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This story is one bard's attempt to make sense of a crappy ending to a show she loved and one American's attempt to make sense of the crappy turn her country has taken.

In terms of continuity – I didn't go back and rewatch the later seasons (the train wreck that was Season 5 and the somewhat less train wreck that was Season 6), because in part I am very old, and having made up with this show, don't want to have to break up with it again and wreck our renewed love affair. Suffice it to say this takes place after Friend In Need, but I'm ignoring that whole 25 year gap thing because that was some weird shit. And who can keep up with which gods got killed and who didn't- that weirdness I'm just ignoring. I may have gotten some details wrong here and there, but my heart is in the right place. Shout out to Robyn Harris who helped me off the ledge when I though my two central gods had been made mortal permanently in the show – kids do you research ***before*** *you write your fan fic. Or if you don't be grateful for the friends who have your back. I decided the best way to say goodbye to fan fic was to spend some time with the two that started it all for me in the first place, and one I hadn't really spent time with before. So, this is that.*

The Resurrection of Xena

By Bat Morda

Started on 4/15/2017
Finished on 1/14/2018

Chapter 1: The Two-Thousand Year Old Woman

Gabrielle Evans opened her eyes with a start. She listened intently, trying to determine what had woken her up. As if on cue, another raindrop landed on her face, then another then another. Sitting up, she stretched her shoulders and tilted

her head from side to side, consciously working the muscles of her neck – willing them to relax. She sighed, breathing in the sea air and smiled sadly to herself. There was something about sleeping outside, under the stars that made her dream of her life long ago – the life she was determined revisit. The world had changed around her, and she had changed within it, but the essential truth of who she was and the love she carried kept her moving forward. The rain intensified rousing the dog lying next to the deck lounge where she'd drifted off. A gray and white pit-bull stood up shaking the water from her coat and whined.

"Okay, Argo – I get the message," Gabrielle said quietly. Picking up the soft blanket she'd fallen asleep under she walked barefoot across the smooth teak sundeck to the stairs that would spiral down to her to her bedroom suite below. The dog eagerly trotted a few steps ahead of her and waited. Before heading indoors, Gabrielle glanced upwards off the port side to the clouds, just barely backlit by the moon that were now raining in earnest. With a ghostly white glow shining off the still ocean around her, she could hear the rainfall hit the water rather than see it. After all of these years, centuries stacked upon each other like cordwood, it was still the little things that made Gabrielle think of home; think of Xena.

She was drawn from her reverie by Argo's whining, seemingly in concern to the shift in Gabrielle's thoughts or perhaps the increasing rain. This had been an unusually wet year in Southern California, and Argo disliked rain or rather the thunder that sometimes accompanied it. Smiling at her canine companion the woman, once upon a time known as Gabrielle of Potidaea padded down the stairs to the master suite of *The Hippolyta* – the yacht and floating fortress that she called home. While her company was based in Ireland, her yacht was registered in Greece and she found it fitting for a once Amazon Queen to pay homage to another.

To most people Gabrielle Evans seemed like your average eccentric billionaire and *The Hippolyta* like your average opulent mega yacht. Much to Gabrielle's relief however, most people didn't pick up on all the little things that told a much more interesting story. The yacht, like her owner, was indeed worth a fortune. Gabrielle had commissioned its construction, working very closely with the ship's architects to create a vessel that would fit her needs, both personally and professionally.

Built by the Benetti shipyard and christened in 2015 *The Hippolyta* had been Gabrielle's home for the past two years. Nearly 200 feet long, the sleek white vessel was the very cutting edge of modern yacht design. Fast in the water with state of the art navigation, radar, sonar, GPS and satellite connectivity the ship kept Gabrielle in touch with the world at large when she needed to be, and let her escape when she needed that as well. She maintained a crew of 15 that rotated from the personnel in a specialized division of her business, Bardic & Company. If she'd left the ship as most comparable yachts were designed, it could sleep 12 guests in the 6 cabins onboard, not counting her grand master suite. Gabrielle had retained one additional suite for a guest stateroom, and she could easily make additional spots for guests in the library if necessary or other places onboard where couches expanded to beds. The other staterooms however had been converted to a gym, an office, a study, and a vault for treasures that traveled with her. Several concealed compartments stored a variety of weapons and surveillance equipment.

Gabrielle had fallen asleep under the stars on the sun deck, and while not an unusual occurrence the years had taught her to appreciate not sleeping in the rain when she didn't have to. She descended the stairs past the upper deck then to the main deck to her private rooms.

She reached the bottom of the stairs, and followed Argo through several rooms to her bedroom. The room was spacious enough to fit a king-sized bed and not feel the least bit cramped. It was on the interior of the main deck and instead of windows rich wood paneling and several paintings covered the walls. The carpeting was thick and luxurious, the bed coverings and pile of pillows had splashes of deep reds and rich grays that contrasted nicely with the wood. The lighting was warm and inviting. To Gabrielle the deep color of the wood and warmth of the light reminded her of being on tall-masted sailing ships centuries ago. There was a nightstand on each side of the bed with places to charge a variety of electronic devices and a small neat bookcase was home to various volumes on a variety of subjects from science to politics with a few good mysteries as well. As she undressed for bed, her back to the full-length mirror in the bathroom, she barely noticed the dragon tattoo covering her back, still as vibrant and clean as it was when freshly healed. She brushed her teeth, studying her reflection, wondering if she should grow her hair long again. People assumed she was in her mid to late thirties, some even thought she was younger. She considered that the shorter hair made her look older, not that five years difference either way mattered much. After rinsing her mouth, she left the bathroom and padded across the bedroom to the walk-in closet. She selected a gray skirt, blue shirt, gray tie, and a pair of heels to match. The outfit was sharp and stylish. She probably wouldn't need a jacket, but put one aside just in case and made sure that everything was pressed and in order.

Finally, she checked her phone for any last-minute messages. There was one from Susan Yin, her director of Intelligence and Special Projects. The message was marked urgent so she hit the call button.

"Gabrielle," the voice said by way of greeting. Save for meetings, Gabrielle was perfectly comfortable with being addressed by her first name. There were times and places for formality and she'd assembled a team of people who knew how to navigate those waters quite well. "Thank you for getting back to me so soon."

"What have you got?" she asked.

"Two things. We've made some real progress on Project Olympus. I know you wanted to be alerted when we found anything concrete and this afternoon we did. The second thing is there is someone who wants to transfer to Special Projects from Acquisitions and Holdings. His name is Brian Glass and he's been with the company for four years. He started in Philanthropy, stayed there for two years, then moved to A & H where he is now. I know we generally don't consider someone for SP that soon, but he looks great on paper – almost too good. I brought him in for an interview, and he interviewed well; too well. I think you should vet him sooner rather than later. I'd like to bring him to the meeting tomorrow, to meet with you after the department meeting." Having made her case, Susan didn't elaborate. She waited patiently for her boss' response or request for clarification.

"Send over his file," Gabrielle said. "By all means, bring him to the meeting. He can have breakfast outside while he waits for the department meeting to finish.

I'll have someone here keep an eye on him. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. It's better to know what we've got than be surprised."

Bardic & Company was a large enterprise; too large for Gabrielle to personally interview everyone who worked for her. She knew everyone's name and face, but only made personal connections with people at a certain level or within specific departments. Special Projects was one of those departments. Strip away everything else and this was why her businesses existed at all. Gabrielle knew every member of the Special Projects team well - from his or her birthdays to favorite flavor of ice cream. It was absolutely vital to Gabrielle that everyone in that division be trustworthy and discrete. While rare, it wasn't unheard of for someone to try to infiltrate her company for a variety of reasons.

"What about Project Olympus?" she asked.

"There is a woman named Valerie DelRay who fits the parameters you described," Susan said. "It's evident that she's created multiple personas over the years. She's been getting better at it, but made some mistakes some time ago. Presently she owns a software start up called *Bliss*, which is a dating app. it's a fairly new company, small. I've already reached out and can get you a meeting tomorrow – late afternoon if you would like. I sent over a photograph that Mike Nieminen took earlier today."

Gabrielle put the phone on speaker and opened the attachment. She smiled at the results. "Where is the company headquarters?" she queried, wondering what arrangements would need to be made with her transportation division.

"Would you believe Venice?"

"Italy?" Gabrielle asked, disappointed.

She could hear the grin in Susan's voice. "How about Los Angeles."

"Well, well I'll be damned," Gabrielle, mused. "See if you can get an appointment for 4pm or later. Contact Transportation, have the Tesla brought to the marina. I'm also going to need…" pacing her bedroom she was quiet for a moment thinking. "Roses – a dozen white and a dozen –um…" she tried to think of as many color combinations as she could, it was important to have the right offering, "the dusky orange ones with the tinge of lavender on the edges, you know the ones I mean?"

"I think so," Susan replied. "You want them mixed, right? I'll have a photo of the arrangement sent over first thing in the morning to make sure it's right."

Gabrielle nodded to herself, her mind already anticipating tomorrow afternoon. This was a moment she'd been working toward for centuries. This could be the next link in the chain that would bring her beloved back to her. She pushed those thoughts down, wanting to keep her composure on the phone. She swallowed and took a steadying breath before speaking again. "That's great. Thank you, Susan. Good work – see you tomorrow."

She waited for Susan to wish her a good night before putting her phone down and slowly sitting on the edge of her bed. Argo jumped up, turning in a circle three times before making herself at home on a blanket at the foot of the bed, ignoring the plush dog bed on the floor. "This could be it girl," she said quietly. Her hand shook as she reached forward, touching the wall next to her bed. A panel slid silently to the side and a shelf moved forward. Resting on the sturdy shelf, in a protective bracket

was a clay urn; the urn containing Xena's ashes. Gently, reverently, Gabrielle touched the cold clay surface. "Xena, this could be it." She whispered. "We may finally be getting somewhere." She sat there for several long moments, looking at the urn and feeling hopeful. Touching the wall again, the shelf slid back within and the panel closed. She rested her hand against the wall for a moment more, feeling the connection to her warrior before climbing into bed.

She picked up the leather-bound book sitting on her nightstand and using the ribbon bookmark, opened it to the next blank page. With pen in hand she wrote down her thoughts, telling Xena about her day and her findings. She felt almost giddy, hysterical even. She had been searching for anyone from Olympus for so painfully long, but Aphrodite especially. Poseidon had told her, that fateful day, that Aphrodite was the key to Xena's resurrection and at long last, she may have found her. She wrote for nearly an hour, saying everything she felt she needed to say for the day and then set the book and pen back on the nightstand.

"Sweet dreams, girl." She said, patting the dog and trying to settle herself for sleep. Like a crack that breaks the dam, emotions still surged through her. "Hey Siri, play Fleetwood Mac, *Wish You Were Here*," she said out loud to the darkness. Piano tones filled the room from unseen speakers and for the first time in a very long while, Gabrielle of Potidaea cried herself to sleep.

There's distance between us
And you're on my mind
As I lay here in the darkness
I can find no peace inside

I wish you were here holding me tight
If I had you near, you'd make it alright
I wish you were here
'Cause I feel like a child tonight

There's rain on my window
And I can count the drops
But I can't help feeling lonely
There's no way, no way that I could stop

I wish you were here holding me tight
If I had you near, you'd make it alright
I wish you were here
'Cause I feel like a child tonight

Each moment is a memory
Time's so unkind
Every hour filled with an emptiness
I can't hide

Oh, this distance between us

Can't get you off of my mind
As I lay here in the darkness
I can find no peace inside

I wish you were here holding me tight
If I had you near, you'd make it alright
I wish you were here
'Cause I feel like a child tonight

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"Gabrielle, it's 6 am," a woman's disembodied voice said gently from the intercom speaker. One eye opened then the other. Even after two millennia she was still not a morning person. She rubbed her eyes and reached for her phone. She checked her emails, okayed the flower arrangement that Susan had sent over in the night, and absently rubbed Argo's belly while she reviewed the documents for her interview after the meeting.

"Gabrielle, it's 6:15," the disembodied voice announced.

"Okay, oaky," she replied, getting out of bed. Argo got up and headed up the stairs to the deck and an Astro-Turfed area set up for her use; one of several throughout the large ship. Gabrielle dragged herself out of bed and headed to the closet to dress for a quick workout before readying herself for the meeting ahead.

Bardic & Company was the latest manifestation of the bard's public persona. Based in Ireland, to most casual observers it was a private firm that bought and sold other companies, managed a host of investments and holdings, and provided money to a variety of charities through other charitable organizations and foundations. On paper, she was a very reclusive billionaire who did not grant interviews or attend gala events. In fact, there was a great deal of speculation as to who Gabrielle Evans was, given that there were few photographs and those attributed as being her were obviously way too young to actually be the company owner herself. Gabrielle met with outsiders as needed, as Susan Vincent, the spokesperson for Gabrielle Evans. The crew of *The Hippolyta* knew her as Gabrielle, of course – essentially living with her. The division heads of the company, each with the title of Executive Vice President, she met with personally, as herself, but to the world outside that selective bubble she was an enigma.

These executive vice presidents met monthly, always in person, to report on their divisions. Wherever in the world Gabrielle might be at the time, she had her executive staff flown to her location to discuss the details of their division. The meetings could last anywhere from a few hours in the morning to several days depending on what was happening within the organization. Gabrielle found these face-to-face meetings essential. Long ago she'd mastered the ability to read micro expressions and used these sessions to make sure the people she trusted with the most valuable of information about her empire were indeed trustworthy. Trust and agreement didn't always go together and she still shuddered at the debates several years ago when she'd announced to her Finance team that two hundred million dollars would be needed for the design and construction of *The Hippolyta*, a ship
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that eventually needed an additional fifty million to complete the enhancements she found essential.

Gabrielle had already lived on a yacht for some time; she wanted the new ship to keep pace with advancements in security and technology. She was not surprised that the finance team didn't see it as the necessity she did, but they didn't live here. And Gabrielle wanted people to challenge her if they had more expertise or if she was wrong. Once in awhile, someone would make a strong enough case about any given decision that she would change course. It was rare, but not unheard of.

She was hopeful that today's meeting would be on the shorter end of things. The more time she had to prepare for her meeting in Venice, the better. The tender boat brought the executive team to *The Hippolyta* at 8:30 am. A scrumptious breakfast buffet had been set up in the area adjacent to the conference room. The various division heads ambled into the area, fresh from security checks that also included handprint and retina analysis, depositing their cell phones into a secure box just outside the meeting area. Gabrielle didn't worry about offending anyone with the security checks. These sorts of measures were utilized throughout Bardic & Company and they all would be very familiar with them. Being careful did not require her to be distant or cold however so when she made her way to the breakfast area, she greeted everyone warmly, taking time to ask about their latest vacations, or birthdays or anything that might have happened in their lives since the last meeting.

She made it a point to welcome Brian Glass, the man who had arrived for the interview after the meeting. She knew him by sight but hadn't previously had much in the way of conversation with him beyond the polite hellos and chit-chat when she stopped by an office for a meeting. He was tall and muscled with a blond military haircut. She walked Brian out to the deck where he could sit and eat his breakfast while discretely watched by security. Returning to the area outside the conference room she selected her breakfast when everyone else had filled their plates and were seated at the table. She helped herself to some eggs Florentine and a blend of vegetable and fruit juices. Once inside the conference room, the doors were closed and a final security sweep was conducted inside the room.

Argo had her own breakfast in a bowl to the side of the buffet and made her way through the guests to greet them and look for handouts. She wasn't given any, but she did happily accept the ear scratches she was offered. When the group made their way to the conference room, the dog followed, making herself quite at home. Everyone was used to the boss' dog accompanying the boss everywhere.

"Let's get started," she said as she took her seat at the conclusion of the final security check. Like her private staterooms, the conference room had no windows, but unlike her suite, the colors were lighter, the lighting a brighter white. The table was a large oval composed of pieces of reclaimed ship wood that had been masterfully sanded and bound with brass bands on the ends. It looked old and new at the same time. Everyone sat comfortably in leather-upholstered chairs that circled the table, all eight division heads and Gabrielle had ample room. An ornate art deco rug in shades of blue lay between the conference table and the polished wood floor. "Acquisitions and Holdings, you're up first. Mr. Tiller," she said.

A handsome African-American man in his fifties reviewed the notes on the iPad in front of him briefly before speaking. “Thank you, Ms. Evans,” he began, “I’m happy to report that the overall portfolio is up sixteen percent this month, which as you remember is even better than last month. We are preparing to liquidate warehouse twelve, but you’d asked to review the inventory once more in person before we move anything.”

Gabrielle nodded “Right, hold off for now. I haven’t been able to arrange a visit, I will keep you posted.” As an afterthought she added, “do you think several months will significantly cost us when it comes to the auctions if we need to delay?” She watched the faces at the table carefully; their eyes shifted and they all looked uncomfortable.

Finally, Susan Yin, seated to Gabrielle’s right, spoke up, “President Turner is insane. The markets for everything could crash any second and the west coast could be nuked tomorrow. This current administration is a nightmare to plan contingencies around.” There were general murmurs of agreement.

“Assuming we’re all still here I mean,” Gabrielle clarified. She understood the fear. The current administration was terrifying and run by incompetent amateurs, but she had lived through the Spanish Inquisition and that put things in perspective.

Tiller shrugged, “There is no way to know for sure what the markets are going to do. Our current analysis gives us a six-month window. I think the information is solid, as long as we don’t start a war with North Korea this week.” He checked his notes once more. “The appraisal is nearly finished; we will be ready to move as soon as you’re ready.”

“Excellent,” Gabrielle said before looking at the man next to him. “Transportation and Operations; Mr. Hernandez.”

An older man with salt and pepper hair nodded and cast a quick glance to the woman across the table from him. “We need to increase the transportation budget, not just for this year, but moving forward. The company has grown in the last two years and the current budget is no longer enough. We need an increase of at least twenty-five percent.”

Gabrielle suppressed a grin as she watched the woman that Jorge Hernandez had glanced at fold her arms defiantly. “Ms. Martin, I sense that Finance has an opinion?”

“Finance is still paying off this!” she gestured at the room around them.

“Well, I did serve you breakfast,” Gabrielle said with a grin. There were several quiet chuckles around the table.

“There is a lot you want Finance to finance,” Ms. Martin replied, not backing down. “A quarter billion dollars here, a quarter billion dollars there – eventually it adds up to real money. Every department received budget increases- especially Philanthropy and Politics. Acquisitions and Holdings has been doing a lot more acquiring and holding and hasn’t really been liquidating…”

Gabrielle lifted her hand and the director of finance fell silent immediately. “Mr. Tiller, what is the current appraisal of vault twelve?”

“Conservatively, five hundred million.”

“Okay, move forward with the liquidation, don’t wait for me. Have the final appraisal sheets sent to me before shipping anything to the auction houses. Let’s see

if we can pressure them into trimming the commission." She raised her eyebrows at her head of Finance who nodded her agreement, for the moment mollified.

To Gabrielle's disappointment, that was only the first debate of the morning. The meeting lasted nearly twice as long as she'd hoped. Victoria Chen, head of the Political division gave her assessment of the present political climate and which races they thought would benefit most from campaign contributions. Different theories were presented for possible outcomes and contingencies where the company was investing the most resources. A number of worst-case scenarios were discussed and some spirited differences of opinion were debated.

"We know something is going on beyond an incompetent, amateurish administration," Victoria Chen said supporting the assessment of Jorge Hernandez. "There is a bigger game being played and we still don't know who all the players are or what the end goal is. Where is SP on this?" She asked.

"Special Projects is looking at all of the different approaches that have been discussed at this table," Susan Yin replied calmly. "We aren't holding anything back. As soon as we know it," she looked at each of the other vice presidents in turn, "you know it. I agree with you that there is someone behind the scenes pulling the strings and we are working very hard to get you answers." The finality in her voice and her polite attention turned to the Africa –American man sitting next to her made it clear that she was done discussing the topic.

When it came to his turn, the Philanthropic Division's DeShaun Johnson made the case to fully fund Planned Parenthood, funneling the money through smaller charities. There was more debate as a list of seventeen other worthy charities was narrowed down to twelve. The head of Human Resources, Fiona O'Brien, reported on current staffing levels, different requests for press interviews that were immediately rejected. She finished with a brief discussion on staffing levels and individuals that would be promoted into closer working proximity of Gabrielle.

When HR concluded, Technology and Research was the last of the eight departments to give their summary. Leticia Sanchez discussed several start-up companies that should be vetted for purchase to enhance the civilian intelligence company that Bardic & Company also owned. To no one's surprise Ms. Martin of finance wanted to see more data before entering purchase negotiations. Her expression soured further when Gabrielle casually mentioned that she may be purchasing the dating app *Bliss*. By the time everyone had reported it was well past lunchtime.

As the meeting broke up and the division heads meandered out of the conference room, Gabrielle made a point to chat casually and say a few words with everyone individually. She did this as she shook their hands and covered any action items that they needed from her.

The head of Finance approached her last. "If I didn't argue with you I wouldn't be doing my job," Ms. Martin said simply.

Gabrielle smiled. "I know that, Heather," she said warmly. "But you're going to have to trust me when I say it's going to be okay. There is more crap lying around waiting to be liquidated than vault twelve. There is real estate, other holdings, god knows what. We are not going to run out of money any time soon, regardless of what happens in the market."

The vice president wasn't convinced. She was about the same height as Gabrielle, in her mid-forties, and had brown hair that reached just below her ears. She adjusted her glasses, pushing them up from the bridge of her nose. "I can only operate by the numbers you put in front of me. You've been very clear about not skirting the law even though you've got plenty of room to maneuver- as privately held as this privately held company is. But when assets are on paper, I report as you've instructed me to. Between the holdings and the tax implications, we have a lot of bases to cover."

"I know," Gabrielle admitted. "I've got some stuff going with Special Projects right now, but I promise – as soon as I can I'm going to sit down with you and Susan and give you a better overview on some things to help with forecasting."

Heather Martin smiled in agreement. "Just let me know when."

Gabrielle couldn't resist needling the woman once more, "we can even have the meeting here since you gave me a quarter billion dollars to buy this boat."

The smile vanished from the other woman's face. "Sometimes I wonder why I work for you," she said.

Gabrielle chuckled, "it's because I'm fun and pay well."

When only Susan Yin remained, she had Brian brought in from the outer deck and invited the two of them to her office. A door to the side of the conference room led to a warmly lit and somewhat imposing office. Like most of the interior of the ship, it was decorated with powerful art deco designs. This space had a large window on the stern side where the deck and ocean beyond could be seen. There was an elegant desk, polished quilted maple with inlays of contrasting wood in art deco designs, which visually dominated the space. The two chairs in front of the desk were a matched pair with light blue upholstery and some silver trim. Gabrielle's own chair in this more formal office space looked like a marrying of art deco and industrial chic; stylish, but lived in. Just past the office was a less formal study where Gabrielle actually did her work; this room, not unlike the Oval Office in the White House, was for official business. Argo followed them in, and after making three circles on the large pillow by the bookcase, lay down watching all three humans intently.

She gestured for Susan and Brian to sit. Taking her own seat, she opened Brian's file. She didn't hesitate, and got right to the point.

"Four years is a pretty quick turn-around to be assigned to Special Projects, isn't it, Mr. Glass?" she asked. She studied the face of the man across from her, keeping the muscles of her own features relaxed and neutral. Her suspicions were confirmed when she noted that he was telegraphing signals, actively using micro expressions to convey trustworthiness. This guy was a pro.

"You can see from my resume that I have experience in the Navy as an intelligence officer. I've got an MBA, I've done well at the company thus far, and I think I would be an asset to your Special Projects Division." He spoke with confidence and ambition. "I think I'd be a good fit Ms. Vincent."

"I can see that," Gabrielle said sounding impressed. "I see that you did quite well with Philanthropy. You brought a number of worthy charities to our attention and managed to accomplish a great deal with the resources afforded you."

She asked him to elaborate on his take of the departments he'd seen, the work he'd done, and what exactly he could bring to the table. He wasn't shy about touting his accomplishments, both within Bardic and at previous jobs. He went on for some time and Susan brought the conversation back to his initial interest in Bardic, and his work in Philanthropy.

"Yes ma'am," he said, nodding. "DeShaun Johnson and I worked really well together. It was a team effort. Knowing I wanted to move up in the company, he suggested I transfer after my first two years; get a feel for how the other departments work."

"He is absolutely right," Gabrielle agreed. "But usually Intelligence and Special Projects is the last stop on the highway, not the third."

"Ahhh," he said, a bit disappointed. "I was under the impression that all departments are treated equally?"

"They absolutely are," Gabrielle reassured him. "I just meant from the standpoint of how all the pieces fit together. Tell you what – it's not protocol, but I'm going to put you in SP on a provisional basis. Susan will give you your assignments." Susan nodded in acknowledgement. "It will be slow going at first; I'm pulling her in a few directions right now. You will report to Sabin Jha, her second in command. Hang in there- your portfolio will grow. You do have qualifications that will be a great asset for us." He thanked her and she asked, "Have you got a favorite band?" He looked at her, puzzled. "SP is famous for its karaoke nights," she explained.

He grinned. "Lynyrd Skynyrd, for sure," he said.

"You'll fit right in then," she said without hesitation, standing up to indicate that the meeting was over. Brian and Susan also stood, and Brian did not flinch at the door when Susan didn't follow him to it. He nodded to them both, wished them a nice day, and followed the crewmember out of the office. When the office door was closed once more, both women sat down, clearly more relaxed now.

"Wow," Gabrielle said.

"I didn't think I was imagining anything," Susan replied. Susan Yin had been in Gabrielle's company longer than anyone else. In her early seventies, Susan had no-nonsense attitude that Gabrielle one described as "Helen Mirrin-esque" much to the Chinese woman's pleasure. She dressed simply, always wearing variations of the same slacks and blouse. She kept her long black hair, which was streaked with gray in a ponytail and seldom wore makeup. Having been around the bard as long as she had, her whole life in fact, there was no way she would not have noticed the other woman's lack of aging, but she never said anything. She was the third generation of her family to work for Gabrielle's 'family' and regardless of what her own personal thoughts might be, she never asked any questions.

"He's good, I'll grant him that," Gabrielle said appreciatively. "He controlled his expressions, his breathing. I've no doubt the guy can beat a polygraph. He's someone's plant; now we need to find out whose and what it is he's after."

"I think DeShaun was also suspicions and that's why he bumped him to Acquisitions," Susan said.

Gabrielle shook her head, "I can't imagine him not coming to me like you did. At any rate, I want every transaction he did for Philanthropy audited. What organizations did he bring us, who is working there, what did they do with the

money – everything. And I want to know what he's been doing at Acquisitions. Every day of this guy's last four years, I want to know what he had for lunch. I also want to meet with DeShaun at some point to get his take."

"Understood," Susan replied.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "He's so ballsy," she said. "What is my least favorite song ever?"

"Sweet Home Alabama," Susan replied without needing to think about it. "They even made it a trivia question at last year's holiday party. Maybe he was trying to read you?" she wondered.

Gabrielle didn't specifically advertise that she studied micro-expressions. The people who worked with her knew that 'reading people' was something she was good at. She would tell them "I have many skills" and elaborate no further. The people who were the most successful with her were the ones who left it at that. Susan also studied micro expressions, and while she didn't have the years, and years, and years of experience that Gabrielle did, she did know what techniques were being utilized.

"He was absolutely trying to read me," the bard affirmed. "I tried to keep as open and clueless an expression as I could. I do not want him to know we suspect him already. Keep his work isolated, but let him think he's actually doing something. Let's see if we can figure out what it is he's looking for."

"Will do," Susan replied. Shifting a bit uncomfortably, the older woman continued, "I'm very pleased how Sabin is coming along. I really wanted to bring him to the meeting. He needs to take over more of my portfolio, be a fixture at the monthly meeting."

Gabrielle looked at the woman sitting across from her. She knew what Susan was trying to say, this was not the first time they had this conversation. She couldn't help but think how much the woman looked like her mother now, and her grandfather when each of them had a similar conversation with the bard. "You know I value your judgment above anyone else in the company. Like your mother and grandfather, you have contributed so much and I…and my family of course… are forever grateful. If you think it's time to step away, you need to step away." That was how this conversation always went: Susan would say she needed to retire, Gabrielle would give her the green light, and the dedicated woman would want to stay to finish one more project, or operation, or quarter.

"Besides," Gabrielle added, "Sabin is still nursing a broken leg from that event outside Moscow. You can't drag him to boring meetings on crutches. He was here last month, bring him next month. He will be ready when the time comes." Susan nodded, she seemed a bit embarrassed by the suggestion of dragging an injured man to a routine meeting. Gabrielle knew that if Susan were in traction and hooked up to life support, she'd still manage to make it to the meeting. "How is Shen adjusting to boarding school?" she asked instead. Asking a grandparent about their grandchildren was always a sure-fire way to cheer them up.

As she expected Susan's eyes brightened with pride. "He loves it," she said, beaming.

"No homesickness?"

"A little, maybe. Being able to come home most weekends has been good."

The bard nodded. “You’re doing right by him Susan,” she said warmly.

“Thank you, Gabrielle,” the Chinese woman replied, grateful. “I did not expect to be raising my grandson by myself, but the two of us are making a go of it. He has remarkable maturity for one so young.”

Gabrielle nodded. It had been a difficult year for the woman sitting across from her. She lost her husband Tom and daughter Beatrix in a car accident while she had been watching Shen so the two could go out for Father’s Day.

“I like to think Trixie and Tom are watching over us,” Susan said with a sad smile.

Reaching across the table, Gabrielle squeezed her hand warmly. “You know what they say Susan,” she said. “When you think of the dead, the dead can hear your thoughts.”

“I do find that comforting,” she replied.

“You know,” Gabrielle suggested. “It’s been awhile since you and Shen had dinner on the boat. We need to plan an evening. Head over to Catalina, go swimming, have a barbecue. Argo loves swimming with him.”

“You spoil him, Gabrielle.” Susan protested.

“Godmother’s are supposed to spoil their godchildren, right? Don’t make me pull rank.”

Susan nodded. “Yes, yes we would both love that. You are a very kind woman. Just like your mother and your grandmother.” She winked and Gabrielle wasn’t sure if it was an unconscious eye flutter of if she was teasing her.

Susan glanced at her watch and looked at Gabrielle a bit concerned. “Your appointment with Valerie DelRay is at 4 pm. I know it’s not far, but it’s already 3.”

“Give me 15 minutes and I’ll ride back to the marina on the boat with you. No sense in making two trips. Are the flowers in the car?” Gabrielle asked.

Susan nodded. “Yes, and the address is already programed into the navigation.” She handed her boss a small slip of paper. “But here it is with the phone number if you need it.”

“Can we tell Heather that we’re saving money in the water taxi budget by sharing a ride?” Susan teased. “I swear that Ms. Smith is the most terrifying person in the company.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Gabrielle said as they left her office.

Chapter 2: The Goddess of Love

Gabrielle turned down Ocean Avenue following the directions glowing on the screen built into her dashboard. The Venice Canals near Santa Monica were man-made waterways with rows of houses overlooking them. They were a little bit of Europe tucked in Southern California; they were beautiful and serene and seemed out of place just a stone’s throw from the Venice boardwalk. All of the homes were nice, sold for millions of dollars, but were all relatively modest in size. There were no sprawling estates here. They had a boat dock of some sort on the water, and many homes had a small boat of some kind to visit neighbors.

It was equal parts comical and ironic that the woman she’d been searching for, for two thousand years was presently living not a half hour from where her

yacht was parked. It was hard to think of something she'd been working towards for so long as happening suddenly, but less than an hour, she'd be face to face with someone from her old life; possibly the only person on earth she could say that about. She wished now that she'd had more time; at least more time between knowing where Aphrodite was and actually seeing her. She wasn't sure what she'd say, how she would admit what she'd done, or how she ever hoped to persuade the goddess to help her. Now, as she turned down the final street she made a firm commitment to herself to use the same blind willingness with Aphrodite that she had exhibited with Poseidon two millennia ago. Whatever the goddess might ask of her she would do it, completely and without reservation. She had come too far and waited much too long to let this opportunity, probably her only opportunity, pass.

She brought her car to a stop in front of an adorable cottage. It was two stories, and had what looked like a modern take on a thatched roof. She wasn't sure what she expected, but had thought that Aphrodite would live in a mansion behind a secured gate or something similar. This was completely charming and inviting. The front door was at the back of the house; on the street side since all the homes in the canal area had their living areas along the water. She left the roses in the car; they would not be the sort of thing one brought to a business meeting. After all, there was a slight chance this might not be her.

There wasn't much of a lawn in front of the house, but there were cheerful flowers growing from a number of different vessels. Urns and flower boxes of different shapes, sizes, and colors with brightly colored flowers and herbs of diverse varieties fought for space; it was eclectic, but inviting too. As she walked up the front walkway she saw several small Greek statues. She knew she was in the right place. Taking a deep breath, she rang the doorbell.

"Yes?" a voice asked via a speaker to the side of the door.

"Gabrielle Evans for Valerie DelRay. I have a 4 o'clock appointment," Gabrielle said. She managed to straighten her skirt and tie before the door opened. Gabrielle looked up into the crisp blue eyes of Aphrodite herself. "Gabrielle Evans," she said extending her hand.

Aphrodite visibly did a double take at the sight of her guest. Automatically she extended her own hand and said "Valerie DelRay. Please come in." The goddess held the door open and Gabrielle stepped inside.

The house was gorgeous, she wasn't surprised at that, but it was also homey, warm, and inviting. It also smelled wonderfully of lavender.

"Right this way," Aphrodite added before leading Gabrielle through the entry.

She had but a moment to glance around and could tell that this place belonged to a much different woman from the one she used to know. She had almost expected Baroque or Rococo furnishings; draperies and gold leaf, gilded everything-Versailles perhaps. Instead she felt like she'd stepped into the home of a millionaire who loved to entertain, but who enjoyed the company of down to earth people. The beautiful antique furniture looked comfortable and utilitarian, the stunning floors to be walked on. A quick glance into the kitchen as she passed by showed the domain of someone who loved to cook.

Aphrodite led Gabrielle towards the canal side of the home to a small office the size of her study on *The Hippolyta*. The window to the left provided a gorgeous

water view. “Please sit,” the goddess indicated the overstuffed and inviting chair across from a well-worn desk. The colors of the office were warm; tasteful oranges and yellows mixed with accents of pale blues and greens. It made Gabrielle think of spring.

As she sat down she took a moment to let her eyes take in the vision of home that now sat across from her. Not surprisingly, Aphrodite had not aged a day. The woman was stunningly beautiful with calming blue eyes- only now her hair was short- shorter than Gabrielle’s even. She was wearing a vintage inspired dark blue dress with pale green accents. It was professional, but clung to her curves and was sexy as hell. Gabrielle glanced away to keep from staring.

“I hope traffic wasn’t too bad.” Aphrodite said, drawing the bard’s attention away from the window.

“Not at all,” she said. “I came from the marina, it’s almost like we’re neighbors.”

“I understand you’re interested in buying my company?” Aphrodite asked, continuing to stare at Gabrielle.

“I am,” Gabrielle succinctly replied.

“Well I have to tell you…” the goddess trailed off and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to stare, but you look just like someone I knew a long time ago. And your voice…”

Gabrielle smiled warmly, this was the sign she’d been hoping for. “Aphrodite, it’s me. Gabrielle from Potidaea.”

Clearly taken aback, the goddess’ eyes narrowed, “No way.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “We met in one of your temples when you did something to Joxer to make him act heroic every time he heard a bell.”

“Holy shit,” Aphrodite gasped. “But… how?”

Shrugging, Gabrielle replied, “it’s a long story, but the punch line is Ambrosia.” As if on cue her stomach growled loudly.

“Still with the eating thing?” the goddess observed wryly.

Gabrielle nearly blushed, “in my defense, a meeting ran late and I didn’t get a chance to have lunch. Can I take you to dinner? Catch up?”

“Of course!” Aphrodite replied. “I can’t believe I’m actually seeing someone from the old neighborhood.” Both women stood up and she hugged her visitor warmly. “Wait a minute,” she added. “Does this mean you’re not interested in buying my company?”

“Sure, I’d love to buy your company. You can name your price over dinner,” Gabrielle answered.

Aphrodite was a little surprised by the comment. The woman she’d talked to earlier, from the software company didn’t seem phased by the two hundred and eighty million dollar price tag. While a fraction of what *Tinder* was worth, *Bliss* wasn’t cheap. Just what sort of business was Gabrielle into?

“Your home is beautiful,” Gabrielle added looking around as they headed towards the front door once more.

“Thanks,” Aphrodite replied, bringing her thoughts to the present. “I travel a lot, but when I’m here it feels like home.” She picked up a purse and cardigan sweater from the couch by the front door, holding it open once again for the bard.

Gabrielle stopped at the door, and touched the goddess' arm while leaning up to kiss her cheek. "It is really good to see you, Aphrodite." The goddess smiled.

