward, hard, drawing a deep breath. When she turned back around and looked at Gabrielle, the bard stated, chastising, "Oh, no you don't, Xena. Don't even think about it." But it was too late. Xena had already pounced on top of her, pinning her to the floor, and proceeded to tickle her in the one spot that she reserved for only the most torturous of retaliations.

Gabrielle squealed, not even having the power to voice surrender this time. She was at the mercy of the raven-haired, sky-eyed woman currently seated on her rump.

Phoenix had heard the commotion and had begun down the hall to see what was going on. She reached it and bent her head around the door and could see what had caused the ruckus. Xena was tickling Gabrielle in an attempt to get a crossword puzzle book back. She'd even forgotten there was one lying around in there. She turned to head back to her bedroom but stopped. She was taken by the play between the two in front of her fireplace and felt a need to stay. But the longer she watched, the bigger and darker the shadow on her soul grew. So she crept back to her bed. Crawling into it and curling her body into a tight ball, she willed herself not to cry as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 9

Malik heard the endless banging in her sleep and tried to ignore it for as long as possible, but someone wanted attention and they wanted it badly.

Mumbling a few choice words under her breath, she rolled off the couch, trailing the sheets behind her -- she could have cared less -- and headed to the front door to stop that incessant pounding.

Raven was standing there, beaming those pearly whites at her.

"*Why* do you *do* that?" She growled at that smiling face.

Raven chuckled and held out a package she had in her left hand. "I've come bearing gifts." She waited for Malik to step aside.

Malik ran a hand down her face, shaking her head at the same time. "Come in," she barked and turned. Gabrielle was already awake and standing behind her. Malik gave her a look she didn't quite understand and passed by her, heading right back to the couch.

Gabrielle had a fresh smile of greeting when she turned her attention from watching Malik back to Raven. "Good morning."

"Hey, Sleepy Face." Raven stepped up to her, kicking the door shut behind her. She handed Gabrielle her package, taking her arm at the same time, and walked them towards the kitchen.

"Some people *do* sleep in on Saturday mornings, Rave," Gabrielle felt the need to remind her.

"Sleep? SLEEP! *Sleep!* How can you even *think* of sleep when you're going to be gone for two whole months -- away from me!" She reached into the nearest cabinet and grabbed a mug.

Laughing, Gabrielle opened Raven's "peace offering" and found a coffee carafe and a bunch of donuts. "Mmmmm, custard?" she hoped.

Raven nodded. "And cream filled, too!" She was quite proud of herself.

"Well, thank you, Sweetie." She pecked her cheek, feeling her whole back ripple, and knew Malik was behind them. She looked over her shoulder to confirm it.

Malik resigned herself to being "nice" that morning. Since it was just a day away from Gabrielle's departure, she didn't want to ruin it by being in a mood, so down the hall she took herself, determined to be civil, even if it killed her.

"Coffee! I simply *must* have some coffee!" Malik stressed, way over the top, and sent them a wicked grin. "Now, because *some* people don't have watches to tell the time of day, I'm awake. Someone will pay..." She plucked the cup from Raven's hand, the coffee from Gabrielle's, and took them both with her back down the hall.

Not missing a beat, Raven grabbed two more mugs, Gabrielle's hand, and smirked at her shorter friend as they followed Malik.

* * *

"Of course you need new clothing, Gabrielle!" Raven boomed, setting down the Beemer in the closest space she could find next to the entrance doors of the mall. "Now hush and let Malik and I dress you up for once. If not, we'll send you packing naked!"

Malik laughed. She found it terribly hard to not enjoy Raven. Although mostly quiet, when she *did* speak, it was usually a dinger, and Malik found herself feeling a pleasant liking for that green-eyed beauty.

We could probably become great friends if Gabrielle wasn't in the middle, she thought as she stepped from the rear of the Beemer.

Even though she'd been warned, Gabrielle continued to complain as they each took an elbow and led her through the mall, looking for, and finally finding just the right store for their little queen.

* * *

"Gabrielle?" Xena called, eyeing a great pair of hunter green pants she knew would mold wonderfully to Gabrielle's legs.

"Hmmm?" Gabrielle was busy fingering some silk scarves.

"Come here, look at this."

"What'd ya find?"

Xena humphed, then ordered, "Just come here!"

"**Ooohh-K!** Boy what side of the bed did you get up on this morning!"

"None. I believe I was on top," Xena reminded her, smirking to herself.

They turned, facing one another, and Gabrielle let out a gasp.

* * *

"Gabrielle?" Malik called, plucking a green blazer off the rack.

"Hmmm?"

"Come here, look at this."

"What'd ya find?"

"Just come here!"

"**Ooohh-K!** Gods, what side of the furs did you wake up on this morning?" she quipped.

"I slept on the couch *again*..."

They turned towards each other, Gabrielle letting out a little breath of shock.

"Ahhhh, *Xena*?" Gabrielle called over her shoulder, her eyes never leaving Malik's.

"Ahhhh, *Malik*?" they clearly heard come from their right.

Xena tore her eyes from the smaller green-eyed woman with the same name as her bard, and sought out where her real bard's voice had come from. She spotted her standing next to a tall, dark-haired woman, her face resembling the same emotions currently residing on Xena's.

"Hey, time is credits you guys. What are you doing, buying the whole store?" Phoenix came striding down the aisle, fingering fabric as she walked.

The four women turned to watch her. Malik's face paled to alabaster white when she saw that lift driver again. Their eyes met, and for one brief second Phoenix's step faltered, then she smirked ever so slightly, barely visible, but Malik saw it anyway, and Phoenix continued on her way.

"I swear if I wasn't around, you two would get lost," came from the other direction, and five pairs of eyes turned Raven's way.

Raven saw the group of four women, noting the confused looks on all their faces. Then her eyes met Phoenix's and she walked right into a rack of sports bras.

"Ooof!"

Xena's Gabrielle rushed to her, her concern always evident for any of the gods' creatures. Looking at her face to gauge the amount of injury, Gabrielle placed a hand on her arm, smiling for her benefit when she saw Raven was more embarrassed than anything.

Malik's Gabrielle was smiling, feeling some of the tension release slowly. "Klutz," she called to her friend.

Xena and Malik exchanged looks, and then dropped their eyes. Phoenix had the only presence of mind, it seemed, to get an introduction from them all.

"Well now, does everyone here know each other?" Her black eyes skipped to each of them, landing on Raven last. She hastily looked away from the woman's intense, green stare.

* * *

There was an outside eating area on the top floor of the mall, and all of the women seemed to gravitate towards it, silently, just following the lead of the woman in front of them. Once outside, they found a corner table and sat.

Phoenix saw the only seat left was right beside Raven, so she decided to hop onto the nearby table, dangling her legs over the side.

Xena's Gabrielle began. "Well, first thing's first. To lessen the confusion here, we'll just call you Gabby, and I'll keep my full given name. If that's all right with you?" She smiled kindly at Gabby, and how could Gabby not agree? She nodded her head. "Okay then," Gabrielle continued, "Believing in *Fate* the way that Xena and I do," she noted the look exchanged between Gabby and Malik, "and after the adventure we just had, I'm inclined to believe we were *destined* to meet."

Phoenix rolled her eyes, catching Raven's smirk when she saw it. "Gabrielle," she started, "skip all the spiritualist gibberish already."

Gabrielle proceeded by ignoring her, and then she went on to start the tale of their adventures with Dari and Sondra. When she mentioned their names, Malik and Gabby knew the tale she was telling was indeed true, or at least, the women in the story were real.

"Ok, so you're saying," Malik's eyes went to Gabrielle first, then Xena's, "that you two helped Darian Redmond capture that psycho Lutheran Ingles?"

They nodded in simultaneous affirmation.

"And found the money that started the trust fund," Gabrielle proudly added.

"You knew *Sondra McDowell*?" Gabby was in a state of awe.

Gabrielle smiled and patted her hand. "Sondra's *me*, actually." She had been interrupted in her story and hadn't quite gotten to the time traveling part of it yet.

"Huh?" three voices chorused.

Gabrielle glanced at Xena, and Xena shrugged, saying, "You're the bard, do the bardly thing." She smiled, knowing that *her* bard really didn't need any encouragement to talk.

"Alrighty then," Gabrielle said.

Gabby exchanged looks with Malik; something was becoming very clear here.

Continuing, Gabrielle started from the beginning. "So there we were in our own time, and Aphrodite -- she's the Goddess of Love -- decided she wanted Xena and I..." she paused, clearing her throat,

"she wanted us together." Gabrielle temporarily halted again when a waitress sauntered up to their table for orders.

Malik stole a lingering glance at Gabby, wishing they had a "Goddess of Love" of their own. Xena saw the way the taller woman looked at *her* smaller friend. She knew that look. For so many years, she had seen it every time she witnessed her own reflection. It was un-satiated hunger, a white-hot desire. She had even named it, "The Gabby." She smiled inwardly, her face never revealing the thoughts going on behind it. *Strange*, she never thought she'd see her "Gabby's" face on another soul. But then on second thought, maybe she wasn't.

After getting a list of sodas, the waitress left them to their huddle. Gabrielle continued, "So Aphrodite snapped her fingers, and poof, Dari came falling from the sky one night."

Raven laughed, unable to contain herself. "You *are* sober right?" she had to ask. She could accept some of the story, but she knew people just didn't snap their fingers and cause a being to fall from the sky, and from the future, to boot.

Gabrielle scowled at her. "Well, whether you believe it or not, it's true."

Xena caressed Gabrielle's look with a sweet smile. She knew people may not believe them at some time, and here was that time. So she continued for her bard. "I caught her, and we fell into a river. She was badly hurt, so we got Ares -- the God of war -- to heal her, and make it so she understood our Greek language."

Malik picked up on that. "So how come we can understand you?"

Xena's eyes went to hers, finally. Still a little leery of what had happened with Phoenix the night before, she had been trying to avoid any exchange of gazes, worried this tall creature had the same ability. "When we went to the future -- your past -- Aphrodite made it so we understood, well, *half* understood your languages. We knew the words, could speak them, could understand them, but not their meanings. Eventually, we got the *gist* of most things. We spent quite

a bit of time with Dari and Sonny, and they instructed us in the ways of their world."

"Hey you're skipping parts," Gabby chimed in, always a sucker for a good tale.

Xena sat back, gesturing for Gabrielle to continue, which she did. She told them of Dari's adventure in their time, and how she had started falling for her, unbeknownst to her who Dari really was.

"Fascinating," Raven was getting into it now. It was such a perfect love story, with cliffhangers and everything. And even if it wasn't true, she was glad for the experience of the telling.

Gabrielle doubted that the fair-eyed beauty believed her, but she could tell she was totally into the story now, so she proceeded. "Xena, being her considerate self," a comment that got the bard a kick under the table from the warrior next to her, "decided we needed to go to the future so Dari could tell me herself who she really was. Xena explained her idea to Aphrodite, and with the help of the Cronos Stone, we traveled through time, finally landing in the year 2001, where the first person we met was Teddy, a great cabbie, who helped us a lot.

"The same evening we arrived, Dari was shot and Sonny kidnapped. We spent some time tracking Lutheran, and during the hunt for him and Sonny, I learned she was my reincarnated soul, as Dari had been Xena's.

"We got the bad guys, found the money, and stayed with them a while afterwards to learn more of their world. Then it was time to go, but while we were shimmering out, Teddy came racing out of nowhere, knocking us apart. I'd guess she and Aphrodite made it back home safe and sound, but Xena and I started going in a different direction, and here we are." She turned and looked at Phoenix, who was sprawled out along the entire table now, one leg drawn up, and a hand resting on the knee. "And thanks to another cute cabbie, we had a place to sleep last night and these clothes to wear."

Phoenix waved her complimentary words away. "Aw, go on with yourself."

Gabby's mind was spinning. This is what she'd been searching for, for all those years. Complete and absolute proof that time travel could happen, and not just to a past life to a future one. "We, Raven and I, have a project that we've been working on for the past five years," she interjected, "This is like *too* bizarre."

"What project?" Xena asked.

Raven answered, "Gabrielle- errr, *Gabby* and I have been trying to create a time machine."

Chapter 10

Needless to say, their shopping was halted for the remainder of that day. Gabby offered to cart Gabrielle and Xena back to the College in her trans, and that left Raven to travel with Phoenix.

You know what this means don't you, Gabs ole girl? Gabby thought to herself, and smiled in answering. She would just *have* to postpone her fake vacation. *Shame.*

"So explain this time travel thing," Xena said from the back, catching Gabby's attention. If there was one topic that bounced her Beemer when she discussed it, *that* was it. She spent the better part of their trip explaining exactly what she understood time travel to be, and what some people believed was either possible, or not.

"Okay, so up until now, time travel to a future universe was unheard of, or thought impossible?" Xena asked.

"In a sense. There are those who believed it was possible, but no one had any proof, and despite yours and Gabrielle's being here, there still isn't any tangible proof. You happen to be here based on some type of magic, and not having used an actual device."

"But we can get back? We don't wish to go forward, we need to go *back* in time." Gabrielle finally joined in.

"Well... See that's where the problem really begins. Rave and I have our theories and speculations, but we don't even have a model of an actual machine yet. We do have a contraption that transports "Objects" through space, but not dimension. For the most part, it has been debate on our part, and plenty of long nights reading up on the subject. Time traveling *is* possible, or at least we believe it is. It's the 'how' that we've yet determined."

* * *

"From around here?" Phoenix attempted to make conversation. She had tried entering Raven's eyes, to get at that mind, but something blocked her access, and rather than let Raven know, she harbored the curiosity inwardly, planning to work over it later when alone.

Raven was watching her hands on the wheel. She loved Phoenix's hands. They were of a square shape, tanned, and finely manicured. The nails were filed down short and showed white against the darker skin. She could just stare at them all day.

"Yes," she finally answered.

Phoenix glanced at her. "Not much of a cunning linguist, are you?"

Raven lifted her eyes to look at her. She smiled knowingly, and the sun rose in Phoenix's otherwise dull and dim day. "Depends on the conversation."

"Oh, so this is kinda boring for you then, eh?" She skirted another glance at her. "Figures, you scientific type's only have... well, *science* on the brain."

Raven laughed, "Not entirely true, in addition, chemistry *is* a science, after all."

Phoenix started feeling that little devil inside her burning to be released, what's more she wanted to shake raven up a bit. She nonchalantly plucked at a few buttons on the consol beside her, and Raven yelped when the Beemer quickly changed form.

"What the..." Raven found herself clinging onto Phoenix's waist for dear life.

"What is she doing now?" Xena had spotted the Beemer in front.

"Poor Rave," Gabby laughed, watching her friend.

"I believe she's changed it into a Cyclic Beemer," Malik confirmed for the two in back. "The 3K equivalent to a Harley Davidson."

"She is... Rather... Strange," Xena said mostly to Gabrielle, but Malik caught her words and turned to look at her.

"Strange doesn't even come close." She glanced at Gabrielle then back to Xena. "I met her yesterday, she took me on the worst ride imaginable."

Gabby finally put two and two together. "So that's why you looked like a used up filter in a cleaning unit when you stopped by."

"I don't wanna talk about it," Malik sulked, turning back to face the front.

"Weeeeeeeeeee!" Phoenix was having a blast. She gunned the throttle, dipping and weaving between other slower moving Beemer's, all the while relishing in Raven's secure hold around her midriff.

"Good thing I have a rather strong hold on my bladder," Raven said next to her ear.

Laughing her joy, Phoenix took them around the University a couple times, and then gently landed the vehicle. She watched her when Raven was finally off the monstrous beast. "Little too much for you, huh?"

"I'm handlin' it." Raven wobbled a bit for a few steps, then gained her balance again. She stuffed her hands into the front pockets of her jeans and watched Gabby landing beside Phoenix's Beemer.

Gabby migrated to Raven's side, once she was out, smiling up at her friend. "Have fun?" A giggle escaped her.

"And she's bow legged too..." Phoenix sighed as they all watched Raven stalk away up the walk.

Malik looked from her to Gabby, hunting for any sign of jealousy on her little friend's face. There was none -- and was that a look of piqued interest she saw on Gabby's features?

Xena was frowning as she followed behind them. She finally asked, "Okay, what's bow legged?"

Phoenix chuckled and dropped an arm over her shoulders. "You know what a bow is, eh? Seen the shape?" Xena nodded. "Okay, well, her leg's are bowed, see?" She pointed to them just as Raven disappeared inside the building.

"Oh." Xena was still frowning, not grasping the significance.

Phoenix patted her shoulder as they, too, disappeared inside. "It's a fetish I have. Some people go nuts over feet; I happen to get giddy over bow legged women." She shrugged. Xena finally understood and she smiled, her eyes watching Gabrielle's sexy shoulders as she rounded the bend up in front of them. Oh yes, she understood all too well.

Chapter 11

"Don't touch," Raven warned when Phoenix moved around the room, touching, poking and prodding at some specimens on a shelf that had caught her interest. She drew her hand back and stuffed it into her jacket pocket. *Maybe she should have taken the guided tour led by Gabby*; she thought. Raven sure was a broody lil cuss. Then she looked at her again and smiled. Raven was leaning over a table, checking out one of the peculiar specimens under some machine. She crossed her arms, leaning a hip against the counter, *Nah, she was happy right where she was.*

Raven looked up and attempted to hide a flush when she saw herself through the eyes of Phoenix. She cleared her throat and pretended the woman's interest was concentrated on the micro-imager instead of her.

"So this is what you do, eh?" she asked, gesturing to the wall of oddly shaped samples. "Dissect these things all day long?"

Raven eyed Phoenix balefully. "No. There's much more involved." She wondered if Phoenix could even begin to comprehend what she and Gabby did.

"Hmmm, well, sounds terribly exciting. So what's next on this here tour?"

Raven went on to explain the different areas of their huge laboratory at Wellington University; the home to the Tennatron, the world's second highest-energy particle accelerator since the Tavatron back in the 21st century. She explained about the Higgs Boson, and got a little too deeply engrossed in the tale of Smart Materials.

Needless to say, when she was half way through the tour, Phoenix's head was overflowing with information she'd just as soon have learned on her own accord – if at all -- than on that tour.

* * *

"Women can *what*?" Gabrielle asked, shocked.

Gabby turned from the door leading to their version of the H.A.L. "Impregnate one another, with the help of *H.A.L.*, of course," Gabby repeated, smiling at Gabrielle. She explained, "A man, *Arthur C. Clarke*, envisioned wonderful things for mankind beyond the Y2K mark. He envisaged that within the next year, humans would have embarked upon far-flung space travel guided by a heuristically programmed Algorithmic (HAL), a machine that could reproduce "*most of the activities of the human brain, and with far greater speed and reliability.*" Neither of his imaginings was close to becoming a reality back then.

"That is, until 10 years ago." She gestured for the group of women to enter the room ahead of her and continued with her tale. "Not only did H.A.L. reproduce the activities of the human brain, a new and stunning bit of info was discovered; it could reproduce the body's reproductive tract."

Gabrielle rubbed at her temple, one eye closed as she tried, really tried, to grasp it all. She glanced at Xena and saw she was just as, if not more, confused.

Gabby didn't notice. She was still rattling on, "...Nanobots, robots the size of a molecule, travel through the bloodstream of your brain beaming messages to neurons that will enable the simulation of sight, sound, smell, and hearing, as well as emotion and sexual sensations. The sense of self becomes infinitely fluid at the same time as the concept of personal space takes on a much more literal meaning.

"Hans Moravec, founder of CMU's mobile robot laboratory and someone who had written of how our brains may one day be downloaded into a computer, traced a genealogy of robots, originating with the creation in 1950 of Elsie, the work of British biologist, W. Grey Walter, who built it to have the IQ of a bacterium. 'Elsie' would move in response to light, including beams that it would emit from its own tortoise-like body. When placed before a mirror, it would dance in front of its own image. Later robots, such as the 1990s vintage

'Xavier', could build an internal map of their surroundings and navigate down a hallway, though Xavier flustered easily."

Xena didn't understand a word of it, but she was amazed with how much Gabby sounded, moved, and even gestured like her bard as she regaled her saga.

"It was believed that machine intelligence would never be achievable until a computer could mimic the full cognitive spectrum, including emotion, dreams, and the nuances of touch and sensation. *"You'll never get a computer to think until you've figured out how to get it to hallucinate,"* David Gelernter, professor of computer science at Yale University and a parallel programming specialist, once said. And that is what we have done; H.A.L. can do all that and *more*."

Gabrielle groaned, and Gabby finally got the drift. She ended her tale with, "Many great men and women before Raven's and my own time put to motion the spark, and here we are, in the literal fire, as it were." She motioned her hands in a wide arc, showing off H.A.L.

"Okay, in layman's terms," Malik interjected for her two new friends. "Explain to them *basically* what it does."

"You go into a room, and we do the rest."

Malik laughed. "Gabby! That's not ALL of it. Goddess, you make it sound so antiseptic."

"Well, okay," Gabby had to agree. She grinned at the three in turn, further explaining, "We don't do *all* the work. We just program the machine based on *your* brain chemistry. We download parts of your 'thoughts' and 'emotions'-- fiddle here, and twiddle there, and poof, one of you is pregnant." She saw they were no closer to understanding it that way, than if she'd explained in full technical terms. It was a lose-lose situation.

"It's mostly a mind process. You feel what each other feels, and if both parties are in tune... emotionally, physically and spiritually in sync, the computer takes care of the rest," Malik threw in.

"Would you like to try it?" Gabby offered.

"Oh, I don't know." Xena fidgeted from foot to foot. Gabrielle ultimately made the decision for them both.

"Yes." She looked at Xena, "I don't think they'd hurt us."

"Whatever Gabrielle wants, Gabrielle gets," Xena said with a grin.

"Okay, then," Gabby blushed. If it were Malik saying that and not Xena... "I'll have full control, so don't worry about impregnation, at least this time around. You two will just feel the effects of general sexual intercourse."

"Gawd, Gabbs, you sound like a text book!" Malik rolled her eyes. "How are they to get in the *mood* with talk like that?"

"You mean we're going to..." It just then dawned on Gabrielle.

Gabby smirked. "Yes."