Walking to Gabrielle's car, Aphrodite was again trying to synch the bard she knew, with the woman she was with. There was a ridiculously expensive dark green Tesla sitting in front of her house. Seeing expensive cars in LA wasn't unusual, but Gabrielle? "Nice wheels," Aphrodite remarked.

This time it was Gabrielle's turn to open the door. She reached inside for the flowers, taking them off the seat so the other woman could sit down.

"These are for you," Gabrielle said, handing her the flowers. Aphrodite arched an eyebrow. "Look, I know that you need to give an offering when you visit a goddess. It's been awhile, but I remember my manners."

The goddess brought the blooms to her nose and inhaled their sweet scent. "Thank you, they're lovely," she said, as Gabrielle started the car. After a brief suggestion/negotiation about where to eat, Aphrodite suggested a restaurant called Moonshadows off the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. Gabrielle was familiar with it. The electric car silently moved down the street as she tried to make sense of the last few minutes.

The Goddess of Love would be the first person to proclaim that gods weren't like most people. They don't surprise easily; very little can throw them. As the car wove its way through her neighborhood to PCH, Aphrodite allowed herself a moment to admit she was thrown. Sure, she obviously knew all about Ambrosia and the effect it could have if humans ate it. She'd heard the stories about Velasca and Callisto among countless other humans who had consumed it. But even allowing that Gabrielle survived the Ambrosia itself, the mere fact of surviving two thousand years, with her sanity intact was simply unbelievable. Gods were built for long lives. Every fiber of their being was designed to endure eternity. Mortals had life spans that could practically be measured in breaths. Their brains were small because they could only hold a few years' worth of information. How had Gabrielle not gone mad?

"Look," she said, being very direct but not wanting to startle the woman behind the wheel, "I'm having a hard time believing what I'm seeing. I mean, sure, Ambrosia, I get that. But how has two thousand years of living not made you crazy? I'm going to need pages and pages of exposition. Don't leave anything out. And how did you find me anyway?"

Gabrielle was watching the road, but glanced at her companion with a smile. "I promise I will tell you everything," she said. "But not while I'm driving. Please, tell me about you. How have you spent the past couple of millennia?" She kept her voice light, but was truly fearful of what the goddess might say.

"I'm going to need background music for this," Aphrodite said as she picked up the bard's iPhone. "What's your passcode?"

While it could be seen as an incredibly intimate question, Gabrielle gave it to her without a moment's hesitation. Aphrodite smiled, and held the phone up to the driver.

"Cute pooch," she said at the smiling pit bull's face on Gabrielle's lock screen.

"That's Argo."

"Not your first Argo, I'd guess?" she asked and resisted the urge to take a peek through Gabrielle's photos, instead hitting her music app and selecting Adele

then shuffle. She was not surprised to see a wide variety of music on the bard's phone. Operas, classical, renaissance, modern, it was the variety you would expect from someone who had enjoyed music since ancient Greece. The song *Water Under The Bridge* began to play and Aphrodite was impressed with the Tesla's sound system.

"There have been quite a few," she admitted. "Not always Argo, mind you. But it's a bit of home I keep revisiting." She was quiet a moment and added, "I miss home."

"Me too," The goddess agreed. "I have no idea what happened, Gabrielle," she began. "One day, I'm visiting one of my temples – I had plans to meet with Apollo on Mt. Olympus but I needed to check on something first. Then this wave hits me, like some kind of sonic boom. It sent me clear across the courtyard and knocked me unconscious. I eventually come to and there is a crowd of worshippers standing around. I wanted to get the blink out of there, figure out what the hell happened. But, no blink." Aphrodite looked out the car window at the ocean stretching as far as the eye could see. Even now, talking about this was upsetting. Gabrielle stayed quiet, letting the woman compose herself. "Most of my powers are gone," she simply said. "I can't move instantly, I'm earth bound. No fireballs – I mean I'm not mortal, I'm still a god, I still have my duty, my job, that type of power is intact, but different too."

"How so?" Gabrielle asked. They were driving into the setting sun so she took a pair of RayBan sunglasses off of the dashboard and put them on. Aphrodite took a pair of nearly identical Wayfarer sunglasses out of her purse. Both women grinned at each other wearing sunglasses they'd actually purchased in the 1950s.

"I used to be able to infuse the entire planet with love from home," Aphrodite continued, "I could be standing in Greece and love, jealousy, infatuation, passion, lust, desire, or hope- all of it could be felt everywhere. Over the years my range has contracted I guess. I feel myself pulled to different places." She chuckled sadly, "I have a ridiculous amount of frequent flyer miles, I'll tell you that."

"What kind of places are you drawn to?" the bard asked, enjoying the cadence of Aphrodite's voice. There was a tangible kindness you could hear and Gabrielle was warmed by the sound of it.

With a shrug she continued, "I spend a lot of my time in war torn places, places in Africa where people are starving, places where disasters have happened. I do a lot of volunteer work to be near people who need love and hope. Then I come back to places like this, where people have everything, to make sure they feel empathy and caring and take an interest in the people with less."

She was quiet a moment. "But places like this have a dark side too. Back in the day, someone could misinterpret one of my gifts; let's say a guy with an unhealthy fondness for his goat or whatever. I could handle that directly – poof and I turn the guy into a goat so he can get rejected in goat language. People do really awful things in the name of 'love' now and I can't do anything but comfort the victims." She knew the conversation was getting heavy, and that is not how she wanted to start her reunion with Gabrielle. "But enough about me, how did you keep from going crazy? You've got to tell me that at least."

Gabrielle knew the goddess needed a distraction from where her thoughts had just taken her. "I learn things; languages, professions, skill-sets. As long as I'm

engaged it helps me pass the time and keep hopeful." She pulled into the parking lot of the Moonshadows restaurant. It was on the beach, and they were early, but this was clearly a place where waiting a long while for a table wasn't unusual and she hadn't made a reservation. "Don't get me wrong," she said as she parked the car. "I've wasted decades from time to time trying to escape my own head. I've tried to get high or drunk which isn't very successful and I've been institutionalized numerous times" Now it was Gabrielle's desire to turn the conversation back to something lighter. "I hope we can get a table on the patio."

Aphrodite smiled as they approached the host. The couple ahead of them had just been told there was no outdoor seating available. The goddess asked for a table for two and Gabrielle was surprised and pleased that they were led outside to the corner table on the patio, closest to the water with a stunning view. As they sat down, Aphrodite thanked the waiter and winked at Gabrielle. In French she said, "Being a god still has some perks."

"You haven't lost a step," the bard replied, also in French.

"How many languages do you speak?" the other woman asked, continuing in the language she'd chosen as she looked over the menu.

As Gabrielle opened her own menu, she replied, "Honestly I've lost count. Forty at least that are current, more that are dead now; I've moved around a lot and try to learn the language of wherever I'm at. Some have gotten fairly rusty from lack of use."

The waiter arrived, after introducing himself Gabrielle ordered them a bottle of Shimizu No Mai Junmai Daiginjo, her favorite sake listed on the menu.

"From the beginning," Aphrodite instructed, shifting to Portuguese.

The drinks arrived quickly and Gabrielle took a healthy swallow before beginning her tale in Portuguese. "After Xena died I went kind of crazy," she began. "For several years, I actually was crazy. I imagined that Xena was still with me and that I could talk to her and that she wasn't really in the urn of ashes I was carrying everywhere. I couldn't cope with her loss. I had initially gone to Egypt and spent several years there. I learned a lot about the people, the culture; I did some good I suppose, but I missed home and came back to Greece. I thought I would continue what Xena and I had been doing; helping people, like I did in Egypt. When a village is in trouble, they don't care that their savior talks to her dead girlfriend. Eventually I settled into my grief and stopped hallucinating."

The waiter returned and the women ordered appetizers and entrées. Gabrielle ordered a second bottle of sake. "We're old friends who haven't seen each other in two thousand years; we've got a lot of catching up to do." she explained.

"Honey, I have those kinds of friends," he replied understandingly.

"Ironically", she continued when the waiter walked away, switching to Swahili, "it was the village of Cirra that changed my life. The village had rebuilt itself since the last time Xena and I had seen it. The vineyards had been replanted and they were making wine again. They were shipping it to other parts of Greece but pirates had been molesting the transport vessels. I felt an obligation to help them so I assembled a crew, got a ship, and went after the pirates. We found them, but a terrible storm hit and the ships were near a treacherous shallow reef. Both ships

floundered on the rocks. Poseidon intervened and gave us a challenge and an ultimatum." Gabrielle looked out at the ocean, remembering it like it was yesterday.

"Was it the first time you'd encountered my uncle?" the goddess asked.

"No," Gabrielle replied shaking her head. "Xena and I had encountered him twice before, when we'd had our adventure with Ulysses," Two millennia later and the memory still made her frown. "And when we'd met Cecrops. I think Poseidon had a grudging respect for Xena from those encounters, but I don't think I made much of an impression."

The sun was now low on the horizon and the sand of the beach nearly glowed warm ochre. The clouds from the night before had moved on and the sky was clear. Stars would be making an appearance soon. She took another sip of sake. The patio was full of other diners, no one noticing or caring that she and Aphrodite were switching languages every few minutes. The patio was made from rough-hewn beams like a pier, with bright white railing to keep anyone from falling off the deck. The tide was starting to go out, the waves at this point crashing only a short distance away with the water rushing towards them below. The rock and the water reminded her so vividly of that shipwreck, trying to look after her crew, feeling responsible for them. Caught in her memories, the bard remembered Poseidon showing up. She couldn't say it directly; couldn't tell Aphrodite what she had done for Poseidon. Right now, with the sun setting, it was too scenic and beautiful to say something that would make the smile on the goddess' face fade and turn angry; maybe after dinner, maybe after another bottle of sake. Maybe. She just needed more time.

"There was a task he wanted completed," She continued. "Whichever crew completed it would survive." Inwardly she cringed at her own vagueness, but Aphrodite either didn't notice, or didn't care.

"So it was Team Gabrielle versus Team Pirates?"

"Exactly," Gabrielle agreed. "I pressed my luck and said I'd accept his terms if he would help me bring back Xena. He agreed."

Aphrodite sipped her sake and looked over at her companion. Her expression was gentle and sad. "I've no doubt that you found out that bargaining with a god never goes as you'd expect?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Did I ever. We completed the…task. My crew was saved, the pirates drowned and I stood there, waiting for him to bring Xena back. Instead he handed me this small gold plate with a tiny bit of Ambrosia on it. He said that he didn't have the power to bring Xena back, that he'd only agreed to *help* and that I needed to find something first. He doubted that one lifetime would be enough time, and that's what the Ambrosia was for."

"Ouch." Aphrodite said.

"It was so similar to what had befallen Cecrops, only unlike Athena he gave me the choice to become immortal or not. He insisted I eat it right then and there, so it didn't fall into anyone else's hands. He also promised that if I'm able to complete the task and return to him, he will give Xena Ambrosia as well so we can live out our lives together."

Aphrodite switched their language to Finnish before commenting, "that's a pretty generous offer from my uncle. Except you didn't really get a chance to think it over, that's not much of a choice."

Their food had arrived and the two ate, enjoying each other's company and the sunset. After a couple of bites, Aphrodite asked, "Any side effects from the Ambrosia?"

Gabrielle shrugged, "Some. I've never been sick. I was in England during the black plague and didn't get so much as a sniffle. If I break a bone or get cut I heal very quickly, but I didn't go Velasca crazy if that's what you mean."

"Interesting," Aphrodite said, taking another bite of exquisitely grilled white fish.

"I can't get a tattoo or pierce anything," Gabrielle added. "The dragon tattoo that I got, for protection shortly before Xena died is fine, it hasn't faded at all. But nothing new…"

"You've tried?" Aphrodite asked wryly

"Maybe," Gabrielle answered, switching to Mandarin.

"Let me guess, you've tried to get a tattoo and your skin forces the ink out and by the next morning you've just got stained sheets? Or when you get something pierced, the second you take the stud out, the hole closes up?"

"Ah ha!" Gabrielle said, feeling the sake in a nice way. "You too!"

With a wink the Goddess of Love said, "what can I say, I was heavy into the punk scene for a while."

They ordered dessert. The spectacular light show of the sunset was gone. The sky shifted from oranges and pink hues to shades of indigo. The first stars were making an appearance and the sea made itself known more by sound than sight. The waiter didn't mind them taking so long over their meal, especially since Gabrielle ordered her third bottle sake. At one hundred eighty dollars a bottle, he'd do better on a tip from this table than turning it over for other diners.

"Any children?" Aphrodite asked.

Gabrielle nodded. "I was alone for a very long time. Nearly a century I'd say. I was just so sad and lonely. Everyone I'd known had died; my family, my sister's family, even Joxer and his family. I'd moved away. I knew I wasn't ready to fall in love with another woman, so I just put it out of my mind. I met a very nice man," she stopped to think for a moment. "His name was Mistos; we got married and I had five children in fact. It was a time of happiness. I was still pursuing the task Poseidon had given me, but my family was a wonderful source of renewal." Her expression darkened, "Until I was outliving my great grandchildren that is. I've been married a few times since then but I won't have any more children. Knowing I will outlive them hurts too much."

"I think that's the worst part," Aphrodite said as the two women shared their desserts; they'd ordered several delectable items from the menu. "It's no secret that I don't get along famously with my family, but I do miss my children. I had four sons and a daughter with Hephaestus. I have no way to know if they were on Olympus when the blast hit, or if they are somewhere in the world. It's hard not to know." She took a sip of sake before continuing, clearly distraught. "I think that is the hardest part of all of this. Not being able to move, having it take so damn long to get from point a to point b. Trying to find an individual in the world is nearly impossible," Aphrodite complained. "My children could be here, searching for me from temple to temple, I could miss them by a day and have no way to know."

Gabrielle looked at her "I know exactly what you mean," she said, quite serious.

Aphrodite said something else that Gabrielle did not understand but recognized the language.

"I've always wanted to learn Navajo," she said. "I've never found anyone to teach it to me. Who taught you?" the bard asked.

"No one," Aphrodite replied. "I just know languages. All of them; if there is a language that someone uses to express love, I know it." She shrugged, "it's a feature, I guess."

"There are over six thousand languages on earth," Gabrielle said, amazed.

"Don't forget Klingon," the goddess replied smoothly.

"No way," said Gabrielle.

"naQ mer," Aphrodite said with a smile.

The waiter came back to the table and apologetically told them that it was eleven and that the restaurant closed at ten. Gabrielle casually handed over a black American Express card.

"Holy shit, Gabrielle," Aphrodite said eyes wide first at the black AmEx card and secondly at the bill for dinner.

The bard rolled her eyes. "Let's go take a walk on the beach," she suggested when she'd paid the bill, barely glancing at it and simply doubling the total to make the tip.

The women made their way onto the sand, both taking off their shoes and leaving them by the rocks that led up to the parking lot. The tide had receded and the repetitive sound of the surf was soothing. "Do you keep tabs on your descendants?" the goddess asked.

Gabrielle chucked in spite of herself as they walked up the beach on the firm cold sand where the water had receded. "Yeah, I've got a funny story about that. I kept closer watch a long time ago, when I at least knew who was related to whom without doing any research; but over time I lost track. Since the dark ages, I've been saving things, hording them, knowing they will be valuable later. Money has been power for a very long time and not having a dick…" the goddess nodded understandingly. "So, it's the late '20s, early '30s. The depression has hit, and at the time I was an archeologist. I'd made some 'discoveries' of artifacts I'd saved from Egypt, like I said, I'd spent some time there right after Xena died. And don't get me wrong, I really was an archeologist, later on I had some classical training. I'd learned to read hieroglyphics while I was there so it was a pretty easy subject to tackle. It's amazing how much easier 'history' is when you've lived it. Anyway, I come across this guy, Harry Covington and his adorable daughter, she must have been thirteen years old at the time. She was the spitting image of my daughter Lila when she was that age. I did some research and sure enough, I'm one of Harry's ancestors."

Gabrielle had to take a couple of quick steps towards Aphrodite to dodge out of the foam pushed forward by a larger than usual wave. The goddess grabbed ahold of Gabrielle's arm to steady her, and they continued up the beach with their arms linked.

"I shifted careers away from archeology," Gabrielle continued. "But I kept an eye on the family. He would fall on hard times and sell his discoveries. I'd buy them

through a variety of different agents. His daughter grew up and became an archeologist herself. I'd let the things her father sold get 'stolen' and placed back in circulation so she could recover them. I wasn't surprised she was gay, but I was surprised at how ballsy she was about it in the '40s and '50s. Her girlfriend was a tall brunette named Melinda, who was the spitting image of Xena. The two of them died in a car accident seven years ago. They were hit head on by a drunk driver. Theirs was the last family funeral I've ever attended, from a distance of course, so as not to freak out the family.

They continued on in companionable silence for a moment. "What did you do during World War II?" Aphrodite asked.

"French Resistance," Gabrielle replied. "You?" she asked looking up at the goddess.

"I was in the SS and I inspected concentration camps." Aphrodite replied flatly without emotion.

"What?" Gabrielle asked stunned and horrified.

"Honey," the goddess said gently, "it was the only way I could freely move from camp to camp. They needed every bit of love and hope I could muster. I helped as many people as I could escape naturally, although it wasn't nearly enough. For the rest," she looked at Gabrielle with deep sadness clouding her eyes, "they didn't know it was me of course, but the love and hope was there. They felt it for each other and that gave them strength.

"After the war I was needed in Japan so I traveled there, traveled between Hiroshima and Nagasaki and helped with the rebuilding. I have no doubt that my brother Ares was on earth when the blast hit. His handiwork is everywhere. If anything, I think the way things have turned out has made him stronger."

"I'm so sorry, Aphrodite," Gabrielle said, "the things you must have seen." She put her arm around the taller woman's waist and gave her a brief hug.

"This is one of those times I'm glad I don't dream, I've no doubt I'd have nightmares. But I go where I'm needed, I have that responsibility," she was quiet a moment. "I actually saw Ares once during the war. He was standing on a stage with Hitler; if I had the ability to kill I'd have taken them both out, but that's not something I can do."

"You don't dream?" Gabrielle asked, surprised.

Aphrodite shook her head. "I technically don't need to sleep, but I've learned how to do it. It's relaxing, I suppose. I can handle a few hours at a stretch, but not like people. I guess it's more like meditation for me."

"For the record," she said. "I think you're 'people'." They had both stopped and were looking out at the moonlit water. "I wonder how long I'll live?" Gabrielle wondered out loud.

Aphrodite looked down at her companion. "Stand here, face me," she instructed. Gabrielle did as she was told. Aphrodite was backlit by the lights of the distant restaurant, and while she couldn't see her clearly, she could feel the warmth and nearness of the woman standing in front of her. The goddess put her hand over the bard's heart, listening intently, she rested her other hand on a strong shoulder. Gabrielle felt a lurch, like her heart had literally skipped a beat. She felt a connection at the touch, a warm loving connection. Then she noticed the kind of unsettled

stomach, awkward butterfly sensation that could accompany the first stages of romance. Aphrodite smiled a small smile to herself and the bard was embarrassed she could be read so easily. “I have to say that you’ve got a long way to go yet, Gabrielle. I have plenty of time to figure out what to get you for your five thousandth birthday.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Gabrielle said in disbelief.

“If you get Xena back at least you know you’ll be able to have a decent reunion,” the goddess offered.

They’d turned around and were now walking back towards the restaurant and parking lot. Gabrielle’s thoughts had shifted somewhat from chatting about the past to figuring out what she wanted to happen in the future, the immediate future.

“So, you said you lived near the marina?” Aphrodite asked, breaking into her thoughts.

“Sort of,” Gabrielle replied. “I live on a big boat, kind of a yacht really, that’s anchored just outside Marina Del Rey.”

“Why a boat?” the goddess asked. Gabrielle fell into step next to Aphrodite and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to put her arm around the taller woman’s waist. The goddess responded by putting her arm around the bard’s shoulders.

To Gabrielle, this was the closest to home she’d ever felt since losing Xena. She was talking to someone who knew and loved them both and there was no denying the mutual affection present. That simple act of connectedness, arms around each other, gave Gabrielle a sense of being understood that vocabulary could not. What could be felt didn’t always have to be said in words. After two thousand years, she could actually say the truth about herself and her experiences and not be put away in a mental institution.

“I live on a boat because I got sick of having to leave somewhere quickly in the dead of night and forget to bring along some important something or other. Sometimes I had to skip town because villagers thought I was a witch, or someone figured out I wasn’t who I said I was. It’s also safer. It’s harder for people to sneak up on you at sea.

“What have you been doing all these years?” she asked the goddess. “For money I mean, to keep a roof over your head, buy plane tickets?”

“Lately I’ve been getting married from time to time,” Aphrodite said. “I find someone old or dying, who is decent, rich, and deserves to have their last years be amazing. The house I have is the one I shared with my last husband. It’s paid for so I keep it. With money in the bank I’m able to travel around and do what I’m supposed to do. I might be with an Amnesty group, Médecins Sans Frontières, the ASPCA, UNICEF, or the United Nations. Sometimes I trek for months in the jungle, or live with tribes. When the money gets low I find another source. Honestly, I suspect I live less like a goddess than you do, Gabrielle.”

“Ouch.” Gabrielle said, feigning distress.

Aphrodite smiled. “The *Bliss* app is a new approach; I’m modernizing.”

“Of course!” Gabrielle agreed. “I’m buying that app! What did you say your price was again?”

"I'm not going to make a business deal with you after three bottles of sake," Aphrodite objected.

"You can," Gabrielle reassured her. "Do I feel buzzed right now? Hell yes! But by the time we get to the car, I'll concentrate for a second on clearing my head and it'll be clear. I just want to enjoy being buzzed for a few more minutes."

"You don't have a girlfriend who is going to be waiting up for you?"

"No," Gabrielle said. "My last girlfriend was…" she thought for a moment, "sixty-two years ago. Shit, there went my buzz. I just did some math."

"You've been alone that long?" Aphrodite asked, surprised and amused.

"There have been some casual flings here and there," Gabrielle said with a slight blush. "I'll admit I'm feeling a little rusty."

Two delicate eyebrows arched up on the goddess' face. "Oh really?" she asked with interest, brushing a stray strand of hair away from Gabrielle's eyes. "Do tell."

"I'm trying to come up with a smooth way to ask if you'd like to see my yacht and not sound like a total douche," she said with a grin.

Aphrodite smiled. "I've got news for you. If you utter a sentence with the word 'yacht' in it, you're going to sound like a douche." The air had a moist chill; the mist was starting to roll in. It was dark but Aphrodite knew that green eyes tinged with desire were shining up at her. They stopped walking. She took a moment to ask herself if this was what she wanted, and if this was what Gabrielle really wanted. While she was accustomed to everyone being in love with her, she was love incarnate after all, she had managed to parse out over the centuries which individuals were simply in the haze of who and what she was, and who could see past the trappings of divinity. Gabrielle was lonely, her devotion to Xena was absolutely authentic and there was no mistake that the bard had learned that love for someone else did not make her love for Xena any less. Humans are not built to be solitary creatures and she would only ever be fully successful in her goal of Xena's resurrection if she were able to stay healthy herself. That meant physically as well as mentally and emotionally.

"Are you asking me to see your yacht, Gabrielle," she asked quietly, "or asking me to spend the night?"

Without hesitation, the bard leaned up and kissed her; a warm and caring but also confident and self-assured kiss. There was no mistaking its intent.

"I'm inviting you to spend the night on my yacht." Gabrielle's voice was clear and soft, with no trace of the sake from moments ago.

The Goddess of Love smiled. "Then lead the way," she replied, taking the bard's hand as they walked back to the car.

Once they'd retrieved their shoes, Gabrielle walked to the passenger side of the car to open the door. As she walked around to her side of the car she pulled out her phone and quickly sent off a text. "Just told my girlfriend to clear out for the evening," she explained as she started the car. She opened her music app and picked a song from the Adele play list. The strains of *When We Were Young* started to play.

Aphrodite listened for a moment, the meaning of the song not lost on her for a second. "You've got game, Gabrielle. I'll grant you that," she said as they turned on to PCH once more. They drove for a bit and Aphrodite noticed they were not heading towards the marina. "Sweetie," she said, "are you going the wrong way?"

"Nope, we're taking the scenic route," she replied. It didn't take long for them to arrive at the Santa Monica airport. Gabrielle drove to the gate where someone was waiting for her. She was waved through and drove on the tarmac of the small airport to a waiting helicopter, again with someone standing by. She got out of the car and opened the door for Aphrodite. After Aphrodite exited the car, Gabrielle reached in for her flowers.

The helicopter was already running, and the goddess was surprised that at their approach the pilot got out and handed the headset to Gabrielle who handed him her car keys and climbed into the pilot's seat; she gestured with a nod for Aphrodite to take the seat next to her. She handed her a headset. "This is very *Fifty Shades of Grey*," Aphrodite said into the microphone.

Gabrielle laughed, then tried to look serious. "Seriously?! Someone writes a lousy Twilight uber fan fiction story and all us billionaires get a bad name." She handed the goddess the flowers and moved the control stick as the 'copter took off gracefully. "I assure you, I don't have a dungeon onboard the yacht."

"That's too bad," Aphrodite said teasingly. Gabrielle chuckled. "And for the record," the goddess added, "If you use the word 'yacht' from your own personal helicopter, its extra douchey."

"Well, fuck me," Gabrielle replied, feigning exasparation.

"Perhaps," the goddess answered demurely.

They flew over Los Angeles, the lights shimmering like millions of stars below. The 101 freeway sprawled below them with the red and white lights snaking their way over the hills. The 5 could be seen off to the side and the 10 just below them. Gabrielle flew for twenty or thirty minutes giving the goddess an exquisite view of the city before making her way to the marina. There was no question as to where the helicopter would land. *The Hippolyta* was by far the largest ship there. Sleek and majestic, it was too large to actually be docked; the yacht was a short distance beyond the other ships, anchored out by itself and tended to by smaller boats. From above Aphrodite was impressed, not just with the sheer size of the vessel, but how beautifully designed it was. The bow of the ship had the helicopter pad; as they landed there were two people waiting, one to offer his hand to help Aphrodite exit the aircraft and another woman who waited for Gabrielle to hand over her headset. She climbed into the cockpit and in a moment the aircraft ascended away.

Gabrielle handed the flowers to the man who had helped her companion out of the craft. He nodded, immediately turning around and disappearing below deck.

"How many people work on this ship?" Aphrodite asked.

"I have 15 permanent staff who rotate in and out from the transportation division of my company. They're really good at being invisible. Lots to keep everyone busy, you won't run into anybody around my quarters unless you want something."

"Gabrielle," Aphrodite said softly "I guarantee that they're not going to be the ones who are going to give me what I want."

"Goddess, I hope not," Gabrielle said as she led Aphrodite below deck.

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Aphrodite woke slowly, enjoying a sensation of contentment and satisfaction that she hadn't felt in years. She'd fallen asleep between Gabrielle's legs with her head resting comfortably on the other woman's belly. As she lifted her head, Gabrielle's hand slid from the crown of her head and came to rest at her side. Looking down at the bard, Aphrodite smiled. It was indeed appropriate to think of her as "the bard" when she looked like this. Asleep Gabrielle looked like the naive, inexperienced young woman she'd met two millennia ago. There was innocence in sleep and Gabrielle wore it exquisitely; while the goddess had initially considered waking her companion for an encore performance, after watching Gabrielle sleep she couldn't bring herself to do it. They had enjoyed each other for hours and nearly immortal as Gabrielle might be, she was still human and undoubtedly exhausted. She was happy and content for sure, but exhausted nonetheless.

Aphrodite thought that she might have dozed off for an hour or two, not nearly long enough for a human to recharge their batteries, so slid out of bed and pulled the covers up around the sleeping woman. She nudged the dog sleeping in a dog bed on the floor with her foot and pointed at the bed. Sleepily, Argo hopped up and after only one turn in a circle was instantly lying down asleep at Gabrielle's side her muscular head on the bard's thigh. She glanced at the watch Gabrielle had removed when they had undressed and a light touch revealed the numbers 4:42 glowing softly. Silently she crossed the room to the bathroom and closed the door behind her before turning on the light. She ran some water to wash her face and hands. She saw her reflection in the mirror and grinned; Xena might have feelings about what she'd been up to and what she intended to do more of and that would just have to be sorted out if and when the time came.

Turning around, she leaned against the elegant stone counter and gazed around the exquisitely appointed bathroom. There was a lot to take in, even for a god. Asleep, just outside the door, there was someone with a level of experience that could approach her own. The myth writers had it wrong; gods didn't sleep with each other because they had some weird fondness for incest. It happened because there are a very small number of people who could really understand their experiences in any meaningful way. Even gods needed to be understood to some degree. She was distracted from her thoughts as she examined the tub across from her; it was massive. It could easily sit three people and appeared to have jets. The entire bathroom was large. The shower area was separate, and there was a dressing table off to the side. Everything was tasteful- elegant fixtures, well-crafted cabinets, soft textures. It was stately without being showy. There was no doubt that Gabrielle enjoyed her creature comforts, but wasn't looking to impress anyone with them.

She turned the lights off before opening the door to avoid waking her companion and walked across the bedroom to the door on the other side which she assumed was the closet. As she suspected, it was. What she didn't expect was that the door opened to another large area with hangers and shelves neatly stacked and hung with the bard's wardrobe. Closing the door behind her, she reached to where she expected to find a light switch and soon the room glowed with a warm inviting light. Everything was immaculate; nothing disorganized or out of place. In a way she was surprised; there was a mixed heap of clothes they'd taken off of each other in a pile on the floor not ten feet from where she was standing. Gabrielle didn't strike her

as fastidious. But here there was an order bordering on OCD. There was a small section of formal wear, a larger array of suits, pants, skirts, shirts, jackets that she likely wore for work. In addition, there were some sweaters on shelves, several pairs of jeans, and some more casual shirts. There were a variety of shoes, from sexy high heels in various colors and styles, Chucks in a few colors, some running shoes, to hiking boots. She picked up an elegant stiletto to see if it was her size and it wasn't. Annoyed, she put it back. Two thousand years ago she'd have been able to make anything fit. She was tempted to open the drawers and see if they were as organized as the shelves, but didn't. On a hook by the door were a couple of decadent bathrobes. Finding what she came for, she put one on, turned out the lights, and left the closet.

She left the bedroom and made her way through the short hallway to the living area she'd come through the night before. She was surprised that she didn't feel like she was on a giant yacht. She felt like she was in a wealthy person's home from the 1930s. The setting was a fascinating blend of art deco and modern tech that oddly enough worked. The colors were dark with warm yellows and after a moment's consideration, reminded the goddess of Xena's armor. The couch and chairs looked inviting and lived in, there weren't many personal effects or knick-knacks, but she figured that on a ship, it might not be practical.

Doorways to the side of the living room lead to a conservatory of sorts; there was a wall with a variety of guitars hanging from wooden brackets. She recognized the various styles and brands having an interest in music herself. Gabrielle had her bases covered: six-string, twelve-string, acoustics and electrics. She had several vintage models and some newer state of the art guitars. There was a bass, a keyboard rack, and several amplifiers. Clearly Gabrielle had become a musician in addition to everything else. Absently she gently plucked the strings of the classical guitar hanging in the middle of the group. Its tone was sweet, full, and perfectly in tune. There were bookshelves as well lined with nearly identically leather-bound books. Just past the conservatory was a small intimate dining area. It became clear to Aphrodite that these rooms were Gabrielle's inner sanctum and she preferred to be introduced to these spaces by the bard. Beyond the dining area, the space opened up and only now did she begin to feel like she was on a large ship.

She could see out the windows to her left the horizon beginning to lighten with the glow of the coming dawn. She looked around for a doorway or stairs to take her upstairs and out onto the deck and the morning air. It took a moment but she found the stairway to the deck above then another door to a beautiful and spacious deck. It was only now, on deck, that she realized that the ship was moving and that they were well away from land.

She was curious but unconcerned. There was no doubt that Gabrielle would fill her in when she woke up. The air was crisp and cool but the robe was warm and comfy so she settled herself on a deck lounge to watch the sun rise. With the smell of the ocean filling her senses, Aphrodite could almost pretend she was back in Greece watching her brother Apollo. A flock of pelicans flew by in perfect formation completing the picture. Watching the pelicans, she knew they weren't far from shore and based on the sunrise, she could tell they were heading south.

Aphrodite looked around at the ship from this vantage point, taking in the sheer size of everything. A short distance in front of her was an inviting pool, salt water no doubt, with a hot tub. The decks looked much more modern than the interior of the ship. The wood deck was a pale teak; the lounges were white with blue pillows. The interior of the pool and hot tub were a pale blue. The outside areas of the yacht were clearly intended to look like any billionaire's yacht while the interior spaces were more personal and reflected what Aphrodite remembered of Gabrielle. There was a barbeque kitchen and a covered area with couches and tables. Off to the side was a small yard with what looked like grass and a large water bowl in a holder. She was surprised not to see another soul. It was almost like being on a deserted cruise ship, but at this very moment she felt like the only person in the world in a contented happy sort of way.

It was then she felt rather than heard Gabrielle approach from behind. Strong arms reached around the lounge to hug her and she felt a gentle kiss at the top of her head.

"Good morning," Gabrielle rumbled, equal parts happy and sleepy.

"Good morning, yourself," Aphrodite replied, reaching up to pull the other woman in for what she felt, at this stage of their relationship, was a proper greeting. Gabrielle's mouth was sweet and her skin was cool to the touch. She had clearly spent a couple of minutes cleaning up this morning as well. "You weren't kidding about an unobtrusive staff," she continued. "I could have made off with your '54 Les Paul and no one would have stopped me."

Gabrielle looked out at the ocean, "You wouldn't have gotten very far with it," she said.

Argo had followed her mistress above deck and after licking Aphrodite's hand in greeting, she made her way to the AstroTurfed area to do her business. When she was done she ambled back to the two women looked at Gabrielle and whined putting her paw on her mistress' leg.

"Michelle is going to feed you this morning," Gabrielle said. She pointed back at the stairs, "go to the galley. Go get breakfast."

Clearly the words 'breakfast' and 'galley' were well understood because the dog hurriedly bounded in the directions of the stairs.

"Smart dog," Aphrodite observed.

Gabrielle settled herself on the lounger and looked at Aphrodite intently. "While you wouldn't have seen them anyway, I've instructed everyone to go below decks until I tell them otherwise. That's why the ship seems so deserted."

"What's up?" Aphrodite asked.

"I am going to tell you something and it's going to make you angry. Then I am going to ask for your help." Gabrielle studied Aphrodite's face and noted that gods did not have micro expressions to let you know what they were thinking.

"You don't think you should ask me the favor before you make me mad?" Aphrodite asked.

The bard was resolute. "No, because that's not fair and I don't want to treat you that way."

The goddess shrugged, "fire away," she said. "I already know the favor is helping you get Xena back."

Gabrielle reached out to take Aphrodite's hands. The goddess allowed this and waited patiently. "You never asked me the task Poseidon gave me," she said. "The task that was between my crew and the pirates." It was not a question. She stated this as a fact.

Concern was beginning to color the goddesses face. "We Olympians stay out of each other's way," she said. "Often you're better off not knowing what they're up to. But I'll bite. What did he have you do?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath and looked out to sea. If she didn't say it now she doubted she would ever be able to. Two millennia of dread were about to be exposed. Keeping her voice calm, she said, "I destroyed the Anvil of Hephaestus."

"YOU DID WHAT?!" Aphrodite exclaimed, drawing her hands back as if they'd been burned. In an instant the goddess was on her feet and backing away towards the railing. "What the fuck!" she shouted, obviously furious. The glow of post-coital happy contentment was gone, red-hot rage having completely taken its place.

Gabrielle got to her feet, her arms outstretched, pleading for calm. "I know, I know, I'm sorry. I didn't know that was going to happen."

Aphrodite raised her arms. She was not capable of making a fireball but sparks sputtered colorfully in her hands. "Did you even ask?" she demanded hotly.

Gabrielle put her arms down. "No," she said quietly. "Would he have told me?"

Aphrodite was furious but also frustrated at the harmless sparks and lowered her hands as well, tightly clenching them into fists. "Probably not," she said and turned away from the bard to look angrily out at the sea. The anger radiating off of the goddess was palpable, as was her frustration at the impotence of her rage. Gabrielle joined her at the railing, giving the goddess some space. Not looking at the bard she said, "I lost most of my power because of you. I can't go home. I am cut off from my family, my children. I can't move freely. I can't do much of what I'm here to do." The words hung there for a moment before she added, "have you considered that the world is the way it is because of what you did to me and my family?"

Gabrielle nodded, "I have," she said, not trying to make eye contact. She looked back out to sea, wishing that Poseidon were here to comfort his niece. Or perhaps, shoulder some of her anger.

Aphrodite continued as if she hadn't spoken, "the rise of Judeo-Christianity, Islam, the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, Witch Burnings, Pilgrims, all that shit in the Middle East. If the Olympians were able to defend ourselves these other mythologies might not have taken hold and the world wouldn't be the way it is."

"I have considered that," Gabrielle said. "I spent twenty-five years pursuing a doctorate in philosophy and ethics, Aphrodite. I've written paper after paper wrestling with this very question."

"And what did you decide?" she asked icily, turning to face the bard.

Gabrielle shrugged, and looked up at the very angry deity, "I can't apply what I know today to who I was two thousand years ago. If I'd known then what I know now, that destroying the Anvil would limit your power and break the tether between Olympus and Earth, I probably wouldn't have done it."

"Probably?" Aphrodite asked incredulously.

Gabrielle shrugged again. “It was for Xena,” she said simply. Then, after a moment’s thought she added, “and whose fault is that?” Aphrodite crossed her arms defiantly. “Why is it that I love her so much I’d move heaven and earth to get her back? That I wouldn’t ask any questions and actually eat the fucking ambrosia that condemns me for eternity?” She looked intently at the goddess now, nearly daring Aphrodite to say she had nothing to do with how Gabrielle and Xena felt about each other.

Aphrodite sighed, some of her anger losing its steam, “Immortality always looks better from the mortal side.”

“Look,” Gabrielle said, closing some of the space between them, “If you don’t want to help me then you need to end me. That’s why I sent the crew below deck. I know you have the power to do that.” She looked out to the ocean where the sun had now risen above the horizon. She took a deep breath and unguardedly looking into the goddess’s eyes, made sure she knew she was deadly serious. “Two thousand years has taught me that while I thought I’d search forever for a way to bring Xena back, I now know I can’t endure a ‘forever’ without her.”

Aphrodite looked away, away from the ocean and away from Gabrielle. Her eyes traveled around the floating palace that to Gabrielle probably felt more like a prison. She wondered if her interactions with Xena and Gabrielle all those years ago had created a bond between them that would lead to this. Coming to a decision, she looked at Gabrielle once more. “I will help you, Gabrielle,” she said in a tone that implied she wasn’t doing the bard any favors. “For two reasons. First, you deserve this and I don’t mean that in a nice way. Let’s say we can get Xena back. You pull her out of the Elysian Fields or Heaven or wherever. Have you thought that through?” Gabrielle nodded, clearly ashamed that yes, she’d considered it and it was not a deal-breaker. “And for the sake of argument, let’s say she doesn’t remember where she was and hate you instantly. Gabrielle, you may as well be a god to her. She won’t be able to relate to you; your experiences, your knowledge, your understanding of a world that is going to be one big giant nightmare to her. When she was alive *she* was the one *you* learned from. Just how do you think she’ll adjust to this world and to you?”

Gabrielle looked down, unable to face the goddess but her voice however was resolute. “I know. I’ve been thinking about this since the world first started to change. It was hard enough to take in gradually, let alone all at once.” She looked up again, her eyes wet with unshed tears. “I admit it. This is selfish. I want her back. I *need* her. If I can’t make that happen then I can’t continue. After two thousand years of trying, I *know* this. Aphrodite, you were the one I tried hardest to find because I thought that you might be willing to help. If you won’t help me, or end me, I am still looking…” She paused for a moment. “If I find Ares he very well may be willing to end me, if you won’t.”

Aphrodite turned towards the water again, closing her eyes to the sun, feeling the first warmth of the new day. Gabrielle was serious. This fight was over. What’s done was done and it made little sense to expect the Gabrielle of Ancient Greece to have the wisdom of the Gabrielle of 2017. “Xena needs to come back not just for you Gabrielle,” she said gently. “If we want to fight Ares we will need all the help we can get. That’s the second reason I’m willing to help you.”

"Fight Ares?" Gabrielle asked, surprised. "Who said anything about fighting Ares? I have no idea where he is, do you?"

"No, but you've seen enough history to know the world is nearing the brink of a very ugly repeating of it. Surely you don't think that's by accident."

"Incompetent politicians are the work of Ares?" Gabrielle asked, trying to wrap her head around what would clearly be a new approach for the god.

"This much coincidence takes an awful lot of planning Gabrielle." Aphrodite said seriously, her arms crossed. There is no mistake behind the absolutely worst people being in charge of some very dangerous agencies and a chief executive with zero interest in the job at hand."

Gabrielle reached out and put her hand on the goddess's arm. "I promise you, if we can find any possible way fight what's happening to undo what I have done, to put it right - Xena and I will absolutely do it."

Aphrodite nodded and leaned in for a kiss. Gabrielle responded by moving closer and bringing her hand to the nape of the taller woman's neck. When they parted, the bard looked confused. "Two seconds ago you were ready to kill me."

A smile crossed Aphrodite's lips, one of the big radiant smiles that lit up her face. "It's too early for breakfast so introduce me to that bathtub of yours. Make up sex, duh."

Gabrielle was surprised to find that she was actually blushing. "Um, I've just been talking about my devotion to Xena…"

The goddess stopped her with a gentle finger to her lips. "I realize I have a reputation for jealousy, but in this case, no." She smiled again, this time a warm caring smile, with genuine affection. "Gabrielle, I know you're lonely. You have been for some time." She chuckled, ruefully "you probably also thought that last night *you* were seducing *me* in order to get me to help you. Yes, you're two thousand years old honey, and for a human that makes you really remarkable. But sweetie, this is my wheelhouse. I know you woke up this morning surprised by realizing how much you genuinely love me." She pressed her finger a bit to stop the question she knew was coming. "No, I didn't *do* anything to you to make you feel that way, you just do – you can't help it." She reached out and pulled the bard in for a warm hug and held onto her before continuing. "I will let you in on a godly secret," she murmured into the top of the bard's head, "I won't say I've been lonely, for fuck's sake, I'm the god of love. But I will say it's 'refreshing' to be around someone where I can be more myself- with someone who knows me from the old neighborhood so to speak. I'm happy to exchange bodily fluids with you until we figure this out – no strings attached. I'll help you, and when we get Xena back…" she let her words trail off for a moment. "You in?" she finally asked.

Gabrielle broke the hug and took a step back. There was no denying that everything Aphrodite said had been the absolute truth. She also couldn't remember the last time anyone had gotten the better of her; knew what thoughts she was hiding, knew a truth she didn't think she was telegraphing. There was no telling how long it would take to find the next bit of the puzzle, it had taken this long to get this far. She smiled, green eyes twinkling with a bit of mischief. She gestured over her shoulder, "My tub is this way."

Chapter 3: Unforeseen Consequences

Later, much later, the two women once again ascended the stairs to the sun deck. They were both wearing shorts and t-shirts, Gabrielle refusing to let Aphrodite put on the dress from the previous night if she was going to be in comfortable clothes. While the shorts were a bit shorter on the goddess, everything fit just fine.

To Aphrodite's surprise, a table with an overhanging umbrella had been set up where the lounge recliners had been. A tablecloth, china, flatware, and linen napkins in silver napkin rings had been set out and a bottle of champagne in an iced carafe stood to the side of the table. On the table, the flowers she'd been given the previous night were the centerpiece and there was a scrumptious assortment of fruit on a platter.

"When did you arrange this?" Aphrodite asked, as Gabrielle held out her seat.

"I texted Michelle right before we got in the shower," the bard replied. "I thought that would give her plenty of time to pull breakfast together. She's serving as captain this rotation, but she's the best chef on board and agreed to cook for us as well. The crepes should be up shortly."

"So, all your conquests get the royal treatment?" Aphrodite teased.

Gabrielle mocked offense. "I'll have you know that last night was the first time I've ever said 'oh god' during sex, and had one actually answer me. That deserves the good china. Would you like a Mimosa?"

As Gabrielle prepared the drinks, Aphrodite put some fruit on each of their plates and helped herself to the whipped mascarpone cheese that was in the center of the arrangement. "The crew rotates jobs?" she asked as they began eating.

Gabrielle nodded as she replied, "several of us have our captain's license and can perform all duties on the ship. When we're at sea and I'm not…ahem… entertaining company," she winked at the goddess, "I take a job like everyone else. Maintenance, navigation, kitchen, laundry, medic, you name it. All of us can do almost everything. On a repositioning voyage, where we move the ship to a place some distance away where there are a lot of days at sea, other than where I sleep, I'm no different from any other crew member."

"Why so much redundancy?" Aphrodite asked.

Gabrielle smiled sadly, "It was something I learned from Xena. If you're on a ship and your only navigator is killed, or the medic, or the captain, or the only mechanic, you're kind if screwed. While this ship was under construction everyone who was in the transportation division of my company went through all sorts of training on the specifics of this ship. Many of them are hold overs from my last ship, so it was a fairly smooth transition."

The tenderness that Gabrielle used when speaking about Xena said volumes to the goddess. Aphrodite reached for Gabrielle who grasped her hand warmly, gently stroking the skin of the goddess' fingers with the pad of her thumb. The two women sat there for several long minutes, not feeling the need to speak each enjoying looking at the other, the gentle touch between them speaking volumes without words.

"I like that it's always casual Friday," Aphrodite remarked as two men in jeans, t-shirts and sneakers approached their table. She recognized one of the men

as the one who had helped her from the helicopter the night before. The goddess could feel no tension in Gabrielle's hand whatsoever as the men approached. She made no movement to withdraw her hand nor did she stop the sensual contact.

"Good morning Steve, Hatsuo," Gabrielle greeted the pair as they walked up to the table. "I'd like to introduce Aphrodite. Aphrodite, this is Steve Hagstrom who is currently our Bosun heading up maintenance and Hatsuo Eko who's in charge of security."

Both men nodded respectfully to Aphrodite wishing her a good morning. Steve looked intently at Gabrielle. "We have to talk to you," he said, his expression serious. Aphrodite was about to get up and give them privacy but Gabrielle's firm grip told her not to go anywhere.

"Aphrodite has Class One Clearance," she said simply. "What's up?"

Without hesitation or even a second glance at their boss' companion, Steve handed Gabrielle a shiny silver bag, sealed with a small electronic device inside it. "I found this yesterday during my sweep after the meeting. It was just outside your office. We were boarded by the Coast Guard for an inspection after you left so I wasn't able to do the check until after that."

Hatsuo continued, "we were going to say something when you returned last night, but Michelle insisted we wait until this morning. I put it in an isolation box after storing it in the Faraday bag."

Only now did she release Aphrodite's hand to accept the small shiny bag from Steve. "How long until we get back to Marina Del Rey?" Gabrielle asked studying the bug.

"We turned the ship around as soon as you gave the all-clear this morning. We should be there in two hours," Steve replied.

Gabrielle nodded, "Keep the security tapes cued up. I'll be along to review them and introduce Aphrodite to the navigation crew after we finish breakfast. I take it you didn't see anything in the playback?" she asked looking at both men.

"There was some odd distortion on the file," Steve said. "Both when the Coast Guard crew was onboard and when Mr. Glass was waiting for his interview. It was like a lens went out of focus then back into focus."

"I was watching him personally," Hatsuo, continued, "and I didn't see him do anything but eat his breakfast. We've gone over the ship twice more and haven't found anything else that isn't supposed to be here. Your stateroom was checked last night before you returned, and it was all clear, no recording devices."

Aphrodite chuckled in spite of herself and Gabrielle nudged her under the table with her knee. Gabrielle nodded, "is Argo with you guys below?" she asked. It wasn't unusual for her dog to roam the ship, dividing her time between the various members of the crew making sure she got attention from everyone daily.

Steve shook his head, "She's still with Michelle in the kitchen I think."

Gabrielle handed the small bag back. "Okay, we'll be along in a bit." Nothing can be done about the bug at the moment. It was a transmitter, not a recorder so whatever they heard, they heard."

They nodded, turning to go when another woman walked up behind the two men carrying a tray loaded with scrumptious looking crepes. Gabrielle introduced Aphrodite to Sarah Gibson who was serving as chef this tour and that the crepes

were compliments of her and Michelle Fender who was serving as captain. The chef was roughly the same age as the rest of the crew she'd met thus far, with rich auburn hair that evoked more red than brown. Not a color found in nature, the chef wore it well in a short swept up haircut that almost make it look like her head was on fire. She wasn't as physically fit as most of the crew but muscled and looked like a woman that could do a great deal of damage with a frying pan.

As they ate Aphrodite asked, "What is 'Class One' clearance?"

Gabrielle grinned, "It's the same security clearance I have," she said. "You can go anywhere you want on the ship, open up any door or cabinet, ask anyone any question and not only will no one question you, they'll help you out the best they can."

The goddess' eyes widened in surprise, "Gabrielle, I wasn't expecting that."

The bard shrugged, "You've already got the pass code to my phone so…" then she made eye contact with the goddess and put all kidding aside. "The entire point of my company, besides continuing the work of trying to do something positive in the world, is to get Xena back. Poseidon said very clearly that you were the key. If I am successful, I will owe you everything." She stopped for a moment to organize her thoughts. She glanced out past Aphrodite to the ocean beyond, with the sun glinting off the expanse of blue. There was something about the sea that always helped Gabrielle orient her thoughts. She wanted to be clear, direct, and compassionate. She had no illusions that she was anything more than a recreational diversion to the goddess, but wanted to make sure that the goddess understood where she stood with her.

"I know that you know my love for you is genuine. And you are absolutely right; I have been very lonely. Lonely in a way that I don't even think I recognized until it had subsided. I absolutely adore you, not just because you're the amazing goddess that you are, but you also remind me of who I really am, beyond the countless fake identities and lives I've lived. The fact that I can be honest with you is just as intoxicating as you are." Aphrodite smiled at her, the radiant 'Aphrodite smile' and Gabrielle was glad her thoughts were emerging as intended. She continued, "I don't think you will be offended that I don't feel like you're my soul mate. But I trust you every bit as much as I've ever trusted Xena. In fact, at the moment I trust you more than any other being on the entire planet. This is my last shot; if it doesn't work there is no way I can keep trying. So yeah, at this moment in time, you're more central to my entire organization than I am and that deserves clearance."

Aphrodite studied the bard. She wondered to herself if this was just a by-product of a human being living two thousand years, this level of self-awareness and having one's shit together. It was incredibly attractive, and sexy as hell; while she felt drawn to the woman sitting across from her more than she had any other human she could think of at the moment, it wouldn't do Gabrielle any favors to tell her that. Aphrodite knew how complicated love and relationships could be; after all she was the architect of most of it. But love wasn't just romantic, there was an intensity of platonic love that could coexist with a physical relationship and it would be to Gabrielle's benefit to steer her in that direction. It was time to be the 'responsible god', and Aphrodite was up to the challenge.

"I am not offended that I'm not your soul mate, sweetie," she said, her voice rich with genuine affection. "I've known that you and Xena shared a soul long before the two of you ever did. Besides," she continued "I am a god and out of your league; and I don't mean that as a slight," she added hurriedly. "It's just how it is. Your trust is not a gift I take lightly and while I might enjoy some drama from time to time, your trust is not something I would betray, unless I really felt I had to."

Her gaze into Gabrielle's green eyes sharpened and the bard felt herself get a little dizzy. "Now I want you to remember exactly what Poseidon said. What did he tell you, word for word."

If Gabrielle had been standing she surely would have stumbled, perhaps even fallen over or fainted. Her sense of balance was thrown and she was hit with a wave of vertigo. Behind the off-balance sensation however, she could see the memory clearly; the memory of standing on the sand with Poseidon standing next to her. She was slightly dazed as she repeated the conversation.

"'I want to be clear about what we discussed earlier', I said. 'When you bring Xena back it is not going to affect the 40,000 souls that perished at Higuchi. The souls will stay in a state of grace and Xena can be returned, Yodoshi stays defeated.' Poseidon looked down at me almost indulgently as I remember, and said,

"Gabrielle, I have been watching the two of you for many years, since our encounters together. And I have continued to watch you since her death. The gods of Jappa do not have dominion over me. You followed their rules for that event. Xena died, freed the souls of the dead and was not resurrected by the life-giving waters of that fountain. The gods of Xena's homeland bringing her back has nothing to do with the events of Jappa.'

'Then where is she?' I asked, looking around the beach. We were near a basalt cave by the rocks of the shallow reef. Poseidon and I were standing on the sand and I couldn't see Xena anywhere."

"Poseidon was standing on the sand?" Aphrodite asked for clarification. "In the water?"

"No," Gabrielle said, taking in the details of the memory brought to the surface of her consciousness. "The water was now about twenty feet behind us."

"Okay," Aphrodite said, "go on."

"I can't bring her back by myself, Gabrielle,' he said. 'I told you I would help you get Xena back and I will do just that; I will *help* you. You need to bring me something. It belongs to Aphrodite and is undoubtedly her most treasured possession. If she is willing to part with it of her own free will, then I can provide Xena a rebirth. It will take the *gods* of Xena's homeland, not just me. Xena will have two parents- Aphrodite and myself."

"Not a visual I needed," Aphrodite mused with annoyance.

"I'm sorry, it's what he said," Gabrielle replied, a bit miffed at being interrupted.

"Please continue," the goddess urged.

"'I will go to her temple and call her,' I said completely naively – not having the faintest clue what I'd done." Gabrielle explained with sadness in her voice.

"Poseidon shook his head. 'I'm sorry Gabrielle,' he explained, 'the gods can no longer hear you at their temples or anywhere else. Through you I have severed the

connection my family has to each other, to Mt. Olympus, and to the world.' I was about to ask why and he shook his head. 'While I appreciate your help, I do not owe a mortal like yourself or anyone else apology or explanation,' he said." As Gabrielle repeated this she almost felt like she was reliving the memory. "That is when he handed me the small plate of Ambrosia.

"'The journey to resurrect Xena will not be child's play and should not be left to a child. This is going to take time, more time than your lifetime would allow. You are going to have to search, like finding a specific grain of sand on the beach, to find my niece. If you are up to this task, take the Ambrosia and give yourself the time and develop the maturity you will need to complete it. When you return to me with the key, I will fulfill my promise and Xena will be resurrected."

The memory started to fade and Gabrielle remembered the last thing the god had said to her. "'Your life will be long, Gabrielle," he said. 'Make sure you take the time to live it while you're searching. It's the only way you can possibly survive.'"

Gabrielle felt the dizziness subside and looked at Aphrodite who was studying her intently. "It's funny," she said. "After all these centuries, I confused 'Aphrodite has the key' with 'Aphrodite is the key'. The end result is the same though, I had to find you."

Aphrodite nodded, "and that you did," she said before taking another bite of her crepe. "How did you do that by the way?" she asked, her expression curious.

The bard helped herself to a couple more strawberries off of the fruit plate before answering. "One of the divisions in my company is called 'Intelligence and Special Projects'," she explained. "It is the part of my company that I use to manage my various identities, if I need to generate documentation; basically the super illegal stuff, truth be told. It also acts like a private surveillance/intelligence company, also not strictly legal. We have people who scour public records, but also cultivate assets and gather information from different agencies like any other spy organization. One of the things the division looks for is people who change identities. Sometimes it turns out to be the witness protection program- we leave that stuff well alone; sometimes people are on the lam, sometimes people just want a new start, but once in a great while it's because they are trying to hide the fact that they are immortal and need to start a new life."

Aphrodite's eyes narrowed a little. "Are you saying I was sloppy, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle blushed a little, "Well… I only know what to look for because I do the same thing myself, and I've built this behemoth organization to search for it. If I didn't have my own private army to help me look, I'd have never found you." The goddess took a sip of her mimosa, knowing that Gabrielle was just being kind. "Besides," the bard added, "If you are interested in, I don't know, maybe trying to disguise your past better moving forward, my company is certainly at your disposal."

Argo bounded back across the deck to greet her mistress, her rounds with the crew complete. Gabrielle scratched behind her ears and fed her a couple of slices of apple from her plate. "Do you know what Poseidon was talking about," she asked, as Argo ambled over to receive some affection from the goddess as well. "Is it something at your place maybe?"

Aphrodite also gave the dog a piece of apple, impressed at how gentle and sweet the pit bull was. “Yes, I know what he wants. It isn’t at my place; I know where it is though. It’s in Santa Barbara.”

“Road trip,” Gabrielle trilled.

“I’d like to stop at my place first.” She looked at Gabrielle and winked. “I think we may be spending some time together and I’d like to pick up a few things.”

“Let’s review things at the command center,” Gabrielle suggested. “I can introduce you to everyone on the bridge. After that I’ll take you back to your place and then we can head to Santa Barbara, maybe have lunch up there. Do you mind if we bring Argo?” the bard asked as they left the table and headed down one level from the sun deck to the upper deck where the command and navigation center was located.

“I was going to suggest that,” Aphrodite said. “She may be of some help in getting that key back.” Gabrielle was about to ask her to explain and the goddess shook her head, an annoyed expression crossing her face. “I’ll tell you about it on the drive up. I’m having too lovely a morning to ruin it with something negative.”

Gabrielle let it go, and held Aphrodite’s hand as they walked across the upper deck. The sun was shining, the sky an azure blue. The day was already warming up and the recent rain seemed to be a distant memory. She gave the goddess’ hand one last squeeze and then stepped aside so she could step into the command center first.

The central navigation center was clearly the technological nerve center of the ship. It was dimly lit. Much of the light came from an array of screens arranged across an expansive console. Above the console were windows that circled the room allowing for a three hundred and sixty degree view. There was a chair at the center of the console, as well as a smaller table off to the side with some charts and a couple of people conferring. A tall muscular woman standing next to the chair was clearly in charge. Other than her body language, there was no way to know she was the captain. Everyone was dressed in the same casual attire as the two men Aphrodite had met earlier. Jeans, t-shirts, hoodies, and sneakers seemed to be the unofficial uniform. The woman standing next to the chair had her hair pulled back into a bun, and she was talking intently to another woman when Aphrodite walked in, Gabrielle following her with Argo trailing behind. All talk stopped and the captain spoke up.

“Gabrielle on deck,” she said, loud enough for everyone to hear her. Everyone stopped what he or she was doing to give the bard their undivided attention.

“Thank you, Michelle,” Gabrielle said. “I wanted to introduce everyone to Aphrodite.” She nodded at the woman to her side. “She has Class One clearance, and while not officially part of the company, think of her as tangentially associated with the SP division.”

There was an immediate look of understanding and acceptance on the faces of the crew that were assembled in the command center. “Aphrodite has already met Steve and Hatsuo,” Gabrielle continued, nodding to the two men on the far side of the room. She scanned the room, noting to herself the crewmembers not present and looked at her watch. “Blake, and Nicolai off duty?” she asked.

The captain nodded. “Yes, Sarah is attending to things in the kitchen, Samantha is in the laundry room and since Vox is the newest member of the crew,

Ingrid is giving her an extensive tour of the engine room. Put a mechanic and engineer together and they are convinced they can improve things," she said.

"This is our captain, Michelle Fender," Gabrielle continued with a chuckle. "She is also responsible for our breakfast."

The goddess extended her hand to the captain who shook it warmly. "Welcome aboard," Michelle said with a smile.

"Thank you," Aphrodite replied. To Aphrodite, the captain looked too young to be commanding a ship. Everyone in the room seemed roughly the same age that she and Gabrielle appeared – early thirties to late forties. The captain specifically seemed to be in her early forties. She was beautiful, with deep brown eyes and a winning smile. She was fit, muscular and looked like she could easily grace the cover of a swimsuit magazine, her demeanor though made it clear that she was every inch in charge.

"I hope breakfast was okay?" she asked sincerely.

Aphrodite smiled at her, making complete eye contact and felt the woman's pulse in the hand that she still warmly clasped speed up in response. "The crepes were divine, the mushrooms were roasted to perfection." Michelle beamed but swallowed hard before continuing to introduce the rest of the assembled crew.

She gestured to the woman standing next to her. "This is Elaine Jackson, our executive officer, she is in charge when I'm off duty." Elaine was a petite African-American woman who came up to the captain's shoulder. She had an unmistakable scar on the side of her face, although her hair was styled in an attempt to cover it up. Aphrodite shook her hand and felt a rush of sympathy. This was a woman who had seen personal difficulty, though she had triumphed over it.

"It's nice to meet you," the goddess said. She squeezed the woman's hand, conveying respect and Elaine smiled.

"We were just switching shifts" Elaine explained, holding her head a little higher, "which is probably why Gabrielle brought you by right now."

"Behind Elaine," Michelle continued, "Is Wolfgang Fowler, who is part of the navigation team, he's going off duty and Prisha Washburn is taking his place at the conn." Aphrodite leaned forward, shaking each of their hands. Wolfgang was a bookish young man with glasses. His hair was prematurely thinning and his arms were covered with tattoos. In fact, Aphrodite could safely assume his whole body was covered, as there were dark shapes peeking out from the neckline of his t-shirt as well. Prisha, on the other hand, seemed to be the oldest member of the crew, her long black hair also pulled back into a bun at the back of her head, a distinct gray stripe across the bun. Her nose was pierced and her skin was a stunning rich brown. She spoke with a slight accent that Aphrodite placed as New Delhi.

"Next to Steve and Hatsuo is Bohemian Van Lyle who is also in security, but we call him Bo."

He took several steps towards Aphrodite to shake her hand and the goddess was struck by not only the suitability of his name, but by how much he clashed with her idea of 'security personnel'. He was tan, with shoulder length light brown dreadlocks and mischievous green twinkling eyes. He looked more like a surfer or beach bum than security personnel. "Your name is amazing," Aphrodite said as she

shook his hand. He was very tall, at least six foot nine, and his large hand seemed to engulf hers. His fingers were warm and calloused, and Aphrodite instantly liked him.

He chuckled. “My moms thought so,” he said. “They’re hippies. Aphrodite isn’t a half bad name yourself,” he added.

It was the goddess’ turn to laugh, “It’s an old family name,” she said. “I was born in Greece, on the beach in fact.”

“Killer,” Bo said, impressed.

“Last, but not least,” Michelle continued, indicating the woman who had moved to stand next to Bo. “Is Rebekah Luna, our representative for all things legal.” This was the least casual looking member of the crew. She was dressed professionally, in a blue skirt with blue deck shoes and a white blouse. She was the same height as the goddess with short blond hair and pale grey eyes. Aphrodite shook the woman’s hand and could immediately tell that this woman was suspicious of her. Her warm smile did not meet her eyes, and those eyes revealed a keen intelligence. She was already trying to figure out exactly who she was to Gabrielle and if she meant any harm to her employer. Completely unoffended, Aphrodite was grateful that the bard surrounded herself with people that had her back.

Aphrodite looked at Gabrielle in surprise after shaking the woman’s hand, “you travel with a lawyer?”

Gabrielle shrugged, “In Turner’s new world order having someone from your legal team who specializes in Maritime Law on board cuts down on the hassles dramatically.”

“Gabrielle,” Hatsuo said with some urgency, “we have the security file cued up if you’d like to review it.”

Gabrielle and Aphrodite walked over to several monitors at the end of the console and watched for a number of minutes. The first feed was from the camera that covered the area where Brian Glass was sitting at a table on deck eating breakfast. The next footage were from several camera angles, each taking a portion of the screen over two different monitors that showed the Coast Guard crew coming onboard the ship and searching it. The lawyer, Rebekah Luna, was accompanying the woman in charge of the Coast Guard team.

Hatsuo offered Gabrielle his seat and she watched the footage intently. She tapped several buttons to replay key moments of the feed again, to move backwards or forwards or to switch to a different angle. “They were looking for weapons,” she said, not as a question.

Hatsuo rolled his eyes, “they said it was drugs, of course – but yes.”

“Because of course you smuggle drugs on a mega yacht,” Gabrielle groused, annoyed.

“I think they were expecting a playboy partier,” Wolfgang offered.

“No,” Hatsuo disagreed, “they had scanning equipment and a dog. They saw the AstroTurf zones and bowls and asked about Argo; I said she was with you.”

“She was in the safe hold with me,” Elaine added.

Gabrielle nodded “thank you.”

After examining the different camera angles, she focused on the shot that included her office. Just like with the footage of Brian Glass, the image went out of focus, then a moment later came back into focus. Gabrielle watched this several

times before commenting. “It looks to me like the feed was corrupted. Like whoever planted the bug wanted their tracks covered- obviously- but also had some other part of the file corrupted as well. So the question is, did Mr. Glass plant it or did someone on the search team. Did anything unusual happen here?” she asked looking at Michelle.

The captain shook her head, “I had the bridge. I wasn’t watching the video feed exclusively, I was also monitoring everything else,” she said gesturing at the console. “No alarms went off, nothing rebooted up here. We only went back to the footage because of what was found in the sweep after the Coast Guard left.”

Gabrielle shrugged, looking around at her assembled team. “Well, they made a valiant attempt. If the Coast Guard planted it I wasn’t onboard and no one was in my office so they didn’t really get anything. If Glass somehow placed it,” she shrugged again. “I interviewed him and then had a brief chat with Susan Yin about,” she glanced at Aphrodite, “Valerie DelRay and her software start up. I’m not sure what anyone would make of that.”

The bard stood up and leaning back against the command console thought for a moment. “We want to be careful, but we don’t want to appear rattled,” she began. “We are going to be back in the marina soon and then Aphrodite, Argo and I are going to be gone for the rest of the day.” She looked directly at Michelle. “Please have Transportation bring the Tesla back to the marina. Also read in Susan as to what we found. I want extra security with anything having to do with Transportation. I want extra security for anything involving Special Projects, but I don’t want Brian Glass to think anything is out of the ordinary. There are some pretty big things coming to a head and I don’t want anything to fuck it up.”

Everyone in the room nodded. “We understand,” Michelle said. “I’ll brief Susan myself and Hatsuo will get in touch with Robyn about the Tesla.” After a moment’s consideration she added, “Would you like a security detail to travel with you, for today?”

Gabrielle shook her head, “No. That’s only going to be a red flag. I’m going to just go about my business as usual. I don’t think anything is going to pop up that Aphrodite and I can’t handle. How are we on restocking the ship? If we needed to set sail would we be ready?”

Steve nodded, “we are expecting to take delivery of a couple of more spare parts later this afternoon. Food stores, all of that is good to go. If we had to leave now we could and have the spares shipped where ever.”

Gabrielle nodded appreciatively. “Good to know. Don’t change anything; don’t do anything out of routine. Just be ready to leave at a moment’s notice. Is anyone leaving the rotation?”

Michelle shook her head. “We’re all having a great time, and at the last staff meeting, everyone confirmed that we’re set to finish out this rotation. You’re stuck with the lot of us in our current positions for another eight weeks.”

There was no hiding the broad grin on Gabrielle’s face. “I couldn’t be happier. Thank you everyone, and I’ll see you all later. When I know my ETA, I’ll text you.” She glanced at Aphrodite, “if we’re not back by tonight, say 8 pm, come looking for us. If we have any trouble I’ll let you guys know if I can.”

Chapter 4: Crazy Ex-Boyfriend

A short drive later, Gabrielle and Aphrodite were back at the goddess' home on the Venice Canals. Aphrodite pushed the front door open to the bard's surprise. "You don't lock your front door?" she asked with amazement.

"Would you break into a god's home?" she asked Gabrielle simply. "That's seriously bad karma."

"Well no, of course I wouldn't, but I don't get the sense that you're exactly advertising who you are, *Valerie*," Gabrielle replied.

Aphrodite shrugged. "Fair point. But people are generally very nice to me. Besides, my neighbor Dwayne keeps an eye on my place when I travel. His husband John died earlier this year and sometimes he likes to watch TV here in the evenings for a change of scenery." She seemed to make a mental note to herself, "I need to tell him I may be gone for awhile so he knows."

As the goddess led them through her house this time, Gabrielle felt more at liberty to stop and take in her surroundings. Argo was busily exploring, sniffing everywhere, and making herself at home. If the bard had to pick a style to describe the place, she decided 'bohemian' would probably be the best adjective. Victorian pieces nicely complimented art deco or art nouveau which seemed at home with early American and more modern accents.

"I want to grab a few things," Aphrodite said, leading them upstairs. Argo bounded after her with Gabrielle bringing up the rear. In simple picture frames on the wall going up the stairs were shots of Aphrodite and an older handsome man in a wheelchair. In some shots he was by himself, much younger and vital looking standing on a mountainside or posing next to a kayak or mountain bike. In the photos with Aphrodite he was older and clearly sick and frail. "How long were you married?" the bard asked. "This last time," she said clarifying.

Aphrodite smiled, entering her bedroom, "Five very nice years," she said. "I had recently been broken up with, if you can believe that. I was at a charity fundraiser and I'd just run into my ex, so I was pretty steamed at the bar. Max rolls up in his chair and makes the most outrageous play for me." The goddess giggled, clearly pleased at the memory. "The balls on that guy, it was adorable and refreshing. He wheeled me off my feet and we were together from that night until he died. He had cancer. He had been a businessman who walked away from his business to focus on bringing fresh water to people who needed it and to finding ways for villages to start their own micro businesses and lift themselves out of poverty. He was more interested in living his life than treating his illness," she shrugged. "I knew it was very serious; I don't think the treatments would have worked anyway."

Gabrielle looked at a group picture on the goddess' Victorian nightstand. "He had children?" The bedroom was decorated in shades of rich red and gold with sapphire blue accents. Like the expressions in the photo, and the feeling she got from the room, the whole house in fact, there had been a lot of love shared and expressed in these spaces. The feeling of affection and safety was almost palpable.

"Yes, three of them," she said nodding. "They were each given two million dollars in the will, the rest going to me to continue my own service work which they

are all very much behind. I honestly have never had someone's family embrace me the way Max's family has. I still keep in touch with them. Max passed away two years ago."

While Gabrielle knew the goddess understood mortality even better than she did she still said, "I'm very sorry for your loss."

Aphrodite had been going through her closet, deciding which clothes to pack in the small duffle bag that she'd put on the bed. At Gabrielle's words, she stopped what she was doing and looked at the bard. Gabrielle was standing there, on the other side of the bed having just set the family photo back on the nightstand. Her expression was sincere, poignantly saying that even after two millennia, losing a loved one was still painful whether you were a god or not.

Aphrodite put down the sweatshirt she'd been holding and crossed the room to Gabrielle's side of the bed. She sat on the edge of the bed, pulling the bard down to sit next to her. She took Gabrielle's hands. "Thank you, Gabrielle," she said. "When someone lives a long time it's very easy to forget that everyone's life has meaning. It's a lot to hold, being the keeper for the memories of everyone we love, and it's so much easier to forget; to discount individuals and get numb to the pain of loss when we have to endure it so often. The fact that you can feel sorrow at my loss, after enduring so much loss of your own speaks volumes about you and I am again impressed at what a remarkable creature you've become."

Gabrielle smiled, not really knowing what to say, but she didn't need to worry. A moment later and the goddess had leaned forward, covering her mouth with a passionate kiss, pushing her backwards on the bed. The bard had no objections and kissed her back enthusiastically. For several long minutes, they conversed in a language without words using their bodies to say what all the languages they knew could not. Neither of them heard the front door open, but Argo did and barked twice in warning. It was then they could hear a man's voice from the bottom of the stairs.

"Valerie? Did you get a dog?"

Aphrodite pushed herself up to a sitting position, releasing the bard beneath her. "Fuck. That's Dwayne."

Gabrielle chuckled. She was disappointed, certainly, but also amused to be interrupted like a teenager with a parent coming home unexpectedly. "You know we never would have made it to Santa Barbara if you'd kept going," she said.

Aphrodite stood up and readjusted her bra beneath the t-shirt she borrowed from Gabrielle. The bard sat up as well readjusting her own clothes and running a hand through her hair trying to look presentable.

"Up in the bedroom, Dwayne," the goddess called out below. She crossed back to the closet looking at her wardrobe.

"I wanted to know how your date went," he called up the stairs as he climbed them.

Gabrielle could hear the heavy footfalls of someone large approaching. In moments, an enormous bald man in a striped brown and white kaftan and sandals entered the bedroom. He was tall and muscled and appeared to be in his late sixties, although without any hair, it was almost impossible to tell.

"There you are honey," he said in greeting. "Oh my goodness!" he exclaimed when he saw Argo rush to the door to greet him "Aren't you precious," he knelt down and let the dog climb on him and lick his face. "What a sweet girl," he said.

"Argo! Down!" Gabrielle scolded gently, trying to give the man a break.

"Oh, she's alright," he countered, getting back to his feet and smiling warmly at her.

"Dwayne, I want you to meet Gabrielle," Aphrodite said as Gabrielle got up to shake hands with him. The man towered over Gabrielle; he was easily six and a half feet tall and was wide and muscled. The bard felt like she was standing next to a large block of granite.

"Don't be silly," Dwayne said enveloping her in a warm hug. "Any friend of Valerie is family to me." He winked at her, "you are family, right?"

"Dwayne!" Aphrodite scolded, with more force than Gabrielle had used on Argo.

"Oh yeah, I'm family," Gabrielle agreed, enjoying his flamboyant playfulness. He released her and she sat back down on the bed.

"Is this the girl?" He asked, raising an eyebrow in Aphrodite's direction.