Xena perked right up, circling an arm around Gabrielle's waist, noting the heated flush that raced along her bard's throat and cheeks. "I'm game!"

Chapter 12

"Hey, what's that?" Phoenix asked, eyeing a long, cylindrical shaped object hovering above their heads in the next room on Raven's tour.

"That's *Tele*, a Teleportation device."

"Really? Cool!" Her black eyes shone with wonder. "Without wilting my brain any further today, does it actually work?"

"Yes, it *works*." Raven nodded, reaching for a lever that would lower the machine, allowing them access. "Want to try it?"

Phoenix wasn't sure. "You won't, like zap me to Mars cause of that little stunt in the Beemer earlier, will you?" She beamed a flashy smile on Raven.

"It doesn't 'zap.' You decorporealize at one point, here in this machine," pointing at it, "then you decussate, and incorporate at another destination."

"I don't think I've ever been incorporated before." Phoenix smirked at her.

"It doesn't hurt. I've experimented in it many times, as has Gabby. Trust me." Her eyes were kind, clear green. How could Phoenix not?

* * *

"I won't get you "preggers," Gabby whispered to Gabrielle, winking at her as she and Xena were lead into the inner chamber. "Trust me."

Xena was raring to go, not quite understanding that they didn't need to even remove their clothing. That took away half the

enjoyment, for her at least. But she had decided to "go with the flow," and go she would.

They stood in an open, circular room. Above them they could see mirrored windows and wondered if someone was behind them, watching. The walls were steel sheets, sanded metal that reflected their images with a dull sheen.

"Ready?" Gabby's voice came at them from everywhere.

"Umm, will someone be watching?" Gabrielle put to voice one of her fears.

"No, as soon as the blue light comes on, all visuals are shut down on this end."

They heard Malik's laughter-filled voice add, "Don't worry, we won't sell the pictures; they'll be for our own *private* collection."

"That's *not* funny," Xena growled. Gabrielle was smiling as she put a hand to Xena's forearm.

The room filled with blue, bathing them in sensations with its soft light. Music began playing -- stringed instruments mostly -- around, in, and over them. Xena watched as Gabrielle's body started to rise from the floor. And then her own began its ascent.

So far so good, she thought, meeting her love eye to eye. She smiled, reaching out a hand to caress Gabrielle's face.

Gabrielle not only felt the hand, but the feeling that lie behind the gesture. Her mouth rounded out in an O as she was finally privy to Xena's deepest desires once again, as she had been that one time when Discord melded them. Only this time, the feelings were so much stronger, so profound and powerful.

Xena was too far away. She wanted to be closer to Gabrielle, and as the thought entered her mind, she floated closer, their legs intertwining as their lips met in a slow, sensual exchange.

Gabrielle closed her eyes, allowing herself to fall backwards on a cloud of air. Xena's body moved with hers until they were positioned as if lying in bed, with Xena on top of her.

Xena felt her intensity go through Gabrielle, and Gabrielle's passion back through her. She had to close her eyes; it was all coming too fast and hard. "Slower," she whispered, and as if some invisible

entity had heard her plea, everything slowed. She opened her eyes again, saw Gabrielle's were open, too, and she was staring back at her.

Xena ached to feel Gabrielle's skin next to her own, and it was done. Her eyes widened as the garments fell from her friend's body and landed on the metallic floor. She smiled, lifting a brow, seeing right into Gabrielle's desires, and then she felt her own attire drop moments later, boots and all.

I love you, transmuted from one brain to the other, and back again, filling their every pore as they joined.

* * *

"That was awesome!" Phoenix raved, stepping from a second Tele across the room. She shook her head slowly, trying to gather the words to explain the experience, and to share it with Raven.

Raven knew exactly what she meant, having had that experience many times over, never dulling to its wonders. "I know," she said softly.

"Wow..." Phoenix had to sit after she ran her hands down over her torso and legs. "Just making sure I'm all here," she offered when Raven started staring at her with an upturned brow.

* * *

She was Xena's heat, her infernal flames of Helios, causing Xena's body to swirl unrelentingly. Her climax was hard, like thunder flashing, rivers flooding, and dams bursting. Gabrielle held securely onto Xena's shoulders, clutching them as if she were about to drown inside the warrior.

Xena was enveloped in a haze of tenderness unlike any she'd ever known; so powerful she felt an onslaught of tears beginning to rise. She recalled the tenderness of Gabrielle's earlier kisses, the strength of her body, of Gabrielle's arms as they had held her, and she was able to keep the storm at bay. Her mind drifted back to when

they first met, in the wooded land beside Podadia. *Such a child then, but in a way, weren't we both? I've grown so much with you, my Love. Even more, I think, than you have.* On she thought, about engulfing Gabrielle in the circle of her arms that very first time, and how surprised she'd been to find how Gabrielle felt; solid, every muscle taut, tight. Her body trembled as she remembered, and she leaned down to brush a soft kiss over Gabrielle's slightly gaping mouth.

Memories flooded Gabrielle's being, ricocheting off Xena's inbound remembrance. Only her nostalgia lie back at Dari and Sonny's...

Strolling hand in hand down the beach, side-stepping out of the way as the tide came in, Xena and Gabrielle felt the euphoria engulfing them, the same feeling that had begun the day they first met and had continued every day after, even when they both weren't aware of it.

Gabrielle pulled away a little, just the tips of her fingers clutching Xena's, and she bent over to claim a shell before the tide got it.

Smiling, Xena watched her swishing it in the water to clear away the sand. Afterward, Gabrielle was holding it up for Xena's inspection.

"I love sea shells."

Xena treasured her exuberance and gave her a kiss on the cheek for it. "I know."

Gabrielle stopped walking and moved in front of Xena. Her arms slid up Xena's shoulders and folded around her neck. She released a smothered breath when Xena's mouth came down on hers for one of the deepest kisses they had ever shared. She had to pull away when she felt her heart slamming against her ribcage.

Resting her body into Xena's, she just stared up into her eyes; loving the way she looked at her, and the way she saw herself in them, loving Xena, and loving the feel of Xena's body holding her, pressed against her.

"You're terribly wonderful to be with, Xena, and I'm not just saying that because I'm In love with you either."

"I know."

Chuckling, Gabrielle gave her a quick, hard kiss. "Smarty pants. Do you also know that I would be completely lost without you?"

"No, don't think I do." She rocked Gabrielle side-to-side, beaming at her, holding her tightly about the waist, fingers locked firmly together at her lower back.

Water swished around their feet, and she pulled Gabrielle further up the sand. "How about we go back to the house and light us a fire?" Dari and Sonny had gone out for the day, leaving them run of the entire place.

"And?" Gabrielle was already excited just by the prospect of the fire and being alone with Xena in front of it.

"And whatever you want."

It had been A Good Day.

* * *

"How long have they been in there?" Raven asked, glancing at the dial pads along one of HAL's main consoles.

"A while." Gabby knew she should have ended the bonding sequence long before now, but it was their first time, and they were so in love, she didn't have the heart to interrupt them.

"Well, I've shown Phoenix all that I can..." she said as way of a hint that time was passing.

"I wonder if you have *any* romance in that soul of yours, Rave, or are you just a computer at heart?" Gabby quipped, missing Malik's interested glance at her, then at Raven.

"Pfft."

"Hey, what's the holdup in here?" Phoenix poked her head around the doorjamb.

"No holdup, we're just about done."

* * *

Their bodies began their descent, and with it the feeling of complete rapture. It was quite a downer for both women.

"I could do that *all* night," Xena whispered, hurriedly putting her clothes on.

"You *have*," Gabrielle snorted, and then giggled when Xena's blues dropped down quickly.

Chapter 13

It took nearly a week for it all to be explained to Xena and Gabrielle before the light of understanding appeared in their eyes. But in the end, they comprehended the dynamics of what Gabby and Raven tried to explain to them, in as close to layman's terms as possible. They might be able to get them home, but it would be a while before that could happen.

Deciding what to do while Raven and Gabby worked on their problem, Xena made it her business to find out just what was happening, or not happening, between Gabby and Malik. When she learned what had been going on over the past year, she knew in her heart of hearts that there was a reason she and Gabrielle were there. The warrior may have no longer believed in Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos, but she still trusted in the concept of *Fate*, and it was their *Fate* to get Malik and Gabby together.

Housing wasn't a problem. Malik's vacation home, 200 miles away, was on the grand scale, and everyone came to the mutual decision to stay there. The ride up could only be described as amazing. Xena and Gabrielle had been so fixed on the problem of getting home; they had failed to appreciate the beauty around them. It really wasn't so different than the Lerrette they had just left. Okay, the streets may have been see-through where they were once asphalt, but that only added to the beauty. No distraction lay between the eye and the land.

The closer they got to this vacation home of Malik's, the more at home Gabrielle felt, and the easier Xena began to breathe. The climate started to change soon after the trip commenced. It grew colder, and there were even patches of snow clinging to the ground.

Gabrielle held tightly to Xena in the rear of Malik's Beemer, as much for the feel of her body as the warmth, which she lay claim as the reason. Xena didn't care why her warrior-bard clung to her, as long as she maintained the physical contact. She found it painful to be away from the smaller woman, even when they were in the same room together. If she wasn't able to touch her, it was torture. Something told her that it was the same for their 3K counterparts.

She had seen the casual touches that had passed between the two in front; a hand to the cheek to check if Gabby was warm enough, and Gabby's blush that soon followed. And when Malik complained of a tension headache, Gabby immediately lifted her hand to the back of Malik's neck, gently massaging. She watched the woman's mouth open in a silent moan when Gabby's fingers made contact with the sensitive flesh. If she was feeling what Xena had felt all that time when Gabrielle would touch her, and she couldn't -- wouldn't -- touch her in return the way she wanted; then she had no doubt that her new friend was in agony.

Gabrielle could tell that Xena's mind was somewhere else. *She's so cute when she's concentrating.* Gabrielle rolled her eyes and chuckled. *I can't believe I just called Xena: Warrior Princess... cute.*

The chuckle tickled Xena's chest, causing her to look down, questioningly. "What?"

"Oh, nothing." Gabrielle smiled up at her warrior. Actually she smiled up, but couldn't get passed Xena's mouth. And don't think that the ex-warlord didn't notice it.

"You got something on your mind, Gabrielle?" Xena asked in her sexiest, low voice.

Gabrielle swallowed hard; never taking her eyes off Xena's full, wet lips. "Yes," was the only answer she could manage, and that came out as a half groan.

That was all Xena could stand. Without another word, or a moment's hesitation, Xena captured Gabrielle's mouth. She kissed her little warrior hard, harder than she had intended, but when she went to pull back, Gabrielle moaned in protest; her hand wrapped in Xena's black mane, urging her on to further exploration.

Gabby was riding along, minutes from Malik's get-away, when she glanced in the rear-viewer and almost swiped a protection barrier. She quickly flipped the auto drive on and attempted to control her breathing. There was no need for her to react so to seeing two women kiss. It was an ordinary occurrence. But in that split second when she saw *those* two women kissing, she saw herself and Malik locked in a heated, passionate embrace. Her body couldn't take the sensations that sprung from that momentary flash. It was more than a fantasy, although, the Goddess knows she'd had enough of those in the past year. It was as if she could feel Malik's lips on hers, her body against her own, and all of the desire welled up inside her to overflowing.

This is ridiculous, she thought. *I'm a grown woman. I can control myself.* Then she stole a quick glance at the Goddess of a woman sitting with her. *Damn, where's a snow bank when you need one?*

Gabby had been so wrapped up in her own hormonal dilemma that she failed to see the one transpiring beside her. Malik had witnessed the same event that Gabby had... with the same results. The ex-doctor told herself that it was a physical impossibility for her body to react the way that it was. Only it was, and she knew it. She stared straight ahead, refusing to look at Gabby. To be honest, she was terrified that if she did look at that silky blonde hair, those tender green eyes, and that delectable tapered neck, she'd have a screaming orgasm on the spot.

She made her hands into fists, cursing under her breath. *Coward*, the tiny voice taunted. *Still afraid, after all these years? You're pathetic.*

I won't lose Gabby, the way I lost Simone. Malik reasoned with herself.

It wasn't your fault, and somewhere in that dense gray matter, you realize that.

I should have known. Please . . . enough.

How could you know, when she didn't?

I was a DOCTOR, wasn't I? Malik swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat.

But . . .

NO! *No buts, any ifs, no ands, and no maybes...* she wasn't going to risk it, not with her Gabrielle. Malik was not going to ever again watch someone she loved die.

* * *

Gabby set the Beemer down in front of the sprawling house. When it had first been built almost four generations ago, it was little more than a cabin, seemingly sculptured right from the very forest surrounding it. Over the generations, it had been built onto and remodeled. As a result, it was almost impossible to assign it any one particular style or name. *Different* was a word that came to mind when most people saw it for the first time.

Firmly in control of her rolling emotions since their shared kiss, Gabrielle whispered in Xena's ear as they walked through the front, double doors, "Boy, is Aphrodite going to be sorry she missed out on this."

Raven went right to work setting up a makeshift "lab" in the basement where she and Gabby could spend most of their time trying to solve the most important puzzle, to them anyway, and see that Gabrielle and Xena returned home.

The five women settled into their respective bedroom suites, with only Xena and Gabrielle sharing. In a short time, everyone began to grow accustomed to each other -- it was astoundingly easy. It was like being a member of a big family. Even Raven's niece was to sleep over a couple times when her parents went vacationing.

Phoenix had attempted to get some time off work, but Gerty, at first, would have none of that. Her drivers weren't going to tell her when they would work, it was the other way around, and she made that clear to Phoenix. The lifter hesitated to explain the situation in any detail, especially the reincarnation parts. She didn't want that woman too deep into her personal business. But she selected bits and pieces, dropping her guard enough to mention a few names in order to try to play on the old hag's sympathy, if she had any; even going so

far as to say that she had two friends who were in a fix as to how to get back home.

Gerty listened intently, and much to Phoenix's surprise, she eased up on the attitude. She wouldn't let her completely off the schedule, but she would be more flexible about the hours she did work. Even though she couldn't fully enjoy the amenities at Malik's vacation home, Phoenix would be able to keep in close contact with them, and with Raven in particular.

Although Phoenix didn't stay with the group of women, she visited frequently, if just to see more of Raven. During the second week of their stay, Phoenix surprised Raven with the fact she was a writer. She had a series of published works, mostly horror, but that didn't take away from the fact that she was a small literary success. And she further bowled Raven over when she asked her to be the "Doctor" subject of her next work in progress. Raven was hesitant at first, not too sure she wanted her image penned in any work, let alone a horror novel, especially after Phoenix told her the plot -- she was a psychotherapist, who was being stalked by her best friend, who was a murderer, unbeknownst to her.

She flat out declined the offer to Phoenix, but sort of agreed to herself as she continued to pour over data with Gabby to find the answers to their puzzle. She didn't think of the book again, until one night Phoenix made it all too real for her.

Chapter 14

Raven opened her eyes when she felt heat on her face and jumped, trying frantically to move, but finding herself restrained by Phoenix. She was calmed somewhat by the knowledge it *was* Phoenix, and her body relaxed as she could see straight into the woman's eyes by way of the moon's glow through the bedroom window.

"What are you doing, Phoenix?"

"Experimenting."

Raven chuckled. "Does the doctor get murdered now?"

"No. The first of the love making happens way before that."

Stomach twitching, loins pulling, Raven drew in a ragged breath.

"You need to be more alarmed though, but I guess it's ok. You know me. She won't know until the end, who's been stealing into her room at night to have her wicked way with the good doctor."

"I would have the brains to make sure you wouldn't get in a second time."

"That wouldn't stop Dakota, Rave, You botched up by letting her inside in the first place. Locks wouldn't stop her."

"Why not?"

"I have a *very* vivid imagination."

"Does the doctor want Dakota to have her wicked way with her?"

"I don't know yet, does she, Raven?"

Raven rolled Phoenix off of her and sat up, reaching for the light... for sanity. "Ok, enough *experimenting* for tonight."

Phoenix smirked, tumbled across the bed, and sat up next to Raven. "Feeling any better about being portrayed as the victim?"

"I'm still thinking about it."

Phoenix smiled to herself internally. *Well, at least Raven wasn't still gung ho about not doing it at all.* "I'm going to be up for a while working on it. If you'd like, you may join me."

"It's two in the morning, Phoenix."

"My mind has no clock."

"Nor any sense."

"Tis not true ole temperamental scientist o' mine. See you later... maybe." She slipped away just as quietly and quickly as she had arrived. Raven got up and bcked the door, leaned against it, and blew out a breath.

* * *

Before going to bed the next evening, Raven checked the door locks and the windows and slipped into bed feeling safe that she wouldn't be awakened at two a.m. again with Phoenix on top of her.

When she next opened her eyes, she saw Phoenix lying beside her with her head propped up on her palm, leaning against one elbow, wearing a knowing smirk. Raven's hands were tied to each side of the bedposts.

"Okay. You've made your point, now untie me." Raven tugged at the satin cord, but it was no use.

"Actually, I should have taped your mouth, too." She chuckled, twirling Raven's stomach in a mad dance. "Next time," Phoenix promised.

"Listen you..." She was growing unnerved at the sensation of being utterly at someone else's mercy.

"Hmmm?" She couldn't stop herself from enjoying the feel of Raven's reserve shattering.

"Are you going to appear *every* night?"

Phoenix pursed her lips, and then nodded. "Mm-hmm, until Dakota murders you."

"By that time I would have moved."

"Ah, but Dakota's your friend; you would have told her where."

Raven groaned deeply with the frustration of Phoenix Carlson.
"I abhor your brain."

"I don't believe that at all. You dislike the fact you don't think of these things first, *Ms. Scientific Mind herself.*"

"Untie me you insufferable..."

"Hey, I wouldn't be talking like that. It appears you don't have the edge here." She fingered the knots. "I tie great knots, ask anyone."

"Alright, stop playing around."

"You're no fun." Phoenix leaned over her to untie one hand, and then she released the other with a simple pull of the end of the cord that was hanging loose.

Raven rubbed her wrists, then tried to grab Phoenix around the neck. Phoenix caught her hands and pinned her down; her lithe body moving quickly over Raven's to keep her there.

"The doctor never fights back, Raven."

"Tough. Write it in."

"She wants it." Phoenix moved her mouth close to Raven's, breathing on her lips, staring into her eyes, looking at her mouth, hovering closer and backing away, then hovering again. Once her top lip touched Raven's, and Raven's eyes fluttered closed, then opened to see Phoenix's beautiful ebony. "*Does* she want it, Raven?" Raven could have sworn the question was asked, half in pleading.

"The murderer ought to know already."

"She does, but does the doctor know?"

A knock sounded, and Phoenix rolled off of Raven, slipping away into the darkness. Raven sat up, turned on the light, saw the time and outwardly trembled. As she went to answer the door, she wondered where Phoenix had hidden herself away.

Gabby was there with Crystal, Raven's little 6-year old niece, and she slipped her into Raven's bed. "She had a bad dream about you," she said as she came back to the door.

Her words made Raven wonder if she'd been dreaming too. The rope was gone, and when she checked after Gabby left, so was Phoenix.

"What are you looking for, Aunty Ravey?"
Turning to her niece, she smiled and then replied, "A rat."

* * *

"So, tell me," Raven posed the question the next morning, "how are you getting into my room?" She had seen Phoenix heading out of the house with a set of Holosliders and followed.

"Dakota wouldn't tell the doctor. Don't you want to be surprised at *all*, Raven?"

"Were you really there last night or did I dream it?"

"Maybe, maybe not." She smiled, dropped the Holosliders onto the ground, and leaned on the pole projectors. "Which would you prefer to believe?" She stepped onto the Holosliders, snapping her heels in place.

"I'd like to believe you weren't nutty at all, and it was everyone's imagination." She walked beside Phoenix as she pushed off, making her way over the snow at a slow pace.

"Then believe it."

"You make it very hard, Phoenix." She was so taken with the depth of Phoenix's eyes reflecting the light off the snow she had to look away.

"Hop on," Phoenix invited.

Raven laughed at the idea. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because we'll *both* break a leg."

"No we won't." She picked up her pace, looked back at Raven, warning, "Hurry up, I'm almost gone."

Raven ran, jumped, and landed behind her, grabbing onto Phoenix's waist securely and squeezed her eyes shut just as tightly. After a minute when they were still upright, and she felt her legs moving with Phoenix's, she opened her eyes.

"See?" Phoenix was smiling, pumping extra hard with Raven's added weight. She headed toward the hill. "We're going *down* now."

"Oh shit!" Raven closed her eyes again and pressed herself against Phoenix's back, hiding her face between her shoulder blades, nestling close. It was nice like that, with Phoenix's billowy jacket cushioning her face, and secretly because of Phoenix's body close to her own. She felt their descent and began a muffled yell in Phoenix's jacket.

Phoenix made it to the bottom without incident and came to a stop, then purposefully tipped them over. She unlatched herself from the Holosliders and sat up, smiling for Raven when she sat up a moment after feeling her body parts to make sure there weren't any breaks.

"Safe and sound?"

"I'll let you know in a minute."

"Your eyes sparkle," Phoenix said softly, taking Raven's chin in hand and turning her to try to penetrate the green depths. "They're so much livelier after a downhill run."

Raven's cheeks deepened with pink and she looked away then back, unable to keep her stare from Phoenix's.

"How friendly are Dakota and the doctor, Phoenix?"

"They're getting friendlier."

"Are they lovers?"

Phoenix ran a finger over Raven's lips and down her chin. "Are they?" she returned, feeling Raven's trembling. She leaned closer and whispered these words for Raven's heart...

"If I held you down --
pinned you to the floor
with the force of lust
penetrating you
into weakness..."

If I massaged myself
into your muscles
made you pliant and warm
draped you limp across my thigh

and entered you
from behind...

If I brought your lips
to my breast
cradled your head
in my hands
and rocked you
with my body
to sleep...

would you come
to me
again
deeper
harder
softer
than before...?"

She had been leaning Raven back slowly, when they heard...
"Aunty Ravey! Here we come!" Little Crystal and Gabrielle came flying down the hill in a Holoboggan.