"Not, *that* girl," Aphrodite said, cutting off any further elaboration.

"There is another girl?" Gabrielle asked with feigned offense.

Aphrodite shook her head, "Dwayne, you are a trouble maker."

He laughed, a warm rich laugh of a man who laughed often. "She has me there," he said conspiratorially to Gabrielle. Looking back at the goddess he said, "Honey, you didn't come home last night and you hadn't said you were leaving town so when I saw that same car in front of your house, I wanted to check on you."

Gabrielle laughed. "Awww, that is so sweet, Valerie. He's making sure I'm not an axe murderer or something."

"You were the date?" he clarified.

"Oh yeah," Gabrielle said with a grin.

"And she was with you all night?" he asked interested, in a gossipy sort of way.

"And how." Gabrielle supplied, accepting his offered high five with gusto.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes, amused at the playfulness. "I'm glad you stopped by Dwayne," she interjected not taking the bait. "I'm going to be out of town for awhile, so I wanted to give you a heads up. Make yourself at home. I'll send you a text or something when I know I'll be back."

He looked at Gabrielle. "You sweeping her off her feet?" he asked.

The bard nodded, "I'm trying to at any rate. Lord knows my helicopter didn't impress her last night so I'm hoping a weekend in the Bahamas or dinner in Paris might do the trick."

He shook his head and put a large beefy hand on her arm. "Honey, I've never met anyone less impressed with money than Ms. DelRay." His voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone, "When you go to Paris, you do the cooking for dinner and you'll fare much better. I swear she is the most down to earth woman I've ever met."

"I appreciate the advice," Gabrielle said sincerely.

"I get the feeling you're a nice girl," he said, patting her arm.

"And just what the hell are you wearing?" He demanded of Aphrodite who was finishing up with her duffle bag.

"Um, those are my clothes," Gabrielle explained. "I didn't want her to have to put on the dress from last night and…"

"Well that explains it," he said looking critically at the goddess' outfit.

Gabrielle had changed into blue jeans and a short-sleeved blue and white striped button up shirt. She was wearing a well-worn pair of Chuck Taylor All Star shoes. Aphrodite had left on the somewhat short shorts and t-shirt, fully intending to change before heading to Santa Barbara.

"Where are you going today?" he asked, joining Aphrodite at her closet. He was picking out different sets of clothes and holding them up to the goddess deciding what she would wear.

"Santa Barbara," Gabrielle supplied helpfully. Aphrodite turned to her and rolled her eyes. Instantly the bard knew she'd said something wrong.

"You're not going to see Rick, are you?" Dwayne demanded, very disapprovingly.

"Yes, we have to go see Rick," Aphrodite confirmed, then pointed at a shoebox on the top shelf of her closet that she couldn't reach. With ease, Dwayne slid it from its place under other boxes and handed it to her. "But it isn't what you think, whatever it may be that you're thinking. He has something of mine, and I need to get it back."

He handed her an outfit he'd decided on, and selected a pair of shoes to go with it. "Rick is bad news," Dwayne said to Gabrielle. "Valerie dated him before she met Max and even when she and Max were married, he still showed up once or twice to cause trouble."

"Thank you, Dwayne," Aphrodite said taking a couple of things from the shoebox and putting them in the duffle bag before stripping out of her clothes and donning the outfit the large man had handed her. "I can handle filling Gabrielle in."

Dwayne ignored her. "Nothing makes me angrier than a man that comes at a woman like that."

"He tried to hurt you?" Gabrielle said, instantly on her feet.

Dwayne was impressed. "Oh honey, I like this one." He said with a nod to Gabrielle then shrugged, "I told him to beat it."

"You broke three bones in his face," Aphrodite clarified. "And Max and I had to bail you out of jail. John was furious."

Dwayne smiled, clearly the memory was not a bad one. "Oh he was angry indeed. You marry a psychologist and they want you to talk everything out." Gabrielle nodded understandingly. "You see, I'd been a boxer in my youth and I had a different way of getting my point across."

"I've been in a few scraps myself," Gabrielle said reassuringly. "I promise that if he tries anything, I'll break a few bones in his face and say it's from you."

"Oh honey, I really do like her."

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"I don't know who to ask about first," Gabrielle said conversationally, "Rick or this other woman." They were driving north on the 405 freeway towards the 101
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which would take them to Santa Barbara. Argo and Aphrodite's duffle bag were in the back seat, the dog using the duffle as a pillow as she slept contentedly. "And I absolutely adore Dwayne," she added with a chuckle.

"Dwayne is a dear," the goddess agreed. "I met him when I started seeing Max seven or eight years ago. We spent a lot of time together when Max died and then his husband got sick. I've told him most of my more recent stories."

"As for Rick and 'the woman', they're part of the same story," Aphrodite said longing for the godly powers that would let her do something about the traffic. She thought for a moment, "I met Rick in the mid '90s. We dated and things were fine – until they weren't. Most of the time I have a pretty good effect on people; you hang around Ares you're going to get more hostile, hang around me you're going to be kinder."

Gabrielle nodded, as she changed lanes. "I'd agree with that."

"Well, once in awhile my presence has the tendency to bring out the worst in people. Jealousy, insecurity, rage – shit that was there all along of course - but instead of people listening to their better angels as it were, they listen to all the wrong voices. Rick was like that."

"And the girl?" Gabrielle asked.

"Rick and I didn't live together, but I knew his habits and routine. If I'd just broken up with him, he'd have gone ballistic. Like, in a dangerous kind of way. So I needed him to break up with me. I made sure he caught me in bed with another woman. Sure enough, he flipped out and kicked me to the curb. That should have been that." Once they got to the 101, the traffic lightened up somewhat and Aphrodite looked at the rolling hills of green passing either side of the freeway. The rains had made Southern California nearly unrecognizable.

"And this woman wasn't in any danger?" Gabrielle asked.

Aphrodite shook her head. "I'd known her from my earlier life as a flight attendant. She was in town for a layover and was living in Sweden so I doubted he'd be able to find her."

"And this is the guy we're on our way to see," Gabrielle clarified.

"I'm afraid so sweetie. I know what Poseidon wants and I'm certain he stole it from me when we broke up. I haven't worried about it these last dozen years because I figured I knew where it was and I was in no hurry to deal with his shit to get it back."

"I can totally see you as a flight attendant." Gabrielle commented with a smile.

"Absolutely!" Aphrodite agreed. "When I don't want to be married for awhile I'll go through training and take a job doing that – makes it easier to fly to where I'm needed. I've been doing it on and off since the '60s. What are some of the jobs you've gravitated to time and again?" She asked.

"Medicine," Gabrielle replied. "Out of strict practicality. I heal fast, but I can still get hurt and knowing how to do repairs and help others has been a gift. Luckily I don't scar or I'd be a mess before I learned how to do proper stitches."

"I *knew* you had the hands of a surgeon," Aphrodite said, causing the bard to blush a bit.

"Technically yes, I've been a surgeon; last time I finished med school in the 60s. I've gone through formal med school at least a dozen or more times at this point. I go back every century or so because medicine advances so much. I've studied western medicine, eastern medicine, acupuncture, Ayurvedic medicine - you name it. I'm glad that I don't have to disguise myself as a man anymore to get training. You don't get sick, so it's not going to be of much use to you."

"I'll find use for those hands, don't worry." Aphrodite said with a wink.

"Says the master masseuse," Gabrielle replied, still pink in the cheeks.

The goddess smiled, "well it is a language people use to express their affection." She was thoughtful for a moment. "I'd say I might ruin you for anyone else, were anyone else not Xena."

Gabrielle smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes and she knew that the bard didn't share her confidence that their mission would ultimately be successful. "When did you come to America?" Aphrodite asked, deciding to change the subject.

"I arrived initially after the westward expansion, during the gold rush." Gabrielle explained. "I wanted to buy land and things were so awful for women when it came to owning any property or making any binding business agreements. For a number of years I lived as a man here, a gunslinger actually, so people would leave me alone. Did some work for Pinkerton and settled in Oregon. But I got shot twice, once in the arm and another in the stomach, so I hung up my six-shooter for good. I went back to England after fifteen years and then tried to come back to New York in 1912 but got detoured to Halifax."

"You were on the Titanic!" Aphrodite exclaimed, surprised.

Gabrielle nodded, "I was. I was married and yes, we were in first class, but the women and children thing – there was no way William was going to step into a life boat and take a seat from someone else. I stayed with him until he drowned. The water was freezing, but you know – Ambrosia. I managed to swim to a lifeboat and climb aboard."

Aphrodite reached over and rested her hand on the bard's thigh, giving a slight squeeze. "Honey, I'm very sorry for your loss," she said.

Gabrielle blinked a couple of times, clearing her eyes that had begun to well up. "I haven't thought about him in awhile," she said. "He was my last relationship with a man. He was a good man; it was a terrible night." She shook her head slightly, to clear the cobwebs from the past. "When did you come to America?" she asked.

"Well I certainly wasn't here at the beginning," Aphrodite said happy that they'd come to the coastal part of the drive. "I wouldn't have tolerated the puritans for five minutes. I spent some time here during the wars against the natives, and again during the Civil War. I was an abolitionist from Pennsylvania then. I participated in the underground railroad and tried to help as many people as I could make their way to Canada. I even met Harriet Tubman, that woman was a badass."

Gabrielle nodded, "Amelia Earhart, met her once, another badass," she said.

"Absolutely," Aphrodite agreed. "Speaking of badasses, I've met Queen Elizabeth."

"Which one?" the bard asked.

"Both."

"No shit!" she exclaimed. "Absolutely both badasses- but I've only met the first. I've got one for you – Ruth Bader Ginsburg."

"No way!" Aphrodite said enviously. "When?"

"A few years ago at a party. Total badass."

"How about Queen Hatshepsut?" Aphrodite asked with a smirk.

"No fair, that was way before I was born," Gabrielle protested.

Aphrodite chuckled, "you are trying to out name drop a god. We're the next exit," she added noting the signs.

"What about Woodstock?" The bard asked.

"I was all over the summer of love!" the goddess replied excitedly. "I was absolutely at Woodstock. You?"

"No, but I did see the Monterey Pop Festival," Gabrielle replied.

"*I* was at the Monterey Pop Festival!" Aphrodite exclaimed.

Gabrielle might have laughed if it had been the least bit funny. Instead it felt almost like a punch in the gut. She had been searching the globe, traveling from place to place trying to glean information from local stories about someone that could possibly be the goddess of love. To know that they had occupied the same space, at the same time a half-century ago and didn't see each other was kind of painful. She felt a reassuring squeeze from the hand still resting on her thigh and reached down to hold it. There was no point dwelling on things that didn't happen fifty years ago, they were on the right track now and that's what mattered.

Aphrodite gave Gabrielle directions to the guard station of the gated community where their quarry lived. Gabrielle lowered her window and looked expectantly at the goddess. There was no way Rick was going to grant them passage.

"Name?" The no-nonsense guard asked.

"Valerie DelRay to see Rick Gaverelli." The guard looked down at his list and Aphrodite added quietly "I'm on the list."

"Here you are, on the list," he said, opening the gate. "Have a nice day."

When they were out of earshot Gabrielle turned to Aphrodite. "The Jedi mind trick? Seriously?"

"You fucked most of my powers Gabrielle, but not all of them," Aphrodite said hotly then quickly regretted it. "I didn't mean that as nastily as it came out," she amended.

"Yes, you did," Gabrielle corrected her, "and it's absolutely justified."

Aphrodite navigated the bard to the sprawling estate of the goddess' ex-lover. Gabrielle parked in the driveway and before she could move to open the door for Aphrodite, the goddess had already let herself out and opened the gullwing door to the back seat for Argo. "Come on sweetie," she said and the dog hopped out of the car. She rummaged through her duffle bag and put something small in her pocket.

She knelt down and took the dog's large muscular head into her hands, resting her forehead against the pit bull's. Gabrielle wasn't sure, but after a moment the dog almost seemed to shimmer, then it was gone. Aphrodite kissed Argo on her forehead and stood up.

"Argo isn't in any danger, is she?" Gabrielle asked, concern threading her voice. "My last dog was shot and…"

"No honey," Aphrodite reassured her. "Argo is going to be fine. She might impersonate a scary dog if Rick is an ass but she isn't in any danger, I promise." Then she added with a wink "Strong with the Force I am."

She knocked at the door and in moments they were greeted by a man Gabrielle could only describe as a retired super model. She guessed he was in his sixties, had the fit body of a dancer and the chiseled features of a man who probably sold high-end underwear for a living.

"Hey Rick," Aphrodite said cheerfully.

He was immediately suspicious and looked past Gabrielle. "Valerie. Did you bring your goon with you?"

Gabrielle instantly hated the guy. "Actually I'm the new goon," she said helpfully.

He smirked, looking down at her. "And I'll bet I know how you got that job," he said, like it wasn't a good thing.

"Actually, the sex is just a bonus, I got the job by kicking the other goon's ass."

Aphrodite put a restraining hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Rick, you took something of mine, and I'm here to get it back." She pushed past him and entered the house, Gabrielle and Argo following her.

"You can't just come into my home," he protested. "How did you get past security?"

They were standing in his living room which was dominated by a pool table. Gabrielle positioned herself next to the rack that held the pool cues. She didn't want trouble, but didn't want to be unprepared for trouble either.

"Look," Gabrielle said. "Give her back her…" She stopped for a moment utterly confused. She had no idea what they were there to retrieve. "Valerie what exactly is it that we're here to get anyway?"

"I don't have it anyway," Rick said defensively before Aphrodite could speak, "I threw it away."

Argo growled, a menacing, deep-throated sort of growl. Gabrielle looked at her dog, stunned. She'd never done that before.

"What the fuck," he said.

"She can tell when you're lying," Aphrodite said, "It had no value to you. You only took it because it had value to me."

"I didn't," he protested.

Argo growled once more.

"I'll make a trade," Aphrodite said, taking a small USB drive from her pocket.

"My screenplay!" He shouted lunging for the thumb drive and the goddess. In a fraction of a second Gabrielle had grabbed a pool cue and using it like a short staff thrust it in the space between Rick and Aphrodite. She didn't hit him, the tip of the pool cue stopped less than an inch from the man's throat.

"Not so fast, buddy," she said, the warning in her voice evident. He made a movement to grab the pool cue which she quickly pulled away and an instant later had in the exact same position. She was too fast for him. "Not today Rick."

Aphrodite put the thumb drive on the edge of the pool table. "Where is it?"

Not taking his eyes from the drive, he muttered, "in the master bathroom, down the hall to the left."

"Gabrielle," Aphrodite said, her voice calm and firm, "please go get it, you'll know it when you see it. Argo and I are going to be fine right here."

The bard would have preferred to have been the one to keep an eye on Rick while Aphrodite retrieved whatever it was, but she did as she was asked. She gently poked Rick with the pool cue to make him look at her. "Do *not* touch her," she said with as much menace in her voice as she could muster.

She put the pool cue down and followed the directions to the master bedroom with the attached bathroom. She was absolutely not surprised to see mirrors mounted over the bed, nor was she surprised to see satin sheets and a number of visual details that made her want to take a shower. The insecurity of the space, the attempt at macho, manly decorating made her wonder what on earth Aphrodite could have ever seen in him. She entered the bathroom and looked around. A book about sports was near the toilet. There were shaving creams near the sink. Some flowers that had seen better days were on the window sill in a pewter pitcher. She picked up the pitcher wondering if that might be it. It felt cold in her hands so she put it back down. She turned around to look at the area with the tub, and the shower next to it. The bathtub was nearly as large as hers, complete with massage jets. There were candles in various stages of decomposition in several different candle holders. One of the candle holders caught her eye; it was white, sort of, it looked almost like mother of pearl or the inside of an abalone shell, but it was all shades of white and seemed to glow from within. It was almost rectangular about the size of a large coaster and one edge looked sharp, the other smooth. She ran her fingers over the smooth side, it was very pleasurable to the touch and seemed almost warm in her hand. There was no doubt that this was it.

Gabrielle walked back into the living room with her prize and showed it to Aphrodite.

"You used my shell as a candle holder?" the goddess demanded angrily.

"You said you didn't have my screenplay," he retorted, just as angrily.

"I didn't have your screenplay you ass, you left this drive with a bunch of your other crap. I only found it when I was getting rid of the jeans you left and it fell out of the pocket. I was going to mail it to you, but then you came by the first time to threaten me." Blue eyes blazed with anger, daring her ex to push her further. "Gabrielle, leave the candle, let's go," she said and stormed towards the door. Gabrielle snapped the candle off of the shell and left it on the pool table then followed Aphrodite and Argo to the front door.

"Then why did you keep it?" Rick demanded as they left the house, "admit it, you liked the way you were portrayed."

"As a stripper? Rick, you're delusional. I was going to send the thumb drive back to you eventually, but after the last episode with my husband Max…"

"And I can see you're cheating on him, just like you did with me…" Rick nearly screeched as Gabrielle opened the door to the back seat for Argo. She unzipped the duffle and put the shell inside as the dog settled herself in the back seat.

"Fuck you, you fucking dick," Aphrodite said hotly, "You're nothing like my husband, and your screenplay was boring and derivative."

"Well, that went well," Gabrielle said cheerfully as they drove away from the Montecito estate. Aphrodite didn't respond; she was staring out the window, a frown creasing her perfectly symmetrical features. "Hey," the bard urged steering the car with one hand and taking the goddess' hand with her other. "What's going on?"

Aphrodite looked over at Gabrielle, her face flush with annoyance. "He's such a dick," she said.

"Absolutely," Gabrielle agreed, "but this is about something more. I don't think it's about being portrayed as a stripper in a lame screenplay because what's wrong with strippers? It's about the shell, isn't it?"

The goddess took a deep breath and squeezed the bard's hand. "You are very perceptive Gabrielle."

"I've noticed you don't want to touch it, you don't even want to talk about it."

Aphrodite sighed. "I was born from sea foam in a large clam shell. This is the last bit of shell that I have. I'm attached to it, I feel connected to it. If I hold it, or even touch it, fuck even talking about it kind of gets me obsessive, I don't know why. For so long it's been the only thing that's reminded me of who and what I really am; how things used to be. If I have to part with it to get Xena back I know I shouldn't be handling it. It makes me act like an addict and that isn't what we need right now."

Gabrielle drove to a restaurant in Santa Barbara that the goddess was familiar with. They would be able to eat on the patio, with Argo sitting in some shade on the other side of the decorative fencing. Before exiting the vehicle, Gabrielle gave the goddess' hand one last squeeze. "It means more than I can say Aphrodite, that you would give that up to get Xena back."

Aphrodite smiled releasing the bard's hand. "You're sweet," she said leaning over and softly kissing Gabrielle's cheek.

"Before we go in, do you mind if I make a quick phone call?"

Aphrodite shook her head, taking the opportunity to touch up her makeup in the mirror. As she hit the number on her phone, Gabrielle quipped, "you look absolutely perfect without makeup, why do you even wear it?"

"I like to fit in," the goddess replied.

"Yes Gabrielle," Susan Yin's voice came through the sound system of the bard's car. The electric vehicle was still on, although silent, the call routed through Bluetooth.

"I need someone on your team to build a dossier on Rick Gaverelli. He lives in Montecito at the Cypress Estates. For the time being I want him on low level surveillance. I don't necessarily think he is a threat, but he just got really rude with…" she looked over at her companion, "Valerie DelRay and myself and I don't want to take any chances."

"Consider it done," Susan said promptly. "Can I help you with anything else?"

"Yes," the bard replied. "A number of years ago ah…my mother… was in touch with a guy named Zuma Ocean. They worked out a way to send signals to each other to make contact." Gabrielle could hear the woman typing on a keyboard.

"Yes, I have it here, the Z-Ocean Protocol." Susan affirmed.

"Great," Gabrielle replied. "I need you to send a message with that protocol. The message is quote, 'I have the key, both of them', end quote. When we get a response to that message I want it relayed to me immediately."

"Will do," Susan assured her. "It says here that leaving the call signs could take any number of weeks to get a response."

"I know," Gabrielle said sadly. "The asset is off the grid and there is no telling how often he checks for contact.

"Okay, I will keep you posted. Anything else?" Susan asked.

"No" Gabrielle said and let the other woman end the connection.

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"So what happens now?" Aphrodite asked, spearing another forkful of salad and enjoying the sun on the patio. Both women were wearing their sunglasses and to the casual observer looked like any other Santa Barbara socialites. More casually dressed perhaps, but their comfortable casual manner and easy conversation belied the fact that the two women at that patio table had seen most of the important historical events in recorded history.

Gabrielle put down her slice of pizza and took another sip of chardonnay. "Unfortunately, we wait."

Aphrodite angled her head down and looked at the bard over the top of her sunglasses. "I can think of worse ways to kill time than with me," she said.

Gabrielle blushed. "No, I didn't mean that, no of course not. Seriously I can't tell you how happy I am to spend time with you, how…"

"Relax kiddo, I'm messing with you,"

"What I mean," Gabrielle clarified, "Is that I get antsy at this stage. Stakeouts drive me nuts; I can't just sit and wait."

"You live on a boat Gabrielle. Let's go to Catalina, Anacapa, Santa Cruz - wherever." Aphrodite finished off her wine and poured herself another glass from the bottle sitting on the table.

"That's actually a good idea," the bard agreed. "I've had some security issues, getting away from the mainland for a few days might be a good idea."

"Before you hoist anchor," the goddess continued, "I want to ask you about something and I don't want to push any buttons." Aphrodite looked at Gabrielle, her eyes invisible behind the stylish sunglasses. For the briefest of moments Gabrielle had a flashback to sitting at a campfire where she had asked Callisto a question, clearly pushing the psychotic warrior's buttons, and she remembered the question she got in return. She shook that memory away and focused on the beautiful woman sitting in front of her.

"Shoot," she said.

"When you get Xena back, no Gabrielle look at me," the bard had turned her head, the possibility was almost too much to hold. "*When* you get her back," the goddess said again, "are you prepared? Does she have stuff to wear? Do you have an identity for her? How are you going to handle her inability to understand," she looked around, "well everything? She won't be able to speak English, won't know who George Washington is, will be completely ignorant of two thousand years of history." She could see the bard clench her jaw and was afraid she'd offended her.
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"Don't get me wrong," she added hurriedly, "If anyone can do this, it's Xena, she's amazing. But this isn't something that's going to be solved with a sword and cracking someone's skull. I mean, you will have to keep her from trying to solve problems that way."

"I will admit," Gabrielle answered, "that I haven't taken care of the clothes part of it. I used to keep a wardrobe for her and I stopped sometime before the middle ages, it was another thing to haul around and I needed to find you first so…" she shrugged. "As for the rest, Xena and I can park ourselves out at sea and I can take as much time as necessary to explain to her everything that has happened. To teach her whatever languages she will need to know, how to read and write, all of it." She paused for a moment, "I know it will go better if, say, there are two familiar faces she has to rely on instead of just one."

To Aphrodite the suggestion wasn't exactly an unexpected one. Since Gabrielle had found her she'd felt less alone and apart from the world than she had in recent memory. "While I'm not one to hang out with my former lovers, when you become a former lover my dear, I will still hang out with you," she said as gently and plainly as she could.

Gabrielle looked a little stunned by the observation but smiled sadly, of course that was what was going to happen. And it wasn't like the bard didn't want that to happen, Xena was the love of her life. But hearing it put so succinctly, with no animus, just as simple fact; it still stung. "In the meantime though," Aphrodite said, deciding to cheer her up, "you aren't 'former' yet and I shall let you thank me in advance. Besides," she added, "I can take care of the wardrobe thing for you. I know her size, I know what she'd like to wear. We can set sail tomorrow evening?"

"That would be perfect," the bard agreed, refilling her own wine glass. "To the present then," Gabrielle said holding up her glass, which pleased the goddess more than she would ever admit.

As the sun moved towards the west, readying for its descent to the ocean horizon, the bard and goddess were heading south on the 101 freeway. A playlist of songs about Southern California provided a background soundtrack. "I've got a question for you," Gabrielle said as they enjoyed the expanse of blue. "That thing you did to Argo, where she's now a canine lie detector, is that permanent?"

"Well, I didn't really do anything to her. Dogs can already tell when someone is lying. I just encouraged her to say something about it. I can make her forget if you want me to."

"I don't want to make her feel weird." Gabrielle said, living for centuries still left some unknowns when it came to understanding the psychology of dogs.

"Honey, communicating better with you doesn't make her feel weird. If anything, I'm sure she'll be happy that you're taking her advice and listening to her, but it is up to you."

"No, go ahead and leave her as is, if she doesn't mind. Okay, here is another question. I'm going to add you to my charge account, do you want to get added as Valerie? Or use a new identity?"

"I'm not sure," Aphrodite admitted. "It's been awhile since I've switched, it might not be a bad idea, although I've kind of gotten used to Valerie DelRay." She thought a moment more. "How often do you change identities?"

"I'll be honest," Gabrielle admitted. "At any given time I have six alter identities that are fully vetted on paper. They have social security cards, for the American identities of course, passports the works. I pay taxes on them, a couple of them own property. If I need to switch, I can do so pretty seamlessly. I'd be happy to let you adopt one of those if you want."

"You pay taxes for six people who don't exist," Aphrodite said shaking her head.

"What I can I say, I'm in to public schools and roads," Gabrielle chuckled. "How about Anna Winter or Ingrid Larson?" she asked.

Aphrodite shrugged, "I'll take the one you ripped off from Frozen," she said.

"Okay," Gabrielle said handing Aphrodite her phone. "Take a selfie and pretend you're posing for a passport photo. Because this is going to be your passport photo." The goddess did as she was instructed and handed the phone back. The bard selected a name and again, the phone call routed through the car speakers.

"Yes, Gabrielle," Susan Yin said.

In that moment, hearing Susan's voice, her de facto right hand professionally, Gabrielle made a split decision. The centuries had taught the bard to trust her own instincts, and she decided she needed to read in the woman on the other end of the line regarding the truth. Tomorrow she would do something that had landed her in a psychiatric unit more than once.

"A couple of things, Susan," she said. "I'm sending you a photo. You'll recognize Valerie DelRay from the surveillance photos Mike took." We are going to assign her to the Anna Winter identity. I need you to bring a complete package for her to the ship tomorrow. Valerie has Class One clearance."

"Is she assigned to SP?" Susan asked.

"Sort of, yes," Gabrielle said. "She's not technically on payroll… hold on," she turned to look at Aphrodite. "Do you want to be on payroll?"

"How's your dental plan?" the goddess asked with a grin.

"No, I don't think she will be on payroll, but add her to my expense accounts. She will have access to the plane, the cars whatever she needs."

"Got it," Susan affirmed, "I'll contact HR and get this to the appropriate departments. Do you want her identified as Valerie DelRay anywhere, or just as Anna Winter. You know that Sabin Jha and myself are the only people who know all the aliases," she reminded Gabrielle.

"Just as Anna Winter. I also want you to start an alias for Xena,"

"Last name?" Susan asked.

"Amphipoli," Gabrielle decided. "Let's run the identity two ways with American and Greek citizenship, I'll let you know later which one we will use. Photo to come later, it's not for me or Valerie."

"I'll start working the contacts," she affirmed.

"And Susan," Gabrielle added. "When you come to the boat tomorrow with the package for Anna, set aside some time. I want to read you in on some stuff."

"I will see you tomorrow," she agreed. "I will text you my ETA when I head over."

"Sounds good," Gabrielle said, ending the call. "Well that's a productive day," she said to Aphrodite.

As they arrived back at the marina, Gabrielle hesitated before pulling into the parking lot. “Are you good with taking a boat to the boat?” she asked. “I mean, I could head to the airport instead…”

“And waste time flying around when I could be in your bed?” the goddess teased, then added more seriously, “the view last night was stunning and wonderful – and it has been a very long time since I had that kind of view, but yeah, I’m good going home and going to bed.”

Gabrielle pulled into the lot, handing her keys to the man waiting for her. “Thanks Dave,” she said.

“Shall I keep the car on hand?” He asked. “Or move it back to storage?”

Gabrielle glanced up at Aphrodite. “Anna will be using the car tomorrow, so keep it here,” she said before escorting Aphrodite to the boat that would take them to *The Hippolyta*. She didn’t say anything to the goddess of course, but hearing her refer to the ship as ‘home’ brought a smile to her face. Whether it was conscious or not, to her it spoke volumes.

Gabrielle slid into bed next to Aphrodite, who was watching her. Neither woman bothered wearing any sleeping attire. Unlike the previous night which was very much about pent up lust and seduction, there was a more settled intimacy between them this night, almost as if they had spent years in this relationship, not hours. “Out with it Gabrielle,” Aphrodite said when the bard looked at her shyly.

Gabrielle swallowed, “I’m going to ask you something really unsexy,” she finally said.

“I just watched you brush your teeth,” the goddess replied, “I think I can handle unsexy.”

“Would you mind if I wrote in my journal for a few minutes,” she finally asked. “I usually do it before I go to bed, and I didn’t last night and…”

Again, Gabrielle was rewarded with one of the smiles that seemed to light up not only the goddess’ face, but any room that face might be in. “Honey, of course not. Hand me your iPad, I need to drop a note to one of Max’s kids.”

Gabrielle handed her iPad over and picked up her journal and pen. Aphrodite noticed that the binding was the same as most of the books in the library. “All of those books in the library, they’re all journals?”

Gabrielle shrugged, “Well I am a *bard*, ya know.”

“You’re not worried about prying eyes?” she asked, trying to imagine how many volumes it would take for two thousand years of memories.

“You’re welcome to read them if you’re ever curious about what I’ve been up to,” Gabrielle said as she passed the book over to Aphrodite, inviting her to look at its pages. Immediately the goddess could see why the bard wasn’t worried about anyone reading her most intimate thoughts. She was writing in a combination of Greek, Latin and words from a dozen other languages thrown in. She even recognized several hieroglyphics. Aphrodite flipped back a couple of pages and saw that the entries were written almost like letters to Xena, a way to someday fill the warrior in on absolutely everything that had happened while they were apart.

“I see you’ve glossed over much of our interaction, Gabrielle,” the goddess remarked coyly, scanning the most recent entry about her discovery.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, “You can see they’re letters to Xena, I’m not a dick. That stuff gets glossed over. You should see how uneventful all of my honeymoons have been.”

“Yeah, but it’s not everyday someone wakes up with the Goddess of Love…” while she was just teasing, Gabrielle could almost sense something else lurking just below the surface. If Aphrodite had been human she might suspect a wounded ego.

“Hold on,” she said and turned to the back of the book and carefully tore three or four pages from the volume. She started writing, quickly. Pausing from time to time to close her eyes before putting pen to paper again. Aphrodite didn’t know if she was visualizing her thoughts or waiting for inspiration. She turned her attention back to the iPad and in twenty minutes Gabrielle had finished the four pages she was working on. She put them under the iPad on the goddess’ lap. “Give me a fifteen minute head start,” she instructed, “then you can start reading.”

Aphrodite did as she was instructed finishing her email then glancing at the news websites. The news was nearly all bad, equal parts heart breaking and anger inducing so she closed that app. She watched Gabrielle for a moment; the bard was lost in her own thoughts of what she was recording for Xena. She checked the time read out on the iPad and realized that twenty-two minutes had gone by, so she picked up the pages and started reading.

The words strung together, in the bard’s neat script of Greek and Latin were at once very graphic and left nothing to the imagination, but kind of elegant too. She turned the first page over reading its backside. She needed to revise her assessment of the work; the words were veering from graphic and elegant to downright raunchy and quite plainly filthy. “Holy shit, Gabrielle,” Aphrodite breathed as she continued to read. The vignette placed before her was both an inventory of things they had already done, as well as an imagining of how the night might progress. Stylistically the bard transitioned from poetic, to coy, to nastily descriptive; yet together it had cohesion. And there was humor. Flipping to the backside of the second page the goddess couldn’t help but giggle. “Oh you wish,” she said out loud. She moved on to the third page as the bard finished with her journal. She watched Aphrodite read her words, inwardly beaming with satisfaction as she saw crisp blue eyes flare with hunger and desire. By the time the goddess flipped over the fourth page Gabrielle thought she could almost feel heat radiating from the other woman’s skin.

Aphrodite finished the document and turned to look at Gabrielle after tossing both the pages and the iPad on the floor. “Hell yeah you’re a bard,” she said, her voice thick with desire.

“You gonna make that all happen?” Gabrielle asked, her own ardor rising, as she saw her reflection in pale blue eyes.

Aphrodite smirked, “You’ve shown me what kind of bard you are, I think I need to show you what kind of goddess I am.”

“So you were holding back?” Gabrielle teased, thinking that she was kidding.

“Actually, I was.”

Chapter 5: Having a Hammer

The moon had long since reached its zenith in the sky and Aphrodite was sitting up in bed wondering if she should feel guilty or not. She knew that she was not listening to her own better angels when indulging her desires with the bard. Being perfectly honest, she could not remember the last time she'd indulged herself this way with a human and couldn't even think of a time like this with a female. The immortality of course was the only reason felt safe in letting go, knowing that she wouldn't hurt Gabrielle. Perhaps it was selfish on her part, still she doubted there would be any complaints from her companion. She gazed down at the bard who was sleeping very soundly next to her a strong arm stretched across the goddess' waist. She was pondering when the appropriate time would be to transition their relationship to something that didn't include sex and decided that she really didn't want to think about it.

The sound of crickets drew her from her thoughts and she saw Gabrielle's phone vibrate on the nightstand across from her. She nudged her companion, "wake up honey," she said. "Your phone is ringing." Gabrielle didn't budge. She shook the bard. The bard continued to sleep soundly. Not wanting her to miss the call, she reached over Gabrielle's sleeping form and picked up the phone, she saw that it was Susan Yin calling so she answered.

"Gabrielle's phone, this is Valerie," she said.

The other end of the phone was quiet for a second. "Um…is Gabrielle there?" The other woman asked.

"She's here alright," Aphrodite said, "I'm just having some trouble waking her up." After she spoke, she grimaced. This was not Dwayne on the other end of the line, a close confidant that Gabrielle might discuss her sexual escapades with. She didn't know how much the bard's employees knew about her private life and she shouldn't have been so blunt.

If she was surprised, Susan Yin didn't let on. "Well I can give the message to you, since Gabrielle gave you clearance," she offered. "When she wakes up you can fill her in?"

Aphrodite shrugged. "Tell me what you've got and I'll let you know."

"Zuma Ocean responded to the message. The response was, quote, "Bring the keys, ashes, and hammer to the tip of Baja, new moon, the arch" end quote," Susan recited the message as though it weren't the least bit confusing. "The new moon is in three weeks on the twenty-third," she added.

"Yeah," Aphrodite agreed. "I think Gabrielle needs to hear this, hold on and I'll try to wake her again." She set the phone down on the bed and pushed Gabrielle onto her back. With a hand on her heart and one on her forehead she concentrated.

With a jolt the bard's eye flew open, and she bolted up in bed. "By the gods!" she exclaimed in surprise, "Holy fuck that was amazing! I can't even…"

She stopped talking when she saw Aphrodite close her eyes and shake her head vigorously. She looked at her quizzically and then saw the phone in her hand, the phone she was handing to her. The one with the Senior Vice President of Special Projects on the other end. Were she any younger than two thousand Gabrielle Evans would have probably died of embarrassment. She put the phone to her ear. "Hi Susan," she said sheepishly, "I was…um…asleep."

Gabrielle cringed at the audible smile in the other woman's voice. "Apparently," Susan said. She repeated the message she'd given Aphrodite and waited for the bard's response.

Gabrielle tapped her watch on the nightstand, it was almost half past three. "Okay, I understand the message," she said, annoyed and frustrated.

"Do you want to push our meeting tomorrow to later in the day?" Susan asked, misinterpreting the source of Gabrielle's annoyance.

"No, no, you're fine," Gabrielle assured the other woman. "I just need to make an unplanned trip to Greece, that's all. How soon can we get the jet to LAX?" she asked.

"Philanthropy is using it to transport food and medicine for a humanitarian project right now," Susan said. "If you don't cut that mission short, we can have it at LAX in a week. Shall I check with transportation?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath; Poseidon wouldn't be at Cabo San Lucas until the new moon there was no point getting there early. Once again she would have to wait. "Tell Transportation to get the plane back to me but only when it's current assignment is over. The crew should rotate out. If they don't want to, that's fine, but this could be dicey, they need to be sharp."

"Understood," Susan said before hanging up.

Gabrielle put the phone back on the nightstand, her near death embarrassment having been tampered by frustrating news. "We're going to Greece?" Aphrodite asked, moving a stray strand of hair from the bard's face.

Gabrielle nodded, knowing she was going to bring up a sore subject. "When I destroyed Hephaestus' Anvil…"

To her credit, the goddess wasn't annoyed, didn't frown or give any indication that this news had her positively furious less than twenty-four hours ago. "How did you accomplish that, by the way," she simply asked, curiously.