Phoenix dropped her hand and pulled Raven up to a seated position as they scooted away from each other slightly. Phoenix gathered her Holosliders and pole projectors, stood, waiting as the Holoboggan came to a stop further down by the frozen lake. She held out a hand and helped Raven to her feet, holding onto her hand when normally the contact would have ended after the assisting.

She felt Raven's eyes burning into her, and she moved closer. Raven tried to explain what was in her heart... "I'm quiet with you, sometimes -- but never silent. Inside, the intensity of every feeling you evoke can lock me into wordlessness -- and more and more often that's where I find myself -- wordless, but full of you..."

Raven was flushed, but she maneuvered her fingers through Phoenix's anyway, squeezing tightly. She stared at Phoenix's throat as

she moved her body in front of her, wanting Phoenix face to face. She lifted her left hand and cupped it to her cheek, descending to kiss her, and was slapped on the back of the thigh by a snowball. She turned, looked back and down, then up at the perpetrator. Crystal was hiding behind Gabrielle's legs giggling.

Phoenix dropped her Holoslider equipment, and after a gentle squeeze, Raven's hand, and bent for her own handful of snow.

Gabrielle teamed up with Crystal and they fired snowballs at Phoenix -- and Raven, when she got hit with another one and decided to join Phoenix's one-woman team.

When the snowballs flew with too many directed at Raven, Phoenix came to her rescue once again, shoulder rolling over to her, and she hopped up, grabbed her hand, and they ran. They were laughing when they scaled a huge mound of snow and jumped off its cliff not knowing what lie below.

They lay hunched down on the underside of the mound as Gabrielle and Crystal made more snowballs.

"Little goobers," Phoenix complained.

Raven chuckled, moving closer. "This is nice," she said softly, liking the feeling it gave her, lying down with Phoenix, knowing there was an impending rainfall of snowballs on the other side of their wintry haven. She moved onto her side, leaning her elbow into the trampled snow under her and stared at Phoenix.

She would have kissed her if she hadn't spotted Gabby off in the distance, and just by her posture, she knew the woman was upset over something. Raven gave Phoenix a sad smile and jumped to her feet, helping *her* up this time.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, Gabby's down again, I can tell. And it's probably all Malik's fault, as usual." She proceeded to explain the situation; how Gabby felt for the singer, and how it wasn't being returned. Then Phoenix was struck by an idea so bright, Raven could nearly see the hologram of a light bulb projected above her head.

Chapter 15

With Phoenix's urging, and Raven's concern for her friend, they put into action *the plan*. Gabby wasn't convinced by it. She didn't believe for one minute Malik would be jealous over her and Raven, even if it was a real relationship and not this façade in which they wanted her to participate.

But it couldn't hurt to try. So she went along with it, "letting" Malik catch her and Raven during more intimate times, exchanging a look, or a small caress. Nothing major, because if it did end up working, Gabby didn't want Malik jealous to the point where she would feel ill will toward Rave, just enough to see Gabby was the only woman in the world for her.

* * *

A short time after *the plan* had been called into action, Malik swung the front door open to her vacation home and came face to face with Raven. Her mood sank faster than a Beemer without beryllium, and she stepped aside. Raven had plans to be gone a week. *Why had she returned?* she wondered. "She's upstairs."

Raven smirked after she had passed. *Oh, Malik, my friend, if you only knew...* "Thanks."

Malik bored holes in the woman's back as she watched her taking the stairs two at a time to get to Gabby. She didn't even want to imagine what they would do up there alone together.

* * *

"Hey," Raven said, poking her head into the room, casting Gabby a stunning smile. "Malik's in a mood."

"Serves her right." She immediately felt guilty about saying that and sighed. "Rave, I don't know how long I can do this, making her think we're an item so she'll get jealous... Heck this may not even be affecting her at all, and I feel like some teenager... then there's the fact I'm using you, which I don't like one bit." She shook her head. "Phoenix is nuts."

Raven went to her, plopped down beside her. "Okay now, none of that worry wart stuff from you. I'm fine with this; I don't mind being used for the *greater good*." She chuckled. "And we *all* think Phoenix isn't playing with a full cube, but I have my doubts." She patted Gabby's knee. "You just be your charming self and let *me* handle Malik. And as for affecting her, oh I'd say it was definitely affecting her."

* * *

After a sufficient enough time had passed for Malik to be driving herself crazy with wonder and worry, they came downstairs together. Malik noted their hands clasped tightly. She looked away, meeting Gabrielle's eyes, but every inch of her body was aware of only one Gabby.

Gabrielle looked at her namesake, to Malik, and back again. *Poor, poor hearts*, she thought. *To be so lost to turmoil*. Then her eyes fell on Raven. *One minute she's out in the snow, ready to kiss Phoenix, next she's practically engaged to Gabby*. It just didn't make any sense to her. But maybe that was the way of this new generation. She preferred her own time, where you fell in love with one person and stuck with it until the end. *And what of Raven?* She seems like a good person, her eyes were *so* kind, and she couldn't believe anyone not liking the quieter woman. Maybe that was Malik's dilemma, she couldn't dislike Raven and the very fact was driving her mad? Gabrielle mentally shook her head. She wished Xena would get down there already, before any tempers flared.

"Drink anyone?" Malik offered halfheartedly.

"Here, let me," Raven said, hopping up from her seat beside Gabby. She whooshed passed Malik, leaving the smell of musk in her wake. And *Eternity*... Malik moved from her spot so she could get away from the pleasant combination of scents.

"I'd better help her before she gets it into her head to start mixing up stuff like she does at the Lab." Gabby shot up, knowing Malik would see the lie on her face eventually, and she'd feel even worse for it.

"Malik, don't," Gabrielle said as soon as she saw where Malik was headed when the two women still weren't back from the kitchen after 10 minutes had gone by.

Malik ignored her, stomping down the long hall. She shoved the door in, and just as she suspected, Raven was kissing her Gabby.

She didn't know only seconds before they had been having a simple chat to pass the time. And when Raven had heard the angry footfalls of Malik, she grabbed Gabby in her arms and planted a deep one on the shocked scientist, for Malik's benefit alone.

"So glad you're enjoying yourselves while we're dying of thirst out here." She let the door close behind her words and stalked down the hall, straight to Xena's room.

When Malik began her statement, Raven had broken off the lip lock with Gabby, but had not released the vise-like grip on her friend. But after the singer departed, Raven loosened up her hold and looked down to see Gabby openly staring at her in absolute astonishment.

"Jeez, Rave... warn a girl beforehand next time!" She felt the flush rising up her neck and moved from Raven's arms. *Ok then*, she mentally fanned herself.

* * *

Xena stepped back as soon as she saw Malik's face and extended her hand to any of the many available seats. "What happened to you?" she asked, closing the door quickly. Over the past month they'd grown closer, Xena becoming Malik's confidante and

friend. If there was a thought that went through Malik's head, she could be sure it was floating around Xena's as well.

"She's driving me insane, Xena!" Malik plopped down on the couch and then stood just as abruptly, stalking around the room.

"Whoa, hold on, tell me what happened, from the beginning." She circled an arm around Malik's shoulders and led her back to the couch again and sat with her.

Malik told her all of it. "And I was feeling so good about seeing her this morning, just us two having breakfast together, after a month of Raven there nearly every time. When Raven said she'd be gone for a week, I was pleased," she admitted. "But now she's back. I can deal with their being together; I could have done without seeing what Raven was doing to her, but it really isn't any of my business.

Malik looked over toward Xena after her little tirade and was met by a lone, raised eyebrow. "Okay, I was jealous of it anyway." She stood to pace again, still not wound down even after getting most of it off her chest.

"I think Raven knows how you feel about Gabby," Xena voiced her thoughts aloud.

Malik huffed. "Yes, everyone knows except for Gabby... her blind self." She chose a chair in front of Xena.

Xena didn't want to point fingers, but it seemed to her there really was only one reason Gabby wasn't aware of Malik's feelings. "Well, what are you waiting for, Winter Solstice? Tell her already."

Malik frowned a moment, then she got it and chuckled. "No, I can't do that. I don't know what to do, but *that* isn't one of my options. She's with Raven. They're apparently happy with each other -- no I couldn't.

"You'd think after so many months I would have harnessed this need for her, too, but no, it does what the hell it wants, no matter how I feel about it." She tilted her head back staring at the ceiling and then sighed, trying to release everything. "It's a real bitch loving someone so badly nothing else matters. You know?" She looked at Xena a moment, asking with her eyes, too, then looked back at the ceiling.

Xena nodded, mostly to herself. "Yes, I know exactly what you feel, Mal." She stared off out the windows -- mind far away. *Worst day of my life was when I sent her away with well wishes to marry Perdicus...*

Malik glanced down at her, head still tilted up, and then she moved her eyes away. "She looked so good, too," she said softly, remembering what Gabby was wearing. "Brown is definitely her color."

Xena smiled, looking at her profile, and asked, "But I thought you preferred her in white?"

"Well, yeah." She laughed at herself. "Oh, Goddess, Xena, see? I got it bad! She could be dressed in a tent and I'd want her." She leaned her head back on her hands and tried to shake her thoughts into focus. "I am too old to feel like a damn teenager every time I think about her."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Mal. It's good she makes you feel young, not that we're too old. I'd like to think of us as wiser, not older."

"Well, apparently if I was so damn wise I'd have figured out what the hell to do about her. Either tell her or forget her, and since I can't do either, I'm screwed."

"Why can't you tell her, Malik? What's holding you back?" Xena knew there was something her friend wasn't saying; a secret that her soul was harboring that needed to be released before she would be free to love Gabby.

Seeing the tears well up in Malik's eyes confirmed it. She captured the mirror image of her own bright blues and assured Malik, "It's all right, tell me."

And she did. All of the sorrowful details came spilling out... Simone's illness, the guilt over not having *the sight* enough to know before it was too late... everything. It had been so long since she had even spoken the woman's name aloud to another living soul, but it was different with Xena. They shared so much, not to mention an all-consuming love for the same karmic presence.

After all that needed to be said, was, Xena wanted to explain things the way she saw them. "I have a plan." And her eyes sparkled as this newfound idea was born. "I once gave Gabrielle a poem, but it wasn't directly from me. I told a friend that I wanted something special for someone who meant more to me than the whole known world, and this woman wrote down what was in my heart for her. But unlike the idea I have here, I didn't confront Gabrielle with the feelings, I let her believe it had just been a birthday present written by a famous poet back in our own time."

Malik didn't quite understand. "So you want me to give Gabby a poem?"

"Not exactly. You write her a song. Then sing it to her."

"Oh, I couldn't do that." Malik flushed just thinking about it.

"Sure you can!"

Malik laughed, "You're great for my ego, Xena, but realistically -- no, I can't. Plus she's got this thing for Raven... I don't want to intrude on it."

Xena was frowning. "She and Raven aren't who the Fate's selected to be together. No matter what or who comes between you; she is the one."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you and Gabby are me and Gabrielle, therefore, you're destined to be together in every lifetime. It's a fact." She shrugged. "If you stop listening to the fear and look inside yourself. You already know that. And before you waste as many years as I did by stalling, you need to let her know what is in your heart."

"I have been thinking of ending this new musical career, and what better way to go out on, huh?"

"Now you're thinking!" Xena gave her shoulder a playful punch.

And she was. Every cell in her brain was fizzing with activity. But first she had to know if she would be doing more harm than good.

Chapter 16

Gabrielle released a sigh of relief when she saw Xena finally heading down the stairs with Malik in tow. Her eyes twinkled at Xena when the taller woman dropped down beside her on the sofa. "Where have you been?"

"Playing matchmaker," Xena whispered, nudging Gabrielle when she spotted Malik and Gabby walking towards the kitchen. That left them alone with Raven.

Raven noticed the room cleared out, her eyes coming to rest on Xena and then Gabrielle. She gave the two a half smile, mentally twiddling her thumbs. What she wouldn't give to be at the lab right then and there, working on anything, other than being under the micro-imager that was their gazes.

Fooling Malik was easy, but these two, no... these two were more in tune with what was going on around them.

Xena could see Raven's discomfort at being left alone with she and Gabrielle. And the more she stared at the woman, the more nervous Raven became. It was as if she was afraid that Xena could see into her mind, or perhaps it was her heart that she didn't want anyone to have access to?

Avoiding all eyes, yet feeling gazes upon her, she nearly jumped for the door when she heard the announcer chime. Gabrielle watched her retreating back. An idea formed inside her when she saw that it was Phoenix.

Xena watched her lover hop up and head straight for Malik's recreational console. She wondered what was going on in her little bard's devious mind.

Gabrielle had a Hades of a time locating that micro disk she'd come across in her earlier exploration of Malik's vast music collection, but find it she did, and she set the tiny, silver circle into

one of the empty slots. She casually turned and winked at Xena, then went to sit beside her and Phoenix.

"What are you up to?" Xena whispered.

"You're not the only matchmaker here," Gabrielle was full of herself as the song began.

"Percussion

Strings

Wings

Words

Dare you see her

Sitting dare across da way

She don't gotta lot to say

But dare's sometin' about her...

And you don't know why

But you're dying to try

You wanna- kiss da girl.

Xena rolled her eyes. *Of all the...* She openly stared at her bard in amazement. "You're outta your mind!" she finally proclaimed, low enough just for Gabrielle's ears.

"Shhh, it's cute." Gabrielle had a mile wide smile on her face, and it grew even bigger, if possible, when she caught Raven's own amused grin under the brim of that hat. She had tilted the white Stetson in such a way so she could hide most of her face, as she pretended to read some lab notes on her S-Book.

Xena didn't know how long she could take it, and neither did Phoenix, it seemed. Suddenly the younger woman jumped up and slapped a hand on the stop pad, ceasing the music all at once. She bore her eyes into Gabrielle, seeking and locating the reason.

* * *

"It was Raven's idea," was the last of Gabby's confession. They didn't want Malik to know Phoenix had been involved; there was too much tension between those two already. And now that the air had been cleared, she felt so much better. She didn't tell Malik the reason *why*, but having admitted her relationship with Raven was a farce was enough for the moment.

"She's trying to make Phoenix jealous... Wow, who'd of thought ole Raven had it in her..."

Gabby stared at her, slowly shaking her head as Malik's own mind circled around false scenarios.

How could one woman be so clueless? Gabby wondered.

* * *

Two days later, Malik had the final plans ready for her last concert, growing more and more excited at the prospect of going back into medicine. But far exceeding her career change, she was ecstatic about the fact that in two weeks she would reveal all that she felt for Gabby, and then...

She didn't think of the *and then*. For her it was enough making it through the Christmas holiday that approached in a week. Telling the truth to Xena about Simone seemed to have unleashed a cathartic effect. She no longer felt bound by her insecurities that she would lose Gabby, at least not that way.

* * *

Gabby stood in the door watching them a moment, taken in by their sweet and innocent beauty, she could never deny that. She had been on the hunt for some munchies while she pored over more notes Raven had given her earlier that day when she felt *them*, and felt compelled to be closer to the purity she'd sensed coming at her with dagger like intensity. She felt a tear fall, and wiped it away. They were dancing close, "Lady Soul" playing over and over. It was a beautiful scene to share, just a fire lit, two young lovers locked in an

embrace that Gabby would have given anything to have once. She envied them-- she could admit it.

Their bodies were solid, strong. Gabby's eyes concentrated on their hips, nearly joined together by some invisible super glue. Her eyes lifted, stared at Gabrielle, and compared her to herself. Yes, they looked different, but they were so alike in their desires, their needs, and their passions for tall, sexy, blue-eyed women.

They kissed, and Gabby was enthralled. She felt their love, felt what the kiss was doing to each of them; if she hadn't felt the feelings, she'd think nothing had been going on between the two. Their bodies were responding, that she felt the strongest, but under it, under the feeling of severe longing, Gabby felt the passion, the ultimate desire she herself felt for Malik McCormick.

It wasn't a simple kiss, just lips and tongues -- no, it had warmth; it was filled with yearning, filled with a hunger all new lovers felt deep inside, but it was controlled in these new lovers so that the love they felt came out in it first. Their breathing and what Gabby felt, a raw, sexual ache, was second on their minds.

Xena's hands caressed Gabrielle's lower back, her backside, truly feeling it, impressing it on her soul. Gabrielle's hands touching Xena's neck, feeling her strength, her jaw, her thumb slipping into her mouth as she kissed her.

Gabby wanted what they had, wanted it so badly she began to cry because she believed she'd never get it. She hadn't even come close with Malik to the feelings these two women felt. It was right there, in their kiss, in their touches, in the way their eyes had been expressing that love as they looked at each other before the kiss.

It was almost unbearable for Gabby. She craved that love, she ached for that caress, to be held with such adoration, to be kissed, led by such desires she could faint.

A floorboard creaked behind her. Gabby jumped, almost gasped, but she saw Malik standing there, in shadows, eyes silvery, staring back at her.

Malik wanted to go to her, wipe away the tears, and she took a step, but Gabby dropped her eyes and fled back down the hall from whence she came.

Malik's eyes flicked to Xena and Gabrielle a moment, then they moved away and she followed Gabby's invisible footprints until she was at her door. She lifted a hand, would have knocked, was moments away from knocking, but she saw the light under Gabby's door go out, and that was even worse than Gabby turning and walking away from her. Malik let her hand fall to her side, and sadly she went on her way back to her own lonely bed.

Xena was nuts, Malik thought. That plan of hers would never work. She may as well try to cure all the newest diseases in the world; she'd probably have better luck.

Chapter 17

"Just get in already!" Phoenix's coal eyes were burning with impatience as she watched Malik's hesitation. Each woman stood on either side of the lifter's Beemer.

"I don't trust you." Malik stated simply, crossing her arms over her chest, defiant.

"Oh of all the... Fine, sit in front then." She went around the lift, slapping the hatch open for her.

Malik stood her ground. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to take this last minute trip to the store with Phoenix.

"You want to finish your Christmas shopping, don't you?"

"Yeah," she grudgingly agreed.

"And there's only ME here with a vehicle to cart your stubborn ass around in, right?"

Malik reluctantly plopped down in the front seat, cringing when Phoenix slammed the hatch closed on her. She watched her hop over the hood and slide off the other side, coming to the driver's hatch and slipping in.

For revenge, Phoenix poked at the M.A.U., volume up high, top down on the Beemer, and she gunned it, rising with a roar and taking off.

Malik gripped the sides of her seat, praying to the Goddess that the automatic passenger restraint system would hold, taking glances at Phoenix, who seemed unfazed by her own antics. *Does she even know the fear she puts into others?* she wondered, watching Phoenix dancing in her seat, singing every now and then, "What becomes of the broken hearted," as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"You have a wickedness inside you, Phoenix, and whether you know it or not, it seems to take enormous pleasure in making others

uncomfortable... even fearful of you." There, she said it; she just hoped Phoenix heard her over that noise.

Phoenix poked the music off, and then looked at her. "And what the hell do you know anyway? You're so clueless, if someone told you Pluto still couldn't be habited by humans, you'd believe it." She scowled at her.

"We're not talking about *me*."

"We're not talking about *anything*." She slammed a finger into the M.A.U., nearly cracking its faceplate, and tried to ignore Malik's words.

* * *

When they returned, Phoenix was glad to see Gabrielle was finally back. The confusion in her eyes told Gabrielle she needed to speak with her, and quickly, too. Gabrielle made excuses, not explaining to Xena where she was headed, and she met Phoenix out on the porch. Phoenix was already sitting on the railing, waiting for her.

"I need to know what it was I saw that day."

Gabrielle knew this moment would come sooner or later, and hoped it would have been later rather than sooner, still not knowing exactly what to say. She took a deep breath, wrapped that huge coat of Malik's around herself tightly, and tried her best to explain what it was of her past they saw and experienced.

"I had a daughter."

"You're not gonna tell me I'm your kid, are you?" Phoenix's lips turned down.

"No, I'm not. Just listen, ok? Don't presume, don't judge, don't even think until I've finished."

"K." Phoenix didn't like where this was headed.

Gabrielle explained what had happened, how she'd been impregnated by Da' hak when she and Xena had traveled to Britannia, and how the child grew so fast inside her that in a matter of days she'd given birth to it, only to learn it wasn't a normal child as she had

hoped. It was evil. But back then she didn't want to believe it, or Xena's warnings of how dangerous her child truly was.

"So because of my firm belief that I could change that child, a wedge formed separating Xena and myself. We worked through it back in Dari and Sonny's time, but during our own, it was still there, always in the back of our minds." Gabrielle's thoughts drifted back long ago, to the years of unresolved emotions, unspoken love, unforgiven actions. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, forcing herself to put those memories where they belonged, in the past, and she continued...

"After I set Hope adrift in the waters, never to see her again, at least that was my belief at the time, my actions came back to haunt us months later. A child appeared one day, while Xena and I were visiting the Centaurs, a girl, in her pre-, or early teens, who seemed to need help. It was Hope, with not only her outward appearance grown, but her capacity for evil as well. She did need my help; she used my compassion and vulnerability against me. But again, I didn't know or want to believe it. She killed Xena's son, Solan, for which I took full blame.

"I led Hope to believe I was going to hide her away from Xena yet again, but I poisoned her in a field while her powers were still weak from the murder she had just committed. She died quietly. I'll never forget that day." She stopped, tears streaming freely now.

Phoenix hopped off the railing, taking her into her arms. "I'm sorry," she said, not really sure for *what* she was sorry. Just that she hated seeing this woman in tears. It broke her heart, and she *did* have one, contrary to popular belief. She could feel it ache, right then and there.

Gabrielle wiped at her face, sniffing, and drew back. "It's ok. Let me finish so you can understand who you are."

"Am I Solan?" Phoenix still didn't get the connection.

"No, from those images I saw in you, I believe you're Hope's child, my grandbaby."

"What?!"

"Well, her second one after the 'Destroyer.'" She told Phoenix about what happened when Hope came into their lives a third and final time. She needed to know everything, so she could have the ammunition for the internal battle that lie ahead.

"When the Destroyer killed Hope, her karmic energy was released and reborn in someone else. I believe that person was your mother, your biological mother. So you see, you're not evil like she was, you've just been touched by evil."

Phoenix walked down to the far end of the porch, desolate. She liked to believe that part of her inner being was just "spunk" -- a rebel side. Now she finally knew the truth; her mother was reborn, evil incarnate, and she was a product of that evil. She'd just as soon have not learned the real truth.