"Poseidon gave us the challenge outside of Hephaestus' cave.." Gabrielle explained. "He wasn't there. The pirate captain immediately had some of his men storm the cave entrance to beat us to it, and they started hacking at the anvil with their swords. As I'm sure you know, if you hit any kind of metal on that anvil, unless you're Hephaestus of course and know what you're doing, you're going to generate sparks that will kill you. The pirate captain went through a third of his crew before he figured that out. I had my crew split into three groups and head out in three different directions to see what was in the area.

"Not far from the cave, to the north was a village that was being harassed by a giant. A few miles away to the east my men found a sleeping Titan. I'd remembered the incantation that awakens Titans. I woke him up, told him to take care of the giant, and suggested that the anvil might make a good weapon."

"Who was it?" Aphrodite asked.

"Menoetius," Gabrielle replied.

"So Menoetius fought…"

"Agrius," Gabrielle supplied.

"So Menoetius fought Agrius the giant and destroyed the anvil in the process? The goddess asked.

"Exactly," Gabrielle said.

"And they were both killed when the anvil was destroyed?"

"Yes," Gabrielle admitted, making no attempt to defend herself.

"If it's any consolation, Menoetius was a total dick," Aphrodite said. "I mean I'm not glad he's dead of course, he was distant family, but he was not a nice person."

"I know that doesn't make it okay," Gabrielle said.

"The plan was classic Xena," Aphrodite acknowledged. "So what happened to my ex-husband's hammer?"

"After it was over, Poseidon handed me the hammer and told me to keep it safe. I took that to mean to hide it, so I did. I had no idea he expected I'd keep it with me," Gabrielle said.

"I'm sure if you'd tried it would have been taken from you by now," the goddess offered.

"Absolutely," the bard agreed. "When I left Greece after my great grandchildren had died it took me a long, long time to really learn how to keep myself safe. I've lost everything I had any number of times. Certainly, every time I was admitted to an asylum, or arrested. I've started over more times than I can count." She gestured in frustration, "hell, if I'd had it on the Titanic, it would be two miles down on the bottom of the ocean right now."

"You remember where you put it? You'll be able to find it?" Aphrodite asked.

Gabrielle nodded, "I'd stashed Xena's ashes in the vicinity of the other mementos and I went back to pick them up a couple hundred years ago. Besides, we've got a week to go over maps, get everything planned, it's all good."

"So you have nothing left to worry about for now?" she whispered near the bard's ear.

"Well maybe one thing," she replied with a mischievous grin.

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Gabrielle woke with a start, feeling relaxed and revitalized in a way that defied description. Images of the previous night and morning came to mind and she blushed at the memory, but looking around her bedroom, she realized she was alone. She tapped her watch on the nightstand and it read eleven twenty-one am. "Fuck," Gabrielle exclaimed, shocked she'd slept so late. She picked up her phone and there were a number of unanswered texts from Susan Yin, requests from the bridge to see if she was alive, missed phone calls and finally a note from Aphrodite. The message read, *Don't worry about a thing, hon, I got this.* She sat up and hit the comm button to contact the bridge.

"Yes Gabrielle," Michelle's voice greeted her, the amusement clear under a thin veneer of professionalism.

"Is Susan Yin onboard?" the bard asked feeling like an idiot.

"Why yes, she's having brunch on the sundeck with Aphrodite. Argo is there too, angling for a second breakfast."

Gabrielle could feel her cheeks flush crimson. She closed her eyes wishing she could manipulate time instead of just outlive it. There was no way she was going anywhere without a shower, as she turned her head to get out of bed, she winced in
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pain. She gingerly touched her neck, surprised at how much it hurt. “Please tell Susan I apologize and I’ll be on deck in about twenty minutes.”

“Will do,” Michelle replied. “And Gabrielle?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“I wouldn’t worry about anything. She and Aphrodite are having a lovely brunch. Your friend is really fantastic, we all like her.”

“Thank you, Michelle,” she said, releasing the button on the comm unit. This was a wrinkle she should have foreseen and blindly didn’t. Of course people would make assumptions about the nature of their relationship. No one meets someone you’re sleeping with and thinks ‘your fuckbuddy is fantastic, so nice she’s helping you get the love of your life back.’ She absently wondered if her crew would be just as welcoming of Xena or if they would choose sides and resent the woman who took Aphrodite’s place.

Not that Xena or anyone else could actually take Aphrodite’s place, she decided. Their relationship may change but the goddess was going to hold a unique place in the bard’s life permanently; how could she not? People can’t just forget what they know about you, what you share together. That didn’t make her love for Xena any less.

Standing in front of the mirror in her bathroom she was shocked to see the deep purple bruise on her neck, looking at her back, arms, and other parts of her body, there were bruises all over. She didn’t remember it happening and had to assume that she was not immune to injuries inflicted by gods, regardless of how pleasurable the affliction was at the time.

The day was warm so she dressed in shorts and a t-shirt after her shower, not bothering to put on shoes and headed up to the sun deck. She was relieved that only three or four of her bruises were still visible. There was an empty chair at the table where Aphrodite and Susan were talking. Argo was contentedly chewing a bone in the shade of the umbrella. As soon as she sat down, Aphrodite looked at her alarmed.

“Oh, you seem to have a smudge,” the goddess said as she touched her neck, as if she was wiping away a smudge of dirt and the pain vanished. The bard casually glanced down at her arm and her thigh noticing those bruises had vanished too. “Thanks, Valerie,” she said.

“It’s okay,” Aphrodite replied with a nod to Susan, “I told her my given name is Aphrodite.” Gabrielle nodded in understanding. “And look at this,” she said excitedly, picking up a large yellow envelope sitting on the table. “She dumped the contents on to the table and there was Anna Winter’s passport, driver’s license, credit cards including a black American Express card identical to Gabrielle’s, social security card, and insurance card for the vehicles owned by the company. All the kinds of paperwork and identification one would have in their wallet as well as several bound stacks of bills.

“10k?” Gabrielle asked.

Susan nodded, “the usual. We can work up diplomas and such later.”

As Aphrodite put the money and the paperwork back into the envelope, Sarah Gibson approached their table with a tray. There was a very large shot of strong espresso, a healthy sized dutch baby pancake, some fruit, and tater tots. The

bard was embarrassed anew. She had just been served her favorite meal after an all-night bender. Susan and Aphrodite both chuckled. She looked at Aphrodite accusingly.

"What? I had eggs benedict," the goddess said with a wink.

Gabrielle tried to think up a classy retort when Aphrodite pulled a few bills from the stack in the envelope and gathered the documentation and credit cards, leaving most of the cash and the passport. "You kids have fun," she said, "I've got shopping to do and I know the boat is waiting to take me ashore. Mind if I take Argo with me?" She stood up and without any hesitation, leaned over and kissed Gabrielle goodbye.

Gabrielle returned the kiss, inwardly a little uncomfortable that it was right in front of her vice president. A vice-president who was also a god-daughter.

"Don't be such a prude," Aphrodite whispered for her ears only as they parted.

Gabrielle blushed. "You can absolutely take Argo," she said changing the subject. "They have a leash and bags for her on the taxi boat, but they won't let her in the stores."

Aphrodite winked again. "Wanna bet?"

Gabrielle watched her go and when she turned back to Susan, the other woman was openly smiling at her.

"What?" Gabrielle said, taking a deep sip of the espresso and digging into her breakfast.

Susan shrugged. "I'll be honest, I had no idea you were gay."

Gabrielle was surprised, "You're kidding," she said.

"Okay, I don't worry about your love life, and I've never done boat duty so I guess I never thought about it one way or the other. You run an organization of mostly spies Gabrielle, we all compartmentalize really well and you keep your private life pretty private. I've never known you to be involved with anyone."

Gabrielle thought about the seventeen years that Susan had worked with her as 'Gabrielle Evans' and the years before that as 'Rebekah Evans' and certainly she hadn't had a serious relationship in that time. A few flings, but it had been over sixty years since her last real long-term relationship and that was kept from her business life. If it had been a hundred years earlier Gabrielle might have been concerned if this would change how the other woman saw her, or if she had any questions that needed clarification. In 2017 no one gave a shit and the type of person who would, wouldn't be working for her. "We are going to discuss my private life a little later," she said, after dipping a tater tot in ketchup, "I need to wake up first. In the meantime, fill me in on what's going on with Brian Glass."

Susan sipped her coffee deciding how to best answer her boss. "Today was his first day and it was about what you'd expect. I will have him working on a research project, totally isolated from anything else we have in the pipeline. Everyone knows he's a provisionary placement, he knows he's provisionary. Sabin is going to work directly with him and we've had a long conversation about the guy. Sabin doesn't trust him and plans to watch him like a hawk."

Gabrielle nodded approvingly. "If by some miracle we're wrong about him and he withstands this kind of scrutiny, he'll be a keeper."

"I agree," Susan said.

Finishing her breakfast, Gabrielle realized there was no further reason to put off the conversation she needed to have with Susan. She punched the number for Sarah on her phone after asking the other woman if she'd like more coffee.

"Sarah, can you please have someone bring another double espresso for me and another cup of coffee for Susan to the study." As an afterthought she added "And some scotch and a couple of glasses. Thank you, much appreciated," she said putting her phone down. "Okay, let's go to the study, I need to read you in and you might have a question or two."

The other woman led the way, being quite familiar with *The Hippolyta*. As they walked down to the lower deck she said conversationally, "Aphrodite invited Shen and I to Catalina with you guys for the weekend."

Gabrielle was surprised, as a security precaution very few people knew that Susan had a grandson. "How did that come up?" she asked.

Susan looked a little bewildered, "I'm not sure, I mean, I mentioned him- we were talking about family, she said she knew you from where you grew up, and it just kind of came out. I just get this feeling that I can trust her. Which I realize is quite out of character for me."

"Aphrodite has that effect on people. She is trustworthy, but I'm going to explain a bit more about that. And absolutely; join us in Catalina. We're moving the ship tonight. We can stay for four days so we're there through the weekend. Have the helicopter bring you guys on Friday when he gets back from boarding school. You can head back Sunday afternoon to get him back to school by curfew. It's been too long since Shen and I hung out."

They walked through Gabrielle's 'official' office to the private study accessed by a door on the wall behind her desk. Like the office behind them this room had no windows but it was much more homey. To one side was a somewhat cluttered desk. There were several shelves with books as well as other antique looking mementos. A number of personal photos adorned the walls and bookcase. Susan settled herself on the couch against the far wall, a coffee, double espresso, bottle of Scotch and two glasses sitting on a low table in front of the couch. Gabrielle closed the door to the study and then crossed to her desk where she flipped a switch. A low hum sounded, a white noise, and a pale blue light went on in the corner. The room was absolutely secure.

Gabrielle joined Susan on the couch and got right to the point. "What I'm going to tell you is going to sound impossible, you may think I'm crazy and you will absolutely not be the first to think so." Susan sat politely, paying attention. Gabrielle continued, "Your family has worked for me for three generations. Your mother and your grandfather, worked for *me*."

"Yes, I know that," Susan said.

"I mean me personally. Not my mother or my grandmother." Gabrielle clarified.

"Yes," Susan said.

Gabrielle frowned. This conversation had never progressed in this fashion before. "You don't seem to find that odd." Gabrielle finally said, at a loss.

"Oh, no." Susan disagreed, "I find it very odd. I am grateful we are having this conversation. I remember my grandfather telling me stories about when the two of you met in 1912, although you were going by Ingrid Bard at the time."

"I remember him then," Gabrielle replied smiling fondly. "A young man of 20. He was part of the second wave of immigrants from China, and we met in San Francisco. I'd landed in Halifax Nova Soctia in April and then made my way west. My husband William had died and I was focusing on my company."

"He described you as self-possessed and confident; someone who could talk anyone into doing anything and talk herself out of any trouble. The company was Chakram Enterprises then?"

"It was. It was a difficult time for me then and your grandfather was kind beyond his years." It occurred to Gabrielle now as she remembered the man how much his granddaughter resembled him.

"I know the two of you were close. He said that you treated him with a level of respect and trust unusual for that time."

"I treated him exactly how he deserved, he was a very dear friend. Back then, when I was preparing to change identities, it was a time – years- consuming laborious process. Inventing children people never saw me with or relatives, or adopting a relative's child. Just before a switch the people who worked closest with me would transition out, either by retirement, or I'd find them better jobs elsewhere. Then I'd promote people from the lower ranks so my new self would start fresh with a new senior staff who didn't know I wasn't who I said I was. Obviously, this has gotten more difficult over time.

"Anyway, I just couldn't part with Shen Chu and kept him on. I came up with a story about adopting my niece and having her away at boarding school. I did what I could with hair and makeup to age myself. When it came time for Abigail Evans to take over from Ingrid Bard and rename the company Bardic & Company your grandfather pleasantly went along with it. I always suspected he knew but did his best to treat me like I hadn't known him for eighteen years. I think he clued in your mother, Betty when she started in fifty-two, because she never said a word."

"Shen revered you so, and it was something he instilled in my mother. He thought you were perhaps a benevolent spirit or Wu. My mother's assessment was a little different. She was a devout Christian after she married my father and thought you might be an angel sent to live among people."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I can guarantee there is nothing angelic about me. And you?" Gabrielle asked, really surprised at how the conversation was going. "What do you think? Angel, Wu or something else?"

"I have no idea. My grandson is really into spider-man, super heroes in general but especially spider-man. The genre is full of remarkable people who were the victims of some sort of accident or experiment." She leaned forward to pick up the delicate coffee cup. "I remember when I started at the company in sixty-nine, there was that glorious year when all three generations of us were working for you, or for Rebekah Evans I should say, before Shen died, right after Tom and I got married in nineteen seventy. There we were, Shen thinking you were a Wu, mother thinking you were an angel, and me too preoccupied with learning my job to give it much thought."

"I see," Gabrielle said, feeling more refreshingly lost than at any time in recent memory. "And it was the gay thing that surprised you?"

Susan chuckled, "Yes, actually that was my big reveal for the day. As long as you're 'coming out' about this, so to speak; feel free to elaborate. I can't imagine you being anything other than human."

"I am absolutely human. A very imperfect, flawed one at that." Gabrielle reassured her, taking a sip of espresso and deciding how to best frame her explanation. "Let's say your grandson is on the right track. Something happened to me when…well when I was a bit younger than I look now. It made me age very, very slowly. Like *really* slowly."

"Just how old are you?" Susan asked, the familiar apprehension beginning to thread her voice.

Gabrielle looked at her directly, her expression serious. "It's hard to say because when I was born it wasn't like we had calendars, and time keeping in general has shifted a bit but my best guess is that I'm about 2,097." Gabrielle's very fast reflexes allowed her to stop Susan from dropping her cup of hot coffee. Gently she took it from the Chinese woman's fingers and set it back in its saucer.

"That…it can't…"

"I know," Gabrielle said gently, reaching for the bottle of Scotch and pouring some into each of the glasses.

"That's the time of Caesar," Susan finally said, dumbfounded after a mental calculation.

"I did not like him," Gabrielle said, as she handed her one of the glasses. "He was a horrible person."

Susan Yin took a very deep breath and let it out slowly. She accepted the glass from Gabrielle but she didn't drink from it. "Aphrodite, she's like you?"

This was not a question Gabrielle was expecting, because every other time she'd told anyone her big secret she had been the only person in her predicament. "Actually, Aphrodite is much older than me," She said. "Even if she doesn't always act like it."

At this point Susan took a healthy sip of the Scotch. "Something happened to you over two thousand years ago." She almost seemed to be trying to convince herself. "Two thousand years ago. I would not believe it if the evidence wasn't overwhelming," Susan finally said. "Gabrielle, you have a way of talking about history that sounds very convincing. Like you were there."

"You don't think I'm just a history nerd?"

"I'm not alone in thinking you are the biggest history nerd to have ever lived. But even for a nerd you know a lot of detail about a lot of subjects, a lot of professions. I've known you my whole life- seventy-three years, my mother's whole life. You are my godmother, my mother's godmother. You obviously haven't aged a day in that time. Changed your hairstyle maybe. When you talk about historical events though, you have a way about talking about the past that brings it alive."

"I used to be a bard," Gabrielle explained.

"Where?" Susan asked.

"Greece."

"You mean Ancient Greece." Susan clarified.

Gabrielle frowned. “Well yes, if you want to make a girl feel old.”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said. “This makes so much sense of Acquisitions now. The property you own, the priceless paintings, antiques, warehouses of really old stuff. And it makes sense why you keep buying new stuff – new art, new guitars when you own vintage ones, the stocks, vehicles – you’re saving things knowing in several hundred years they will be priceless.” Susan looked relieved, giddy almost that so much of what she’d seen in her working life now made sense. “I thought you were an amazingly savvy businesswoman, and you’re just really patient and persistent.”

“Hey now!” Gabrielle objected. “I’m kind of a savvy businesswoman.”

“In the sense that living longer than everyone else is savvy, then sure.” Susan said. “Everything you’ve amassed is to fund charitable ventures and special projects. Why?” Susan put her glass down and poured herself another drink. Gabrielle was happy to see she’d moved beyond shock to realizing that she could now discover every secret there was behind Bardic & Company “Wait…wait,” the Chinese woman said putting her hand up, her eyes suddenly getting wide. “Aphrodite…is… *Aphrodite*.”

“About that,” Gabrielle began.

“The myths. The Goddess of Love.” Susan interrupted, unable to stop herself. “She’s a goddess?”

Now Gabrielle picked up her own glass of scotch and took a sip. She enjoyed the warming sensation in her mouth wishing the alcohol could also give her inspiration as to handle this next line of questions delicately. “Aphrodite is indeed the one you’re thinking of. Certainly, she is a goddess to me, not just because I know her and I love her, but she was part of the dominant religion when I was growing up.”

“And the others?” Susan asked her voice quiet and stunned.

“Ares, Poseidon, Athena, Hades, these haven’t been mythological figures for me, these are people I’ve had conversations with. Something happened two thousand years ago that cut these people off from the source of their…well I guess power is the best word for it. They still aren’t like regular people, or like me even, but they are closer to us than they were.” Gabrielle felt no need to go into detail about exactly how the god’s of her day lost much of their power.

“Are all religions like that?” Susan asked.

Gabrielle shrugged, “I don’t know. The ancient Egyptians worshipped gods that were part animal. I’ve never met anyone like that. But that doesn’t mean I don’t think they weren’t real, or might not look different now.” She took another sip of scotch. “Living this long has taught me that charismatic people inspire other people. Do they have power before or after people follow them? Who can say. Myths can evolve and change over time; usually they get exaggerated. In your own lifetime you’ve seen the invention of Scientology- a new religion completely created by a science fiction author. Already the myths about him grow with his believers.”

Susan nodded, considering it a fair point. “You’re equating all religions with…”

“I will be the first to say I’m not an expert in religion. As old as I am there is a lot that I don’t know and so many things I can barely fathom. I do know my religion

though, the one I was raised in, and it had gods and goddess and I've met them and battled them…"

"And fallen in love with them?" Susan asked.

Gabrielle poured each of them another scotch. "No. Not exactly." She took a deep breath. While the details of her love life weren't really anyone's business, knowing the facts about Xena might make things less confusing down the road. Especially since she hoped this particular mission might be completed in Susan's lifetime. "I absolutely love Aphrodite. I mean, who wouldn't, right? And we are very close friends- obviously. But the big love of my life is this woman, Xena." She frantically searched for a way to tell Xena's story that didn't have words like 'resurrection' and 'ashes' in it. "Two thousand years ago, when the gods lost touch with each other and I lost touch with them, I also lost touch with Xena. I have been searching for her ever since. I've had relationships in that time, fallen in love with people and stayed with them for many years. There have been other times when I've run around like a total floosy. I'm kind of being a floosy right now, which is fine with Aphrodite.

"When I was a kid, there was this story that people had two heads and four arms, four legs. Zeus threw down lightning bolts and separated people so they'd have one head, two arms, and two legs but we keep searching for the other half of our soul. Xena is the other half of my soul, but that doesn't mean I haven't valued the other relationships I've had. If you ever live to be two thousand you find that your attitudes about monogamy, sexual orientation, and any number of things get really murky." She took a deep breath, not feeling comfortable at all having this personal of a conversation with an employee. "The whole point of my company, why I've built everything I've built has been to search out Aphrodite, who is going to help me…find Xena. Well, her and Poseidon."

"Zuma Ocean," Susan said.

"Yes, he changed his name to that and I have no idea why, it's kind of on the nose." She put her glass down. "I knew this…project…would take a very long time, so I've wanted to do good as I went along. Contribute to causes I believe in, be a force for things positive. I've also learned over the years to be obsessed about my security and I know that knowledge is power."

"Which explains the different facets of Bardic" Susan said with a nod.

Gabrielle looked at Susan, a very real fear suddenly dawning on her. "Susan, I hope this…all of this doesn't change the way you think about me, or about being Shen's godmother."

Susan smiled and Gabrielle felt relieved. "Gabrielle…what is your given name by the way?" she asked.

Gabrielle nodded. "It was Gabrielle. I don't return to it very often, but it was time; I'd missed it.

"Well I'm happy to know you buy it," Susan said beaming. "I have no doubt that you've had children. Believe me, many things about you are falling into place now. You and I both know that a mother, or grandmother's greatest fear is worrying who will care for their children when they are gone. My dear, you've just given me a wonderful gift. I will sleep much better at night knowing that should my life be long or short, you will be there for Shen through his entire life. That the painful burden

will be yours to say goodbye to him long after I'm gone; that he will never lose you." She finished off her scotch and put her glass down.

"Gabrielle, I may be only seventy-three, clearly a child in your eyes, which is a little unsettling. But, sometimes even children can tell us something we don't know. I understand why you are so guarded. I can see why this information could be damaging to you over the centuries. But you have made yourself very powerful, you need to decide who you can trust, like me, and you need to tell them this. If people don't believe you – so what? You're eccentric or crazy. The president of the United States is completely crazy and no one is about to lock him up. Why? Money. Lord knows you've got more money than President Turner, you need to trust more people. And not just for your sake."

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle asked.

"The crew on this ship for example," Susan continued. "Each of these men and women only have one life. And while you've made it clear the risks involved in working in the Transportation and SP divisions, they think you are taking the same risk. You aren't. Trust your crew, they are trusting their lives to the decisions you make. If they think you're crazy they should have the opportunity to leave the company."

Gabrielle felt winded, like she'd just been exposed to a basic truth she'd not noticed for ages. It had been a long time since she'd felt that way. In equal measure she felt stung and proud by Susan's insight. "You are absolutely right, Susan. I will tell them before we go to Baja."

"I will want you to tell Shen as well. Not right now," she clarified. "I would like him to be well out of puberty before he realizes he knows the Goddess of Love." Both women shared a laugh. "But I do want him to know the truth sooner than I did. I am very honored that you were willing to be his godmother. And my godmother."

Gabrielle felt her eyes well up and decided there was no good reason not to cry. "I know this is highly unprofessional and absolutely against HR regulations, but do you mind if I hug you?"

After walking Susan to the docking area at the aft of the yacht, she watched the powerboat motor back to the dock at the marina. She considered the options in how best to tell the 15 crew aboard *The Hippolyta* the truth. She returned to her study and sat down at her computer. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do. Did she want to type out a speech, craft a presentation with bullet points, write poetry? Her eyes drifted over to the book case and the wall with the photos. Inspired, she got to work.

She had no idea how long she'd been at it when she heard the click of someone depressing the button to the intercom. "Gabrielle," Elaine Jackson's voice came through the speaker. "Aphrodite has just returned to the ship. Would you like us to depart for Catalina now?"

Gabrielle glanced at her phone, it was twenty minutes after six. She was stunned that she'd been working all day. While she thought she'd made the presentation that would do the trick, she didn't realize it had taken so long. "Yes, let's head to the Two Harbors. Anchor off of Emerald Cove. What is the weather like on deck?"

"It's a little breezy for dinner," Elaine replied. "Sarah has made a couple of different vegetarian lasagnas for dinner and the off duty crew was going to eat at seven." The bard grinned a little shyly. The unspoken question here was did she want Sarah to fix her something special for dinner and did she and Aphrodite want to eat with the crew or in her private apartment. "I'll let her know my dinner plans when I've had a chance to talk to Aphrodite. You think two hours to Catalina?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Excellent, thank you Elaine."

She punched the name on her phone to contact Hatsuo. "Yes, Gabrielle?" He said answering immediately. "Anything to report on the security front since the discovery of the bug?"

"No ma'am," Hatsuo said. "We've been doing more frequent sweeps, we've been monitoring around the ship. We had an extra detail from Transportation come out and observe from shore. Other than the usual interest in a mega yacht and kids with their drones looking for sunbathers, we haven't seen anything that would prompt me to alert you."

Nodding, Gabrielle made a decision. "We are going to spend four days at Catalina. While we're away from the mainland see if the drone traffic still persists. Make sure there isn't someone with more expertise trying to look like a curious kid. I want everyone to have as much downtime as possible. While off duty I want everyone to relax and recharge. We are going to have an all hands meeting in the conference room before we head back to the marina. I will have some more details then about any possible staffing changes and more downtime before we tackle our next assignment."

"Understood," he said.

She ended the call and there was a knock at the door to her study. "Come in," she called.

Aphrodite was there, wearing a new dress that was positively stunning. It had a very fifties vintage look and was a gorgeous sea foam green with small white polka dots. "Wow," she said appreciatively.

"I was shopping for Xena and somehow some stuff for me ended up in the bag too." She said with a smile.

"Imagine that," Gabrielle replied, getting up from the desk, feeling an unpleasant stiffness in her neck.

"Come see what I bought for your girlfriend," the goddess said, leading the way to the bard's stateroom suite after greeting her with a kiss. She opened the bedroom door and Gabrielle was a little taken aback by the number of bags and boxes piled high on the bed. "We're going to have to make room in your closet. I've already asked Blake to bring some storage boxes up here for the stuff we're going to move out."

"You met Blake?" Gabrielle asked absently, still marveling at the sheer quantity of shopping the goddess managed to accomplish in one day. "How did you fit all this stuff in the Tesla?"

"Honey, I've met nearly everyone on the ship. While you were passed out this morning, before Susan got here I made myself at home. I wandered around, said good morning to the folks on the bridge. Wandered into the crew quarters, took a

look at the engine room. You weren't kidding when you said Class One clearance would give me free reign. No one made me feel the least bit out of place."

"I'm still trying to figure out how you managed to fit all of this…" Her bewilderment was cut short by a knock at the bedroom door. Gabrielle opened the door and a handsome man stood there next to a cart with a number of empty plastic tubs stacked neatly within each other.

Blake Taylor looked to be in his late thirties or early forties. A little taller than Aphrodite with crisp, stylish short hair and a fit physique not quite as muscle bound as some of the other crew. While dressed in what could be describe as "vacation-wear" is ensemble was more stylishly put together than the crew that had had inhibited the bridge when Aphrodite was introduced. He wore casual slacks, loafers and a collared shirt. To the goddesses ears his accent placed him as growing up in the English countryside and then moving to London as soon as he was able. In seconds his manner spoke volumes, this was a man who made order out of chaos. Suddenly it became very apparent to the goddess why the bard's ship was so tidy.

"Good evening, Gabrielle," he said with a warm smile. "Aphrodite requested…"

"Yeah, the boxes…" Gabrielle said absently, looking back at the bed.

Aphrodite shook her head. "She's in shock," she explained to the newcomer. "Just leave the boxes here. We will fill them up and leave them outside the door, over there?" She pointed to a hallway a respectful distance from the bedroom. "Then you can pick them up whenever and put them in storage?"

"Absolutely," he said.

"Great," the goddess replied with a smile. "Then please let Sarah know we will join the crew for dinner, but Gabrielle and I have to chat about something first. We'll see you at seven."

He nodded before leaving and Aphrodite closed the door. She leaned against it, not looking forward to what she was about to say.

"I did some thinking while I was shopping," she began, fully aware that Gabrielle wasn't just in shock at the number of bags and boxes on the bed, but realizing that it was her first concrete evidence in a very long time that the prospect of Xena returning might be more than a pipe dream. "We need to talk about when I move into the guest stateroom."

"Wait, what?" Gabrielle said, like she must have misheard her.

"At some point, I need to move into the guest quarters," she clarified. "Some of this stuff is mine, you don't think I should just set up house there now, when I unpack it? I'm not saying I'm going to start sleeping there, certainly not tonight, but…"

"No, I don't," Gabrielle said without hesitation. "Yes, I know this," she gestured around the bedroom, "has an expiration date. It's been two days we certainly aren't there yet." She looked at the goddess for a moment and chose her next words carefully. "Are you worried about this being confusing for me…or confusing for you?"

"Orgasms don't confuse me Gabrielle," she replied a little defensively.

"I know," Gabrielle said easily. "But sleeping with someone might. It's all the things that aren't sex that might throw you." The goddess didn't reply, but her

expression softened. “Look, I respect that you don’t want to make things confusing for me. Having you in my bed one day and then Xena the next. I agree with you that it would be…inappropriate. But I also want to say that I have been happier these past couple of days than I have been in a very long time. I feel less alien, I feel more hopeful. I feel a kind of security that is letting me move forward and make some very big decisions that could have far reaching implications for me and for Xena. I’m going to give you credit for that. If you want to move to the guest room for you, because you are feeling attached in ways you don’t think are good, then I will absolutely understand. But please don’t do it for me- and you can’t do it until Susan and Shen visit for the weekend.”

“When then?” Aphrodite asked, her voice soft and kind.

Gabrielle thought for a moment. “When we have the hammer. When I have the hammer in my hand and we come back to the boat- that will be it. I will make sure that I will have said everything I want to say to you and I will hope that you have done the same and things can shift in a good way.”

“It’s a deal, Gabrielle,” Aphrodite said although the inevitability of sadness was evident in her voice. “Now we need to get going to dinner, you know they’re going to wait for us. We can clean out your closet after.”

“How did you know about dinner?” Gabrielle asked, following the goddess out of the bedroom.

Aphrodite chuckled. “Are you kidding? Six different crew members invited me.”

Chapter 6: Fun In The Sun

The long weekend at Catalina Island was exactly the break Gabrielle had been looking for. The change of both scenery and routine seemed to lift the spirits of everyone onboard *The Hippolyta*. Bard and goddess went through her closet and packed away a third of the contents therein. Aphrodite had her curiosity answered by discovering that the drawers were indeed as neat and tidy as the rest of the closet. “I can’t take credit,” Gabrielle confessed, “the people assigned as stewards keep me in shape. This rotation it’s Blake Taylor and Samantha Ramirez. The only place that is off limits to the crew is the study and therefore it’s the messiest place on the ship. Occasionally they make me straighten it up, but not often enough.”

Gabrielle went through the wardrobe impressed with how thorough Aphrodite was in anticipating what Xena might need. There were the usual undergarments, jeans, shoes, t-shirts, blouses, jackets, some clothes that were less casual, a couple of dresses, accessories, some technical outdoor clothing, a pair of motorcycle boots, and a leather jacket. “You don’t think an iPhone and an Apple Watch are overkill?” Gabrielle asked with a chuckle. “For the woman who’s most advanced possession was a flying round knife?”

“She is going to need to Google a lot of shit when she gets here. That’s going to be one of the first things you’re going to have to teach her.” Aphrodite put the boxes in a drawer. “I don’t think she’ll give a shit how they work, just that they help.”

For her own attire, the goddess unpacked her duffle bag into the drawer that Gabrielle had emptied for her use. She hung up the things that she didn’t want to get

wrinkled and added her new purchases as well. “Where did you put it?” she asked, trying to sound nonchalant as she held up a new jacket and studied her reflection in the full-length mirror.

Knowing full well that she was talking about the shell, Gabrielle answered. “I put it in the safe.” The goddess nodded, approvingly.

A comfortable routine had developed. The crew gave them plenty of space in the morning, but once on deck for breakfast they interacted with Gabrielle less like she was entertaining a guest and more like she was with family, someone who was going to be around for a while. They would eat breakfast alone, join the crew for lunch and for dinner, and after dinner would retire to Gabrielle’s staterooms. Argo was grateful to have an additional person to swim and play ball with and the crew seemed genuinely happy to have her around. Everyone was drawn to her and seemed to go out of their way to have a few moments to chat with her daily.

Gabrielle was glad that her request that people take their downtime seriously had been heeded. Other than her own private spaces onboard, the bard had always made it clear that the ship’s amenities were for everyone to use. People lounged by the pool, enjoyed the hot tub, swam in the pool or snorkeled off the back deck, and took the jet skis for a spin. Several of the crew had erected a climbing wall from the lower decks that extended past the top decks and were having races to scale it. It wasn’t unusual to see someone fishing or groups of people gathered in the den to watch a movie on the large television.

With the sun warm on her skin and the smell of steaks coming from a well-tended barbecue nearby, Gabrielle didn’t think the day could be any more perfect, aside from having Xena there with her of course. From her vantage point on a beach towel at the stern of the yacht she had full view of her dog frolicking in the water with a few of the crew, as well as people enjoying other areas of the ship. She was absently listening to a political radio show podcast that several other members of her crew were enjoying; laughing at the jokes, while also debating the current political climate. While she felt distracted by Aphrodite’s presence, she was grateful for the respite from the dismal realities of the world at large.

Lazily she opened her eyes when she felt the sun blocked from her face. Vox and Wolfgang were standing in front of her, the two youngest members of her crew. Wolfgang stood there in his neon green speedos, his muscular lean body nearly completely covered by tattoos. He wasn’t wearing his glasses as he’d been swimming. Vox Wandre, the engineer, stood next to him nearly as tall and just as lanky. She was wearing men’s orange baggy swim trunks with an orange bikini top and a white ribbed tank top over it. Her Scandinavian skin was pale and the assortment of tattoos on her arms, legs, and even on her belly under the tank top stood out in sharp contrast. Her hair was white blond and came to just past her ear on one side and was shaved close to her scalp on the other. Her features were boyish and chiseled and she looked at Gabrielle through pale blue eyes, shifting a little uncomfortably in place as she stood next to Wolfgang.

“What’s up guys?” Gabrielle asked, pushing her RayBan’s to the top of her head so she could see them better in the backlighting. “Anything interesting on The Stephanie Miller show today?”

Wolfgang shrugged, “Everyday is a new horror show…”

The trio had their attention diverted by a loud gasp as Bohemian broke the water's surface. Treading water as he flung the wet dreadlocks out of his face, he was gasping for air, looking at the water around him "That's insane!" he exclaimed. A moment later Aphrodite broke the surface of the water. "I don't see how you can do that!" he said in amazement.

"I told you I was a free diver," she said easily, not even winded.

"No one can hold their breath that long," he protested.

She laughed, "I think I kinda just did."

They both cleared the water, climbing the short ladder onto the beach deck where Gabrielle was sunbathing. Aphrodite said 'Hi' to Wolfgang and cocked her head at Vox. "I don't think we've met yet," she said.

Immediately Gabrielle did a double take. Aphrodite was wearing her new bathing suit- a black and pale blue bikini. She'd been wearing a sarong when they left their cabin this morning. The bard wasn't sure if it was the suit or the fact that the goddess had just been in the water, which she was casually shaking from her short hair, but something about the goddess was different. Beyond radiant, the water seemed to shimmer as it ran in rivulets down her body. The goddess almost seemed to be glowing. Suddenly the bard felt very thirsty.

Wolfgang looked like a deer caught in headlights as he was unable to pull his eyes from the goddess standing in front of him. "Um…ah…this is Vox Wandre," he said quickly, "our engineer. Um…hey… I think I need a swim." He handed Vox a tube of sunscreen and bolted for the water, quickly joined by Steve, who had also been lounging nearby listening to the podcast leaving Blake alone to tend the laptop. It was not lost on Gabrielle that everyone in the vicinity was looking at Aphrodite and that the duo now splashing in the water had both been wearing speedos.

"Nice to meet you," Vox said, extending her hand to Aphrodite, her expression ambivalent, a small smile not reaching her eyes.

As the goddess shook her hand it was all she could do to not smile at the young woman sympathetically. While not outwardly hostile, it was clear from the strong grip and eye contact that the engineer was not a fan of the Goddess of Love.

"You and Wolfgang were saying something about the Stephanie Miller Show?" Gabrielle asked in an attempt to diffuse the tension.

"What?" Vox asked. "Oh, yeah, nah," she said with a careless shrug. "Just the usual stuff. Playing clips from the Gideon Power Hour and making fun of him. Shit like that."

Gabrielle nodded. "I'll admit I'm behind," she said a little color tinting her cheeks. "I've been…ah… busy."

"I've heard," Vox said with a disapproving glance at Aphrodite. Then, realizing that she'd overstepped, tried to backtrack. "I was below deck in the engine room the other day with Ingrid when you made the introductions on the bridge so I wanted to come by and say 'Hi'. You know, introduce myself."

"Ah," Gabrielle said with a nod, forgiving the young woman's overstep.

"And to bring you this," she added. Extending her hand holding the tube of sunscreen. "Wolfie thought you might need it."