"Phoenix?" Gabrielle wondered if she should just get Xena. No, she'd handle this. It was her problem. Xena had enough to worry about on her own without this added to it. "Listen, Phoenix." She stood behind the taller woman, and then took her elbow when Phoenix ignored her. "So you're a little *rowdy*," -- to put it mildly. "That doesn't mean you're *evil*, even a little bit. Each time you're reincarnated, more of the evil dissipates -- if you fight the darker part of it -- with just a hint of the karma left from your last lifetime. Take Malik and Xena. Malik is way more a worrywart than Xena ever thought of being, and she can't fight worth a lick. So you see, just because they're the same, doesn't mean they're the *same*."

"But some of her rubbed off on me. I do things... I get pleasure from doing them..." Phoenix whispered.

"True, but that still doesn't mean you're evil. When's the last time you purposefully killed someone?" Phoenix shook her head, smiling a bit. "Okay then, and you don't physically hurt people, or take pleasure in that act..."

"Well, there is the S&M..." She watched the blush heat Gabrielle's face and remembered she was speaking with her *Grandmother*-- oh, by the Goddesses!

Gabrielle could see the turmoil, patted her shoulder, and gave her, her kindest smile. "Hey, I'm pretty darn young to be a granny, don't ya think?"

It was nice of Gabrielle to try and console her like this, but deep down, Phoenix still believed she was nothing more than the spawn of evil.

"There you are!" Xena stepped out onto the porch, searching and finding her mate." What's up?" she asked, walking towards them.

In that moment, Gabrielle decided she should tell Xena who Phoenix was and pray the past didn't repeat itself. "Xena, we need to talk."

* * *

After Xena listened to the tale, to what really had happened that time in Phoenix's cab when they had first met the odd young woman, she stood quietly, thinking. And while she was taking a moment to mull over her thoughts and her emotions, Raven dropped down from over the roof onto the ground below the porch, startling her, throwing Xena back into the past.

"Solan, I know that's you. Come out from where you're hiding..."

"Sorry," Raven said, looking up at her, ripping Xena out from her memories. She frowned when she saw tears begin to pool in Xena's eyes, the expression that of someone who had just learned some horrible event had taken place. "Bird was stuck in the chimney..." she let her words trail off, not knowing what was affecting Xena so.

Gabrielle knew, and she just stared down at Raven a moment before going to Xena's side. "Come inside," she said gently, pulling at her arm.

Xena let herself be led, glancing back at Raven, eyes narrowed, mind spinning.

Raven looked at Phoenix when they were gone. "What was that all about?"

"It's better you don't ask; at least wait a day or so." She followed Gabrielle and Xena inside.

The mood in the house was sullen when Raven entered. She avoided Xena's gaze as much as possible, noting Phoenix was nowhere in sight. That worried her. And Gabrielle picked up on that worry, taking the taller woman's arm and sitting her down, figuring now was as good a time as any to fill her in on what she deserved to know.

Raven, although not entirely disbelieving, still held a bit of doubt after Gabrielle's story was over. She gazed at Xena, sending her a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry about your son, and what Gabrielle's daughter did, but I hope you don't take it out on Phoenix. She, like me, is merely the offspring of those poor souls."

Xena had been telling herself the very same thing the past hour. She nodded. "I don't blame Phoenix, nor have I any resentment towards her." Although it did explain the inner turmoil she felt when she looked at the strawberry-blonde.

"Good," Raven was pleased.

Xena could now see her son in Raven and wondered how she could have ever missed it? "And I know you're not him, but you're a part of him, and it shows... I'm glad we met."

Gabrielle was near tears. She stood and went to the kitchen for a glass of water, anything to pull herself together.

Raven was partially content with the feeling of caring exuding from Xena, but something troubled her. She knew she needed to find Phoenix, and soon. "I'm just going to check on Phoenix," she said, and rose. She passed Gabrielle coming down the hall, smiled for her benefit, and continued on her way.

Chapter 18

Raven tapped an impatient finger on the banister, knowing Phoenix couldn't have gotten far, though Raven neither heard nor saw a trace of her. She strode purposefully back to her suite after having searched inside the entire house. Directly outside her door, she looked up.

Pressing the release plate, she dropped the attic door. Once up, she pulled the tension lock free and the ladder came back at her command, folding the door silently shut. She glanced around half-heartedly. "Nice and dark, but far too dusty for you, Phoenix." After no reply, she went to the window nearest her and raised it, slipping out onto the ledge, rocked off balance for a moment by the cold night air prickling her skin.

She surveyed the rooftop and moved along as her instincts told her. At the center slope, she braced her hand against the main chimney, appreciating its considerable heat. She sidestepped down to the beginning of the west roof range and stopped at the huddling shadow of Phoenix pressed against the warm chimney.

Raven sat next to her with absolute quiet. Phoenix had managed to find enough comfort on the cold, slanting rooftop to fall asleep. Her eyes grew distant as she watched Phoenix breathing. She moved closer and fit herself around Phoenix's shorter form with ease.

Phoenix woke after a moment, blinking into Raven's neck, terribly disoriented, but she didn't move away. She knew Raven's special scent and figured out who was holding her -- *why* was the mystery.

"Clever place to hide. I may not have found you until you froze to death and rolled off," Raven said lightly, somehow knowing Phoenix was awake.

Phoenix tried to clear her mind for conversation, knowing Raven had not come to offer body heat.

"You talk, I listen," Raven stated, her tone a caress of kindness.

Phoenix felt herself releasing, un-stiffening every usual mode of protection. "It just gets too tiring. I've been patient. I've been silent. I've been open. I give everything. I accept what I'm offered, and it comes out the same in the end: I'm just not enough of *good*, and too much of *evil*..." Phoenix was crying silently, letting herself go within the safety of Raven's offering.

Saying nothing, Raven stroked a light caress across Phoenix's back. Her eyes filled for the woman in her arms, but she stayed silent wanting Phoenix's release complete.

"God has obviously over-estimated my level of tolerance." Phoenix's nerves flopped her stomach over; she had not intended to disclose quite so much. Her anxiety rose with Raven's silence. She started to pull away from the taller woman's comforting embrace.

"Ah-ah. I'm not ready for you to move away," Raven whispered, pulling her back into her. "You don't have to be afraid of me." Raven locked her fingers behind Phoenix's back. "Now it's my turn to talk-- *you* listen. It breaks my heart that you don't realize how cherished you are. So what, you had an evil mother? And now you think you're just as evil? We all have our insecurities and confusions. They keep us convinced that honesty is the worst policy. Every one of us believes we're one word away from being found out and being found unacceptable. It's an amazing psychological dilemma most humans fight their entire lives.

"In that, I'll bet it's true that the Gods know their children's minds have been poisoned. But I think he, or she, or they, are waiting for every one of us to find our own personal antidotes. I believe each of us was made possessing the ability necessary to cope -- and prosper. Let's take you, for instance. What would you say your special ability is?"

Phoenix sputtered a hugh into Raven's neck. "To provide a comfortable, if sometimes hectic, ride before my passengers reach their final destination."

Raven popped her lightly on the head. "Eeeht," she sounded a buzzer. "Wrong answer - try again."

They both laughed, then Phoenix thought about it more seriously. "The only thing I can say is *feeling -- plugging into people. I used to do it to connect.* It rarely helps anything though. I stopped it a long time ago, before I completely went insane, feeling everything of everyone. And then I tried again, fell right back into the same ole routine. But being in love with you-" Phoenix's face screwed up on Raven's shoulder and she froze inside, realizing she'd just told Raven she was in love with her. She didn't want to be clutched into Raven anymore, the moment too raw for touch.

Raven released her grip, and Phoenix sat upright, turned, and wrapped her arms around her knees, staring off into the night.

"Phoenix... look at me." Raven's voice was deep and low.

"I can't."

"Yes. You *can*." Raven touched the fingers of her open hand to Phoenix's chin, until she turned back to her. "It's ok. There's nothing to be afraid of, or ashamed of. Do you think the Gods wouldn't be pleased that you can see the beauty in everyone, and want to share that beauty? Even though you try and be this dark and evil being?"

"It's too bad everyone doesn't have your attitude," Phoenix said with heavy irony, "Maybe I wouldn't have found hurt so easy to come by. Maybe if I had turned my plug inward I would have seen some of the trouble coming before it got here." Phoenix hoped she'd diverted Raven off of them personally.

Raven noticed Phoenix's effort, and also that Phoenix wasn't looking at her as directly as she usually did. "Maybe it's time you turned it inward. I'm sure God gave you the ability for a good reason." Raven turned her head and stared out toward the lake.

Phoenix's eyes darted to Raven's, and Raven's gaze sprang back until their eyes locked. "Gotcha!"

They both laughed, relieving the tension.

"Look at me, I'll take you on a practice run... Show you how."

"Huh?" Phoenix asked, confused.

"Hook into me."

Phoenix knew she had wanted to plug into Raven since she'd first met her. It had never worked the many times she tried. "I can't. I've tried. We're on different frequencies or something."

"Try again. You'll get in this time. All you had to do was *ask*." Raven smirked.

Phoenix's heart and mind fluttered at the thought. Mesmerized with the possibility, Phoenix stared at her. "You were blocking me? I didn't know that could be done..."

Raven nodded. "No more resistance from me-- come on, turn around again."

Phoenix moved around and Raven closed in, pulling her tightly into the gap between her legs and circling her arms around Phoenix's back. "I used to do this all the time with Gabby, when we were young. We'll do it together."

Heart pounding, Phoenix asked, "You can look inside, too?" Raven was turning out to be more of a paradox than she'd first thought.

Raven nodded again. "Just relax," she whispered, and she touched her lips to Phoenix's. As Phoenix's heart exploded from Raven's unexpected kiss, she felt herself dropping quickly into blackness. She observed herself without alarm, although she knew this was not her normal plug's connection. She was entering an altered state, she happily realized. Her mind lit up with the understanding. Raven was going to weave their minds together not by the visual, but by using her life's breath.

In the blackness, Raven appeared, pulling away from their on-going kiss to look deep into Phoenix's eyes. She grinned down at her and held out her hands for Phoenix to take hold, which she did.

"I thought we'd do something better than just probe each others minds. Come on." Raven walked with her a few steps when suddenly the image burst into white, and the faces of Hope, Solan, Xena and Gabrielle jumbled and spun through her perception, joining Phoenix

in a flurry of sparks until they became so bright, the image exploded into a radiant golden fireball. Phoenix stepped into it, consumed in such perfect joy, she allowed open some part of herself that she didn't know she'd kept locked, until then.

Lost in the total ecstasy of joining, Phoenix had no intention of returning to her mind, body, or life, as she'd known it. Raven's voice filled her consciousness from the unbound reaches she had released into.

"Not now, Phoenix. Let's go for a visit instead."

Phoenix felt a pressure, then a jolting push within her and the background transformed.

An orange-hued sky shone above and Phoenix looked at herself, and then saw Raven off to her right. She saw the distant horizon against the sky, layers of multi-colored forest peaking and dropping; around where they stood bloomed the white spiraling foliage that she realized grew at the base of their village square back home. They were back in their collective consciousness, but forward in this alternate time, with Phoenix's real parents.

Turning excited eyes on Raven, Phoenix blurted the obvious, "Raven! I'm *home!*" She yanked Raven along with her as she took off running. She followed the sound up ahead, needing to see the majesty of the Great Falls that had been the place where she was first seeded.

Raven allowed herself to be pulled along, laughing with Phoenix in her exuberance. They stopped, the sight of the inspiring waters' living brilliance stupefying the senses.

"It's all here for you, Phoenix. Right here in your head, anytime you need it."

Phoenix, stunned, turned to her; "You pulled this from *my* head?"

"Mm-Hmm. And I'll bet if you focus, you'll even feel that the peace you thought you'd lost is still with you, even after all this time, right here inside your own mind."

Phoenix knew she was right and couldn't conceive, in that crystalline moment's recollection of home, how she'd possibly believed she was ever truly *evil*.

Phoenix felt a sudden shove and she was falling again through blackness. She opened her eyes to find Raven standing with her on the lawn in front of the main entrance to Malik's big house.

Phoenix's eyes went up to the roof. "You're good! Didn't even need the Tele." She laughed, and then hugged Raven tightly. "I thank the Goddess we were never intimate; I'd have lost my mind, or spontaneously combusted," she said, her eyes alight with wonder.

Raven grinned wide. "You're not lost now -- we just *were* intimate."

A clear image flashed through Phoenix's mind of their bodies pressed together.

To ease the embarrassment deepening her lifter's complexion, Raven asked, "Was it good for you, too?"

Chapter 19

"Ok, who wants hot chocolate?" Malik called, carrying in a tray laden with mugs and a bowl of marshmallows.

"Oh, count me in," voiced Gabrielle. "I absolutely love anything chocolate." She had discovered she had quite a "sweet-tooth," as Sonny had called it, back in the 21st Century, and then Phoenix again in the year 3K. Malik went around the room as each one took a helping of the delicious concoction. She noted Raven's sullen look and felt bad for the younger woman. She, too, had been completely surprised when Phoenix had exchanged presents with everyone but Raven.

"Well, I'm outta here. Enjoy the night!" Phoenix sang, pushing herself off the couch. She walked over to Raven, fighting with an inner smile that wanted out badly, and reached out a hand towards her. "Drive me home?"

Raven had a mind to tell her no, but because of the lovesick puppy she had become, she immediately stood. When she passed by Gabby and saw that smirk, she promptly stuck out her tongue and leaned in, whispering, "People in glass dwellings..." walking quickly away before Gabby could reply.

* * *

"You don't even have a tree up? Raven asked when they entered Phoenix's small apartment.

"That's why *you're* here." Phoenix laughed gaily and jogged away from her. She unpacked the tree, gestured to the boxes and boxes of fiber optic lights, retractable tinsel, and tree hangings, then said over her shoulder as she climbed the stairs, "There's more, be back in a sec."

While Phoenix searched for more ornaments for the tree, she could feel her, feel the beauty Raven was experiencing, and the wonderment, and Phoenix had to be with her to share -- to see her. She went back to the living room. Raven was lying beneath the tree, her torso completely under it, legs sticking out, crossed at the ankles. And for once, she had removed that hat. But it was within close reach.

Phoenix smiled when she heard her whistling to Christmas music playing softly from the corner. Raven had hung maybe five strands of lights and a couple boxes of mirrored glass balls. *So much for hanging ornaments*, she thought.

Raven had also turned all the lights off so only the flickering lights on the tree and a few candles lit here and there illuminated the room in sparks of color. The air was scented with cedar and pine, and Phoenix was filled with the romance of the moment. Quietly, she went to her, stood looking down at Raven's lower body.

"O Holy Night," breathed from the stereo. And that it was.

She moved from Raven's stocking feet and bent her head to look at her, but the tree completely blocked her view. If she bent anymore, Raven would surely see her, and Phoenix didn't want her to know she was there just yet.

She stepped over Raven's legs, stood with them between her own, and dropped to her knees just as the words "*Fall on your knees...*" came from the stereo. She straddled Raven's hips a moment, and then sat gently.

"Only me," she reported when she felt Raven jerk. She'd made sure Raven couldn't sit up or wiggle out from under, and that's how Phoenix wanted it, for the moment.

"Why are you sitting on me? More 'Experimenting?'" Raven's deep, sugary voice went through Phoenix like a speeding Beemer through a lightning storm, carefully, but with a sure purpose.

"Because I want to. You mind?"

"Mm-mm." She shifted slightly, and Phoenix settled closer, feeling something stirring in her stomach. She ignored it,

concentrating on staring at Raven's own tummy and the muscles she could see defined by the tight tee shirt she wore.

"Pretty under there, huh?" She laid her hands on Raven's abdomen, traced the indents with her fingers, smiling when the muscles tensed immediately from her touch.

"Very pretty," Raven answered, her voice deeper for some reason.

Phoenix searched for her through the branches, her head bobbing around for the clearings. She saw a face finally, and saw that her eyes were closed. "Liar, your eyes aren't even open."

Raven's eyes did open then, all of the tree lights catching and reflecting in them, the display taking Phoenix's breath away.

"Sit up," Raven instructed, and when Phoenix did rise to her knees but not off, she shimmied out from under the tree until her chest was just under Phoenix's crotch and she blushed, quickly pushing herself up to a full sitting position, meeting Phoenix's frank look with a sweet shy one. She suppressed a moan when Phoenix promptly sat back down in her lap.

"I love your eyes, Rave," Phoenix whispered, teetering closer, not realizing how off balance she was, until she jerked and had to grab Raven's shoulders to keep them from falling into the tree.

"Hmmm, so much I didn't even get a present?"

Phoenix smiled, knowing in her head Raven had been disappointed, that not being Phoenix's intent. She would remedy that as soon as possible now that they were alone. She reached to the side, grabbed a holographic imager from one of the bags, peeled off the coated backing, and stuck it to her lips.

Phoenix was suddenly wrapped as a brightly colored Christmas package; covered in a metallic purple color, encircled with silver ribbon, and topped off with a big, beautiful bow.

Raven blew out a quick breath, not expecting this. She reached up, gently pulling the bow off, getting Phoenix's message clearly. She let the imager fall from her fingers and put that hand to Phoenix's face, drawing her closer, moving forward with parted lips, closing the short distance between them.

Phoenix drew in a trembling breath as Raven's lips brushed not her own, but her dark eyebrows, her temples, just under each eye, then along her jaw, her chin, and lastly, the tip of her nose.

A puff of air broke from Phoenix, and she leaned into Raven, seeking her mouth. Raven felt the tip of Phoenix's tongue sweep over hers, and she pulled back, smiling, leaning forward again, their lips meeting once more. This time, before Raven could pull away, Phoenix's tongue was caressing inside her mouth in slow circles as her hands pulled at Raven's head, gently. Raven wrapped her arms around Phoenix's waist, coaxing her closer with a sudden surge of desire, and she opened herself up fully to her. *Finally.*

Oh Night divine, the radio played on...

Chapter 20

The two weeks before Malik's final concert were excruciating. Thank the Goddess the concert's preparation and final planning gave her some relief from constantly thinking about what was really at stake. Christmas had helped take her mind off the impending event, for a while. But regardless of how much she could stave off the thoughts during the day, night was the hardest time; Malik found herself sleeping less and less as the day approached.

About half way through the week, Xena came downstairs at three in the morning to find Malik pacing in the living room. "What?" Xena asked.

After she recovered from the near heart attack her panther-like past-self had almost given her, she answered, "What else?" She paused, then said softly, "Gabby..." after which, she promptly returned to her pacing.

"Sit," Xena said.

Malik, noticing Xena was her usual talkative self, took a cushion on the sofa beside the one Xena had.

"Talk," Xena coaxed.

If Xena continued with the ceaseless chatter, Malik was never going to get a word in edgewise. The thought caused her to snort. She looked in Xena's general direction and began.

"I'm trying not to think about it, Xena. I really am. But the more I try to push it from my mind, the worse it becomes. I want to stay positive, to visualize how Gabby will react to *your* plan," the emphasis on "your" not going unnoticed by the Warrior Princess. "But no matter how positive I am... I'm terrified!" Malik came close to yelling the final two words.

"Shhhh!" You're going to wake up the entire house, and then won't *we* have some hefty explaining to do?" Xena whispered.

"Wow, you can speak more than one syllable words, and even more than one at a time, too. I'm impressed." Malik had always used sarcasm as a defense mechanism, never understanding until the past few weeks, who to blame that on.

Xena gave Malik, *The Look*.

"Okay... okay, sorry. I'm scared. Besides, you're to blame for this part of my psychological makeup."

"How so?" Xena queried, knowing only the makeup that was used as face decoration.

Seeing Xena's confused look, she explained. "I'm you... a watered down version, but you nonetheless, right?"

"Right?"

Oh great, we're back to the one-syllable words again, anyway... "I inherited that part of my personality from you... the sarcastic part." *Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third...* she wondered when Abbott and Costello were going to stroll out of the coat closet. She couldn't keep from rolling her eyes.

"I get it," Xena laughingly replied, giving the soon to be ex-singing phenomenon a playful shove. "And don't blame me. It's my mother from whom I inherited it. So blame your proverbial grandmother."

"Okay... Xena, will Gabby *like* this?" Malik was still fighting her insecurities.

"She's gonna *love* this."

Malik could almost put her fears to rest when she looked in the warrior's eyes. Her baby blues held the confidence that Malik had always wished for in her own. And when she saw it was possible through Xena, she could actually believe that it was possible for her, too.

A change in subject was in order. "What was -- is your mother like, Xena?" The curiosity about the woman referred to as Warrior Princess had nagged at her since that first day in the mall.

And so, more to occupy the mind of her friend than for her enjoyment, Xena began the long, sometimes sad history of Xena: Warrior Princess and The Battling Bard of Potedia.

* * *

"Pool?" Raven asked.

Gabby looked at Raven, answering, "I'm really not in the mood to swim just now, you go." She was distracted, glancing from the S-Book in her lap back and forth to Malik playing darts across the playroom with Xena and Gabrielle.

"No -- I mean have a game of pool with me?" Raven motioned with an invisible cue stick striking invisible balls.

Gabby laughed, feeling foolish. "Sure, what the heck. You haven't kicked my butt in a while."

"You rack 'em, I'll break."

Gabby went to collect the balls, struggling with the order of solids, stripes... one... the other... *never seems hard when Raven does it.*

"Just follow the colors. Make a descending pattern."

Gabby looked up and smiled at Phoenix's advice as she was migrating over to the table; once Phoenix spotted someone ready to play, she was on it like a bee on honey.

"She'll figure it out. Don't go breathing down her neck and confuse her." Malik said.

"Do you two have to start with each other *already*? It's barely ten in the morning." Gabrielle came over and put an arm through Phoenix's, giving Malik a fake glower.

"Me? I didn't do anything!"

"Alright, just break, Raven." Gabby got all the balls in a satisfactory order and went to find her favorite 21-ounce cue stick.

"Back it up, you're crowding me." Raven gave Gabrielle a series of light pokes with the stick until she had more than enough room.