"Thanks," Aphrodite said, taking the sunscreen from the other woman, which only intensified her frown.

The bard's expression grew stern and she turned her head towards the men in the water. "Wolfgang Louise Fowler did you do the tattoo bet again?"

"Your middle name is Louise?" Aphrodite asked with a chuckle.

The young man laughed and shook his head. "No, it's from the radio show. When you're in trouble everyone gets the middle name Louise. It's a thing." Treading water, he raised his hands helplessly. "It was too easy."

"How much did you bet him?" the bard asked turning her attention to the lanky butch woman standing in front of her.

"Five hundred bucks," Vox said quietly.

"Exposition, please?" Aphrodite asked looking at Wolfgang, who blushed furiously. As if it was a totally unconscious move, she ran her fingers through her hair pushing the short blond tresses away from her face. As she did so her body moved, her arms raising which in turn raised her chest and the muscles of her abdomen flexing slightly. As much as Gabrielle wanted to stare, she allowed herself only a glance and looked at the young man who was transfixed.

"No one believes that Gabrielle has a giant dragon tattoo that covers her whole back," Bohemian explained for the distracted navigator. "Vox is the newest member of the crew and the new guy nearly always falls for it."

Aphrodite chuckled and turned towards Vox. The young woman looked at Aphrodite and after a quick double take almost looked at her with grudging respect. With her short hair smoothed back against her head she had a more severe, commanding presence. "Why don't you think that Gabrielle has a giant, gorgeous, stunning dragon covering her back?" she asked deceptively sweetly.

Vox shrugged, which seemed to be her go to maneuver. "She just doesn't seem like the type or whatever," she said.

Aphrodite nodded to Gabrielle who rolled her eyes, stood up, and turned around showing Vox the sinuous, winged, claw-footed dragon that wound its way from her tailbone to the nape of her neck and across both shoulders.

"Holy shit," the young woman said. Quickly bringing her hand up to touch it, she just as quickly put it back down again, knowing better than to touch her employer so intimately.

"It's always the femmy ones you have to watch out for," Aphrodite added with a wink.

"Wolfgang isn't taking your money," Gabrielle said with a frown at Aphrodite. "This bet thing is too much like hazing and *it isn't okay*," she added to the men in the water and to Bohemian sitting next to the goddess.

"Hey man," he protested, "I wouldn't do that to Vox, we went through training together in Transportation." He winked at his friend who cracked a smile in spite of herself. "She'd kick my ass."

"No, it's cool." Vox demurred. "I'm one of the guys, they've all been great-even Bo." She glanced at the sunscreen that Aphrodite had set down on a low table nearby then back at the goddess. "I'm going to get back to our podcast," she said. "I'll see you guys after dinner."

"I'll join you," Bohemian said, getting up to follow the engineer, wrapping a towel around his baggy swim trunks so he didn't leave a trail of water behind him.

"Okay," Gabrielle said with warmth and kindness, waiting until she left to sit back down on her towel.

"You didn't call me Aphrodite Louise so I guess I'm not in trouble?" The goddess asked as she sat down next to her lover. Gabrielle gave her a look then picked up her beer taking a long pull. With seriousness the goddess added, "that one is going to be trouble. She's absolutely in love with you."

"For now," Gabrielle replied quietly, "She's young and just figuring out who she is. I'd rather her be infatuated with me than Michelle or anyone else in the crew."

"Not your first rodeo with a love-sick employee?"

"It happens from time to time They always end up getting a grip on themselves or transfer out of the department or leave the organization. Sometimes they become really exceptional additions to the team."

"And you never indulge?" Aphrodite asked with a raised eyebrow.

Gabrielle shook her head. "Not for a very, very, very long time at work, and certainly never in the Transportation or Special Projects divisions, they're too important. I indulge elsewhere."

"You're going to have to tell me all about your indulgences later," Aphrodite said with a flirtatious wink, the slicked back hair making the goddess look much more butch than she was accustomed to.

"Should I use the sunscreen?" Aphrodite asked. "I know your skin won't burn but for appearances?"

Gabrielle put her sunglasses back down and glanced around the ship. Frequent glances were still being sent the goddess' way and she was either unaware of the extra attention or chose not to acknowledge it. "Sure. Usually I wear long sleeved surf shirt to avoid the question about not burning or tanning, but the sun feels so nice."

Aphrodite put her sunglasses on before applying the cream to the bard's back. She glanced over at the table a short distance away where several people were talking politics over the podcast and sure enough Vox was glowering jealously at her. She resisted the urge to take off her sunglasses and wink.

Argo strolled over and curled up next to her mistress, enjoying a nice scratch behind the ears. "There is something different about you," Gabrielle said as the goddess finished, taking the tube and quite unnecessarily applying the sunscreen to her lover's back.

"I love the ocean," Aphrodite replied. "I was born from sea foam; it makes me feel young and reckless."

Gabrielle nodded. "It shows. You know, we're going to have a ten-year old on this ship any minute now," she added quietly, for the goddess' ears alone.

"I promise to behave," Aphrodite assured her. "I'm great with kids."

Gabrielle giggled a little and took another sip of her beer, glancing with sympathy at the men swimming around, not because they necessarily wanted to, but because they had chosen to wear speedos instead of baggy swimming trunks. "I'm just glad the affect you have on me doesn't show," she said quietly with a nod to the men off the back of the boat, still swimming.

Now it was Aphrodite's turn to chuckle, "I think it's adorable that you don't think it shows."

Gabrielle was going to respond when the voice of a newcomer diverted her attention.

"I just got off duty, did I miss anything?" Michelle asked, approaching the barbecue and checking the doneness of the meats and vegetables. Sarah shooed her away.

"I'm not micromanaging your captaining, leave my barbecue alone." She said teasingly.

"Look who's being obvious," the bard muttered to Aphrodite, who had just spotted the captain wearing a bikini. Michelle's curly brown hair had been released from its professional bun and fell just past her shoulders. Her bathing suit was a gradation of the colors of a sunset and contrasted beautifully with her light brown skin. Well-muscled and confident, she looked like she had just stepped off the cover of a sports magazine swimsuit edition. As the bard had inwardly predicted, the goddess took notice of her the same way Steve, and Wolfgang had just been looking at her.

"Just so you know," Gabrielle said quietly, "the crew is very much off-limits for you too, especially the captain."

"That's a stupid rule," Aphrodite said feigning a pout.

"Um, no, it's the law," Gabrielle replied. "You kinda, sorta work for me now; you're on the expense accounts."

"You're just jealous," the goddess countered.

"Perhaps," Gabrielle agreed, but was distracted by the approaching helicopter.

"Okay now?" Aphrodite asked. Gabrielle turned her head to see what she meant and did a double take. The shimmer and glow were gone and now Aphrodite looked like a run of the mill gorgeous woman as opposed to the walking, for lack of a better word, aphrodisiac from minutes earlier. "Should we go greet them?" the goddess asked as she watched Argo shake the water from her coat and bound up the stairs to the upper decks.

"Nope," Gabrielle said, laying back and enjoying the warmth of the sun. "Argo will go greet them. Susan will want to get the two of them settled in the guest stateroom. He's going to have to decide if he wants to hunt for his chocolate candy bar now or go swimming first. We've got a routine you see."

"You hide a candy bar?"

"Susan is pretty strict about what he eats when he's not at school, but she knows I do it and is fine. Somewhere on board is a dark chocolate peppermint candy bar and he'll run around the ship to find it." She shrugged, "it's good exercise. I read it in the 'godmother handbook' somewhere."

Aphrodite was amused, looking forward to spending some time with a young person, it had been a long time. "What other kinds of things do you guys do together?" she asked.

"He will tell me about what's going on in school, he will complain about his history lessons, we'll watch movies. I'm not really into video games," she gave Aphrodite a 'it's not as interesting when you've already done it', expression over the

top of her sunglasses. “But there are plenty of people on the crew, certainly with this particular crew, who will play with him. You know, normal ten year old stuff.”

Michelle had taken a seat on the edge of the dock as Gabrielle had been speaking, both to Aphrodite’s delight and the bard’s regret. “You guys have to play music tonight,” she said. “Shen loves it when you guys play.”

“I saw all the instruments,” Aphrodite said.

“Not all of them,” Bomenian added returning to the group, sitting down next to Aphrodite and dangling his legs in the water as well. “Gabrielle has this amazing lute from the Renaissance. We keep it in the vault. Occasionally we can get her to play it for us.”

“Well I think that’s settled,” Aphrodite said looking forward to the future concert.

“I’m hardly the only musician onboard,” Gabrielle with a nod to Bo. “We’ve stayed up many a night butchering songs by any number of people.”

“Just don’t ask her to sing, though,” Michelle said with a chuckle. “Gabrielle is an amazing musician, but singer she is not.”

The goddess laughed out loud. “All these years I’ve known you Gabrielle and you still can’t carry a tune in a bucket?”

“Yeah well,” she said with a blush.

Gabrielle was saved from further embarrassment as a lanky ten year old bounded across the main deck and climbed down the stairs to the beach deck. “Squirrel!” he shouted enthusiastically.

“Moose!” Gabrielle said as he rushed over to give her a hug. That mission accomplished, he went to the other crew members nearby and gave them high fives or fist bumps. Returning to where Gabrielle was he looked over at Aphrodite, suddenly becoming a bit shy. “Shen,” Gabrielle said encouragingly – I want you to meet my friend, Aphrodite.”

“It’s very nice to meet you Shen,” Aphrodite said extending her hand. “Or should I call you Moose?”

The young boy shook it and then deciding that the goddess was okay, he offered her a fist bump that she happily returned. “Gabrielle is the only one who calls me Moose,” he explained. “We used to watch Rocky and Bullwinkel when I was a kid.”

“How was the trip from school?” Gabrielle asked and the boy shrugged, clearly jaded for a ten year old.

“Helicopters are noisy,” he said, “but we did see a pod of whales on the way here which was cool. What is my crew assignment?” he asked.

“Whales are pretty cool,” Gabrielle agreed. “So, you’ve been assigned breakfast duty tomorrow,” Gabrielle said, like she was giving him the world’s worst homework. His face lit up. Clearly the kitchen was not the worst place in the world to be by his estimation.

Over by the barbecue Elaine started to quietly chant “smorgasbord… smorgasbord…” a chant that was quickly picked up by the two men in the water and Michelle sitting next to Aphrodite.

“Pancake Smorgasbord!” Shen announced to the cheers of the assembled crew.

"It's fantastic," Michelle explained to Aphrodite. "He gets to pick three assistants and we have the most amazing collection of pancakes from around the world." Quietly she added, "It's so adorable because he always picks different crew because he doesn't want anyone to feel left out." Aphrodite smiled, already able to see Gabrielle's influence on the small boy. Suddenly several crew who had not been enjoying downtime at the stern of the boat had appeared along the railing, playfully shoving each other out of the way and shouting to get Shen's attention.

"Pick me!" Nicolai Burns shouted from the railing, waving his hand, his thick Russian accent carrying his booming voice to the crew below.

Michelle leaned over towards Shen, "He's the sous chef this rotation," she said conspiratorially.

"You already get to work in the kitchen," Shen shouted back. "Besides, I picked you last time," he said apologetically. "Last time it was you, Samantha, and Wolfgang." Still treading water, Wolfgang slowly put down the hand that he'd just raised. The boy looked around at the faces of the crew and tapped Aphrodite on the shoulder. "You're new, I pick you."

"Awesome!" she said with a huge radiant grin.

"And Bo," he added who accepted Aphrodite's high five happily.

"And Gabrielle."

The selections made, the crew at the railing went back to their duties and Gabrielle shared a high five with Bo and Aphrodite. Susan joined them at the beach deck and Sarah called everyone to dinner. People made their way to the barbecue area and filled their plates with the cooked meats and vegetables as well as a variety of salads and other side dishes. Like all of the meals the goddess had shared with the crew, she enjoyed the sense of camaraderie the close-knit group provided. There was no denying it felt more like a family than crew of co-workers.

Regardless of their assigned duties, after dinner was finished everyone helped out with clearing the plates. Several of the off-duty crew retreated to the galley to do the dishes while others disappeared, reappearing shortly thereafter with instruments, amplifiers, and a drum kit that were brought up from below deck. A concert area was set up on the sun deck at the stern of the ship. Chairs were arranged for the spectators and even the on-duty crew joined them. Elaine, who was presently in command, had a tablet with her that she frequently scanned to check readouts from the command room. Hatsuo was doing the same thing with his own tablet. Bohemian emerged with a black hard-shell case, obviously the lute brought forth from the vault.

Aphrodite took in the crisp clear night and brightly shining stars. Everyone had put on warmer clothes to protect against the slight chill in the air. The water could be heard lapping against the hull of the yacht. The vessel was much too large to fit any of the moorings at Two Harbors, so they were anchored further out to deeper waters than most vessels would dare. A number of curious boats had sailed or motored past to take in the sight of the large ship; several onlookers were about to get a surprise concert. It wouldn't take much imagining to put herself back in Greece watching a play, or a concert when the world made much more sense than it did now.

Gabrielle picked up the lute and checked the tuning. “Any requests?” she asked Shen, her tone implying that she knew full well what the ten year old was going to ask her.

“Eruption!” he yelled, to the delight of the rest of the crew.

Aphrodite couldn’t help but chuckle. Leave it to a ten year old to ask for a song that would have confused the hell out of whomever made the instrument Gabrielle was holding. The goddess acknowledged that even though the instrument lacked a tremolo bar, Gabrielle did a fantastic rendition of the Van Halen classic. More impressive was that as she finished she added strains of the Scott Joplin tune *Maple Leaf Rag* and then the song from the cantina scene in Star Wars. Shen was delighted. When she finished, Aphrodite could hear cheering from several boats that had gathered near the large yacht.

“Do you know anything from the actual Renaissance?” Aphrodite asked coyly. “Something that might have actually been played on that gorgeous instrument?”

“Are you offering to sing?” Gabrielle replied with a bit of challenge in her voice.

“You’re a history nerd as well?” Blake, the steward asked hopefully.

Gabrielle laughed. “She’s more of a history nerd than I am.”

“Oh this, I’ve got to see,” Rebekah Luna said with obvious disbelief in her voice.

“Okay,” Aphrodite said as she approached the bard. “Do you know *The Hunt Is Up* or *Flow My Tears*?”

Gabrielle nodded. “Let’s do *The Hunt Is Up*, it’s more upbeat.” To her audience she added, “From the time of Henry VIII if anyone was wondering.” Gabrielle played and Aphrodite sang in a clear crisp soprano and the crew was mesmerized. When they’d finished there was silence on the deck and in the boats near them. “Well this is awkward,” Gabrielle said quietly to her companion.

“Hush,” Aphrodite chided, “they’re having a moment.”

“How the hell do you follow that?” Bohemian groused, breaking the silence. As if on cue, the sounds of applause drifted up from the boats nearby and the crew joined in enthusiastically.

“Prisha, you’re up next,” Gabrielle said, trading the lute for an acoustic guitar as Bo secured the antique instrument in its case. Samantha Ramirez, the other steward whom Aphrodite had only met briefly while wandering the ship, took a seat behind the drum kit and Ingrid Kamaka picked up the bass. “Aphrodite, I don’t think you’ve met Ingrid,” she said with a nod to her bass player. “As the mechanic this tour we hardly ever see her outside the engine room.”

Ingrid grinned, checking the tuning on her instrument. “Gotta keep an eye on those dilithium crystals,” she said.

“Lugh,” Aphrodite replied, in perfect Klingon. To which the red head responded with a playful wink.

The goddess resumed her seat with the rest of the non-performing crew and was delighted by the concert. A number of people in the crew picked a song with various people singing well, or not, depending on their ability and just how much ‘off duty’ fun they’d had. Prisha sang a haunting song in Hindi. Bohemian sang an extra cheesy version of Sammy Hagar’s *One Sip* directly to Aphrodite that amused

the goddess greatly. People switched instruments taking turns either sitting in the audience, getting up to sing, or playing something different. For nearly two hours Gabrielle and the crew entertained not only themselves, but the nearby boats which had increased in number. When it got colder and the fog rolled in the call for 'last song' was made.

Sarah Gibson, turned to the woman sitting behind her. "Vox hasn't sung anything."

Michelle leaned over to Aphrodite and asked, "Have you guys met?"

"Oh Vox and I go way back," she said with a smile as the lanky woman passed her.

On her way to the stage area the engineer stopped and knelt down to Shen's eye level. "Any requests?" she asked the boy. He whispered in her ear and she shook her head, "You know your grandmother vetoed that song by CeeLo; too much swearing."

"You should sing something mellow," he said sleepily. "It is the last song. Sing something that makes you feel."

"From the mouths of babes," Michelle whispered to the goddess.

The engineer stepped up to the microphone and belted out a gut-wrenching version of Heart's *Alone* that would have impressed Ann Wilson. The cheers from the boats below were heard even though the fog had gotten dense enough that they couldn't be seen.

Well after midnight the crew set to work taking the drum kit apart and moving the guitars back below deck where they would be protected from the moisture and salt. Bohemian, with Shen's help, took care to wipe each instrument down and give them the once over before stowing them. Gabrielle conferred with the boy as to the proper timing of breakfast and apologized to Susan for keeping him up so late.

"He loves it out here," Susan said as she walked with Gabrielle and Aphrodite to their staterooms. "Being around the crew is good for him, I'd trust anyone in Transportation around him. He's convinced that Vox requested ship duty at his suggestion."

Gabrielle nodded. "We trust our lives to Transportation every day," she said quite out of habit then winced when the other woman arched an eyebrow at her.

"Some of us do anyway," the Chinese woman replied.

Gabrielle nodded as the three women came to a halt outside the door of the guest stateroom suite. "We go back to the marina the day after tomorrow," she said. "I will tell the crew before we head back and we will see what comes of it."

"Tell the crew what?" Aphrodite queried, not sure what they were talking about.

"About me," Gabrielle said.

Aphrodite looked puzzled. "Trust me, Vox is the only one who cares that you're gay and that's because she wants to be gay all over you."

Susan chuckled. "There was a time when Michelle wanted to be gay all over Gabrielle as well, but she got over it. And I thought she didn't have a chance."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, "She didn't have a chance; no one has a chance. Come on, I'm standing right here."

Still smiling, Susan patted Gabrielle's arm, "This woman takes more good natured teasing from the people who work for her than anyone I've ever met."

"Susan knows the truth about…us…" Gabrielle explained looking at Aphrodite who had a 'no duh' expression on her face. "No, not the sex truth – the age truth."

"Ohhhh," Aphrodite said. She looked down at the Chinese woman who was not quite as tall as the bard. "Do you mind?" she asked as she raised a hand to the woman's face.

"Not at all," Susan said, not quite sure what was going to happen. Briefly the goddess touched the woman's forehead with the tips of three fingers, and then gently cupped her cheek for a moment. Susan's eyes grew wide in surprise.

"That's amazing," she said when the goddess finished. "I feel this… overwhelming sense of…love I guess."

Aphrodite shrugged, "Love is kind of my thing." Turning to Gabrielle she added, "You can trust her. No duplicity. She's a keeper."

"That's why I told her," Gabrielle said.

"What I mean is, her counsel is sound. If Susan thinks you should tell the crew, while it might not be what I'd do, I can see why you would take her advice. She's only ever given you the best advice she can based on the information she has at the time."

"Thank you, Aphrodite," Susan said with a warm smile only now lowering her hand from the cheek where the goddess had touched her. "You are indeed an amazing creature."

They said their 'Good nights' and as Aphrodite and Gabrielle walked to the master suite, the goddess leaned over "I'm betting I've got a chance. I'm just sayin."

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Later, Aphrodite was sitting up in bed, reclining against a soft pile of pillows as Gabrielle reclined against her. Gabrielle touched her arm gently and murmured contentedly, "Do you think telling the crew is a bad idea?" The goddess thought for a moment and then squeezed the bard reassuringly.

"That's not my call to make love and you should stop obsessing about it," she insisted. "If you trust them and think Susan is right, I guess you should tell them. I'm not in the business of advertising who I am so…" she chuckled near the bard's ear. "If we're going to take on Ares and utilize your own private army, it might be useful if they know."

Gabrielle shifted, twisting towards the goddess so she could rest her head on the other woman's breast and absently trace invisible symbols on her abdomen with the tip of her finger. "Noticed that did ya,"

"Your crew is too precise and efficient to be anything but an elite band of fighters. Even the lovesick one. But I have to ask, why is everyone always dressed like they're on vacation?"

"For the same reason that *Transportation* has a friendlier ring to it than *Special Forces.* We aren't advertising who is doing what or making it clear who is crew and who might be on vacation. Depending on whom we get boarded by and what the legal liaison determines at the time, sometimes we pose as rich families."

"Makes sense," the goddess agreed. "How big is your army?"
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"There are about sixty-seven people in the Transportation Division and another forty-two in Special Projects; the crew cycles in and out of duty on board the ship or providing security for other assignments. They need to be in the division at least five years before they get ship duty. Each one of them is remarkably accomplished, even Vox."

"As much as your young butch suitor dislikes me, I'm going to be a cakewalk compared to Xena when she gets here. I'm afraid she may be trouble- nothing Xena can't handle of course – but she's kinda grown on me and I don't want to see her ripped limb from limb."

"I don't think she dislikes you," Gabrielle protested.

"Honey, I am literally doing all of the things that she's fantasizing about, and things it hasn't even dawned on her to fantasize about yet. Of course, she hates me."

"Like everyone on the ship, she is a professional regardless of what she thinks in the privacy of her own mind." Gabrielle replied. "I trust her to do her job and if…when…we bring Xena back, she will adjust or she will leave, simple as that. Besides," she added with a seductive murmur, "can you really tell what people are fantasizing about?"

"I can," Aphrodite said. "It's remarkable how unimaginative most people are, present company excluded of course." She ran her fingers through the bard's hair, brushing it back from her face with a gesture that said more about comfort and caring than it did about arousal. "Which is something we can discuss in greater detail later. It's late sweetie and you should really get some sleep. We have to report to the galley at 7:30am sharp as per Chef Shen's orders.

"Are you going to sleep?" Gabrielle asked, groggily.

"Maybe," Aphrodite replied. "I'm content to hold onto you for awhile." While she didn't respond, the goddess could feel Gabrielle smile and then slip into a peaceful slumber, her breathing soft and measured against Aphrodite's skin. As she held her she thought about the bard's upcoming meeting and what she might possibly do to promote a sense of loyalty to Gabrielle among the crew.

Gabrielle woke slowly hours later and was surprised to find her lover seemingly asleep. They were each on their side, the bard softly breathing against the back of Aphrodite's neck. Happy to be the one conscious first for a change, she took full advantage.

The brush of soft lips against the back of her neck had the goddess of love instantly conscious. She lay there for several long moments luxuriating in the sensation of the sensual caress to her skin. She had just rolled over and begun to move things along when they were interrupted by the sound of a voice through the speaker in the bedroom.

"Gabrielle, it's 7am."

"Fucking A," Aphrodite said, clearly frustrated and annoyed. "Just when the episode was getting good."

"Sorry sweetie," Gabrielle said, disappointment evident in her voice as well.

The goddess rolled her eyes. "If Shen weren't so damn adorable we'd be blowing this off." She frowned at the bard's abdomen after an audible stomach rumble. "I swear that thing is on a timer."

Gabrielle blushed. “Breakfast has always been my favorite meal of the day.” Argo barked in agreement. “Hers too,” the bard added.

The Pancake Smorgasbord did not disappoint. Aphrodite knew that Gabrielle was relieved when the two of them arrived before Bo. She could tell that the bard was going to tease the security officer and stopped her. “He was intentionally late because he assumed we would be otherwise preoccupied.” She whispered in the bard’s ear. The collection of contradictions that was Bohemian Van Lyle was quickly becoming Aphrodite’s favorite member of the crew. He certainly seemed the least intimidated by her, or by Gabrielle even. The genuine kindness he extended to everyone did not seem to mesh with a man who would enlist in a company’s Special Forces division. He was clearly a lover, not a fighter.

“What kind of pancakes are we making today, bro?” he asked Shen as the youngster handed each of them an apron.

He pointed to a chart he’d made on paper pinned to the bulletin board in the large galley. It had four columns, outlining each person’s responsibilities and the day’s menu. “I wasn’t sure if you could cook,” Shen said to Aphrodite his voice quite serious, “so your job is to help out Bo and Gabrielle and me.”

“Every executive chef needs a decent sous chef,” she replied with a smile. “I’m happy to help out.”

The menu listed American pancakes, Japanese pancakes, French crepes, Finnish pannukakku, and Danish aebleskiver as well as an assortment of fruits, bacon, and smoked salmon. Shen wanted to tackle the fluffy Japanese pancakes and the American style buttermilk ones, so Gabrielle was assigned the crepes and Bo was given the other two varieties. Aphrodite tackled the fruit and prepared several fillings for both the crepes as well as the spherical aebleskiver.

“How long have you been a chef?” Aphrodite asked Shen as he moved a mountain of cooked bacon to a warmed plate in the oven.

“My grandmother wants me to be able to take care of myself, so I’ve learned how to cook and do laundry and stuff,” he said. “Technically, I’m not a chef.”

Aphrodite grinned and the young boy couldn’t help but smile back at her. “You kind of seem like a chef to me,” she said. “Your pancakes look perfect.”

He quickly glanced at Gabrielle and then took a step closer to the goddess so he could talk to her without being overheard. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said conspiratorially. “I don’t think Gabrielle has enough friends.”

“You don’t?” Aphrodite asked, surprised. “Isn’t your grandmother one of her friends?”

He looked a little sad as he answered. “My grandmother is a little afraid of Gabrielle,” he said. “Most people are, but I’m not sure why. I’m friends with her, but I’m away at boarding school a lot and I can’t always hang out with her.”

Aphrodite nodded. “You know, I’m here to actually help Gabrielle find another of her friends.”

“Is she nice like you?” Shen asked.

“Unfortunately, no.” Aphrodite answered honestly. “But if you give her a chance, she’s is really nice on the inside. She just doesn’t really show it on the outside the way I do.”

"But it's cool if I like you better?" the boy asked as if this might indeed be an issue.

"I'd be honored if you did, but not upset if you didn't," Aphrodite answered and then sealed their pact with a fist bump before Gabrielle realized they were talking secretly.

Taking her leave of the boy Aphrodite moved on to help the ship's security officer with his tasks. Clearly a master of multi-tasking, Bo was working on the Finnish and Danish pancakes simultaneously, incorporating some of the fruit fillings that Aphrodite had prepared for him. He smiled when she approached, grateful for the extra pair of hands.

"That's one seriously cool little dude," he said quietly.

"I do believe the feeling is mutual," the goddess replied. "It's like an entire ship full of siblings, aunts and uncles."

The tall man was thoughtful a moment, working on the Finnish pancakes with practiced ease. "That kind of describes the main core of Ms. Evans company. Not the subsidiaries mind you, those are like regular companies I guess. But the folks who interface a lot- those of us in Transportation or SP, tech, politics and the rest- it is like family I guess. You close with your family?"

Aphrodite chuckled, "my relationship with my family can best be described as weird; sometimes strange, sometimes estranged- always unconventional." He nodded, opened his mouth then closed it again changing his mind. "Out with it," the goddess urged.

"You seem really cool," he began. "There is something different about you than the others. There is a lightness to Gabrielle that I can't recall ever seeing before. Every one of us is pretty protective of her and…"

The Goddess of Love smiled at the man making him blush. "I get it. Don't break her heart or you'll break my legs, or something to that effect? Before we circle back to just how many 'others' there have been, I can promise that Gabrielle and I are solid. Things may evolve, but no one is getting their heart broken. In fact, I might be the one on the downside here, but I'm a big girl and I can take it."

Playfully he smiled, "if you're ever on the rebound and want to make some bad decisions over a bottle of tequila?"

Aphrodite laughed, genuinely moved by the tall man's brazenness. "I'll keep that in mind," she replied with a flirtatious wink.

By the time an hour had passed and crew were starting to mill about the galley, a mountain of food had been prepared.

Chafing dishes had been set up on deck to keep the various courses warm and the crew who arrived early carried the prepared food, dishes, drinks, and flatware out to the deck for breakfast. On schedule, nineteen people lined up for breakfast, each of them either high fiving or fist bumping Shen in thanks.

"Shen is fantastic," Aphrodite said to Gabrielle as she joined the bard at a round table that was already occupied by several crew. Gabrielle was seated with Michelle to her left and Elaine to her right. Vox was seated next to Michelle and one glance at her features made it clear that she was annoyed the Captain took the seat she'd been hoping for. Wolfgang was seated next to Elaine so Aphrodite took the seat in between the young man and Vox, thereby sitting across from Gabrielle.

"Everybody loves Shen," Wolfgang agreed. "We wish he could spend more time onboard."

"It's a really good school though, and I can understand why Susan wants him to go there." Elaine countered, her hair pulled back from her face today making the scar on her cheek more noticeable.

"He'd be safer here," Vox said quietly.

"Safer?" Aphrodite asked.

Vox smirked a little, obviously pleased that she knew something about the company that the other woman didn't.

"Susan is very cautious," Gabrielle explained. "In the past, there has been a kidnapping attempt or two; an attempt to grab someone to get leverage. Not Shen, mind you but other people. Different countries, different organizations work that way. We've pissed off our share of really terrible people. Susan is really…private… when it comes to Shen's existence. Now that she's raising him on her own she feels that the boarding school is both a better education and a safer environment than living with her full time."

"I can see why you guys would want him here," Aphrodite agreed, which seemed to surprise the woman sitting next to her.

"I see you've added an all hands meeting for tomorrow morning in the conference room before we head back, to the Marina I'm assuming?" Michelle asked Gabrielle. "Is there anything special you need for the meeting?"

Gabrielle took a sip of her guava juice before responding. "Actually, there is. And yes, we're going back to Marina Del Rey. In addition to the usual 'meeting snacks I want a bottle of whatever anyone on the crew drinks. Vodka, tequila, whiskey, bourbon, gin, whatever anyone's poison is, have it at the meeting. The meeting might be at ten, but it's five o'clock somewhere."

Michelle nodded, as if that sort of request weren't unusual, while everyone else at the table save for Aphrodite looked puzzled. "Seats for Shen and Susan?" she asked.

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, this meeting is for the myself and the crew."

"I'm planning to attend." Aphrodite announced which made all the eyes at the table shift to her.

"And Aphrodite," Gabrielle amended without skipping a beat.

"But she's…" Vox began.

"And Aphrodite," Michelle confirmed with a stern look at Vox. "We will have everything set up," she continued with a smile. Without saying anything else, Vox got up from the table with her plate, ostensibly to go get seconds. "I'm really sorry," Michelle said to Gabrielle, "she needs to get her shit together."

"Yeah, but," Wolfgang protested, sticking up for the woman who had just left in a huff, "it's her first tour and…"

"She's getting used to the routine," Elaine finished for him with a warning look at the young man.

"Oh, come on, kids," Aphrodite said with mild exasperation. "We all know what's going on here."

"No," Gabrielle countered gently. "They both have valid points. Yes, she's new, but she should have her shit together."

Michelle nodded, "I…adjusted…I'm sure she will too. I'll have a talk with her." She stood and gathered her plate and glass. "I'm headed to the bridge. Is it just R&R today or will you need anything?"

"I do have some work I need to get to. I may contact you to patch me through for some secure connections. I'll keep you posted."

"If Gabrielle is going to be stuck with work," Elaine suggested looking at Aphrodite. "Bo, Wolfie, and I were going to go snorkeling out by the rocks; you're welcome to join us."

Aphrodite beamed at her, "That would be lovely," she said. With a wink at Gabrielle she added, "Just save me a couple of hours before dinner, okay? Three should do it." Elaine chuckled as Wolfgang picked up his plate and scurried away from the table as quickly as he could.

Gabrielle laughed, "You should really stop doing that to him," she said.

"It's not my fault that he keeps picturing what he thinks is going on," Aphrodite protested. "It's his own damn fault that he's nearly on the money."

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Free from distractions, even those of the most pleasurable kind, Gabrielle was able to finish the work she'd set for herself. She checked off her action items from the meeting with her division heads and even caught up on the latest political dumpster fire by a reckless administration in free fall. She wrote an email to Victoria Chen, head of her political division with some additional candidates she wanted to support as well as organizations to combat the disenfranchisement operations of the Turner administration. Finally, she finished her presentation for the next day and felt ready to tackle the latest stop on her coming out journey. In addition to carving out time for her lover, she also set aside several hours to hang out with Shen and chat about his many adventures at school.

When Aphrodite returned from her own excursion she took time away from the bard to socialize with other crew on the ship. She was aware that she'd recently been monopolizing Gabrielle's attention, and while perfectly understandable, knew that the bard had a vast organization to maintain and oversee as well as a very special ten-year old guest. While she made the most of her time with Gabrielle in the hours preceding dinner, she demurred from watching a movie with Shen, Susan, Argo and Gabrielle, deciding instead to spend some time alone looking out at the stars and the ocean.

The next morning Gabrielle felt a nervousness that she hadn't in centuries. She stood in her closet, unsure of what to wear.

Aphrodite didn't say anything, just kissed her on the forehead and handed her a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. They dressed quietly and walked Argo up to the outer deck together. The goddess brought her purse, which Gabrielle found odd, but was too distracted by her own nervousness to really acknowledge it.

She drank some tea and headed to the conference room where the rest of the crew had begun to assemble. As requested, the bottles and glasses had been gathered in the center of the conference table, with seventeen seats arranged around.
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When the rest of the crew had assembled and the room was secure, Gabrielle got right to the point. “I’ve asked everyone to join me because I have some fairly significant things to cover. Everyone is off-duty for the rest of the day, I will be bringing the ship back to the marina this evening.” The assembled crew looked at each other with varying degrees of surprise on their faces. “Furthermore, after you have had some time to process what I’m about to tell you, you will have the opportunity to stay with Transportation, transfer to a different department, or retire from Bardic with full benefits and retirement. The NDAs you signed when you joined the company absolutely cover what you’re about to hear. Do *not* mention this to anyone, not that anyone will believe you. And finally,” she added nodding at the various bottles of alcohol that rested on a tray in the center of the table surrounded by various glassware, “since all of you are off-duty, you’re free to have a drink or three if that helps this information go down any easier. It’s a lot to take in, and no one will think less of you for having a belt.”

“Since you’re offering,” Bo said as he reached for a bottle of tequila and a glass. There were chuckles around the table and Gabrielle was grateful that the tension had been broken. She reached for a glass herself. He filled her shot glass, then his, and they toasted each other before downing their shots.

Gabrielle tapped her iPad and a panel in the wall behind her slid down revealing a large monitor. In the center of the screen was a rectangular photograph of the bard shot onboard the ship from the previous day. The date was indicated in small type under the photo. “The company line is that I took over Bardic & Company in 2000 from my mother, Rebekah Evans.” She tapped her tablet again and a second photo joined the first. This was also a photo of Gabrielle, but the hairstyle was different. Again, the date of the photo appeared underneath. “She took over the company in 1965 from her mother, Abigail Evans.” A third photo appeared and eyes around the table started to grow wide in surprise. “Ingrid Bard started the company in 1900. Before that it was known as Chakram Enterprises, which was run by Adele Sparrow.” At this point Steve, Elaine, and Sarah all reached for various bottles and glasses, with looks of disbelief on their faces. It was one thing to say someone looked just like a family member or shared a resemblance, it was quite another to see photographs of obviously the same person side by side. The quality of the photographs changed, moving from color, to black and white, then to daguerreotype. One more tap from the bard and the entire screen filled with identically sized rectangles in neat rows with dates, the images of her from pre 1830s represented by drawings and paintings. There was an audible gasp around the table.

“Holy fuck,” Vox whispered.

“Oh moi boch,” Nicolai rumbled in Russian.

“The short version,” Gabrielle continued, “is that something happened to me over two thousand years ago that rendered me, for all practical purposes, immortal.”

For several long moments no one spoke. Rebekah and Wolfgang both reached for bottles and glasses, the clink of glassware and the unscrewing of bottles being the only sound in the room. Finally, Bohemian cleared his throat, “I really feel like this should be a prank or something,” he said. “But you sound really serious.”

“Not a prank,” Gabrielle said.

"This is impossible," Nicolai said after downing his second shot of Vodka. "But I have been with you a long time, and this makes sense of…well…everything." It was clear that the large bear of a man was struggling with his own experiences juxtaposed with things that made sense.

"How did it happen?" Hatsuo asked, at a loss for anything else to say.

Gabrielle shifted a bit uncomfortably. Even though she expected this question, she wanted to be careful in how she answered it to avoid any expeditions looking for some 'fountain of youth' that did not, to her knowledge anyway, exist. "It was something I ate, and as far as I know, it no longer exists on earth."

"I don't see how this is physiologically possible," Michelle said. "How can a body even survive that long. Your cells ability to heal themselves would be nothing short of miraculous. Have you been tested? Could research be done to…?"