"Just break!" Malik ordered. "You're not launching a friggin' rocket."

"Depends on her mood. I'd get away from the table if I were you." Gabby came around the table with her warning, knowing Raven's breaks could get a bit... over zealous.

"You be quiet. I don't do that anymore," Raven playfully snapped back at Gabby's remark.

"You do so! A stray six-ball came... this close... to breaking my kneecap last time we played!" Gabby reminded her as she extended her thumb and index finger to within an inch of one another, exuding charm with a smile.

"*Sure...* Give me a good reason to wipe you out before you get near enough to even *scratch*." Raven sent Gabby a devilish look. Or tried to, at least.

"You're too cocky -- my dinar's on Gabby." Xena said, digging in her pockets.

"Good way to lose it..." Raven said, took aim, and shot a hard angled split, pocketing two on the far side.

"Lucky break -- I got five on Gabby, too." Malik said to aggravate Raven.

"I'll break five of your mini disks if you don't step back and hush up, McCormick." Raven "aggravated" back.

"You'll shoot that fifteen in over there and leave her alone," Gabby advised, pointing to the ball she meant and giving Raven a firm stare. She sidled herself in front of Raven, pointing a finger at her, and giving her a loving look. Gabby knew Raven hated that she was so deeply in love with Malik, and Malik standing there, clueless.

"Now play nice. You know she's just egging you on." Gabby turned to Malik, took the stick from her, and gave her a light shove, which only resulted in forcing herself back a step or two. She didn't see the three behind her smile at her failed attempt, but she did see the gleam in Malik's eyes and called Xena over. Xena handed Gabrielle the darts still in her hand and went over to the smaller woman.

"Here," Gabby instructed, placing Xena's hand on Malik's shoulder. "Now push." Xena pushed, and this time Malik was

moved. "Thank you." She smiled, and Xena nonchalantly returned to her dart game with her Gabrielle.

"Now, for being bad, you lose your turn." Gabby promptly informed Raven, suppressing a smile as she watched the slowly deepening frown taking over Raven's eyes. She went about clearing the table. Raven had taught her well in the years they'd known each other, and Gabby was even able to whip some McCormick butt the second time she played her. And to further flaunt her win, Gabby blew on her nails and wiped them across the front of her shirt.

Eventually, it took Phoenix to beat her the fifth game, the fourth one being against Xena, who was still pouting, sitting a few feet away on a stool at the bar watching.

Malik sat beside her, watching and thinking. Gabby had been acting strangely toward her as the games continued. Xena noticed something affected Malik, although Malik pretended she didn't notice Gabby's ignorance of her.

Gabrielle put in some CD's, and when Concrete Blonde's, "Why Don't You See Me," filled the room, something started to seethe quickly to the surface of Gabby's awareness. In a moment of desperation, she flung her feelings at Malik, hoping they'd latch themselves securely into her. Her eyes locked with strong, sharp intent on Malik's as the song's power carried a clear message slamming through the room. But was it clear enough to pierce Malik's oblivion?

Knowing the transmission was -- at least from her end -- complete, Gabby withdrew back into herself and turned toward Raven, "Another game for restitution?" She smiled whole-heartedly, somewhat buoyant in her release.

"Sure. But no help from your groupies over there, this time."

Chapter 21

With a sharp knock, her stage manager called from outside Malik's dressing room door, "*Two* minutes, Malik!"

Malik nodded, knowing that he didn't see her, but knew she heard him. She turned to stare at herself in the mirror. *Well, tonight's the night*, she thought. Surprisingly, she felt no anxiety. That was good, she didn't need that emotion piled on top of all the others swarming around inside her. "Tonight, you're either mine, or you're not." She stood, took a relaxing breath, and turned towards the door.

Xena knocked, and then opened the door, greeting Malik with a smile. "Hey," she said.

"Hey, yourself." Malik returned the smile. She beckoned Xena inside, and Xena stepped in, closing the door behind her. She leaned against it, lifting her brows. "Gabby's with Gabrielle," she informed. "It's packed out there."

Malik nodded. "When isn't it?" They shared a laugh. "Well, I better get to it then."

"I'm rooting for ya," Xena said, side-stepping her new friend as she held the door open for her.

"Thanks." She stopped, stared eye-to-eye at Xena, and said, "You know, if this works out as I hope, I have *you* to thank for it."

Xena grinned, full of herself.

Malik smirked and added quickly before Xena floated into the clouds, "If *it doesn't*," she paused for dramatic effect, "I'll kick your butt at Virtual Monopoly again!" Her laughter trailed behind her, as did a grumpy looking warrior.

* * *

As soon as Malik stepped out onto the stage, the crowd erupted. She smiled sweetly at her fans, waving. She spotted Gabby in the front row staring up at her and clapping enthusiastically. Malik's eyes took in her smaller friend, and if Gabby couldn't tell how much she wanted her, then that woman was just plain dense. *But after tonight, she would know for sure*, Malik vowed. *No more pretending, no more hiding her feelings or her wants and needs.*

She saw Xena joining her friends below and winked at her. Then she took the mic and said a hello to the excited fans. "As you all know, this will be my last live concert, so you're privy to something special here tonight.

The crowd hooted and hollered.

"So I guess I have to make it a memorable show for ya, huh?"

"WE LOVE YOU, MALIK!" people screamed from every direction.

The house lights dimmed, and a hush came over the crowd. Malik turned away, facing the band behind her. She began with one of her more popular hits; leading straight into two more on the top 10 list that month. She needed to be in her zone for what was about to happen, needed to work up the nerve to finally release all those bottled up feelings hidden deep down inside her.

Everyone enjoyed her energy on stage, her presence. She was magical, her sky blue eyes riveting when they stared down at any one person. Flash lasers went off every now and again, capturing her beauty for ages to come.

Malik had as much fun with the crowd as they were having with her. She danced around, threw roses to THEM, laughing and grooving to some of the more naughty beats.

Gabby watched her the entire time, hardly ever taking her eyes off the woman, simply entranced with her. She danced in the aisle with everyone else, poking Xena at one point when she was just standing there like a bump on a log, the Warrior Princess watching her smaller bard friend and lover going at it with no inhibitions.

* * *

After Malik's fourth song, all having been rather fast numbers - non-meaningful towards her mission to make Gabby aware -- she walked around the stage cooling off and drinking some water. She conferred with one of her backup singers for an upcoming number.

"*Possession*" would be her selected song for her first revelation to Gabby. She stared straight ahead, eyes purposefully not meeting Gabby's, feeling and knowing the woman she loved was staring at her with those deep green eyes, and began...

*"Listen as the wind blows
from across the great divide,
Voices trapped in yearning,
memories trapped in time,"*

Gabby tried to catch Malik's eye; she missed Malik's looking down at her while she danced around the platform. It seemed almost as if Malik was purposefully keeping her eyes away.

*"The night is my companion
and solitude my guide,
Would I spend forever here
and not be satisfied,"*

Malik finally looked directly at Gabby, her eyes cutting to the younger woman so suddenly, Gabby was almost knocked off balance from the force and their intensity.

*"And I would be the one
to hold you down,
kiss you so hard,"*

Gabby's eyebrows shot up her forehead, her body stood frozen, staring back at Malik. She could feel her pulses racing, her mind a cauldron of swirling emotion.

*"I'll take your breath away
and after I'd... wipe away the tears,
Just close your eyes dear"*

Xena watched Malik's Gabby, smiling secretly. She had her arm around Gabrielle and glanced down at her bard to watch the expressions flicker across her features. It was as if they were the only six in the room, the five women below the stage, and that one amazing woman on it.

*"Through this world I've stumbled
so many times betrayed,
Trying to find an honest word,
to find... the truth enslaved,
Oh you speak to me in riddles and
you speak to me in rhymes
My body aches to breathe your breath,
your words keep me alive,"*

Gabby felt faint, her eyes never leaving Malik's. She prayed her legs didn't buckle under her.

*"And I would be the one
to hold you down,
kiss you so hard,"*

Oh holy Mother of God, I'm going to faint, Gabby just knew it.

*"I'll take your breath away
and after I'd wipe away the tears,
Just close your eyes,"*

Malik swung away from the mic, moving around the stage as if in a daze while the instrumental part flowed over and through her body, her movements a part of its beat. She was totally caught up in the imagery of the words she'd just sang to Gabby. She turned back, saw Gabby's eyes had never left her form.

*"Into this night I wander,
it's morning that I dread,
Another day of knowing of
the path I fear to tread,
Oh into the sea of waking dreams
I follow without pride,
Nothing stands between us here
and I won't be denied,"*

No you won't, Gabby mentally confirmed.

*"And I would be the one
to hold you down,
kiss you so hard,"*

Gabby could see it, could feel it, and could totally experience it as if Malik was actually putting the words into action right there, in front of 130,000 witnesses.

*"I'll take your breath away
and after I'd wipe away the tears,
Just close your eyes dear.
And I'll hold you down,
kiss you so hard
I'll take your breath away
and after I'd wipe away the tears,
Just close your eyes..."*

As the last notes floated up and around the room, the crowd began to cheer. Malik took a deep breath, looking away from Gabby. *Ok, that went well -- very well*, she assured herself, feeling her own body pulsating. *Now... to get Gabby's heart throbbing...*

To thundering applause, the band started the next ballad; a poignant tune of pain and latent longing. Malik dropped her eyes to Gabby again.

Gabby wondered when Malik had written this song. She didn't recall its haunting score. Her face grew serious as Malik's eyes bore deeper into hers.

The moment Malik lifted the mic to her mouth the room grew quiet.

*"I had a smile...
Stretched from ear to ear...
To see you walking down the road...
We meet at the lights...
I stare for a while ...
The world around us disappears...
It's just you and me...
On my island of hope...
A breath between us... could be miles ...
Let me surround you...
My sea to your shore...
Let me be the calm you seek...
Ohhhhh, but every time
I'm close to you...
There's too much I can't say...
And you just walk away... "*

A single tear fell down Malik's cheek, but she continued, *had* to continue, releasing it all to Gabby and then let fate take it from there.

*"And I forgot...
To tell you..."*

*I love you...
And the night's...
Too long...
And cold here...
Without you...
I grieve in my condition...
For I cannot find the words to say
I need you so..."*

The tears streamed down Gabby's face, and without even realizing she had, she found she had walked through the throng of the energetic audience all the way to the edge of the stage. At that moment, there was no crowd, no screaming fans, even Xena and Gabrielle faded from existence. There was only the two of them. Only *her* telling Gabby, through music and lyrics, what her heart ached to hear. Her eyes widened when Malik held out a hand to her, but she reached for it, grasping it tightly in her own, protesting when Malik pulled her up on stage, only to stop when topaz eyes looked into emerald, singing,

*"Oh but every time I'm close to you...
There's too much I can't say...
And you just walk away...
And I forgot...
To tell you...
I love you...
And the night's...
Too long...
And cold here...
Without you...
I grieve in my condition
For I cannot find the words to say...
I need you so babe...
Oh I need you so..."*

Their four friends below, along with the whole audience's cheer, thundered around the room when Malik reached down and tenderly, but deeply, kissed Gabby.

Gabby looked up into Malik's turbulent eyes, her emotions no longer constrained. The realization of what had just happened, and was possibly about to happen, slowly seeping in. The stage emitters began to swirl and Malik's face took on an ethereal glow, and Gabby finally did faint.

Chapter 22

Malik's intent look bore down anxiously on the still features of her unconscious friend. She had considered every scenario -- or so she thought -- of what could happen after she revealed her heart to Gabby. The one she hadn't contemplated was the one she was now faced with, and she was at quite a loss when it came to a resolution. So she waited.

Gabby's eyes fluttered opened after a while, and she came awake with a smile on her mouth that spread over her entire face when she saw Malik. *Oh my Goodness, she is beautiful*, she thought, eyes quickly sweeping down and back up Malik's tall frame. Silver. Gabby loved silver, and loved the color even more when she saw Malik dressed in it. The singer had changed into a one-piece pantsuit while she waited for those beautiful greens to open.

Malik bent and brushed a soft kiss on Gabby's cheek, withdrawing a single red rose from behind her back. As she stood, her gaze fell to the creamy expanse of Gabby's neck, and then slid slowly and seductively downward. Something intense flared through her eyes, wiping the previously felt anxiousness right out from their cobalt depths.

Gabby fought a nearly overpowering need to be closer to Malik as her heart jolted and her pulse pounded. She had a maddening and momentary image of being smothered against Malik's chest, crushed against her as if Malik was hugging her with all she felt.

"Can we go somewhere and talk?" Gabby whispered, feeling the small room closing in on them, the walls all too consuming.

* * *

"It's as if I know you already -- inside, outside, your hopes, your dreams," Malik said quietly, her thumb stroking along the back of Gabby's hand. They walked, fingers clasped together, along the sandy shore of Lerrette's famous beach. "I couldn't stop thinking of you all day." She laughed shyly at herself and disclosed, "I was a basket case until this morning. It's silly, I know, but I want you to know *everything*, Gabby: How I feel, what I want, my hopes, my dreams, and my wishes." She paused for breath, then forged onward, "I'll totally understand if you're not interested -- I *will* understand," Malik needed to stress, "but I HAD to let you know how I felt -- FEEL." *Oh Goddess, I'm rambling!* She clamped her mouth shut, took a fleeting glance at Gabby, then away.

"It's not so silly," Gabby said, circling Malik's averted face with an intense look. "And I want to know anything you wish to tell me."

"Really?" Malik had some lingering doubts.

"Yes! Really." Gabby stopped walking, and they faced one another. "You are so clueless, Malik."

"Huh?" At that moment, yes, she had no clue what Gabby was alluding to.

Gabby chuckled and spelled it out for her, "I-L-O-V-E-Y-O-U."

"But Raven -- That night, you sang -- I thought..."

Gabby let her stumble and stammer, completely enthralled with the expressions passing over Malik's face as she slowly came to the ultimate conclusion. "She wasn't trying to make Phoenix jealous, she was trying to make ME jealous?"

Laughing, Gabby poked her in the chest and said, "*Bingo!*"

* * *

They went to the only place that didn't have people clamoring for their undivided attention; the only place they could go, the HAL. They had no idea that's where they were headed, until they landed in the drive of Wellington University. The pair continued passed the main front doors, on to the building farther back that contained the

Lab. Gabby floated to a stop behind Malik and got out, interlocking their hands once again as they came together, to make their way through the deserted hallways.

Malik started the thermo-heater and lit three fires, hoping the abandoned rooms would warm quickly. She'd forgotten the weather, and taking Gabby to the beach hadn't really been one of her greatest ideas.

She went back to the couch and saw the form of her Gabrielle, still where she'd sat her, curled into a ball. "Let's put on some music. It always helps me feel better." She was away from the woman only seconds, then beside her again, encircling Gabby within the folds of her body.

"With You I'm Born Again" began to waft around them. The song entered Gabby's mind slowly, and when she focused, she found herself being swept into Malik, into this new Malik, who offered her all of their comfortable past. But now there was something else -- something new, complete, a joining somehow, with a total feeling of absolute adoration. She wanted nothing more than that perfect comfort to cover her, surround her in the totality of Malik's offering.

Lifting a hand, Malik ran it down Gabby's long, lustrous hair. "I'm here for you, Gabrielle... anything... whatever you need."

Malik's voice vibrated through the smaller woman. "All I ever needed was *you*." She settled into Malik, the sob breaking from her, shaking her shoulders with its undeniable force.

Rocking her gently, Malik cradled Gabrielle as she released a year's worth of unresolved emotion. Then, when the tears began to subside, she lifted her face to her own; eyes locked, crystalline blue meeting sleepy green. Gabby smiled for her as Malik brushed away the tears that fell with a tender stroking thumb.

Gabby put a hand to her cheek, fingers caressing Malik's jaw, staring into her eyes -- such understanding eyes, eyes that would never look at her with judgment, conviction. Eyes that promised her comfort, and Gabby wanted that comfort -- she teetered forward -- eyes that promised warmth, and Gabby wanted that warmth, needed it.

Malik said softly, luring her in closer, "I love you."

Their lips came together once, then again, and again. And then Malik was staring so intently into her eyes, Gabby smiled shyly and bent her head away. Malik held Gabby's face, drawing her closer, their mouths meeting, lips parted for an even deeper connection.

Stroking with light fingers, Malik held the back of Gabrielle's neck, transmitting the tenderness that had overcome her at the beach. She leaned forward and kissed her temple. Leaving her lips pressed to Gabby's skin, she held her close.

Gabby lolled fully into Malik, face pressed to her neck, taking in the smell; clean, ocean air clinging to her. Her desire surged, and she touched the skin with the tip of her tongue. Drawing it back, she trailed light kisses up Malik's neck. The singer stopped moving. In fact, she stopped breathing, while Gabrielle's soft mouth danced upon her flesh. Gabby tipped Malik's chin, looked into those kind eyes, fell inside those kind eyes as her lips covered Malik's.

Gabby's body shook from the reality, and Malik pulled back, eyes heavy, asking, "Are you still cold?"

Gabby laughed... searching for some answer to explain the emotion she was feeling.

Malik watched her, looked deep into her, felt for her.

"Actually, it's getting quite hot... that thermo-processor sure kicks in quickly..."

"You want I should take you outside and throw you down in the snow?"

Gabby's eyes flickered with some reckoning... something vague... Oh yes, her wish for a snow bank, a couple months or so ago -- her solution to the arousal unleashed in her body upon fantasizing about Malik, while riding with her one night in the Beemer...

Malik cradled her face in her hands, searching her eyes -- her mind -- looking for any sign of fear. Seeing none, feeling none, she took a chance.

"You want..." she drew Gabrielle into her, touching her lips with the softest urgency, then pulling back, whispering deeply, "me to hold you down..." Malik coaxed Gabby's tongue into her mouth,

suckled lightly, releasing her slowly, "right here..." meeting her again with a delicate lick and covered her mouth over Gabrielle's still parted lips. Malik's eyes flickered lazily as she asked against Gabby's open, accepting mouth, "kiss you so hard?"

It was just a breath, but on it a word carried that made it so much more, "Yes..."

They stood as one, mouths, breasts, and knees touching, and Malik led her to the HAL. In a dream daze, Gabby fingered the console, and then let Malik back her into the large circular room with slow, deep kisses.

Malik began kissing her harder, even before the blue light clicked on, and music surrounded them with its warmth, transcending their minds into a new plain of the world, and of one another.

With mere thoughts, Malik parted Gabby's clothes from her ardent body. Malik's love flooded through her, through her hands, caressing -- giving more than she'd ever allowed herself to release to anyone.

Gabby held tightly as she quaked under Malik, soaring up higher, murmuring in Malik's mouth the incoherence she'd fallen into. The usual sharpness of her mind had succumbed to their absolute connection. Every fiber of her felt, and took, and needed. Her mind was not allowed to interfere.

Malik also gave, when it was asked, and took, when it was offered.

"I want you to feel it, Gabrielle. I have a deeper love to offer you..." She moved over Gabby, like a cloak, covering her in penetrating warmth. There was a brush of Malik's lips on hers -- on her neck -- her chest -- breasts -- fever at her stomach as Malik kissed there, and still lower.

Gabby opened up for her, welcoming Malik in. She was caught in mid sigh. *How could it feel so good?* There was a slight pulling -- a strong pulling, a taking, a giving.

Gabby felt everything... penetrating into her... Wasn't aware of exactly what Malik was doing to her... wasn't aware of exactly what Malik was doing.

Malik drew fingers out of Gabby -- their hands came together and Gabby pulled at Malik's hands, extending Malik's arms up -- and Malik went deeper -- pulling... pulling herself into Gabby -- into Malik, covering her face with Gabby's mist -- clean, sweet, warm, burning hot -- sliding over Gabby -- sliding into her -- making her know... feel... want. Making flames coarse without mercy... quicken into her, making Gabby shatter... Shatter all that was left of Gabby, very little after the coming -- making Gabby writhe...

Gabby began a long tortured groan, rumbling first in her chest, then in her throat, then through parted lips.

After, Malik sank down on her, her face covered still in Gabby's wetness, her voice thick with her promised, "Even deeper now, Gabrielle... Come with me."

Gabby did not know when the mating had begun, did not care. She stared into Malik's eyes as their bodies moved against each other. She reached up and pulled her, and Malik let her full weight down on Gabby, wrapping her arms around her shoulders, pushing in deeper as she comforted Gabby with her mouth -- warm -- like Gabby -- like the sweet nectar of Gabby, pulling it from her as Gabby offered it.

Malik unwrapped herself, needing to touch. She cupped Gabby's face, touching her eyebrows with her thumbs, Gabby's eyelids. Her mouth took their place and she surrounded Gabby's face with adoring kisses, finally coming back to her lips, the corners first, softly, before claiming Gabby as hers with the force of her transcending emotions.

Malik would not release her eyes until she knew the moment they were joined, and the dam broke from them, into each other. The orgasm was all of them, powerful, and they reached a new plateau that neither had been to before. They stood on the very tip of a mountain, looking down at the vastness, and dove in, clinging together, swirling through and around each other.

Shivering, Gabby said breathlessly, "Please, again... It was so beautiful, Malik -- you're so beautiful -- was it my soul touching yours?"

"All three of our souls, Honey, all three." Malik took them there again, a journey so remarkable it made Malik cry, and Gabby clung tightly to her.

Gabby whispered, "I love you, Malik..."

"I've always loved you, Gabrielle -- forever."

Chapter 23

"So," Xena began, grinning as if it were her and Gabrielle's own baby, and in a sense, karmically speaking, it was, "Thought about names yet?"

Gabrielle giggled, not knowing which she was enjoying more, the thrill coursing through her own being, or the excitement on Xena's face. "Xena, it's only been a couple hours since they've known..."

Malik shared their jubilation, and she held Gabby to her body a little harder. They were laying on the sofa, Gabby settled against Malik, who was stretched out behind her. Malik kissed Gabby's temple, then smiled at Xena. "Well, if you two don't mind... We were thinking -- Solan if it's a boy, and Hope if it's a girl."

* * *

Their closeness and their company kept them from thinking of the impending night together, totally together, without the aid of HAL and its mind-altering effects. And Gabby couldn't say she wasn't nervous. In her entire lifetime, or lifetimes, she didn't believe she was ever that skilled as a lover, and she didn't want to disappoint Malik in that area, in any way.

Malik picked up on the smaller woman's troubled emotions as they climbed the stairs side by side at the end of the evening. "Hey," she put a hand on Gabby's arm, "Tell me?"

Gabby shook her head. It was stupid, they just had the most mind-blowing lovemaking, and here she was fretting over a little reality ruining that impression. "I'm ok -- or I will be."

At the door to her suite, Malik's breath blew out, a hard whisper spreading extra tingles across Gabby's throat. "Let's shower," Malik invited, hoping to break the wall of tension she could feel surrounding them.

"You first, I don't mind."

"Why don't we do it together?"

Gabby gulped hard, throat tightening. "Ok." *Why was she so agreeable whenever she was so vulnerable?* she wondered. *And why was it only with Malik?*

When Gabby still hadn't moved, Malik, in a barely audible whisper, called "illuminate," causing the room emitters to switch on. The now ex-singer looked into her love's face. The panic about to break showed clearly.

"Or we could just lie down a while and be close. There's no rush."

Malik didn't understand what Gabrielle could be so afraid of. She loved her, had told her so in writing, in words, in music, in the HAL, in the Beemer, everywhere, in every thing, and in every way. Why was she now hedging on their physical intimacy?

Gabby moved stiffly toward the bed at the far side of the room. Malik sat beside her, suddenly feeling herself go stiff. Maybe Gabby had exaggerated her feelings and was now realizing it?

"You can tell me anything, Gabrielle..."

Gabby's face seemed to fold in on itself, the weight of many emotions too heavy for the fragile muscles to sustain. Malik watched her, Gabby's expressions an open book she couldn't read, blocked by her own mounting insecurities.

Finally, Gabby looked up at her. "I just want it to be as good as in the HAL..."

Malik's eyes popped open. "You're kidding, right?" She couldn't believe it.

Gabby shook her head, staring down, and then lifting her eyes back to Malik's concerned stare. "When I'm with you, I feel... Well, *cherished* is a good word. No one has ever made me feel so totally desired." Gabby rubbed Malik's hand between her own, smiling at the shyness that had taken control of Malik's face. She kissed her hand, wanting to burst from Malik's sweet innocence. And she was struck with a realization, "Are you scared it won't be as good as in the HAL, too?"

Malik let out a solid laugh, then looked at Gabby, her eyes glinting with wicked mirth. "I'm definitely not scared of *That*."

Gabby gave her a droll look. "I'm glad my neurosis amuses you."

Still smiling, Malik stroked her knuckles down Gabby's cheek, said, "Let me try to cure you instead. I can prove with amazing ease how *good* we really are." She kissed Gabby hard and long.

With smooth moves like that, Gabby didn't doubt it, but her meaning had been totally different. She should have said *maybe I wouldn't be as good as the HAL*. "I know you could, but I didn't mean it like that. Oh, I don't know what I'm saying. Maybe I'm going crazy."

"Come here." Malik pulled on her hands, standing. Gabby's cheeks colored under the heat of her gaze as she stared up at Malik. And when Malik's hands touched her shoulders, an involuntary chill ran through her.

"What are you going to do?" Gabby blushed at the shudder in her voice and dropped her eyes.

"I'm going to undress you now, Gabrielle. Don't be afraid, because if you are, then I'll be afraid and we'll be standing here all night."

Undress me? Gabby thought in horror. "Not yet," she stalled, eyes rising, body beginning to tremble like a small newborn chick's.

"I'll be gentle," Malik's calm voice assured, eyes promising, too, lips curving up in a third guarantee. She dropped her hands to Gabby's collar and touched the hot flesh of her neck. Gabrielle almost fell back on the bed, but her wobbling knees kept her upright just by pure determination. And as Malik's hands dropped from button to button, Gabby's breasts tingled against the silky fabric of her blouse. Malik seemed to know because she put her hands inside Gabby's blouse when it fell open and cupped each breast in a square hand, thumbs stroking across already hard nipples. A rush of pink stained Gabby's cheeks when she looked up and found Malik staring down at her, mouth set, eyes burning hot coals of desire.

Explosive currents raced through Gabrielle as her heart hammered against her ribs. It was *really* going to happen, she realized. She closed her eyes, breath labored, knees weakening as her limbs began trembling. She felt Malik's mouth on her neck, hands exploring all of her breasts, releasing the hook in front so they fell free for the gentle touch of her mouth. Gabrielle jumped, eyes opening when Malik took a nipple into her mouth and twirled her tongue around it.

Malik lifted her head, looked deep into Gabrielle's eyes. She cupped her face with a tender hand, tilting her own head, and she smiled down at Gabby. "So strong, yet so timid," she said softly, running a finger down Gabby's chin to her throat, and lower still, to the same nipple she had in her mouth a moment ago. "Do you like it when I touch you, Gabrielle?"

Gabby nodded; closing her eyes again, the sexual heat in Malik's too much to bear.

Malik pulled her closer, and Gabby relaxed, sinking into the cushioning embrace. The roughness of Malik's shirt made her nipples throb, and she pressed closer, shuddering when she felt Malik's thighs against her own and the light pressure she was applying as she pushed her hips against Gabby's.

Malik tilted Gabrielle's head back, claiming her lips with a searching kiss, and Gabby raised herself to meet her kiss, her own mouth urgent, exploring as if she didn't know Malik's mouth by heart already; each kiss like the very first one, and she savored them as such.

Gabrielle was lost, savoring Malik's mouth. She didn't realize Malik had lifted her up into her arms and was gently lowering her down onto the bed, but she knew when Malik's body came over her own, and she just hovered there, not applying any weight. Gabby pulled back, head resting on the down pillow, and she searched Malik's eyes.

Malik slid a hand across and down Gabrielle's silken belly, and when her lover made no protest, she fingered the button on her jeans. She didn't force Gabby, didn't rip the clothing off like they both knew

in their hearts she wanted to. Her ardor was surprisingly, touchingly, restrained as she bent and kissed Gabby, whispering her love for her, and how beautiful she was, dressed, undressed, it made no difference to her.

Gabrielle closed her eyes again, let Malik fondle her breasts, the brown nipples marble hard under her palm, and then Malik took one into her mouth again, tongue caressing the sensitive, swelling bead. She let out a slow breath when she felt Malik's body sinking down between her legs. She put her hands into Malik's thick hair, guiding her mouth to the other breast, gasping when she took that nipple into her mouth with a gentle suck.

"So good, Gabrielle," Malik said, then ran her tongue across Gabby's chest as it arched toward her. Blood pounded in Gabby's brain. Malik followed a path down her ribs to the rise of her stomach with her tongue, circled around her navel and started stroking back up. She held each breast, running her tongue over their points, underneath the medium sized globes, nibbling a little when Gabby's legs pressed into her sides. Her mouth moved magically over her breasts, and she took Gabby's hands, encouraging them to explore.

Gabrielle slipped her hands over Malik's shoulders, kneading, rubbing, feeling the muscles harden, relax, then harden again as Malik moved her body against Gabby's, rocking their lower bodies as one. She pulled on Malik's neck, and when Malik moved up more, she offered her mouth to her and they kissed again, feverishly, every part of their bodies throbbing, it seemed.

"The hell with HAL!" Gabrielle blurted, coiling her tongue around Malik's, meshing their lips together. *This* was a passion she had never felt in the flesh. *This* was an excitement she had never experienced ever in her young life and no machine could ever reproduce that for her.

* * *

"Malik! Let me *sleep* already." Gabby groaned when she felt Malik's hands on her body some time during the wee hours of the morning.

Xena was lying propped up in bed, reading an S-Book on time travel that Gabby had given her when she clearly heard Gabby's plea through the wall behind her.

Gabrielle, awake too, unable to sleep while Xena was awake and not wrapped around her keeping her safe and warm, had heard her alter-self complain. She grabbed her pillow and whacked Xena good and hard with it.

Chapter 24

"Damn it!!" Raven cursed aloud. She and Gabby had been working every free second -- minus Christmas, concerts, and bouts of undying love-- the past seven months and it seemed she was no further than when she had first started. Raven moaned, her thoughts shifting to Phoenix. She shook her head and tried to concentrate on the task at hand. Time travel was a pain in the posterior; at least that was *her* scientific viewpoint.

The house was quiet as Raven moved through the makeshift lab. Her latest trial was an abysmal failure. She had attempted to modify aspects of the Tele experiment to include re-incorporation in an alternate time, as opposed to merely materializing in an alternate location within the same universe. But it had failed -- again. She knew, theoretically, any organic object could be transported to any place, at any time.

If the calibrations were exactly on target... *IF*... A word that scientists of *any* time hated. She was certain of that fact; all scientists work in exact, measurable quantities. Maybe that was why she was having so much trouble concentrating. Love couldn't be measured. And the love she felt for her headstrong lift driver was at the forefront of her thoughts. Poets had exalted the fathomless aspect of the emotion for as long as poetry had existed.

What was that line in Romeo and Juliet, again? "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep. The more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite." Was that true? Raven thought as she recalibrated the chamber's bioorganic feeds for the umpteenth time. *Was love truly immeasurable? Could it not be measured in a look, a touch, or a kiss? And if love is beyond measure, why do we humans keep trying to pigeon-hole it -- Expecting those whom we love*

to fit into our molds and portray only our ideals? Love should be unconditional, free to be what it is, whatever that may be.

"Don't threaten me with love, baby. Let's just go walkin' in the rain." Raven chuckled, and agreed with a "Sing it, Billie." She whistled as the mini disc spun in the remote player. She always enjoyed what Billie Holiday had to say, even when she didn't totally understand.

Raven gave her head another firm shake. It won't help her one bit in getting Xena and Gabrielle back to their own time if all she did with *her* time was think about love and all its charms. "Computer, bring up data 010627," Raven spoke to the console behind her.

Data 010627 has been retrieved, the computer reported moments later.

"Computer, quote 010627-Entry B."

A wormhole is geometry of four-dimensional space-time in which two regions of the universe are connected by a short narrow throat. A classical large-scale wormhole is a solution of the Einstein's field equations, which governs the curvature of space-time. The most interesting thing with wormholes is that they could provide relatively easy means of traveling to distant regions of space or even of traveling backwards in time.

A macroscopic wormhole is not a static structure, it's rather a shape that expands from a singularity with zero throat radiuses to maximum radius and then shrinks back to a singularity again. This expansion-reduction of the radius would be very quick. Even light would not have a chance to pass through the wormhole before it shrinks back to zero radius again. In fact, any now known matter that would fall into the wormhole would pull it together through gravity. If constructing a mathematical model of an open wormhole that allows passage, the equations of general relativity says that matter with an enormous negative pressure is needed to uphold the wormhole gravitationally. The magnitude of the tension of the matter must be greater than the energy density of the matter itself. This would leave us with a material that will have a negative energy density relative to a light beam traveling through it. This kind of material is called

exotic matter because there is no such matter now known. There are some indications that exotic matter can exist. For example between two metal plates there can be field fluctuations that has a negative energy density relative to the field fluctuations in free vacuum. Evaporating black holes also implies that exotic matter can exist.

"Computer, How time travel is possible, 'the Twin Paradox.'"

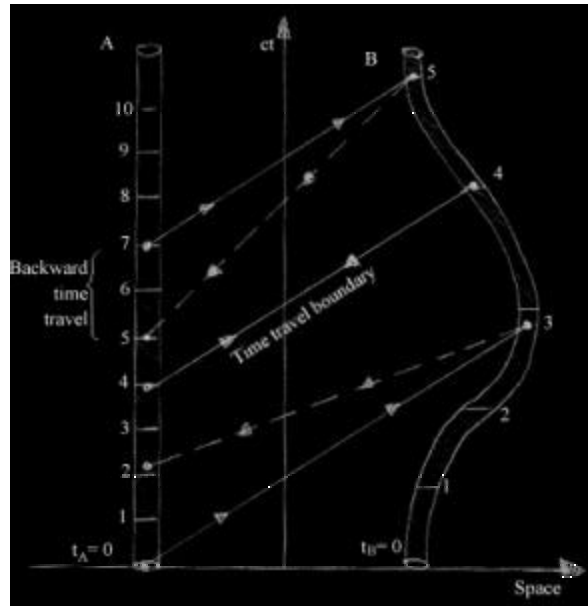
*It is easy to see how one can make a time machine if one considers the "twin paradox" in special relativity. Let an observer A be fixed in a frame and let B be another observer moving with (high) velocity relative to A. The clock moving with B is then going with a slower rate than A's clock because of the time dilation in special relativity. One can write an expression that relate both time as: $T = \gamma * T'$ where gamma is the Lorentz factor:*

Raven quickly scribbled down the mathematical sequence.

$$\gamma = \frac{1}{\sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}}$$

Since gamma is always 1, B's clock is going slower than A's. To have a time machine A and B must be able to hold on to one of the wormholes mouths each. A and B can then communicate either through space or through the wormhole. A message sent through space travels with the speed of light while a message sent through the wormhole takes a shortcut in space-time. A message sent through the wormhole will therefore arrive almost at once if the wormhole is short. In figure 2 one can see a space-time diagram of the situation.

Raven's eyes went to the screen, slowly studying the pixelating image.



"Computer, quote 010627-Entry B01."

Aristotle discussed time and place at length in his Physics. His discussion is very detailed on what it means to talk of the "place," i.e. location, of an object. He notes that place and the object are separate because the object can be moved from one location to another and yet he makes it clear that place has meaning only relative to the surroundings. Thus he notes that a nail in a ship, or water in a vessel, can change its place by virtue of the ship, or vessel, moving, but the nail is still in the ship and the water is still in the vessel. But while he notes that Earth has a place in the heavens, he states that the heavens have no place because there is nothing outside of the heavens (in the dogma of the Ancient Greeks)

She worked her fingers furiously over the console, poking in bits of data, numbers, placements, and coordinates. The adjustments had been made to Tele and were ready for another run-through.

"Wormhole," she muttered to herself absentmindedly. "This is all very simple really," she continued, talking to the computer screen. As Raven waited for her latest recalibrations to be analyzed, she recalled her earlier days before she had used herself as an experimental subject for Tele's creation...

Raven looked around the lab. The ivy plant she had been using was now devoid of its leaves and stood naked on the corner of a workbench. Raven tapped the toe of her boot and pushed her white Stetson further back on her head. "There's got to be something around here." Gabrielle had already threatened her if she touched another of her plants, but what other choice did she have?

"There's always Gabby's cat." She laughed as the sentence escaped her lips. But just as quickly as she spoke it and laughed, she placed guilty fingers over her mouth and bit her bottom lip. She'd kill me if she heard me say that. I've been here too long, she thought, chastising herself. I've turned slaphappy. All this thought of experimentation only confirmed it. Raven playfully slapped herself across the face. Gotta snap outta this.

Then an idea struck her. A pair of stainless steel scissors lay on the table next to the puny ivy. Raven walked over to their location and studied them momentarily. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the highly polished metal. "What I won't do for science," she murmured, remembering some of her past projects and just how far she had gone to prove her theories. Raven sighed and raised the instrument up. With a wince and a quick slice, it was over. In between Raven's finger and thumb a small clump of the scientist's hair was gathered. She had cut the sample from underneath, so it would go unnoticed except by her. She let out a ragged breath and shrugged her broad shoulders. "Oh well," she blew as she placed her hair in the device. Even though hair was dead organic matter, it was organic matter nonetheless and should hypothetically work -- at least well enough to tell if the experiment was successful.

The updated Tele was switched on, and as the machine hummed and blinked feverishly, Raven crossed her fingers. Silly superstition, she chided internally, but they remained crossed. Couldn't hurt. With a final blinding spark of light, the first Tele shut off. So far, so good. After a minute that passed more like an hour, the second Tele that Raven had programmed to retrieve the organism across the room began its mechanical dance. Then it came to an abrupt halt, and

Raven slowly walked over to where it stood. She patted the hatch release with a hesitant touch, not wanting to burn herself. The pad was warm from the immense pressure it had just endured, but not unbearable, so she pushed it open. A small amount of slightly sizzled hair lay within. It worked, not perfectly, but it worked. "Yes!"

She slowly came from her reverie. There was still a lot of work to do. They were nowhere near ready to send a human being through the device to an alternate time, but it was a beginning, and where there was a beginning, an ending was sure to follow... eventually.

"Tomorrow," she said aloud to no one in particular, "We'll see how well you handle sending an object in *time* rather than *place*." She patted the cold shell of Tele and headed for the basement door. She breathed a contented sigh. She was tired and knew that exhaustion and experiments were a dangerous combination. She ascended the stairs, recalling a short verse from grade school. 'He drew a circle that shut me out-- Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But Love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in!' Raven smiled, replacing the 'He' and 'Him' with 'She' and 'Her' of Edwin Markin's "Outwitted" and again thought of Phoenix- she had the feeling she was needed elsewhere. So she went.

Chapter 25

All was quiet, the sky awash with twinkling stars above. A slight fog hovered, its dew misting the grass beneath Phoenix's sneakers. She took in a deep breath, making her way down to the gazebo, seeking solitude. Raven was busy with her time machine, pacing around the lab while jotting down notes and straggled ideas, and Phoenix didn't want to impose on her newly beloved.

The house had a happy atmosphere, as if it, too, was relieved that Malik and Gabby finally joined. But the house was not where Phoenix wanted to be. Although beautiful in a grand way, her mind just needed breathing space, and she always found that out of doors.

The night critters were abounding, scuttling here to there, seeking shelter as she passed by them. Phoenix observed their performance as an outside agent, an unconcerned on-looker watching from behind her own eyes as her mind sifted through bits of memories from the day before.

Phoenix skulked the edge of the woods, taking the long way to the gazebo to avoid being spotted from the house should anyone be watching. She finally reached the octagonal shaped structure and took the three steps leading inside with one leap. She stood and stared out at the peace -- at the moonlight falling over the woods, letting her mind go with the beauty. *It should be like this the entire time -- simple, peaceful.*

She let herself plop onto one of the long benches and sighed her contentment, seeing fleeting images of Raven while she worked on her experiment, and a smile lit up her face. An idle fantasy swept over her, conquering her.

Raven leapt up the steps out of the darkness, startling Phoenix, nearly making her fall from the bench.

"Arg -- Raven!"

Laughing, Raven jumped up and onto the railing. Balancing easily, she grabbed the closest post and swung around it.

"Miss me?" Raven queried.

"You'll fall," Phoenix warned.

"I already have..." Her lips spread into a sweet smile for Phoenix. And when Phoenix returned it with a small, breathless one of her own, Raven's breath caught and she stared right into Phoenix, quoting a poem by Arron M. Kay,

"I fuse all beautiful things I know,
the noble and the true
A surprising miracle then takes place
For the result is you
The moon—
The stars--"

She gestured towards the heavens, dropped her eyes back down to Phoenix, who was staring up at her with a mixture of surprise by this totally unexpected-- and un-characteristic-- act of Raven's, and fear Raven would lose her footing and fall, breaking something.

"The hush of night,
and the dreams they bring to view.
I blend them all with the nightingale's song
And the result is you."

Swinging around the post again, she recited the remainder of the poem.

"Oh guiding night
so kind to me
reviving hope anew

I conjure an everlasting love
And the result is... *you.*"

She hopped down off the railing, much to Phoenix's relief, and stood before her in all her enthusiastic wonder. When she saw the tears, she sat beside Phoenix quickly, taking her face in hand.

"Aw, Honey, don't cry."

"I'm not," Phoenix sniffled.

Raven stood, pulling Phoenix with her into her embrace. They danced around the gazebo.

"There's not nearly as many stars as there usually is," Phoenix whispered close to Raven's neck. She placed a kiss to the warm flesh, leaving the imprint of her smile behind.

Raven led her back to the bench. "I know what you need." She grabbed the railing and pulled herself up and over, coming down with a gentle thud on the grass below. Phoenix turned, curious, and watched her expectantly.

Raven glanced up at her and explained, "A few years ago, I was working on an experiment, and because of a small misjudgment on my part, I tested it on myself."

Phoenix's brows narrowed. "Rave..."

Raven then smiled at her, holding up a hand. "In the end, I'm kind of glad that I did. If not for that err, I wouldn't be able to do this..." She looked from Phoenix, straight up, and bolts of light came from her eyes.

Phoenix's jaw dropped to the bench under her. Her eyes grew huge as Raven shot at least a dozen of the lightening like bolts towards the heavens.

"You're going to hurt yourself..." Phoenix couldn't help but be concerned.

"Shhh." Raven lifted her hand above her head, beckoning the streams of light back to her. The light bent in an arc, falling back down to Raven. Before it reached her outstretched hand the powerful yellow morphed into varying shades of blue, dulled, sparked once more and wrapped itself around Raven's hand, slinking its way up her

arm. It traveled as if it had a mind of its own down her body and back to the one hand where it collected in a rolling, shimmering ball.

Raven threw a smile at Phoenix and spun the ball of light around. Abruptly, she clapped her hands together and the light disappeared.

Phoenix's fear abated, and with it, the thrill at the splendor Raven had produced for her. But before her delight was totally doused, Raven opened her hands and the light had turned to crackling pinks, snapping back and forth from one palm to the other. Phoenix recalled her one time visit to a museum, and the object that had been called a "Plasma Sphere" in which she had taken an interest. She was witnessing before her very eyes nearly the same thing -- colorful moving tentacles of lightning and their response to the slightest movement of Raven's hands. Only this show was not hidden under glass, protecting the curious onlooker's touch.

More colors materialized, and Phoenix's smile deepened. Reds -- greens -- blues -- yellows, all snapping and crackling between Raven's palms, singing their own song of beauty and light. Sparks flew up, fizzed, and died in shaky trickles as they fell back down to the grass.

Raven carefully moved up the steps, over to Phoenix. She watched her light display intently, creating most of it from vigilant and precise hand movements. Her face was aglow with a kaleidoscope of hues, her eyes lit up like they had that night under the Christmas tree.

"It's so beautiful, Rave." Phoenix ached to reach out and touch the exhibit but restrained herself, sensing harm to her person if she did.