Gabrielle raised her hand to stop the question. "Michelle, this is not the first time someone has sought scientific evidence to what I'm saying. In the past, whenever I've told someone, it has always ended with me spending a number of years in an institution or asylum. A number of tests have been conducted on me that have ranged from brutal to torturous; electroshock therapies, lobotomies, painful experiments, you name it. Unfortunately, there isn't anything about me that can help anyone else. As soon as blood leaves my system, it's regular O Negative, nothing special about it.

"Who else knows?" Steve asked. "Or rather I guess I should ask does anyone else believe this?"

"Among the living, I've told you guys as well as Susan Yin who believes me. I told her just a few days ago. Aphrodite," who she indicated with a nod to her left "also knows and believes me. Actually," she continued, "it was Susan who urged me to tell all of you. Depending on how this goes, my intention is to talk to Jorge about who to tell in Transportation and work with Susan to decide who to read in from SP. I also plan to tell the rest of the division heads when I think the time is appropriate."

"So other than the photos, there really isn't any way you can prove any of this?" Elaine asked doubtfully. "I don't mean to be rude, but it sounds kind of out there."

"Out there?" Vox exclaimed. "This is fucking nuts."

"I'm not offended," Gabrielle said.

Steve looked at Elaine and shook his head, "Doesn't this make her obsession with history make sense?"

"Hey now!" Gabrielle protested, "I wouldn't say I'm obsessed with history!"

Michelle chuckled. "Gabrielle, most of the time you sound like you're either a candidate for Mensa or trying out for Jeopardy. But Elaine is right, you can't really prove anything."

"And is it me or is that painting on the sixth row a Rembrandt?" Blake asked. "And that other drawing looks like a Da Vinci."

"Good eye," Aphrodite agreed looking more closely at the screen. "I also see a Botticelli, a Caravaggio and a Renoir"

Gabrielle shrugged. "Yes," she said to Blake then turned back to Michelle. "I was just hoping you guys would believe me."

"It's a big ask," Michelle replied. "I mean it absolutely makes a lot of things about you fall into place, but you just said you sat for portraits by a who's who of famous artists."

"That's crazy," Vox muttered.

"Crazy would be sitting for someone lecherous like Picasso," Aphrodite countered as she opened her purse and pulled out a boning knife from the galley. "Gabrielle can provide physical proof," she said. The goddess extended her hand palm up and Gabrielle placed her hand in Aphrodite's, also palm up. Aphrodite put Gabrielle's hand on the wooden conference table and without warning or hesitation, brought the knife down through her open palm deep into the table's surface.

"Ow! Fuck!" Gabrielle screamed in obvious pain and anger. "Fucking bitch, motherfucker." There was a din of moving chairs, as in that instant every member of the crew were on their feet ready to defend their employer. "It's okay, it's okay," Gabrielle panted around the pain, "please sit back down everyone. Vox, Bo, Nicolai I mean it! Sit the fuck down. Shit, Aphrodite," she said to the woman next to her who handed her another shot glass full of tequila. "I thought you were just going to cut my hand. You know I've been crucified, how could you do that? Fuck!"

Aphrodite looked at the faces glowering at her from around the table. As she hoped they were all angry at her and feeling a great deal loyalty to Gabrielle, forgetting for the moment that she'd just rocked their world with incomprehensible information. "Can we all agree that Gabrielle is impaled on the table?" she asked. Silent nods and furious looks from around the table affirmed her statement.

"What do you mean you've been crucified?" Rebekah asked. "Like Christ crucified?"

Gabrielle struggled to keep her voice neutral, gasping around the severe pain. "Romans crucified a lot of people, Caesar was a dick." Bo poured himself another drink, which the large Russian man immediately stole.

Aphrodite looked at Gabrielle as she put a hand on the bard's wrist to hold it steady, her other hand on the knife handle. "On three," she said then counted, "one," then pulled the thin knife from the bard's hand with a strong yank.

"Ow!" Gabrielle screamed again, but with less anger this time. Gabrielle lifted her hand from the table, leaving a small pool of blood behind. A thin stream of blood trailed down her arm and Aphrodite extracted some gauze from her purse handing it to her lover to wipe the blood away. Gabrielle wiped away the blood that had run down her arm and the wound then held up her hand to the crew. Before their eyes they could see the ends of the open cut, about an inch in length, seal itself. In moments, the open puncture was a red line, like a light scratch. "The red mark will be completely gone by morning," Gabrielle said to the crew before wiping up the blood on the table.

"It still hurts?" Elaine asked, clearly worried.

Gabrielle gingerly touched her palm, "It feels like a really deep bruise. Certainly a knife isn't as painful as a giant nail."

"Let me," Aphrodite said and briefly massaged the bard's hand.

"Thank you," Gabrielle said, then held up a hand that had no visible injury whatsoever.

"Wait a minute," Vox said, looking at the goddess disbelievingly. "You're like Gabrielle?"

"Not exactly," Aphrodite said, pouring the woman a shot of vodka and sliding the glass to her. "I'm much older."

"How did you know I drink vodka?" she asked suspiciously, not downing the shot.

"Wolfgang took the shot from her and drank it himself. "Come on Vox," he said urgently. "Aphrodite. APH-RO-DITE, Goddess of Love, Ancient Greece…"

"You can't be serious?" Vox said to her crewmate, as she looked critically over at the goddess.

"Trust me, she has an effect on people," Wolfgang replied reaching for the vodka bottle.

"I think we're getting a bit off topic here," Gabrielle said.

"Are we?" Steve wondered aloud. "You're saying you're two thousand years old, she's claiming to be older, you both seem to have unusual…abilities."

"Okay," Aphrodite said, "no more coddling. God or goddess or whatever is a very murky word in today's climate so I obviously don't use it. I used to have more power than I presently do but I can tell each of you when you lost your virginity. And, no" she said to no one specifically, "if you were ten years old and it was against your will it doesn't count, and there is nothing wrong with the age of twenty-one, sixteen, eighteen, twenty-two, twenty-four…I could go on. Yes, each year counts when you lose your virginity to each sex for those of you that have indulged both ways – there are differences. And no, being bisexual doesn't mean you're confused, you are actually bisexual, although one of you tried to use that as an excuse before coming to terms with yourself." As she spoke the crew began to exchange nervous glances with each other, wondering what was being said about whom.

"I know what each of you fantasize about. When it comes to love and romance I know what you're afraid of, what you crave, and really there is nothing wrong about admitting your own kinks about submission if that's what you're into. And for the three of you wondering if you have a shot with me, you've picked a killer time to entertain such ideas." Bohemian winked at her then chuckled to himself, Wolfgang shifted uncomfortably in his seat refusing to make eye contact and Michelle kept her gaze steady, refusing to be embarrassed.

She moved to stand behind Gabrielle and put her hands on the bard's shoulders. "If everyone would look at me for a moment." As she'd been talking her words had an obvious effect on the crew and many had taken to staring at the grain of the table, looking anywhere but at Gabrielle or the goddess. "Okay rev those engines…" Aphrodite said when they glanced at her, "and relax," she said softly.

There was an audible gasp around the table.

Gabrielle turned her head and as she looked at the goddess she noticed an intense blue fading from her eyes. "What did you just do?" She demanded, concerned.

Aphrodite shrugged, "I turned all of them on, then off again."

"You guys, I am so sorry," Gabrielle said in a rush. "That was completely inappropriate and it won't happen again," she said sternly to the goddess.

"What?" Aphrodite protested. "If they believe me, believing you will be a piece of cake."

"It's INAPPROPRIATE," Gabrielle exclaimed. "That is totally sexual harassment."

Samantha Ramirez spoke up, "I've gotta say, as one of the few straight women on board, that was really weird."

"It was weird for this gay dude as well," Blake agreed.

"I apologize," Aphrodite said. "Gabrielle is right, it was inappropriate. I did overstep, but you were all being stubborn and we don't have all fucking day."

"Well, I certainly think you made your point," Michelle acknowledged. "And believing what I just experienced, it does make what Gabrielle is saying a little easier to swallow. So you don't die, but you can be hurt, and you built this company because…?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath and retold the same basic story that she'd told Susan. She mentioned Xena, how she was missing, and that to find her she needed to get Aphrodite's help and that a large part of the entity that they all worked for was to seek out immortal people to help in that quest.

"So all the gods are real?" Wolfgang finally asked. "There is an Ares, a Hades, Poseidon, Zeus all of them?"

"We don't know who all…is around," Gabrielle said. "Obviously Ares, I mean look at the world. Pretty sure about Poseidon. We're not sure about the others…"

"And we're all risking our lives so you can find your lost love," Steve asked, cautiously.

"Well, that and to do all the same work that the company has been doing for over a hundred years," Gabrielle replied, a little more testily than she intended.

"What the fuck," Vox said with a shrug, "I'm in."

"Well of course you're in," Ingrid snapped back, "you're…" Gabrielle stood up and with a warning glare stopped Ingrid's train of thought. "You are really dedicated to do so," Ingrid amended sheepishly. "I'm in too."

"No guys," Gabrielle protested. "Take the afternoon and think things over, I know this is weird."

"We kinda signed up for weird by joining a civilian para-military organization, didn't we?" Michelle asked. "I'm in."

Within moments, all of the crew had affirmed that they would continue on knowing what they knew. Gabrielle smiled at them thankfully. "I really appreciate this. I'm going to be in my study for the next couple of hours. If anyone would like to talk to me privately, I'm available, I'll answer whatever questions for you I can." She glanced at Aphrodite.

"I'm going to go watch a movie with Shen," the goddess replied.

"Susan is okay with you hanging around Shen?" Nicolai asked defensively, "After what just happened to us?"

"Oh shit," Gabrielle murmured.

"What exactly are you asking me, Nicolai?" Aphrodite asked with deceptive calm in her voice.

"I mean, he's just a kid," the gruff man protested in his thick Russian accent.

Once again Gabrielle could see Aphrodite's eyes shift from placid clear blue to intense azure then back again. This time only the sous chef seemed to be effected. The color drained from his face and his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"Aphrodite, what did you do to him?" Gabrielle demanded, getting angry. "You have to stop doing shit to my crew."

Nicolai waved her away. "No, Gabrielle," he said wiping at his eyes. "No, it's okay. She made me remember my auntie and how I felt about her when I was ten. It's a nice memory. I understand now where she's coming from."

Gabrielle felt taken aback. "I'm sorry," she said to Aphrodite.

"Sweetie," the goddess said with a smile, "do you think I'd do anything to hurt anyone that has your back? Trust me when I tell you that everyone in this room is an ally," She picked up the hand she'd driven a knife into earlier and kissed the palm, "we can discuss your apology later."

"Miss Aphrodite," Elaine said as the goddess stood up to leave.

"Honey, it's just Aphrodite. Seriously," she said kindly.

"The thing you did with Gabrielle's hand, with the wound…"

Aphrodite walked around the table to where Elaine was standing. "While I don't think you need it, if it makes you feel any better," she put her hand on the petite woman's cheek. When she removed her hand, the scar was still there, but tears rolled down Elaine's face and she hugged her tightly.

"Thank you, thank you," she said.

Wolfgang was confused, "The scar is still there?"

"Not the one on the inside," Aphrodite said. "That's the one that bothered her."

"Hey, as long as you're passing out hugs," Bo said with a grin and open arms.

Gabrielle watched as each member of her crew waited to hug Aphrodite before leaving the conference room, even Vox. She had never been so happy to have her coming out story hijacked by someone who made her immortality seem run of the mill by comparison.

Chapter 7: Homecomings

Standing on the bridge of *The Hippolyta* watching the sunset, Gabrielle listened to the soothing thrum of the engines. It felt good to be in charge of the ship once again. She was happy that several members of the crew took the opportunity to meet with her one on one, but was almost disappointed that Hatsuo and Michelle's, biggest concern was what they could do to help Gabrielle in her quest, not what the bard could do to help them grapple with their new information.

"Hey," Aphrodite said, as she stepped into the command room. "Did you want to be alone?"

"Not at all, beautiful," Gabrielle replied with a grin. "You are welcome anywhere, anytime."

"Your level of game is getting almost annoying, bard," she said after kissing her softly.

"What is the crew up to?" Gabrielle asked after checking the readouts on a couple of screens in front of her.

"Michelle and Bo are helping Vox get drunk on the sundeck as they hash out her feelings. I think the upshot is that you are now way too old for her."

"Nice," Gabrielle said flatly.

The goddess chuckled. "Blake didn't know Steve was bisexual so they're having a nice chat. Samantha, Ingrid, and Elaine, are hashing out the legal ramifications of everything and what would and wouldn't be believed in court. Nicolai, Sarah, and Wolfie are playing video games with Shen while Argo is sleeping on the couch and Rebekah, Hatsuo, Susan, and Prisha are playing Texas Hold 'Em, I think, most likely with your money."

"Look, check this out," Gabrielle said as she watched one of the screens. She turned a couple of dials on a small controller pad and the image on the screen changed.

"Is that from a drone?" Aphrodite asked looking at the view of the water from above on the monitor.

"Yeah, I think I found some whales." As she maneuvered the drone several large blue whales and a couple of smaller ones came into view.

"Look at the calves!" Aphrodite said excitedly as the drone moved closer, providing a view never possible from a boat. Aphrodite was standing behind Gabrielle watching the monitor over her shoulder with her arms wrapped around the shorter woman's waist. They watched the whales lazily break the surface and exhale through their blowholes before submerging again. Eventually a small pod of dolphins joined them, looking tiny by comparison. After a while, the bard brought the drone back to the deck and landed it near the control room.

"What does this do?" the goddess asked pointing at several of the readouts and switches.

Gabrielle chuckled. "It's best to learn from a pro," she said and picked up a handset after turning a switch. "Ensign Shen Teal, please report to the Command Center. Ensign Shen Teal, report to the Command Center, please." The request could be heard on speakers throughout the ship. Aphrodite took a couple of steps away from Gabrielle leaving an appropriate distance between the two of them. Shen and Susan came bounding into the control room with Argo at their heels. The pit bull made a bee-line for a soft dog bed in the corner of the room, plopping herself down most ungracefully.

"I get to drive?" Shen asked Gabrielle hopefully.

"Well, technically you're steering and controlling the autopilot. but whatever. First though, you have to teach Aphrodite what the different read outs mean." Gabrielle said taking a step away from the ship's wheel.

Shen stepped forward with purpose and pointed to a map that was under Plexiglas to the side of the navigation screens. "This is Catalina," he explained. "This is where we're going - Marina Del Rey. He indicated with his finger the path they'd be traveling. "That screen is radar and it's showing the depth of the ocean below us so we don't run aground. This one is the auto pilot and it has the route programmed in. You turn it off here," he pushed a button and took hold of the wheel. "And this is the heading I need to stay on so we go to the right place."

"What about that screen over there?" Aphrodite asked with a smile.

"That's one of the security monitors. The security crew on duty makes sure no one sneaks on the ship," he looked a little embarrassed, "or steals cookies out of the galley."

"And this one?" Gabrielle asked, pointing to the monitor next to security.

Shen scrunched his face thinking. "I think that has to do with communication. The radio channels for the coast guard and when you talk to other parts of the company. It has encryption, right?"

"Exactamundo," Gabrielle said, beaming.

"You guys packed up?" the bard asked Susan as Shen continued to explain patiently to Aphrodite exactly how he was running the ship. At one point, he even turned the wheel over to her and told her she was doing an excellent job.

"We are going to take a car from the Marina to the airport and the helicopter back to school," Susan replied. "This has been a very nice weekend," she said warmly. "Thank you so much."

"Thank you for making the trip," Gabrielle said with a smile. "And thank you for…you know," she added.

"I look forward to many illuminating chats about history. I saw the portraits from your presentation earlier today; quite the who's who of famous artists."

"They weren't all that famous at the time," Gabrielle said with a chuckle.

"What are your plans for the week?" Susan asked. "The jet won't land at LAX until Thursday."

"I have some research I need to do, review some maps, and remind myself where I left something. I need to do some inventories, make sure the ship is stocked since I'll give the crew some extra shore leave when they're off duty. When we come back from Greece we're going to have to go to Cabo and I think taking the boat is best. Honestly, I'd take it to Greece if we had more time to spare, but I'm kind of anxious to…move this project along."

"That is quite understandable," Susan agreed. Conversationally she added, "When your project is finished, I'm out. You need to have 'the talk' with Sabin of course, but he's ready to take over and I'm ready to relax. I'd like our visits to just be social ones."

"I look forward to that too," Gabrielle said with a smile. "It will be great when you get to meet Xena. I think you guys will get along." They were quiet for a moment, watching as a flock of pelican flew alongside the ship skimming the water then rising again. "I will tell Sabin next, and after that Jorge I think. He can help me decide who needs to know in Transportation. I'm also thinking of telling the other division heads."

"I don't think Transportation personnel need to know until they are assigned ship duty and for that they need to be in for a few years. I mean it's Jorge's call..." she shrugged. "I would only tell the team leaders in Special Projects and see where you go from there. People like Brian Glass don't need to know until they've been fully vetted. Most of the rest of the company doesn't get involved in your…esoteric pursuits, so they don't need to know."

"Need to know what?" Shen asked making it clear he'd been half listening to the adult's conversation. He looked at his grandmother and then back at Gabrielle. "Is this about you being gay?"

Gabrielle blushed in spite of herself, trying to remember the last time there had been so much discussion over her sexual orientation. “Did someone tell you that?” she asked.

The ten year old shook his head. “No. You just seem gay to me. I mean you seem like you like girls – not that I’ve seen you around any girls that didn’t work for you besides Aphrodite, but you have that vibe.”

Susan started to chuckle and turned her head, becoming very interested in whatever Argo was up to, which was sleeping.

“Well, Shen,” Gabrielle said bending down to look at the boy eye to eye, “you are very perceptive. I am gay, for the most part, but I’ve had a few relationships with men. If I had to pick a label, I think that’s the one I would pick. Is that cool with you?”

He frowned, giving the question some serious thought. “I don’t really care. You’re my godmother the same either way. I just don’t want you to be lonely.”

“Well buddy,” Gabrielle said, giving the boy a hug, “I’m working on that.”

“You don’t seem gay.” he said to Aphrodite.

“That’s because I’m bisexual,” she replied simply.

He looked from one woman to the other. “Are the two of you…” clearly he had no idea how he wanted to finish that question.

Aphrodite put a hand on his shoulder and smiled warmly. “Now kiddo, you’re venturing into ‘none of your business’ territory. Just think of me as your favorite auntie for the time being. Say, what does control do?” She asked pointing to one of the dials he had yet to explain.

Grateful for something more interesting to talk about than girls and their relationships, Shen happily launched into fresh explanations of the controls he missed and their functions.

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Gabrielle studied the computer screen in front of her so intently that she didn’t notice Aphrodite’s silent entry into her study. Argo raised her head from the couch where she had been dozing.

“Gabrielle,” the goddess said softly, drawing the bard from the computer screen with a start.

“Wha...”

“Honey, it’s two am. You need to stop for tonight.”

The bard glanced at her watch, disbelief clouding her features. She stood with a groan and stretched her back then rubbed her eyes. “I had no idea it had gotten so late. I thought we saw Shen and Susan off maybe two hours ago.”

Aphrodite looked at the screen the Bard had been working on. There was an old journal on the desk as well as some sea charts and maps of Greece. On the monitor were another map and a flight plan with a landing at the airport at Zakynthos. “What am I looking at?” the goddess asked pointing to the hand drawn map in the bard’s journal.

Gabrielle picked up the old book and touched the page reverently. “A lot of the stories for Xena I had to tell over and over. I started off writing things down in scrolls, then the scrolls would be stolen, or destroyed. Next, I kept journals. At some
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point I'd get run out of town or locked up, lose everything, have to start over and I'd start a new journal and retell the stories…"

She shook off the memory and pointed to a place on her map. "This is the Gulf of Corinth. Cirra is on the north side of the water, here in Boeotia," she traced her finger up, "almost directly south of Mt. Olympus. For reference with my less than stellar drawing, here is Macedonia with Potidaea to the north and east of Cirra and Amphipolis further north and further east of Potidaea."

"Right," Aphrodite said looking at the map. "East of Thessaly, here."

"Exactly. We were in the Gulf of Corinth when we encountered the pirates. Poseidon took both crews to the island of Kephallenia to Antisamos Beach with the island of Ithaca just to the north. That's where Hephaestus had the anvil and hammer in a cave at the time. When it was…ah…destroyed, I took the hammer and Xena's chakram, which I still had, and went south to the island of Zakynthos where I stored them in a sea cave for safe keeping. This spot," she pointed to the computer screen, "is called Shipwreck Beach and while touristy, is probably the closest place to head out to the cave. Do you snorkel?"

Aphrodite rolled her eyes, "No, but being a god does let me hold my breath indefinitely, as I know you've noticed," she added with a wink.

"Um...yeah. That is a very good point. For appearances do you mind looking like a diver?" the bard asked, knowing full well she was blushing.

"You need to breathe?" Aphrodite asked, puzzled.

Gabrielle nodded. "Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I've drowned a few times. It's awful. Once I get back to air I cough the water out of my lungs and regain consciousness and my brain repairs itself, but it is not a pleasant experience. I'm sure it's similar to how I've bounced back from the two lobotomies I've been subjected to."

"Honey, I'm so sorry," the goddess said, kissing the top of the bard's head."

"Ancient history," Gabrielle said, forcing a smile. "Come on Argo," she called to her dog. "Let's go for a walk on deck."

As the pair strolled in the cool night air, Gabrielle listened to the distant sounds of the Marina at night. Noise from vehicles, the lapping of waves, and the distant sound of a helicopter somewhere could be heard. "What were you up to this evening?"

Aphrodite smiled mischievously. "They nearly invited me to their poker game until they remembered that I can read all of them pretty easily, so I was invited to just hang out and chat. It's nice, though. You have a good family here. They asked me about Xena."

Gabrielle looked at Aphrodite and arched an eyebrow. "I was honest, for the most part. I explained that she's been kept…separate from the world and hasn't had the same experiences that you had. I told them they'd better give her a chance and that it isn't a 'her or me' situation."

Argo made use of her AstroTurf area and led the way back to the master stateroom with goddess and bard following behind. "Aphrodite," Gabrielle began, stopping halfway down the spiral staircase that led to her bedroom, "I don't want you to think…"

"Shhh," Aphrodite said with a shake of her head. "Not tonight. We are going back to your bedroom, you are going to lie down and have the most amazing

massage you've ever had, and you're going to sleep in well past breakfast. There will be no relationship processing until you have the hammer. We've already established that."

They descended a few more stairs, and Gabrielle stopped her once more so she'd turn around. "Aphrodite?"

"Yes?"

"I do love you."

"I love you too, sweetie. I really do."

The bard chuckled. "But being the Goddess of Love you kind of have to, don't you?"

The goddess paused at the bedroom door and gave it some thought. "I don't have to love everyone equally. Some people, some very special people, I love more."

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The Goddess of Love strolled up to the main deck to join the off-duty crew for breakfast. She sat down with Blake and Wolfgang across from Vox and was joined by Michelle after she had helped herself to the morning's frittata. "No politics at breakfast," the captain announced and Wolfgang turned off the podcast playing from his phone.

"Everyone seems on the same page politically," Aphrodite observed.

Michelle grinned, "We are for the most part, but who needs to hear that at breakfast?"

"And it's one thing to hear the point of view of people who can talk in complete sentences, even if you disagree with them," Blake added, "but when she plays clips from the Gideon Power show, it just makes me want to throw your phone in the ocean."

"Who is Gideon Power?" Aphrodite asked honestly.

"You seriously don't know?" Vox asked stunned.

"What are you guys chatting about?" Sarah asked as she joined the quintet at their table.

"Aphrodite has never heard of Gideon Power," Vox said.

While the goddess was sure that the engineer had tried to keep the self-satisfied superiority out of her voice, she wasn't entirely successful at it.

"He's kind of a Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck, Bill O'Reilly type," Sarah supplied helpfully, no trace of smugness whatsoever.

"Without the charm," Wolfgang added.

"Ah," Aphrodite said, with understanding. "I will admit that I don't get most of my news from American outlets," she admitted. "Unless it's articles in print, I prefer the perspective of people who aren't trying to analyze things and be part of the machine at the same time."

Wolfgang chuckled. "Dude, you're never going to get the best of her," he said quietly to Vox. "You need to stop trying."

"I'd be interested in listening to the program with you guys," Aphrodite said, specifically to Vox, "after breakfast maybe? I do like to get different perspectives."

The young woman nodded, warming up to the goddess in spite of her best effort not to. "Yeah, that's cool," she said into her frittata.
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"Can I ask you a personal question?" Sarah asked, looking shyly at the goddess.

Aphrodite put her fork down, then dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin. "That's kind of my bread and butter, go ahead."

"What exactly do you do?" Sarah asked. "I mean, as The Goddess of Love? Do you go around the world and make people fall in love?"

"You mean like the gig Santa Claus has? Without the toys?" Aphrodite asked dryly.

Unfortunately for Vox, she'd just had a healthy sip of orange juice which came out her nose from laughing, right into Wolfgang's lap.

"Dude!" he exclaimed, annoyed. "Fuck. Come on, man!"

"Oh god, I'm so sorry," Vox breathed. "Santa Claus! That's hysterical."

The navigator brushed at his lap with his napkin, chuckling. "It is kind of funny."

Vox was still cracking herself up, "Yeah, you'd think toys would totally be a part of it."

"Okay, now *that's* funny," Aphrodite conceded. "To answer your question honestly, Sarah," she added to the chef, "think of it this way – when your body is healthy, and it has the vitamins and minerals it needs, it can better fight off infection, right? Well I'm like a massive dose of vitamins that helps people realize the love they're already carrying around with them. Sometimes it's love for a person, or an idea, or a family. Sometimes it's jealousy or unrequited love, hopeless love, or annoying infatuation."

"So, if you can make someone love somebody, you can make them not love somebody too?" Vox asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"I could, but I wouldn't," Aphrodite replied. "Being able to love, even when it's painful and really sucks, is profoundly human and profoundly awesome. To take it away would diminish…" she looked at the young woman sympathetically, "whomever, and I wouldn't do that. A lack of love, even the messy kind, is what gives you the kind of assholes that flock to people like Gideon Power." She turned her attention back to Sarah. "I travel around a lot, all over the world, acting almost like… well the way a magnifying glass intensifies sunlight. I channel and expand the love I feel all around me."

Sarah looked like she was about to ask another question and Aphrodite shook her head, "and one thing all my many years of experience has taught me, is that like Santa, it's best to just accept that I do what I do and not worry too much about the mechanics of how I do it. It kind of is beyond your understanding. Or at least, beyond my ability to have it make sense in a way that fits your understanding."

"Any food left?" Gabrielle asked when she joined the crew on deck. She was greeted by hearty welcomes from those off duty. As she passed Aphrodite on her way to the plates and chafing dishes she squeezed the goddess' shoulder and placed a quick kiss on the top of her head. "Good morning, gorgeous," she murmured quietly.

Aphrodite smiled. She was well aware that this was the first time Gabrielle had ever attempted to be open, honest, and physical with someone in front of her

crew with them knowing the truth, and while clearly she felt some level of self-consciousness about it, she was determined to do it anyway.

Sarah squeezed closer to Blake to give Gabrielle space to sit next to Aphrodite, and the bard enthusiastically tucked into breakfast.

"Wolfie," Aphrodite said when she'd noticed that the rest of them had finished eating, "If you want to put your podcast back on, go ahead."

Gabrielle quickly glanced over to Michelle to see if the captain would countermand that request. She knew about the prohibition regarding phones and dining. Michelle caught her glance and returned it with a wink. "I'm not about to tell The Goddess of Love what to do," she said with a grin to Gabrielle. "You gave her Class One clearance, you're on your on your own." Without another word, the captain smiled and excused herself heading off to the bridge.

Wolfgang shrugged and tapped his phone, playing the podcast from where he'd paused it earlier. The host, Stephanie Miller, was discussing the latest Twitter meltdown of President Turner with her guests, the comedy duo Frangela. They played a clip from Gideon Power's 'Power Hour' where he put a positive spin on the president's behavior and lied about the context of his outbursts.

Aphrodite frowned at the sound of the voice coming through the phone's speaker. "Can you please replay that?" she asked thoughtfully.

Wolfgang scrolled the recording backwards a bit and hit play.

"Well fucking A," the goddess said crossing her arms. "That asshole."

"What?" Gabrielle asked, looking confused.

"You wanted to find Ares, right?" Aphrodite asked. "Well we just did," she added with a nod at the phone.

"That doesn't sound like Ares," the bard disagreed with a frown.

"I think whoever it is, is disguising their voice with a modulator," Vox said, listening critically. "It sounds kind of metallic." She pulled out her phone and after a quick search showed the results to Gabrielle and Aphrodite.

"That's not Ares," Gabrielle said, looking at the photos.

Blake chuckled, "You showed us hundreds of pictures yesterday, all of them you, but none of them you." He cocked his head, something just occurring to him. "What's your real name, anyway?"

"It's Gabrielle," Gabrielle said. "I go back to it every few hundred years. I mean if you want to be formal, it's Gabrielle of Potidaea."

"I'm going to get my laptop," Vox announced. "I've got some software that might deconstruct this," she said nodding at Wolfgang's phone.

"Great." The bard agreed, "I need a quick word with Michelle. Let's reconvene in the den and have a listen."

Aphrodite and Argo accompanied Gabrielle to the bridge where Michelle had relieved Elaine of command. The fit woman was sitting on a couch at the back of the command room reviewing some lists on an iPad and chatting with Steve. "It's your call," she was saying to the bosun, "but I think the varnishing could wait." When she saw the bard at the doorway she immediately stood up. "Gabrielle on deck." Steve promptly stood as well.

"Please, sit." Gabrielle said with a wave of her hand. Argo immediately jumped on the couch and snuggled next to the captain.

"Hey! I was going to sit there," Aphrodite said playfully, earning a snicker from Steve and a frown from Gabrielle.

"What's up, boss?" Michelle asked, clearly flattered.

"Tomorrow Aphrodite, Argo, and I are going to take the jet to Greece to go get something. I don't know how long we will need to be gone." Michelle nodded, listening.

"I think I should take a couple of crew. Normally, I'd just grab a pair of bodies from Transportation…"

"But you trust us more because you've trusted us?" Michelle asked with a wry smile.

Gabrielle nodded. "What can I say, when Susan is right, she's right. I want you to decide who is going to go. I'm not sure what it will be like on the ground. I'm not expecting any issues, but you never know. This should be a simple retrieval mission for something I stored…a while ago."

The captain nodded, "I will text you tonight and let you know who."

"Look, if anyone is thinking of leaving…I don't want anyone going who isn't up for…" Gabrielle began.

"Everyone is just as committed to the company and you as they were last week." Michelle said. "We have had a number of frank discussions amongst ourselves. No one is transferring out."

"I'm sure there must be some kind of fallout…" Gabrielle protested.

"Oh, there's fallout alright," Steve interjected. "No one is pretending there isn't fallout. It's like finding out that the sun doesn't orbit the earth. That's a big deal and you have to rethink a lot of what you've taken for granted. But that isn't your fault," he concluded with a shy glance at Aphrodite.

"Annnnddddd," the goddess encouraged.

"Look, you can't stand on deck and have a conversation with a goddess and not have your religious views somewhat shaken." Steve put up his hands and shrugged.

"Depends on the religion, I'd expect," Aphrodite replied.

"Did you ever meet Jesus Christ?" Steve asked, seriously.

Aphrodite looked uncomfortable. "I've known a lot of people named Jesus. Did any of them fit the description of the person described today? Gabrielle would be the first to tell you about how stories get embellished over time with the telling. Thats what storytellers do. Does that make the central theme of the story, which is 'don't be a dick' any less true? Absolutely not."

"But if someone believes that, and believes in you, and believes in… whatever," Steve protested.

"I know what I am, and I know what people call me. I'm not worshipped the way I used to be- and that kind of sucks," she said "but that doesn't change what I do, for the most part," she added with a glance at Gabrielle. "For all I know there is an Osiris or Horus running around somewhere, whomever. Religion was created as an instrument to govern people by providing solace for the things that scare you. For those of us who've been the object of religion, well it really has less to do with us than one might expect. Personally, I think if you just stick to the mantra of 'don't be a dick' you'll be fine."

"Honestly," Michelle said to Gabrielle with a smile, "No one is going to leave their post because things are just so incredibly interesting now."

Gabrielle shrugged. "Good enough for me."

The trio of Gabrielle, Argo, and Aphrodite descended to the main deck and joined the crew who had assembled in the den. Vox, Sarah, and Wolfgang were huddled around a laptop that was set up on the coffee table with an external speaker.

"Try it again, with half of that." Wolfgang suggested as the engineer's fingers flew over the keyboard. Wolfgang quickly vacated his seat on the couch for either Gabrielle or Aphrodite.

"Argo," Gabrielle said with warning in her voice when the pit bull strolled over to the couch. Aphrodite took the seat next to Sarah while Wolfgang and Gabrielle pulled up a couple of slipper chairs.

Vox made a final tap on the keyboard and playback restarted. The bard's eyes grew wide at the sound she heard. "Holy fuck," she said, amazed.

"I know," Aphrodite agreed. "My damn brother."

"So by 'brother'," Sarah asked carefully, "you mean Ares, the Ancient Greek God of War."

"He's such a jerk, and you don't really have to keep saying 'ancient'. We're old, we get it," she fumed.

"But for 'old' you're also incredibly hot," Wolfgang added helpfully. "Both of you." Aphrodite smiled and gave him a wink which made the navigator blush.

"And he has an army of racist, misogynistic, homophobic, crazed yokels," Gabrielle said, moving the conversation back on track. "Do you know where he hosts his radio show from?" she asked Wolfgang.

The lanky man shook his head. "He's pretty secretive," he explained, "says the government is always tracking him.

Gabrielle took the phone out of her pocket and scrolled through her contacts. After making a selection she put the phone to her ear. "Sabin, the 'Olympus' assignment, please open an investigation on Gideon Power, the radio guy. Full throttle, see if anything connects to the name Ares. This has the highest priority. Thank you." She listened as he reiterated her instructions. "Yes, exactly," she confirmed then ended the call.

She put the phone down and smiled, feeling that she had accomplished more in the last ten days than she had in the hundreds of years previously. "Really great work, guys," she said. "Thanks. I want everyone really enjoying their off-duty shifts. Take time to get off the ship. You want to go out, see a show, fly somewhere- whatever you want- expense it, just be back on-time. I'll have the plane so you'll have to fly commercial, but go first class, I'll let Jorge and Michelle know. I'm celebrating tonight, so I want the rest of you to celebrate as well."

"Not a bad pay day for digging a silly political podcast," Wolfgang said with a grin.

"So, where are you sweeping me off my feet?" Aphrodite asked with a warm smile.

Gabrielle thought a moment, Dwayne's words of caution coming back to her. "I'm taking you hiking," she said with a grin. "Let's go get dressed."

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The late afternoon sun shone down on Yosemite Falls as Gabrielle packed up the remnants of their picnic. “The candied salmon was delicious,” Aphrodite said passing the water bottle back to the bard who stowed it in her backpack. “I must say,” she added with a smile, “you’re making progress taking the ‘douche’ off the ‘billionaire with her own fleet of vehicles’ thing.”

They continued their hike, enjoying the sound of the waterfalls and nature. It was several hours later when they returned to the kitchen of the Majestic Yosemite Hotel in Yosemite Valley. A small table for two had been set up on the back porch and Gabrielle put on an apron.

“You’re making me dinner?”

“I’m taking Dwayne’s advice,” Gabrielle replied with a wink.

“He didn’t mention that I love to cook. Let’s make this a joint effort,” Aphrodite said, joining Gabrielle at the stove.

They were serenaded by the sounds of night as they ate their seabass en papillote with stuffed zucchini flowers. Several deer came into the clearing to have their last nibble on the tall grasses before retiring for the night. In the moonlight, an acrobatic bat made short work of the insects attracted by the lights of the historic hotel.

“What’s your plan for tomorrow?” Aphrodite asked, finishing her wine and chocolate almond tart.

“We go to LAX and take the jet to Zakynthos and hopefully find the hammer quickly. If all goes well, we can be on our way to Cabo the next day.”

“So, this may be our last night together,” Aphrodite observed. There wasn’t the sound of regret in her voice, she was simply stating an agreed upon fact.

“I intend to make the most of it,” the bard said raising her glass.

“Me too, Gabrielle.”

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The next morning they were met on deck by Nicolai and Vox, each of them carrying a large duffle bag. Vox was wearing military boots with pants, a t-shirt, and jacket. Nicolai however, was wearing a dark suit with dark sunglasses. To Aphrodite’s eyes he looked every inch the most intimidating bodyguard she’d ever seen. She greeted the pair with a warm smile.