"Not as beautiful as you, Phoenix." She closed her hands again, cutting off the beauty. "Not nearly as beautiful as you." Opening her palm, she tossed the last fragments up in the air and watched them dribble down and fall harmlessly onto Phoenix's head. Diamonds of color lit up Phoenix's eyes, her tears.

"I adore you," Phoenix whispered to the darkness closing around them again.

Raven knelt before her, pressed soft kisses to her temples, her eyes, her cheeks, her nose, and finally her waiting lips.

"Oh, isn't that just *too* adorable?" A voice startled them, and they both jolted to their feet, wincing through the dark to see the body attached to that voice. There wasn't one.

"Over here," it called again, from behind them.

They spun around, their nervousness growing with each passing second. Phoenix's upper lip broke out in a cold sweat.

Raven took her hand, sensing Phoenix's growing fear. "Who's there?" she called out, straining hard to see into the black.

"Collect them please, Killer," the voice instructed. "I have bigger and better fish to catch."

They sensed the woman had left them then, but as soon as they both breathed a sigh of relief, they were grabbed from behind, pricked with something in their arms, and everything went black.

* * *

"Xena?"

"Mm?"

"Did you hear that?" Gabrielle was leaning over her sleeping partner, a hand on her shoulder, and lips close to her ear.

Xena opened an eye, closed it. She shook her head. "Go back to sleep, it wasn't anything."

Gabrielle shook her shoulder, said a desperate, "Please," and Xena came fully awake. She rolled over and sat up.

"Ok, what did you hear?"

Gabrielle tilted her head. "I'm not sure, like someone coming in the front doors. Mal and Gab are asleep, so I know it's not them. I saw Phoenix heading out a while ago, then Raven followed her, so they wouldn't be back this soon."

"Alright, let's go check it out." She tossed the covers off, dressed as fast as she could, grabbed her chakram 'just in case,' and Gabrielle's hand.

* * *

"Where would they have gone?" Gabrielle whispered close to Xena. They first checked in on Malik and Gabby, finding their suite empty.

"A stroll maybe?" Xena couldn't relax, she sniffed it in the air: trouble.

* * *

"Take that one below, and cover this one's eyes until I know how she did that," the tall woman ordered Killer, some huge Amazon looking woman, muscles bulging from arms and legs. What she lacked in brains, she made up for in body mass.

"And what about these two?" a second female voice asked, eyeing Malik and Gabby laid out on the floor unconscious.

"We'll worry about that after we get the other two. Let's go." With a snap of her fingers, three women shimmered out and appeared in Malik's vacation home.

* * *

Just after they came into the living room together, three beings appeared before them. Xena's eyes widened, and Gabrielle merely let out a small noise of disbelief.

Before them stood the unmistakable forms of Alti, Hope and Discord.

Chapter 26

Xena and Gabrielle had been blindfolded while still inside Malik's vacation home and then led to a vehicle. The thought of fighting the three stood out in Xena's mind, and she would have if it had only been she and Gabrielle. Two against three were pretty good odds, with Gabrielle fighting at her side, even when the three they were battling were a Goddess, a Demi-Goddess, and an evil shamaness.

But there were others to consider, the two who laid unconscious, and the two who were bound, had no way to fight, and could easily be harmed. Xena was not going to risk their lives to satiate the bloodlust she felt rising inside her. One look over at her mate before their eyes were covered confirmed that she had chosen the proper course of action.

Gabrielle sat in the seat beside Xena, with two of Alti's women, one against each hatch of the Beemer. She had correctly surmised the situation purely through her sense of touch, knowing the feeling of Xena's skin against hers, and the sensation of a stranger's form close to her own, in addition to the tight quarters in the rear of the vehicle. They didn't dare speak to one another, not knowing what the punishment to their friends might be. The ride was long, or at least appeared that way, and quiet.

When the driving came to a stop, Xena listened intently in an attempt to get her bearings back. She could tell that three lifts had taken the six of them to this location. She waited and could hear the sounds of two of her friends being carried inside some structure. Knowing that the two unconscious forms had been picked up by only one of the females, Xena expelled a noticeable exhalation of air. Obviously, one trans at a time was being unloaded, so as to not allow

the captives access to one another, or perhaps to not allow certain captors access to certain captives. Next, the warrior heard signs of a struggle. *Has to be Phoenix*, Xena smirked inwardly, remembering the trouble two of the clones had at extricating her from the house's doorway. But Raven was putting up a fight of her own, enough so that each had her own personal escort to haul them into the building.

After all was quiet again, the hatch to the rear of Xena and Gabrielle's Beemer was opened, and their guards stepped out on to the ground with a sound thud. *Big girls*, Gabrielle silently appraised, even bigger than hers. The final two prisoners were dragged out of the seats and pulled to their feet.

"Play nice, you two." Alti warned. "Or the little pieces of your future will pay the price." Alti took Xena's chin in her hand and shook her ex-pupil's face. "You got that, Warrior Princess?"

"I got it." Xena hissed back.

After Alti released her, Xena added, "I also got that I'm gonna make you wish your parents had never met."

"Now, Xena." Alti cooed. "I'm sure my parents did think that... right before I eviscerated them." A sarcastic laugh broke the still air. She directed her stare at the clones that kept a tight hold on the two warriors. "Take them inside, like the others."

* * *

Alti circled around her six captives, never turning her back or looking away from her one time student, all the while grinning a broad smile of triumph. "Xena..." she hissed, walking up to the tall warrior. "...It's been far too long."

Gabrielle's disbelieving eyes shifted from her daughter Hope to Alti, and then to Xena. She tried to grasp what was happening. "I can understand your involvement in this Alti, and maybe yours," she looked briefly at Hope, not wanting to say her name out loud, "but how did *you* get included?" Gabrielle cocked her head in Discord's direction.

Even though Gabrielle's eye contact was momentary, Hope couldn't resist strolling over toward her. "Hello, Mother."

Phoenix's eyes began to tear. So there she was, her parent, the evil Hope. She resembled Gabrielle, but in her eyes was a cruelty that shone like a beacon upon those whom she cast her gaze. As if feeling the stare, Hope turned, leveling her glare on Phoenix now, as she came up to her.

"You didn't think I'd let you get away with what happened back in our time, did you?" Discord asked, drawing all eyes to her.

"Not now, Discord!" Alti ordered, glancing at two female clones standing across from her. She'd created fake beings from the HAL, using the genetic material of women that she'd killed in this lifetime. And they had served her well. "Come, take these two," she gestured toward Phoenix and Raven.

Raven couldn't see a thing, but she could feel Phoenix's fear, and she ached to touch the woman, to give her some of her strength. She was roughly pulled from a seated position and walked- dragged from the room. She could hear Phoenix resisting, and prayed they didn't hurt her for it; she could bear any pain to her own person, but couldn't stand to think of her love hurting.

"Hope, you take these two," Alti instructed, pointing to Malik and Gabby. She wanted to keep Hope away from Phoenix and Gabrielle for the time being. She knew the woman had hate enough in her to ruin her carefully thought out plans.

"Get your damn hands off me!" Phoenix raged, lifting her feet and planting them on either side of the door the two of the clones were trying to push her through.

"You always have to be insolent, don't you Phoenix!"

From behind her, Phoenix heard the unmistakable, gravely voice of *Gerty*. Her legs went limp and she turned.

Alti, having changed her shape into Phoenix's once employer, simply waved to her. Then she gestured for the two women to continue on their way.

* * *

They brought Phoenix into a dimly lit room, and Phoenix scanned the contents: two desks, two chairs, a TV. On the far side of the room was a table and chair. The three stood by one of the desks. Phoenix found herself held in place by one of the clones steely grip. As that one stood and watched the captive, the other went back to the area they had entered and lifted a wall switch.

Nothing happened once the switch had been pushed to an upright position, and that worried Phoenix even more.

"This will be your cell," the second and more muscle bound female informed Phoenix and then released her hold. Phoenix immediately stepped away, in defiance; as the clone caught a pencil her friend had tossed in her direction. She barely acknowledged that their captive had moved when she showed the pencil to Phoenix, then threw it straight at the cement wall five yards away. The cylindrical, wooden object didn't make it to the wall; the moment it touched an invisible field, it disintegrated, and the guards laughed when Phoenix tried to back up.

"What, you don't like your new home, Phoenix?" The clone looked knowingly at her comrade. "At least this is home for the few remaining hours of your life." The captor closest taunted and grabbed Phoenix's arm, pulling her back, pointing to the two red lines on either side of the unseen wall of death. "Pass them and you go bye-bye, got it?"

"Go suck a thermo reactor." Phoenix seethed at the behemoth standing behind her.

The tall woman shoved Phoenix toward the wall and she passed through it with arms raised, guarding her head. She landed on the floor on the other side, not understanding why she hadn't crumbled to nothing as the pencil had. The second captor laughed and flipped the switch again, warning, "It's back on, you stay put and you live... for now."

They both proceeded to sit down at their desks as Phoenix stood, brushing her jeans off, frowning at her current situation. The walls were at least three inches of solid concrete, possibly twenty feet

high from floor to ceiling, and there were no windows, only four walls, three concrete and one invisible wall of instantaneous death.

Phoenix stepped up to it, lifted a hand, then thought better of it, jamming the extremity into her pocket and finding a piece of gum to use instead. She took the gum out, threw half at the wall and jumped back when it was eaten quickly. She placed the other half back in her pocket and went to the chair, plopping heavily down on it.

She didn't stay in that position long. Phoenix began to feel like the tigers she had always watched at the zoo. She had understood immediately why they paced inside their constraints. Even those that had been born and raised in their cages -- wrong word, *habitats* -- instinctually paced -- knowing that there was somewhere else they belonged, somewhere they could roam free, to hunt, to kill, not having to rely on man for their sustenance. She spent the first half hour of her captivity pacing, throwing glares at the guards' backs and trying to think up elaborate plans to get herself out and go help the others. The next five minutes she lay along the table whistling, disrupting their TV viewing, smiling to herself when they would yell profanities back at her, telling her to *shut up*.

"You kiss each other with those mouths?" she would taunt back. And then, during a burst of inspiration, it came to her, and she sat up abruptly, spinning around and hopping off the table.

"Hey, Bozo! May I have some rubber bands?"

The guards looked at each other, and one shrugged, saying, "If it'll shut her up..." and went back to watching the movie. Clone number one got up, disappeared awhile, and came back with a bag of rubber bands.

"What are you going to do with them?" the clone asked before she went through to the other room to set them in the metal box and send them through to Phoenix.

"Make a bungee cord."

The clone stared at her a moment, then smiled. "You're lucky you're funny, or I'd have rearranged that smart mouth for you by now." She went through to the other room and told Phoenix to latch

the pole into the wall. Phoenix did as requested, and the drawer slid open on her side. She took the bag out.

"Thanks a bunch," she said aloud and then quieter to herself, "Asshole." She sat and waited for the clone to sit as well, and when she was sure the guard's attention was once again firmly on the program, Phoenix took one of the bands from the bag. While keeping her forearms on her thighs, she aimed the rubber band at the wall and released it. As she expected, when the circle of rubber came in contact with the force of the invisible wall, it disappeared. She slowly repositioned her aim, each time a foot away from the last attempt. She spanned the wall in a circular motion, shooting several bands at its expanse. Her passes had just reached the floor and had begun rounding up toward the side where she had originally entered the room. With each disappearance, her hope was beginning to fade, until she finally aimed a few feet from the ceiling.

When that one went over the wall, it took Phoenix completely by surprise. *Could it have been that easy all along?* She watched as the band sailed through the air and came down softly at Clone number two's right foot. Phoenix's eyebrow twitched up with amusement, and she took another from the bag, hands still in her lap, and shot it, almost jumping with joy when it, too, made it passed without being disintegrated. She went across the top to make sure all of it was open, aiming her shots toward the ceiling so they'd fall just on the other side and wouldn't endanger her plan if they should land in a more dangerous position than the floor at her captor's feet.

In her excitement, she pulled a little too hard on one of the rubber bands and it broke, the sound reverberating in her ears. When one of the clones turned, Phoenix knew it was now or never. She stood, and the clone stiffened, narrowing her green eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"I wouldn't imagine *standing* is that hard to figure out."

"Listen, you smart ass, I've had enough of that mouth, so why don't you just shut it and sit back down."

"I'm tired of sitting. I want to stand now."

"She said sit." The other guard was turned now in her chair.

"Why don't you come make me?"

They both stood and stomped to the wall, but made sure they stayed way beyond the boundary line. "You think you're going to provoke us, do you?"

"Haven't I?" Phoenix asked cynically, looking from their chairs to them.

"I should shoot you right now." Clone number one reached into her jacket for her gun, her hand rested on the butt of the handle.

"Have to turn the barrier off first," Phoenix reminded. "And if you do, I might escape, then what would you ever tell Gerty?"

"Shut up!" Clone one hollered out, fingers squeezing around the gun handle, aching. Her order was followed by a resounding, "There'll be no escaping today," from clone two.

"Oh, really?" By that time Phoenix had walked up to edge of the barrier line herself, and then turned and ran. She sprang onto the chair she had repositioned in front of the table and bounced across the tabletop, racing toward the back wall. She ran up the concrete, backed flipped across the short distance, over the wall of death and her two guards. She landed solidly on the other side, then turned with a smile and taunted, "Not a very effective wall you got there, eh?" She took the opportunity to strike before the shock could wear off and kicked the larger clone into the barrier, causing her to disappear with a howling scream of pain. Phoenix turned to the other, downed her with a punch, and turned to leave. She then turned back, face devoid of all emotion as she bent, grabbing the clone and hauling her up, onto her feet.

She said deeply, "This is for Raven," and then she gave her a backwards shove. She closed her eyes briefly as another horrifying wail resounded around her, and inside her, then it was over -- silence was all she heard, and then the TV, and reality came back. She headed to the door, what she'd just done *literally* behind her.

The door was locked and she searched madly for the key, knowing as she did that she wouldn't find it, that it had been on one of those clones. Getting it now was not going to happen.

"*Arg!*" she complained and went to the steel door. It was too thick for a punch, so she went to the desk, grabbed the steel chair, and slammed it against a crack in the wall. She drew back, noting the small dent, and heaved the chair again, making a longer opening. Finally after several strikes, the passage was wide enough for her to stick her head and shoulders through, so she did, and looked up and down the deserted hallway.

She was slipping the rest of her body through the opening when she noticed the red laser beam. The dust from the concrete debris was curling in its neon hue. She ducked back through the wall and waited a minute, then peeked back out.

All was silent, but she didn't try escaping. Instead, she pulled the pack of cigarettes she'd taken from some under age kid that had gotten in her lift earlier that morning and lit one, blew the smoke in the direction of the first beam, then exhaled a puff of smoke higher and saw another shaft of light. She did this two more times and found the hall filled with booby traps, blocking her escape, so she went back into the room.

"Like I need this," she said, shaking her head back and forth. She went to the opening again and reached for the lowest beam. Quickly, she flashed her hand through it and retreated into the room. She heard shots whiz by and blew out a breath, then poked her head out of the wall. She set off the next one, waiting -- and literally saw a dozen or so arrows fly past the opening.

"Shit, Gerty, any more stunts like this and I'm gonna start to think you *really do* want to kill us." She poked through the wall again, disrupting the beam of light, and waited. As she stood in the opening, she noticed a red light across from her and too late, she tilted her torso away. She spun when the bullet hit her side and went through, dropping her.

"That was sneaky," she groaned, rolling onto her back, looking down at her side, seeing the smear of red making a three-inch circle appear. She stood, went to the wall, and knew she had to face that last trap. She waved her hand between the beams and dropped down onto the floor on her stomach.

Nothing happened.

Faulty? she wondered and waited another three minutes counting, "One Mississippi... Two Mississippi..."

Chapter 27

After three minutes, Phoenix got up, looked out of the opening, and slowly wiggled herself through, listening to the deafening silence that surrounded her. Her confidence building, she started down the hall. Reaching the end of the passage, she came around the corner to find Killer standing there, ready with a punch. Upon contact, Phoenix's head snapped back and she was thrown backwards. Blood oozed from her nose, and anger poured from her eyes. She cocked her left arm and sent it forward. Killer keeled over like a demolished 20th Century high-rise.

Phoenix stepped over her and continued down the corridor, checking each room, forgetting to be careful in her haste to locate the others. One of the doorknobs was booby-trapped and a net came down on top of her, and then a thick fog of gas sprayed around her, causing Phoenix to black out.

* * *

"Tie 'em tight," Raven advised her captors.

"Oh we are," one of them assured her, pulling extra hard on the rope. She tapped the black glasses covering Raven's eyes. "I hope for your sake you willingly tell Alti how you did that little light show."

"No, she hopes for *her* sake, she tells ME how she did it," Discord said from the doorway. Alti wouldn't let her near Phoenix, Xena or Gabrielle, and with Hope taking Malik and Gabby off, that left Raven to her mercy. *She wasn't much*, Discord thought, *but she'll do*, and shrugged, entering the room with a little bounce in her step.

* * *

Malik awoke totally disoriented. The last thing she remembered was sleeping with Gabby curled up in her arms. Wait... she did vaguely recall the feeling of a jab in her bicep, something like a hypodermic? She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate, focusing only on those pieces of information that she required, trying to filter out the noise in her head the way Xena had been teaching her. She went back to that night, to falling asleep after she and Gabby's last lovemaking; the sound of the bedroom door opening in the darkness, and one, no two forms' heavy footfalls on the carpet. Then came the prick of the needle in her skin, and last, before she slipped into a deep unconscious state, was feeling Gabby being pulled from her arms.

Malik's eyes flew open. *Where's Gabby?* she thought, and her voice soon echoed the inner question. "Gabrielle?" A single word, filled with every conceivable emotion.

"Which one?" A small but dangerous voice asked from the dark.

"Who's there? I can't see you. Where's Gabrielle?" The panic inside Malik rose. Something was wrong -- terribly, terribly wrong.

"I'm here." And a click sounded off the walls. The room flooded with light, not completely, but bright enough to blind Malik. She strained to see the form that slid closer to her side. The outline was that of a woman, fairly small, about the size of Gabby, but it wasn't her. She would have sensed if Gabby was in the room with her, and she wasn't. Malik's eyes slowly began to adjust, and the woman's features were becoming clearer. She was blonde and was wearing a short skirt, brown suede maybe, and a halter top, green, with the look of a sports bra. She had boots on, also a suede-like material, and they came up to the top of her calves. *Strange.* Malik focused in on her face, still too unaccustomed to the light to make out her features. She blinked rapidly and looked back again, and her heart froze. The long blonde hair, the clear green eyes -- it was Gabrielle... Not hers, and not Xena's, but it was a Gabrielle.

Oh, my God. "Hope?" Malik asked.

She was answered by a cold, hard smile and a sadistic, inhuman look staring down at her out of the mirror image of the eyes of the woman carrying her child.

* * *

Gabby regained consciousness for the second time in 24 hours, only to find that this time her surroundings were nowhere near as welcoming. She was in the dark, except for a shaft of light that shone beneath the entrance to the room. She tried to get up, but found that she was restrained in a prone position, her wrists bound together and connected to the front of whatever it was she was lying on. Her ankles were also constricted, apparently by use of the same method as her wrists. She was alone in the room, the best her senses could decipher. Only two thoughts invaded her mind: Where was Malik? And please don't let anything happen to our baby.

* * *

Gabrielle hated waiting. She and Xena had been kept apart since their arrival, and the separation was driving the bard insane. She tried everything she could think of to keep her mind off what could be happening to the four people she had grown to love, but images flashed through her mind, tortures she had witnessed, experienced. Worst of all was when she allowed the impossible in, and Xena flooded her thoughts. She knew Alti, knew the hate that the woman had for her love. The tears welled up in Gabrielle's eyes, and she knelt. "I don't know if anyone's listening, but if you are, please protect her. I love her with all that I am, and if anything should happen to her..." A sob broke loose from the bard, but she was determined to go on. "Keep her safe. Keep them all safe. I beg you."

"How precious." The familiar voice taunted from an unseen audio emitter. Then the door to Gabrielle's cell opened. "We've been

like this before, have we not?" She walked closer to Gabrielle. "Me on my feet, you on your knees."

Gabrielle stood in one swift motion, not quite bringing herself eye level with the embodiment of evil standing before her. "What do you want?"

"I want nothing more than to talk, Gabrielle. We have a great deal to discuss."

* * *

The clone had stayed outside Xena's door since she had been brought to the room. The warrior had been over every inch of the surfaces, with no luck. Her mind raced with every conceivable idea of how to escape and free her friends. *If she so much as touches one hair on Gabrielle's head, I'll...* Xena stomped to the door and banged on it, again. "I want to speak with Alti." She screamed at the steel, knowing what lie behind.

"She'll send for you when she's ready," was all the clone replied. It was all she had replied the entire time Xena had been held in this place.

Xena's forehead pressed against the cold steel. She needed a plan, but worry and fear clouded her internal vision. "Why are we never allowed to live in peace?" Xena screamed again, this time to the ceiling, knowing there would be no reply to this question. She raised her fist to unleash her fury on the steel, but stopped in mid-strike. She instead held her head close to the metal and listened. The guard had left her post. And she heard voices in the hallway, then the sound of a solid jab, followed by an even harder uppercut, and then the thud of a falling body. If Xena knew anything, she knew the sounds of a fight, even one that quick. But who had won? She drew her ear closer and the whoosh of falling material pierced the silence. A hissing sound was next, and somehow the Warrior Princess knew that it was a friend who had just met with Alti's treachery.

* * *

When Phoenix came to, she was standing in a half lit room with Alti there before her, two clones holding each of her biceps, hands cuffed behind her back.

"Oh, you hurt yourself." Alti stepped closer as Phoenix tried to focus. When Alti jabbed a finger into her bullet wound, Phoenix winced trying to back up.

"Such a shame, and look at you, what ever have you been doing? You look like you've been crawling through the desert." She shook her head, moving away from Phoenix and stepped on a panel of buttons. The rest of the room lit up with lasers bouncing around in a mad dance. Alti looked at Phoenix, "I understand you're familiar with rings? All State in 2087?"

Phoenix stared at her coldly, and Alti smiled back. "Now don't be that way, I went through a lot of trouble for you, Phoenix, and you've thwarted my first effort. I hope this one is more to your liking." She indicated that Phoenix should be moved forward and she was, brought to the very edge of a long drop. Phoenix looked down at the spikes rising out of the floor and back up to the rings hanging from a dark ceiling, their ropes seeming to go nowhere -- into infinity.

"What you have to do is make it across," Alti was explaining, indicating the closest three rings that were maybe twenty feet away, "starting from these three. Now you won't have much of a jump, but I'm confident you'll make the leap."

"And if I don't want to play your game?"

Alti laughed. "Oh, you'll play, Phoenix. You're not stupid. You wouldn't die without an effort; you exhibited that already a few hours ago." She walked away from Phoenix and turned, knocking on an invisible wall. "To help you make your decision, this wall moves an inch every second. You'll have seventy-five seconds to make up your mind, or splat." She beckoned to her clones, and they released Phoenix and moved away behind the shelter of the wall.

"Oh, and Phoenix, two of those first rings are not real, and some of the others..." she smiled, "well, I had to make things interesting, so some of them are coated with oil, a few will break under any amount of weight, and others that are secure enough to hold you, will break

after a minute." She turned her back and Phoenix stomped up to the wall and kicked it.

"You crazy bitch, take these off!" She turned, showing the handcuffs.

"I can't," she looked truly sorry. "The key is on you." She laughed and continued from the room. "Good luck, you'll need it." The door slammed and loud music began to play, Cher's Bang Bang thundered loudly around the room, and Phoenix's head. The throbbing beat matching the laser dance. Phoenix dropped down, rolled up onto her shoulders and pulled her hands from behind her, legs going easily through. She sat there, searching her pockets.

Then the wall began moving.

She jumped up, slammed both hands into the wall with no effective result. She could break stone yet couldn't break this glass; it was ludicrous. She started searching for the key again, found it hanging from her necklace and rolled her eyes. *Duh*, she inwardly thrashed herself and undid the cuffs. She threw them at the wall in another bout of anger and walked the length of the platform, knowing as she did she was wasting her time and the wall was getting closer and closer to the edge.

She had a moment's thought of giving up and leaned hands on her thighs, head bent in near defeat, but the wall bumped her and she knew she couldn't let Alti win. She stood, looked at the first three rings, then back at the wall. It wasn't possible; there wasn't enough runway to jump the twenty or so feet.

She looked at the ceiling and could have shouted her frustrating pain. And there was the new pain in her side where Alti had awakened her wound. She looked down at it and saw the fresh blood running down her thigh.

"BITCH!" she screamed, and then was silent, staring at those three rings. She went down to the end of the room, turned, bolted back down the only runway available to her, and jumped, flying over the gape in the floor. Her hand caught the ring and she gripped it tightly as her body swung forward from the power of her leap. She dangled as the momentum slowed and studied the rings, deciding on

her path. She started off, grabbing the first ring and releasing it when it pulled from its mooring and fell down into the pit.

She didn't have much time left on her first ring and she knew it. She tried another ring, which held, and she swung back and forth building up speed for the next leap. That ring was coated with oil and her hand slipped off quickly so she swung by one hand. *At this rate she'd be here the rest of her lifetime.*

And then, as she was doing a better job -- at least making one out of six attempts at the rings, a sudden burst of fire came from directly in front of her and she was hanging right in its path. She scissored her legs outwards and watched as a flaming orb roared through. She looked back, saw the fireball hit the wall, sizzle angrily, and go out.

She rolled her eyes. "You know..." She gritted her teeth, growling, "You didn't say anything about the *fireballs*, bitch!" She started all over again, losing track of the rings she'd chosen for her path. Another ball came out at her and she swung off course to avoid it, cursing and grumbling to herself as all of the rings were swinging, some missing the laser beams and messing her up totally. She reached the last three rings she'd picked and heard the fire being set off. She hadn't enough time to swing from its path and it came at her as she closed her eyes, waiting to be engulfed. But the flame didn't envelop her; instead, it went right through her.

"I've been avoiding *holograms!*" Now she was really pissed, and her anger made her make a few mistakes as she completely ignored the fire and set her sights on the last two rings. Her muscles ached, her arms felt like they'd pull away from the sockets at any time, and each extension of her limbs to grab for another ring brought a searing pain to the wound in her side. But she'd made it that far -- she was *not* going to give up.

She took a big swing for the last ring and missed, and as she was on the backward swing, if that wasn't bad enough, the ring that bore all her weight broke earlier than its designated minute, and she was falling...

Chapter 28

Malik sat on the edge of her "bed" and absentmindedly rubbed her wrists. She had been freed from her confinements, without explanation and had remained still during her release, afraid of what Hope might do if she moved. Even though their eyes were identical to Gabby's, that was where the comparison stopped. The woman that had stood over her was no more her Gabrielle than she, the ex-singer, was Xena.

After Malik was unbound, Hope had exited the room, ever silent, leaving the door open behind her. *What's going on now?* Malik pondered. *After all the trouble to get us here... no this wasn't an accident.* The logical part of her mind knew she was supposed to go through that open door, but her terrified body would not respond. She sat frozen, a chill running along the length of her athletic legs. *It's now or never,* the tiny voice whispered in her brain. "Who asked you?" she responded.

A short time after Hope's departure, Malik rose, somewhat unsteadily, and walked over to the doorway. She poked her head around the frame, cautiously, believing that there had to be some catch, or some trap meant to draw her into the game these beings were playing.

Her confidence grew slightly when she found the passageway clear. The fear and trepidation receded even more as images of Gabby flashed through her mind. Malik knew her beloved was close, but where was she? A small prayer passed her lips as she left the threshold of the cell, and stepped lightly on to the cement floor. When her first footfall passed without incident, Malik took a second, and then a third. With each progressive movement, her strength grew; and with it, her determination to find the woman she loved.

* * *

Gabrielle looked around the room Alti had led her to. This room was similar to the one in which she had been held, only it contained the items necessary to convert it into a make-shift office. A desk occupied the far corner, and chairs had been placed on either side. Gabrielle now sat in the chair across from the desk. Alti also sat, her feet propped up on the metallic corner. Her elbows casually rested on the chair, arms bent upward, fingers touching- tip to tip. Empty black eyes bored holes into the bard.

Gabrielle sat, hoping that she had been brought into this office for some purpose other than a staring contest. She breathed deeply as she decided to put an end to the silence. "You said that there was something we needed to discuss. Were you planning on using telepathy to accomplish it?"

The corners of Alti's mouth curved upward ever so slightly. "I'm glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor, Gabrielle," the evil shamaness hissed. "Even under these circumstances."

Gabrielle's thoughts turned serious and her features corresponded accordingly. "Where's Xena?" she asked.

"Oh, she's around -- and she's still breathing -- for now." Alti's smile widened as her arms came down to rest upon the desktop so she faced Gabrielle eye to eye. "How long she stays that way depends on you."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed, knowing that this woman whom she now faced was one to be taken at her word. "I want to see her." She demanded forcefully. "And the others."

"Don't worry, they're all alive and well." To this remark Gabrielle replied with a raised eyebrow, which struck Alti as a very "Xena" thing to do. "Ok... so they're at least alive, anyway."

Gabrielle was growing impatient with Alti's games and asked, "What do you want from me?"

"It's not so much what I want from *you*, it's what I want from Xena." Alti's eyes narrowed to almost slits; her smile matched,

thinning out to almost a single line. And then she continued. "I want you to convince Xena to visit HAL with me, of her own free will."

"Wha..." Gabrielle started and stopped, sputtering. "Why do you want to go into the HAL with her?"

Alti smiled deviously. "I want a child with Xena."

* * *

Phoenix opened her eyes and stared up into the dark ceiling. She watched the laser beams, heard the music still playing, and felt an awful aching in her back and head, but nothing close to that of stakes impaled through her body. She slowly lifted her head and looked down at herself. She saw the stakes rising from her, but there was no blood, no pain.

Could it be? Were they, too, holograms? She raised her arm and tried to touch one, but her hand went through it. Phoenix quickly sat up, felt the room spin, and fell back again, her hands coming to her head as she groaned. She drew up one knee and rolled on to her side and then back, in an attempt to regain her sense of equilibrium.

"Great stuff to base a book on," she mused and tried sitting up again. Everything spun a little out of focus, but not too badly. She stood minutes later and wobbled to the side of the crater, noticed the finger holes, along with the absence of footholds, and started to climb. *Lucky for me I have all this upper body muscle*, she mused, remembering Raven's comment from a few nights ago. As she ascended, the memory flooded her mind.

They had been lying in the back yard, gazing at the stars. The night air a little chilly, so Phoenix rolled herself backwards, onto her feet, and had pulled Raven up, off of the moss-covered ground.

Rave kissed Phoenix quick and hard before jerking her hands free from her lovers' grasp and grabbing Phoenix's biceps. She squeezed them firmly, and with a giggle announced, "I love a woman with muscles." Raven released a throaty chuckle before turning and running towards the back door. "Race you upstairs," she added with a twinkle in her eye, and a head turned in Phoenix's direction.

Phoenix laughed, and yelled out, "Cheater!" as she sprinted after the woman who loved her.

Upon reaching the top, Phoenix rolled over the edge and lay there breathing heavily, her fury for Alti growing. What would be the odds that she was safe? She got up, found a door, and opened it. Maybe Alti had no faith that she'd actually survive. She hadn't even bothered to stay and make sure Phoenix wouldn't. With this confidence, Phoenix strutted down the hall, kicking doors in as she came upon them until one door revealed her lover hanging from chains, motionless.

"Raven!" Phoenix ran to her, grabbing her in a hug.

Raven's head lifted. "Discord said you were dead."

Phoenix smiled, eyes gleaming. "Rumors of my death have been *greatly* exaggerated." She chuckled, inspected the glasses, and asked, "These things attached to your brain or something?"

"No, just locked in back."

She twisted the lock off, freeing Raven's sight, and hugging her sentimental scientist when she saw her tears. "Hey, I'm alive. Don't go blubbering all over the place, you'll embarrass me." She drew back grinning and then kissed Raven, giving her another squeeze. When she released her, Raven was smiling at her, at just the welcoming sight of her.

"I love you," Raven said deeply, touching her hair, cupping a hand around the back of her neck. "I was sure I'd feel it if you were dead, but she was so convincing, Nix."

She took Raven's hand and led her back through the door. "Let's get out of this mad house."

Raven pulled at Phoenix's hand, pushing her in back, as if worried Phoenix would not be able to face what ever was to come. Phoenix let Raven think she was protecting her; and followed behind Raven with a smile of love-tinged amusement.

"Where the heck did she have you?" Raven questioned, taking the time to *really* look at Phoenix, as they hid behind one wall waiting for one of the clones to leave down at the other end.

"Oh, just in some dark room. There were no chairs, so I had to sit on the dirty floor."

"Sit? You look like you rolled around on it for a few hours. And what happened here?" She indicated the blood staining Phoenix's shirt.

"Nothing much, just a flesh wound, caught myself on a piece of wire sneaking from the room."

Raven stared at her. "You're such a little liar."

Phoenix sputtered her disbelief. "Well, *fine* then!"

Raven giggled and clamped a hand over Phoenix's mouth. She peeked down the hall and saw the guard was gone. She released Phoenix, and they hurried around the corner. At one point, Raven went to grab a doorknob and Phoenix took hold of her wrist.

"I wouldn't do that." She urged Raven back away from the door and punched a hole through the plasterboard beside it, looking inside. "No one's home, let's go."

Chapter 29

It all happened rather quickly. Before Malik had even reached the end of the corridor, Raven and Phoenix turned the corner, half dragging a wobbly Gabby. She didn't ask any questions, there would be time for that later. All Malik cared about, now that Gabby was close within her sights, was gathering the woman up in her arms and finding a way out of that insane asylum.

"Where are our *gracious* hosts?" Gabby mumbled. She never was one to easily handle drugs, and whatever concoction that had been shot into her upper arm was taking its sweet time in releasing her body from its puppet-like strings.

"We'll worry about them later." Raven snapped, as she darted her head around, scanning for any sign of the two missing members of their group. "Right now, we have to find Xena and Gabrielle and get the heck out of here."

"Why would you even *think* about leaving our little party?" The shrill voice surrounded them from all sides, bouncing off the walls and reverberating through their eardrums. Discord shimmered in front of the women with Hope soon popping in beside her. "If there's anything I can't stand, it's an inconsiderate guest." The Goddess turned her head toward Hope expecting something resembling agreement but getting nothing except the usual blank expression. *Talk about your dumb blondes.* Discord sighed with irritation.

Phoenix stepped toward the two and demanded, "Where are Xena and Gabrielle?"

"Oh, they're not here any more," Discord volunteered the information.

Malik cringed, fearing the worst. "What do you mean?" She asked in a near whisper.

Discord smirked and answered, "They're not dead, yet." Then she turned her attention toward her manicure. "Alti needs them alive, at least for a little while longer." She flipped her fingers back around, pointing the charcoal tips in Gabby's direction. "After all, ya can't get knocked up all by yourself."

A collective gasp resonated through the hallway, causing the Goddess of Retribution to cackle with delight. "Well..." she began by placing her hands firmly on her leather bound hips. "I think my work here is done." She would leave Alti to take care of the Warrior Princess and her Bard bitch. Then, when Ares inevitably asked her if she had killed them, Discord could say she was innocent, and actually mean it. She had what she came for--satisfaction, vengeance, chaos, and a great pair of thigh-high, stiletto heeled, black boots as a bonus. As for these no-account mortals... Discord smiled darkly at the foursome just before she victoriously raised her arms to begin her journey back. She spoke to Hope even as her form disappeared from sight. "They're all yours."

Hope's clear green eyes clouded over with the hate she felt for them all. All of her mother's descendants--reincarnations; it didn't matter how they were related to her. They were still a part of that woman; the woman that bore her, betrayed her, and killed her. How many chances had she given her to join them, Hope and her father, Dahak. But Gabrielle had spurned them all--for the warrior. Xena was as much to blame as her mother. So they would both pay. And their descendants would pay. And their reincarnated hosts would pay, until there were NO traces of either of them left in this time, or any other.

Hope stared blankly into the space that contained the four women. She hadn't realized that she had focused her icy, dead gaze upon Raven. The scientist took the opportunity to plug into her. She had to find out what the intentions of this doppelganger to Xena's Gabrielle were.

Raven's blood froze when she read the creature's thoughts. Hope was obsessed with annihilating them--all of them. She had never felt anything as ominous as this in her life. It was an emotion

beyond hate. It was an overpowering, all-consuming, white-hot intensity. The hate inside Hope was so strong that it began causing Raven physical pain; her eyes burned, her head pulsed in rhythm to the liquid loathing that coursed through Hope's veins.

Raven began to slowly rock back and forth on her heels, tears spilling down her cheeks. *Stop--the pain. Must stop.* Raven was losing herself. With her final vestige of strength, Raven released the hate and the pain she received from Hope back at the demi-goddess through a searing flash of light that exploded from her eyes.

Stunned and speechless, the remaining group stood there watching Hope's body disintegrate before them.

Malik gawked openly at Raven.

"Rave, you promised never to use that," Gabby chastened, frowning, not truly understanding what had just passed between the two only moments before.

Phoenix took a strong hold on Raven's clammy hand and pulled her down the hall, nearly running to get away from the building. She knew she had to get Raven out of there. Phoenix had felt an overflow of emotion from the connection that Raven had made with Hope, and it wasn't a good thing. As for the deed she'd just witnessed her lover commit, she was certain Raven had done what she had to and would not allow *anyone*, even Raven herself, to think otherwise.

* * *

Xena kept a close eye on Alti, plotting, mentally designing an elaborate plan of escape the moment Alti's back was turned, but obviously Alti was well used to her little tricks, and she kept a suspicious eye on Xena the whole time.

The Shamaness had spent months reading about H.A.L. and all the functions it was capable of performing, and not performing. She knew in order to create life, the two women had to be as one. That had first posed quite a problem for her, until she had come across a young scientist who told her in a drunken stupor one night that H.A.L. could be reprogrammed...

Alti bullied Gabrielle into a seat in the control room. "And stay there!" she ordered, turning her attention to the console.

Gabrielle had no idea what Alti was doing, pushing this button and that, speaking at the monitors, issuing data commands, but she had a sinking feeling whatever plan Alti had, it would be devious. She was sure Xena would have escaped by now, or at least made an attempt, but when she looked at her friend and lover, she saw Xena's look to be that of compliance. *Was she going to go through with it? Was she wishing for another child? Don't be silly!* Gabrielle scolded herself inwardly. Silly thoughts, that's what those were, and foolish. More than likely it was *her* that Xena was thinking of, afraid of what Alti would do to her if she didn't at least pretend to go along with the whole ridiculous notion.

It was done. Alti stood up tall, leering at Xena's heated blue-eyed glare. "After you," Alti gestured for Xena to enter the room before her. She would keep the restraints on Xena, to take them off would end her plan the moment the key touched metal.

Gabrielle was jittery with apprehension, watching them disappear into the HAL. She couldn't- wouldn't permit Alti's plan to flower. The bard jumped up, nearly tripping over the chains around her ankles. She slipped into the small opening just as the door slammed shut, locking the three inside.

"Gabrielle! No!" Xena turned, hearing her, feeling her. With devastated eyes, she saw Gabrielle being lifted into the air. The music started, and a crimson light replaced the blue one that they'd made love in the first time. More than the color of the light was different this time, Xena knew.

Alti turned aggravated eyes on the bard. "Why can't you just do what you're told?"

Gabrielle got her bearings finally, and managed to turn her body around so her feet faced the floor again. She attempted to prepare herself for the attack on her person, but the battle blows were never aimed at her body, they were directed solely at her mind. Gabrielle recoiled in agony upon being hit by the onslaught of pain experienced over the years in her travels with Xena.

"STOP IT!" Xena shouted, taking a step in Alti's direction. She swung both her arms out in an arch and knocked Alti into the metal wall. She primed herself for a follow-up assault, but her body started to float off the floor.

Alti shook her head, clearing it, and lunged from her position against the cold steel toward Xena.

Xena caught her in midair, swinging around to release Alti into the unforgiving steel behind her. She glanced over her shoulder at Gabrielle, noting her slack expression, her limp limbs. *She hurt Gabrielle. I'll kill her*, Xena vowed and turned. Her mouth met Alti's fist and she spun backwards, head over heels, landing against the wall with a grunt.

* * *

"Hurry, Gabby!" Malik was frantic, eyes on Gabby's hands as she worked the controls of HAL.

"I'm going as fast as I can, Mal." Gabby didn't take time out to look at her. Every precious second counted. She saw what Alti had tried to do, and the she-demon would have succeeded if they had gotten there a moment later.

Raven was trying to pry the six-inch steel door open, to no avail. She considered zapping it, but reconsidered after remembering what had just happened. Phoenix was racing around the outer room looking for something, anything that could be jammed into the crease to lever open the heavy door.

"I got it!" Gabby announced with glee. The four turned as the massive door groaned and started to slide open.

* * *

"NO!" Alti screeched, furious as she watched her plans falling apart before her very eyes. She grabbed Xena around the throat, enjoying how it felt to squeeze the life out of the warrior, when Gabrielle came at her from behind. Alti's grip on Xena's larynx

slacked, but she never lost her hold. Then she stretched out her other arm and reached behind her, securing her fingers on the delicate cords of Gabrielle's neck.

The nanosecond the three women were connected, something blew in the HAL's console, and fire sparked, trailing along the connections and blowing out three of the monitors.

A triumphant gleam was in Alti's eyes as they bore into Xena's. "Aha ha ha ha!" She whooped, and shoved Xena away from her. Alti released Gabrielle, and the smaller woman was taken by gravity's rough hand and pulled down to the floor. She landed with a groan and tipped over onto her side. Xena was next to her in moments, gathering her up into her arms.

"*Don't let her escape!*" Xena yelled, eyeballing Alti as she hovered over all their heads.

"Sorry, Xena, but this time you *don't* win." Alti vanished.

Chapter 30

"Okay," Raven said enthusiastically, poking her head around the lab door. "It's ready."

Four women got up off Malik's couch to join Gabby and Raven in the makeshift lab. Directly in the center of the room was a huge ominous looking machine; neither Gabrielle nor Xena had ever seen the likes of it before.

"Well?" Raven was beaming, glancing back and forth between Gabrielle and Xena, as if proudly displaying a living breathing child she had born. And wasn't it?

"That's the... time machine?" Gabrielle gave her a tender smile. She didn't want to reveal to the excited scientist that she was almost afraid to step into the room that contained the thing, let alone into *the thing*, itself.

Still beaming, Raven took a few steps toward it. "Yes it is. Isn't she *beautiful*?" She shot the four a radiant smile, as if she were a new parent looking through a nursery window. Upon seeing the perplexed and amused looks on her friends' faces she added, "Okay, who's going to be the first victim?"

"Raven!" Gabby glared at her from across the room.

"Just a little joke. Boy the hormones sure kick in when you're pregnant..."

Phoenix stepped up to her side and gave her a loving pat on the back. "I thought it was funny, Baby."

Flushing, Raven dropped her gaze from Gabby's smirk to Phoenix's adoring look. "Thanks." It came out almost shyly.

Xena went to the window when she noticed a streak of lightening brighten up the dark night. "Is it safe to try it in that?" she asked, pointing to the window behind her. The glass reflected the

inner room for a few seconds until another flashing beam of lightening split the heavens.

"Sure," Raven assured her. "I've been testing it for a week now, and it's been storming every day since..." She let her voice trail off. She didn't wish to remind any of them of that particular day. She was still trying to deal with her actions. She'd never taken a human life before, nor an immortal's, or whatever kind of being Hope was. Raven found that forgiveness was a difficult commodity to come by, especially when it was yourself that needed forgiving.

Xena turned back to the window, noticing the droplets hitting the glass. She moved away and over beside Gabrielle. "Well, let's get it done then. We have the mother of a certain shameness to find."

Goodbyes were said, tears were shed, and after accepting little reminders and mementoes from their four new friends, it was time to go home.

"I'll remember you all forever," Xena said, her throat catching. Her gaze settled on Gabby, and she glanced down at her bulging stomach and then back to those tender greens.

"Name her Rain."