“I’ve always wondered what the Incredible Hulk would look like in a suit,” she said warmly to the Russian. “Nicolai, you clean up nice!”

“Thank you,” he said in his thick accent with a small bow to the goddess. “It is bespoke. Transportation has a good tailor.”

They were met at the transport boat by Michelle who handed Gabrielle and Aphrodite their passports, “I got the Susan Vincent and Anna Winter passports out of the safe,” she said. “I hope your trip is successful.

“Thank you,” Gabrielle said accepting the documents. She raised an eyebrow when Michelle hugged Aphrodite as they boarded the small boat.

“What can I say,” the goddess said, shouldering her backpack. “Your crew likes to hug.”

A dark sedan was waiting for the quartet at the marina which took them to a private jet at the Los Angeles International Airport. On the tarmac at the bottom of the stairs stood another well-muscled man in a suit similar to that of the Russian.

"Aphrodite," Gabrielle said making the introductions, "this is Ed Schecter." He smiled, extending a hand in greeting.

"I'll be your flight attendant today," he said. The goddess was at a loss for words. He didn't look like any flight attendant she'd ever seen before. While his suit was similar to Nicolai's, he wore his with a crisp white shirt that contrasted sharply with his dark brown skin. He was obviously a body builder, the suit straining against the very muscles it was intended to cover. His head was shaved and Aphrodite thought he looked like a younger, darker version of her neighbor Dwayne. While Nicolai seemed like a hairy, hulking mountain of a man, Ed seemed to have sculpted his body with the precision of a surgeon. Ed watched Aphrodite try to juxtapose her assumptions with the job title of "flight attendant" and his obvious appearance and chuckled. "Well, maybe a flight attendant who is good in a fight," he added. "Please, this way."

He led Gabrielle, Aphrodite, and Argo head up the stairs first then greeted Nicolai and Vox, both of whom he clearly already knew. "How do you like ship duty?" he asked the young woman.

"Oh, it's been quite the education," she said which made the Russian rumble with laughter.

They were greeted at the top of the stairs by a pair of women each wearing a hijab. "Our pilot Isra Suhr and co-pilot Kismet Suhr." The pair did not wear suits like the two men, but were dressed in the closest thing to a military uniform that Aphrodite had seen on any of Gabrielle's people. "I stole the Suhr sisters from the Royal Brunei Airlines," Gabrielle explained, answering Aphrodite's unasked question if the women were related.

"We should be cleared for takeoff momentarily," Kismet said. "If you'd please take your seats."

Gabrielle's plane was a spacious one. While there were no company markings or logos on the inside or out, it was clear that the vehicle could function as a traveling office or conference room if necessary. There was a couch on one side and several recliner chairs on the other with a couple of tables, small kitchen, and other amenities. A comfortable sleeping area could even been seen towards the back with dressing area. Aphrodite moved to the couch to sit down and Gabrielle joined her, with Argo jumping up onto the far side. Nicolai and Vox deposited their duffle bags at the back of the plane, and the big man moved Gabrielle and Aphrodite's backpacks to the pile as well, then each took a recliner across from the couch.

In moments the plane was moving. Ed took a recliner near the cockpit. "Let me know when you guys are hungry," he said cheerfully. "It's going to be a ten-hour flight, please tell me if you need or want anything."

Everyone thanked him, and soon thereafter they were airborne. Without asking if it was okay to get up, Nicolai stood and crossed the small interior to a cabinet, extracting from it two blankets and two pillows. He handed a blanket and pillow to Vox and said "For later." He then handed a blanket to Gabrielle and said "For now. You don't look good; too tired. Use girlfriend for pillow." He then sat back

down, put the other pillow behind his head, and leaned back in the recliner. “I will wake you up three hours before landing to go over our mission.”

Aphrodite chuckled, shifting and encouraged the bard to just stretch out.. “You didn’t get any sleep last night,” she said quietly. “Don’t argue with a sharp dressed Russian.”

While it was hard not to notice the look of envy that briefly crossed Vox’s face, Gabrielle admitted to herself that she was too tired to care. She put her head down on Aphrodite’s lap and within seconds was sound asleep.

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“Gabrielle! Wake up!” Aphrodite’s voice cut through her slumber with an urgency that had the bard awake and alert instantly.

“What’s going on?” she asked, noting the look of concern on the faces of her companions.

Ed had just put a laptop on the table across from Gabrielle. “Transportation just sent us a code red on Susan Yin and this video call came in for you; you’ve got,” he looked at his watch, “two minutes to make the connection.”

Gabrielle ran her hands through her hair, and briefly wiped her eyes. “Everyone over there,” she said pointing towards the direction of the cockpit, “out of camera sight. She tapped the keyboard and a video window opened up showing a standard interrogation room with Susan Yin seated at a metal table her hands handcuffed to a metal post in the table. Seated next to her was a familiar face. At the sight of Ares, Gabrielle started to gesture with her hands, next to her side below the table, out of view of the camera, keeping the muscles of her face as passive as possible.

“The irritating blond. How the fuck are you still alive?” Ares asked with a big grin.

Gabrielle ignored him, focusing instead on the woman in handcuffs. “Susan, are you okay?” she asked.

“What is she doing?” Vox whispered to Aphrodite.

“It’s American Sign Language,” the goddess explained, her voice a soft whisper.

Nicolai nearly lifted Aphrodite off her feet when he grabbed her arm and brought her to the cockpit. “What did she say?” he asked, trying to speak as quietly as he could, but closing the door just in case. The cockpit of the small jet was now crowded with the pilot, co-pilot, huge Russian, engineer and goddess. “She’s saying ‘red dragon, real time, now, confirm’ Aphrodite repeated, puzzled. Does that mean anything to you?”

In an instant the Kismet, the co-pilot was on the radio, speaking urgently to the person on the other end. “Jorge, Red Dragon, from Gabrielle. You need to confirm. Red Dragon, now. Confirm please. This is *not* a drill.”

From her peripheral vision, Gabrielle saw Ed, standing just outside the cockpit door, nodding to her that a message was getting relayed. Now she needed to stall.

“You’re not talking to her, Gabrielle, you’re talking to me. Why don’t you start with how you survived?”
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"My name is Susan Vincent," Gabrielle said, "What do you want with Susan Yin?"

"I saw you making out with my sister," Ares said holding up an eight by ten photograph of bard and goddess naked in the water at Catalina, when they thought they'd been alone. Gabrielle knew they would be watching the same feed on a small screen in the cockpit recording everything. Ares looked at the picture and looked again at the bard. "I've heard of 'sex on the beach'," he said, clearly amused at his own joke. "But sex in the water? Never saw you play tonsil hockey like that with Xena. Let's dispense with the 'Susan Vincent bullshit. I had you bugged immediately after you made contact with my sister. Your whole crew calls you Gabrielle."

"You kidnapped Susan because you care who Aphrodite is kissing? Isn't that taking the protective brother thing a bit too far?" Gabrielle asked in disbelief fully aware that the God of War was trying to goad her into anger and making a mistake.

Ares shook his head, his dark eyes flashing. "No, I've got your minion because whatever it is you think you're doing, you're going to stop doing it now. Now. Today."

The door to the cockpit opened and Aphrodite signed that there was no word yet, the message had been relayed, and they were waiting.

"What are you even talking about?" Gabrielle asked, not having to feign much confusion. "I ran into Aphrodite, we hit it off, we went to Catalina, why would you even care?"

"At least you're admitting who you are, that's progress," Ares sneered. "How are you still alive?"

"Beats me," Gabrielle replied. As she spoke Argo woke but didn't bark. The dog sat with her head cocked to one side, staring at Aphrodite whose eyes had flared an intense blue once again.

"What was that, the light? Who is with you?" Ares demanded hotly.

"I have a pilot, co-pilot and flight attendant," Gabrielle replied exasperated. "There was a glint of sunlight off the wing. I'm on my way to go buy a company. It's what I do Ares. I make money, I don't know what the fuck is wrong with you and you need to let Susan go."

"I know you're trying to bring Xena back," Ares said, his tone deadly. "Somehow my sister is involved, that's why you're chasing her. You're going to abandon that quest right now."

"Ares, it's been two thousand years. What on earth makes you think I'd be able to accomplish this feat now if I haven't done it already?" Gabrielle asked "And don't be ridiculous, getting involved with Aphrodite to bring Xena back makes no sense, she'd pick up on that in a heartbeat. Does that sound like something she'd be into? You need to release Susan, she has nothing to do with any of this. Tell me where to meet you and we can talk."

"She isn't going anywhere. I know that you are looking for immortals. You've been looking for me, you found my sister, you may have found my uncle who knows who else you've found," he said his eyes cold.

"I found Aphrodite because I decided to buy her company. I buy companies, I make money, I take hot women to Catalina," she said indifferently. "Seriously, that's it. We fucked, had a great time, so what? Xena never even came up."

"You might have thought you learned a thing or two from The Warrior Princess," he shot back. "But you haven't. Underestimating me is something Xena never did that you don't seem to have picked up on. I've been watching you as long as you think you've been looking for me. I took note of your company, seemingly growing out of Chakram Enterprises selling antiquities to raise capital."

"A girl's gotta eat," she replied flatly. "That doesn't explain why you would grab Susan of all people. She doesn't know anything about any of this. This is between you and me, let her go. Just let her go." Gabrielle continued to watch out of her peripheral vision, reading the signs that told her that the co-pilot was still waiting on confirmation from Jorge and the Transportation department.

"That's not how wars are fought Gabrielle" Ares continued. "My beef is with anyone who would consider helping you. This is going to stay a Xena free world. And anyone who would help you is going to have a problem with me. I've really come a long way in my enhanced interrogation techniques. I had some practice in Iraq. Wanna watch?"

"Wait," Gabrielle said hopefully and moving the conversation away from Susan, "Are you saying that you and Aphrodite have the power to bring Xena back? That's something you can do? Because I haven't found anyone in two thousand years that has said they can do it."

"Stupid bard, this is not the part where I divulge the intel you're looking for." Ares rolled his eyes.

Vox tapped Aphrodite's shoulder and whispered in the goddess' ear, her voice barely audible. "Confirmed from Jorge Hernandez, red dragon secure – en route to nest."

Aphrodite relayed the message using sign language and Gabrielle forced herself not to breathe a sigh of relief.

"If you're going to be obstinate, or stupid, admittedly with you it can be hard to tell the difference, I can always ask your associate my questions," he said turning to look at the handcuffed woman, then looking back at the camera with a leer. "She may be more talkative."

"Ares," Gabrielle said, looking past the man to the woman behind him, hoping against hope that Susan could see her face. "From the time that the *dragon* on my back glowed *red* and provided *protection* from creatures like you, I am *secure* in the knowledge that I will always gain the upper hand and triumph in the end." As she said the words she saw the micro expressions on Susan's face change.

"Thank you, Gabrielle," Susan said as Ares' expression shifted to one of surprise and rage. He turned back towards the Chinese woman as if to hit her, but she had already slumped over on the table, dead.

"Fuck you Ares," Gabrielle said when he turned back to face her, then cut the connection. Gabrielle slowly closed the laptop and sat for a couple of moments looking at absolutely nothing as the loss of her most trusted employee began to sink in and make itself real. Tears from her eyes fell freely, but she didn't cry, she was too angry for that. It was one more loss in a string of losses spanning two millennia.

The door to the cockpit opened fully and Vox, Aphrodite, Nicolai, and Ed gathered around all wanting an explanation for what happened, no one wanting to ask for it. Argo walked over and put her large head on the bard's knee, pressing

down reassuringly. Without thinking Gabrielle rested her hand on dog's head and her breathing steadied. "I don't know how he got her," she said, her voice thick with emotion, "but long ago we established that if anything happened to her, I was to immediately secure Shen, red dragon, and not worry about her. She was adamant, and I promised her that."

"But…" Aphrodite asked.

"She had a tooth with cyanide in it," Gabrielle explained. "I didn't think she was still wearing it, she wasn't doing field work anymore. But she was signaling me from the second that Ares started talking that she was planning to kill herself before he could do anything to her, to make her give up any information about me. And she had no intention of enduring torture at her age."

Gabrielle looked over to Kismet, "Update, please," she said flatly.

The co-pilot conversed briefly on the radio. "Jorge is on high alert. Shen has been secured onboard *The Hippolyta*. Extra security has been sent to the marina. Sabin has been alerted and has taken Special Projects to high alert as well. Everyone is waiting for your instructions. Do you want us to turn around?"

The bard shook her head. If Ares was willing to go to these lengths, there must be something he was truly afraid of. "I will tell Shen about his grandmother when I get back," she said. "Read in Michelle, she will inform the crew. I want screen captures from that feed of Ares. I want SP to do facial recognition on every fucking database on earth if necessary, we are going to find him. For now, we proceed as we'd intended; let's go over the mission at hand."

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"Any questions?" Gabrielle asked, an hour later, as she looked up from the map that she'd unrolled in front of her team.

Somber expressions greeted her, but no one had any questions.

"We are starting our descent," Isra said over the cabin speaker. "Landing in ten minutes."

"Let's get dressed," Vox announced as she moved back towards the duffle bags.

When the plane touched down, Gabrielle descended the stairs first, followed by Argo, then Aphrodite. She felt empty inside, but was determined to not let her most recent loss derail what she'd been working so long to achieve. As arranged, a Land Rover was waiting for them.

"Ed, you stay with the plane," she said, putting an earpiece in her ear. "I don't know if Ares knows where we are, or if he knows what we're up to. We will be in constant communication. If anything looks the least bit out of place, you say something. I don't care if we have to buy this whole fucking airport; when we come back, this plane takes off."

"Yes, boss," he said with a nod. "Good hunting."

As bard and goddess walked towards the Land Rover, Aphrodite took Gabrielle's hand briefly and gave it a squeeze. "Welcome home, Gabrielle," she said softly.

Chapter 8: Hurt/Comfort
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Nicolai drove the Land Rover to a small marina where a speedboat was waiting. They didn't talk during the drive; Gabrielle sat in the back seat with Aphrodite holding her hand, feeling connected and looking out the window at a homeland that had changed so much since the last time she was here. Her new responsibility was descending upon her like a cloak; she was a mother now, a mother to a sweet, intelligent, kind ten year old who had already gone through the abrupt loss of his own mother and now grandmother in the span of less than two years. If she could survive this she was grateful, as much as it was going to hurt, that Shen wouldn't have to lose her too.

She knew she couldn't keep the child on the boat indefinitely. He would grow up, become an adult, go to college, fall in love, and raise a family. Would Ares still be hunting him then? Should he go back to his boarding school? Should she send an armed company of soldiers to protect him?

"Honey, you're obsessing," Aphrodite said gently, no doubt reading her thoughts. "Worry about what is in front of you; the rest will sort itself out later, I promise."

Gabrielle nodded, feeling comforted, but still empty.

At the dock, there were a few tourists getting in and out of boats with a wider array of tourists on the beach. They loaded their gear into the speedboat that had been arranged for their use. Before exiting the car, Vox put the small automatic weapon back in her duffle bag and nodded to Nicolai. As they walked to the boat, Vox led with Nicolai bringing up the rear.

In the boat, it was the engineer's turn to drive, while the large Russian man kept watch with the machine gun on his lap. Argo had found a spot between duffle bags to curl up, nearly hidden under a seat. There was not a lot of room in the boat and the ocean spray felt colder than she remembered.

"It will take a while to pass the tourists," the Russian man said, discretely keeping his gun down. While the engines were loud, they could hear each other speak quite well with the aid of the ear pieces they were all wearing. "Vox, I think you should sing."

"What?" Vox queried, quite surprised at the request.

"For Susan," he said in a tone that brokered no argument.

"What songs did she like?" Aphrodite asked.

"She loved music from the seventies," he said with a rueful grin. "We were in the organization a long time together. Different departments, same mission, yes?"

Gabrielle smiled, fondly remembering when each of them had started; Susan a few years before Nicolai, when she was known as Rebekah Evans. "You guys were babies," she said. "Susan always loved the song Blue Bayou by Linda Ronstadt," she mused, remembering how moved the Chinese woman was the first time she heard it.

Without hesitation, the engineer began to sing, surprised and delighted when Aphrodite joined her providing harmony. Gabrielle saw Nicolai wipe a tear from his eyes more than once and she looked out at the expanse of blue both longing and dreading when she would break down and have a long cry over this as well.

In time they passed Shipwreck Beach and found themselves in a more secluded area. Gabrielle critically scanned the contours of the island comparing the

contours to the charts she'd memorized. She signaled for Vox to slow down and for long moments she studied the rocks trying to remember the details from the last time she was here. They weren't too close to rock's edge, at least a hundred feet from the cliff wall that rose nearly straight up in front of them. Anyone standing up there would have an unobstructed view of the boat which meant that Gabrielle wanted to retrieve what she came for as quickly as possible.

"The water line is different," Gabrielle said to no one in particular. "I think there has been some erosion. The cave will be under the water, maybe twenty-five to thirty feet down from here. Vox and Nicolai switched positions, the large man taking over the driver's seat in the boat while the lanky engineer donned a wet suit. Both Aphrodite and Gabrielle were wearing long sleeved swim wear. The bard hoisted the tank and scuba equipment to her back as the goddess extracted a harpoon gun from the duffle bag.

"You don't need any equipment at all?" Vox asked, uncertainly. "Not even a mask?"

"I'm at home in the water," Aphrodite explained. "I was born here."

The goddess dove into the water with bard and engineer following behind, tipping in backwards tanks first from the speed boat. Once under the surface, Gabrielle took the lead and swam down looking critically at the rocks. Dangling from her wrist was a small pick axe and at her waist was an empty satchel. The clarity of the water was good and visibility was easily twenty feet or more. Before long, she'd spotted something familiar and made a bee line for a specific area of rock. Once she'd arrived, she scanned an area covered with coral and various ocean plants. She tapped a couple of times with her axe, trying to disturb as little of the coral as possible and in a few minutes, gave a thumbs up sign to the two women who were swimming nearby. Vox was trying to help her while Aphrodite was scanning the area for any number of predators. With Vox's help, Gabrielle was able to make quick work of clearing the cave entrance, and before long the opening was large enough for the women to swim through single file. Gabrielle activated her headlamp and led the way. Roughly forty yards into the tunnel it opened into a larger chamber, still completely submerged. Gabrielle moved to the back of the chamber on the left side and began to once again dig with her pickaxe. Vox moved to her side adding the beam of her headlamp to where the bard was working. Moments later the remains of a strong wooden box was uncovered. The wood had long since rotted away leaving only the iron bands that bound it. After reaching in with her gloved hand she extracted a pair of sai, a chakram, and a large hammer. She put the hammer and sai into the satchel at her waist and checked the sharpness of the chakram against her gloved hand. The blade easily cut through the neoprene, so she carried it by the bar in the middle, not wanting to risk having it slice through the satchel that carried the hammer.

The trio swam out of the cave and headed for the surface. It was only when they neared the boat that they realized bullets were flying and that they were under attack.

Gabrielle broke the surface first and shouted at Nicolai, "Got it!"

"Very nice," he shouted. "Maybe get back in the boat now?"

The big Russian was shooting back at the cliff top with his automatic weapon, using his bullets sparingly. The attackers were also using automatic weapons, creating a rain of bullets that pierced the water dangerously close to the boat. Small splashes were erupting everywhere as the bullets tore through the water.

Vox broke the surface next and instantly screamed; she'd been hit. "Fuck!"

Aphrodite surfaced last and swam over to aid the injured woman.

"Vox is hit," Aphrodite explained to Gabrielle as the bard swam up to them. There was another small splash as a bullet hit the water and the engineer screamed again. "Twice," she amended.

With Gabrielle's help they maneuvered the engineer to the side of the speed boat away from the gunfire, but not before the woman had been hit a third time jerking her head back. Gabrielle tossed the chakram carefully into the boat, then wrapped one arm around the engineer's torso and held onto the boat cleat with her other hand; Aphrodite did the same and the injured woman hung tightly in between them.

"Let's go!" Gabrielle shouted to Nicolai. The large man did not ask any questions, but put the boat in gear and took off quickly enough to put some distance between them and the gunfire, but not so fast that bard and goddess could not maintain their grip on the boat and on the injured woman they were holding between them. "Is Argo okay?" Gabrielle screamed, hoping he could hear her without the radio she'd been wearing before getting in the water.

"Yes," he yelled back. "She warned me before they started shooting. She's a good dog!"

The minutes dragged on but eventually the large man slowed the boat down, finally putting it in neutral long enough to lean over and lift each of the three women out of the water, depositing them in the boat. Aphrodite seemed fine as far as Gabrielle could tell, but she could feel several places on her own body where the bullets had passed through and her skin was healing. It was painful as hell.

Giving Vox the once over told an even more dismal story. She was bleeding profusely from her abdomen, her shoulder, and the side of her head. A moment's inspection let the bard know that the head wound was a superficial graze requiring only a few stitches. It was impossible to gauge the damage from the other two injuries while on the boat. "Back to the dock," Gabrielle said urgently. "Fast as you can. I'm not losing two people today. I'm fucking not." Nicolai instantly put the boat in gear and they sped off. "Contact the plane. We need to take off the second we board. I don't care who we have to bribe, how much it costs, whatever. Tell Ed to just make it happen."

"Yes, boss," Nicolai said and immediately began to relay the message.

"Hold here," Gabrielle instructed Aphrodite showing her where to put direct pressure on the woman's abdomen, as she groaned in pain.

"I know it hurts, Vox," Gabrielle said, checking to see if there was any apparent injury to the woman's neck or spine. "Hang in there; you're going to be okay."

"You've got this tiger," Aphrodite said encouragingly.

"Report from Ed, boss," Nicolai shouted, knowing that Gabrielle hadn't worn an ear piece into the water. "Representatives from the Greek government are forbidding takeoff. They have some questions for you."

"Looks like Ares tracked the plane," she fumed. "We are not staying for questions," she shouted to Nicolai, "Make sure the twins know we are going to be taking off without permission."

The bard's jaw clenched. the trip back to the dock seemed to take achingly longer than the trip to the cave, but they finally arrived. Before they reached the dock, Gabrielle explained her next instructions to the large Russian. "As soon as we stop, you pick up Vox. Her spine is ok, it's ok if you carry her. You are going to get in the back seat with her and Argo. I will drive." A protest quickly crossed his face but he didn't voice it. "I can drive just fine," she reassured the him. "I have been driving since the invention of the automobile."

He nodded, "Yes, you drive."

"Keep direct pressure here, and here," she explained as the boat stopped and he reached to pick up the injured woman. "Argo, go!" Gabrielle shouted, as she replaced her earpiece and the dog quickly launched herself out of the boat and up the dock. People quickly moved out of the way of the charging pit bull making a path for the rest of them. Gabrielle followed, carrying the chakram and the satchel, leaving the rest of the scuba equipment behind. Nicolai came next and Aphrodite followed, keeping an eye on the injured Vox and sous chef.

When they reached the car, it took only a moment for bard and goddess to situate the other two in the back seat and in moments they were peeling out of the beach parking lot. "Ed, how we doing buddy?" she said, calm tension in her voice.

"I'm spending your cash, boss." He said, his voice calm but urgent. "Local cops should be stopping traffic for you but government detail with a military escort is on their way to the airport," the flight attendant replied. "They are determined to stop us. They are offering medical assistance for Vox."

"The fact that they know she's injured says a lot," Gabrielle replied, expertly winding the landrover through the narrow streets. "I know who's behind this and Vox doesn't stand a chance if we wait for her to get transferred to a hospital. Stick with the local police, offer whatever it takes."

As if on cue, they came to an intersection and a motorcycle officer stopped traffic and waved her though, then started his bike to follow behind. The same thing happened at the next intersection, the officers seeming to leap frog each other clearing a path for her to speed through the winding streets to the airport. It took only a short time to reach the tarmac and the plane.

The stairs were lowered and Ed stood waiting to help however he could.

"Let's go! Let's go – get us in the air NOW!" Gabrielle shouted at the cockpit as she cleared the hatch behind Aphrodite, Argo, and Nicolai, who was carrying the injured Vox. They could see several cars in the distance speeding in their direction. Ed secured the door behind them. The plane engines roared to life as the two women in the cockpit began arranging with the tower for emergency takeoff.

"We've been denied clearance for takeoff," Ed relayed from just outside the cockpit.

"Do it anyway." Gabrielle urged, her voice tense and urgent. "Put her here, on the floor," Gabrielle gestured to Nicolai, who gently laid Vox supine on the floor where Gabrielle indicated then backed out of the way, awaiting further instructions.

"Come here Argo," Aphrodite, who had moved towards the back of the plane, called the visibly distraught dog over to her. Argo reluctantly moved behind the goddess, but kept her injured friend in her line of sight.

The plane began to move as Ed retrieved a combat medic bag from a side compartment, set it down next to Gabrielle, and began breaking out supplies in a very fast, methodical fashion. He first handed the bard a pair of bandage shears, then began pulling out various supplies and equipment from the bag. IV bags, cannulas and tubing, gauze, monitoring cables, and a LifePak 20 portable monitor emerged from what, to Aphrodite, appeared to be a seemingly bottomless bag. This wasn't far from the truth: combat medic bags are designed to provide a battlefield medic the ability to stabilize and transport a severely injured soldier, including the ability to perform emergency surgery. In other words, it was a small hospital packed into a backpack. You just needed to add someone who knows what they are doing.

Gabrielle knew what she was doing. The bard's hands flew over the injured woman, using the shears to completely cut the neoprene wetsuit away from the engineer. Nicolai moved the neoprene pieces out of the way, then retrieved several blankets from a cabinet and covered Vox's legs to keep her warm.

"I gotta say, Gabrielle," Vox stammered, clearly in shock and in pain, "when I envisioned your hands all over me, this isn't quite how I pictured it." Her musing was cut short by a loud gasp of pain in response to the bard removing the pieces of her wetsuit sticky with blood.

Ed attached electrodes to Vox's chest, then grabbed her right arm and slapped a blood pressure cuff to her bicep and an oxygen sensor to her finger. He then gathered up all the ends of the wires and tubes, connected them to the LifePak, and powered it up. The monitor's beeps and chirps reflecting Vox's physiological vital signs were quickly followed by their appearance on the display. Both Ed and Gabrielle glanced at the numbers and visibly relaxed.

"Sorry, sorry," Gabrielle said apologetically. "I know this hurts like a bitch." Ed moved to Vox's other arm, cinched a tourniquet above her elbow then inserted a large bore IV cannula. Despite the pain from her injuries, Vox winced as Ed sent the needle home.

"Seriously, Ed? Fourteen gauge? I'm still conscious you know." Ed grunted in reply while he hooked up a bag of fluids.

"Don't knock it, Vox," Aphrodite said reassuringly. "You're in for some primo hurt/comfort."

"Your shoulder and head injury aren't too bad," Gabrielle reassured the engineer, in part to distract her. "The abdomen may be a little more interesting. Hang in there."

The plane made a turn en route to the runway for takeoff. Gabrielle checked the LifePak again then looked at Vox. "You're pretty stable right now, but I've got to figure out what's going on in there," she said, indicating the bullet's entry point in Vox's abdomen. "I'm not going to be able to put you out, so this is going to hurt a lot,

and I'm sorry about that." She doused her hands with disinfectant, dried them briefly and put on surgical gloves with Ed's help.

"When does the comfort part start?" Vox asked Aphrodite with a swagger the injured woman clearly didn't feel.

"You've got this kiddo," Aphrodite replied with a radiant smile.

"Ed, hand Aphrodite the task lamp and shine it here," she said pointing to the engineer's abdomen.

"We need to take off now," Nicolai urged, watching out the window as a parade of six cars quickly sped towards them. The plane accelerated having made the turn and sped down the runway.

There was a lurch as the jet became airborne, causing Vox to scream. "Everything okay back there?" Kismet called from the cockpit.

"Just level us out as fast and low as you can. We can't go to cruising altitude until I figure out what's going on here 'cause the change in cabin pressure will complicate things."

"Got it, boss."

Vox squirmed in discomfort and groaned as Ed, now prepped and wearing gloves himself, placed a pair of surgical eye loupes on Gabrielle's face. "Vox," Gabrielle said urgently, "I need you to be really, really still.

"I think I can help with that," Aphrodite said. Passing the light to Nicolai, she moved behind Ed to position herself cross-legged at Vox's head. She placed her hands on Vox's temples which had an immediately calming effect on the injured woman.

Working quickly and calmly Gabrielle checked the entry wound through the large tattoo on her abdomen, then she and Ed rolled the now unconscious Vox on her side to check her back for an exit wound. Finding the telltale wound that indicated the exit of an intact bullet, she was about to breathe a sigh of relief when the bubbling of blood from the wound made her catch her breath. Quickly rolling Vox back into place, her fears were confirmed by the sound of the monitor's alarms over the jet's engines as Vox's blood pressure began dropping in response to the blood loss. Vox had been bleeding inside her abdominal cavity, and the delay in treating the injury was starting to take its toll.

"I need to get in there and stop the bleeding." Even as the words were coming out of her mouth, Ed was reaching into the medic bag for supplies. He handed her another set of sterile gloves, surgical mask, scalpels, hemostats of various size and purpose, and gauze and then laid out a sterile towel onto Vox's chest. Gabrielle opened the containers and shook the supplies onto the drape, donned her gloves, and put her instruments into her preferred order. Ed set up a suction machine and hung a fresh bag of fluids to Vox's IV.

Gabrielle rubbed the surgical betadine scrub on and around the bullet wound, feeling around the entry wound for any clues as to the situation below. Placing her index finger on Vox's stomach where she intended to cut, she grabbed a scalpel, looked up and met Ed's eyes.

"Ready?" she asked. He nodded.

Gabrielle looked at Aphrodite. You can keep her under?

"Oh, I'm pretty sure she's otherwise occupied." Aphrodite replied cryptically. Gabrielle nodded at Ed and he turned on the suction machine.

"Let's do this."

Gabrielle steadied her breathing and lowered scalpel to skin. The meticulously rendered tattoo of a large feather colored in a gentle gradation of rainbow hue that fractured into silhouettes of birds taking flight barely registered in the bard's consciousness as she cut. Her focus was beyond the surface of the engineer's skin.

The blood that instantly began escaping the incision was bright red, indicating the possibility that the source of the bleeding was arterial. Ed followed behind the scalpel with the suction wand, clearing out the fluid as fast as he could. Once she finished making the incision, she pulled back the skin to expose the cavity so Ed could thoroughly suction out the remaining blood. While Ed cleared out the area, Gabrielle was studying the cavity for the source of the bleeding. Her search was rewarded by the oozing of blood from a separation in the liver caused by the bullet as it passed through Vox's stomach.

"Okay Ed, I think I see the problem here. Looks like the bullet transected the liver and nicked the hepatic artery. Hold the wound open and let me get in there."

Ed took over holding open the incision from Gabrielle, and Gabrielle grabbed a hemostat and attached the needle end of self-dissolving suture material. She then reached in and gingerly moved Vox's liver around until she could visualize the bullet's path. She followed the path until she reached the source of the bleeding.

"Ed, I need suction."

"Um…" His response caused her to look up from her loupes. She had forgotten he was using both hands to hold upon the incision. Looking over to Aphrodite, she made some rapid mental calculations, then said,

"Goddess, glove up. You're going in." Aphrodite's eye widened, but she calmly reached over to the medic bag, deliberately selected a package of surgical gloves, donned the gloves, grabbed the suction wand, and peered into the cavity.

"Where do you want me?" She asked with feigned innocence. Gabrielle mentally rolled her eyes at the goddess' perpetual lack of seriousness, but maintained her composure.

"Down here, by my thumb," Gabrielle moved her thumb and Aphrodite proficiently suctioned the fluids out of the way, then continued to keep the area clear without getting into Gabrielle's way. Gabrielle quickly identified the nick in the artery wall and moved to suture it closed. Ed observed as Aphrodite continued providing spot suctioning around the area as Gabrielle worked, the two of them working in concert, adept and familiar with the rhythm of each other's movement as if they had been performing this exact dance together for years. He marveled at the dance, distracted to the point he scarcely noticed the fatigue in his arms from holding open the incision.

"Okay, I think I'm good here." Gabrielle's matter-of-fact observation snapped Ed from his reverie. Aphrodite finished her duties with some spot clean up then sat back on her knees, admiring her work.

"I've never been much into housekeeping, but that's not a bad job, if I do say so myself." This prompted another mental eye roll from the bard. She nodded at Aphrodite.

"Don't take your gloves off just yet. I need you to take over for Ed before his arms fall off. I still need to irrigate Vox's abdomen with an antibiotic solution so she doesn't die from infection and waste all my hard work."

"Sure thing, hon." That she was being ordered around by a mortal, albeit an extraordinary one, was not lost on the goddess, but instead of being annoyed she found herself bemused. Nicolai, who had been quietly observing from his position above the surgery as light bearer, also noticed and chuckled quietly to himself.

While Ed massaged the circulation back into his arms, Gabrielle shed her gloves, prepared a bag of fluids with antibiotics, then slowly emptied it into the cavity. Donning another pair of surgical gloves she carefully moved around various organs and tissue in Vox's abdomen to ensure the solution covered as much surface area as possible and to check for any additional injury. Seeing nothing, she suctioned the fluids out of Vox's body.

After closing and dressing the stomach wound she pulled the blankets up to cover the engineer's chest. Checking Vox's vital sign readings on the monitor one more time, she moved to the next area of injury, the shoulder.

"This is a little more straightforward at least," she said to no one in particular after a cursory exam of the wound. "Ed, let Isra and Kismet know we can head up to cruising altitude. Have them contact Jorge; I want a Transportation team on the tarmac when we land. We need a stretcher and equipped van to get us back to the marina and then onto the boat," she ordered. "Any word from Greece? Are we being followed?"

Ed quickly moved to the cockpit to get an update and returned to, what had become for all intents and purposes, an operating room. "No one is following us and the Greek government isn't lodging any formal charges. For the time being we seem to have made a clean break. We're clear to get back to the ship. Isra said she'd update us before landing to make sure it's still safe."

"She's not going to a hospital?" Aphrodite asked, surprised.

"She will be safer on the yacht," Nicolai said.

"We've got adequate facilities onboard to take care of this," Gabrielle said confidently. "In a week she'll be good as new."

After a brief moment of stretching her neck from side to side, the bard donned a fresh pair of surgical gloves, showed Nicolai where to point the light, and began to remove the bullet lodged in the young woman's shoulder. The bright orange koi tattoo had been spared.

They must have reached cruising altitude because when her own ears popped, Vox woke up with a start, and let out a started howl of pain. She looked at Gabrielle clearly confused, with an almost panicked expression on her face.

"Can I take a moment?" Aphrodite asked.

Gabrielle checked the wound. The bleeding was minimal, all things considered, so she backed away a bit to give the goddess the space to move into the woman's line of sight.

"How you doing, tiger?" she asked warmly, a comforting lull to her voice.

"I was just…but how did I...?" Vox stammered, wincing in pain.

"I can send you back there, to relive it all over again. Or you can stay awake with us. It's up to you sweetie." There was no judgment in the goddess' voice, only caring and understanding.

Vox smiled, almost bashfully, "Send me back, please." After a brief touch to the woman's forehead, she was out again; her heart rate and vital signs stable and strong.

Gabrielle resumed her work and in short order had removed a bullet from Vox's shoulder. After cleaning, stitching, and dressing the wound she then moved onto the graze wound on the side of her head, closing it with a few stitches.

Finally, she took the surgical gloves off collapsing backwards as the stress and fatigue finally started catching up with her.

"Excellent work everyone," she said with another glance at the LifePak. "Vox should be fine. You all performed magnificently."

"Looks like all that med school really came in handy," Aphrodite said, relief evident in her voice.

Gabrielle smiled. She was pleased at how soundly the young woman was sleeping, but still curious. "What, exactly, did you do to her?" she asked.

"I…um…" Aphrodite was not one to blush, but something told Gabrielle that if she were able, she would be bright red right now.

"What?" Gabrielle asked, sitting up on her elbow.

Aphrodite shrugged, "I gave her a first-time story."

"A *what*, now?" Gabrielle asked, completely confused.

"Memories," the goddess said, exasperated. "I couldn't think of a scenario to distract her with, so I gave her one of my own memories."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "First time memories? As in sex memories?"

"Yes." The goddess nodded, matter-of-fact. "I didn't have a lot of time to come up with something."

"With anyone I know?" Gabrielle asked, narrowing her eyes in annoyance. Aphrodite shrugged and smiled.

"So, my *employee* is going to remember having sex with *me*, as *you*?"

"That's about the gist of it." The goddess agreed.

The bard was going to say something else, but was distracted by a low, growling laugh that sounded like Jabba the Hutt. Gabrielle turned to Nicolai. He caught her gaze and laughed harder.

"Lesbians have such interesting troubles," he said. "Vox is alive. So what if she's seen you naked?" He continued chuckling, clearly very pleased with himself.

"Well, there's a bit more to it than that," Gabrielle stammered, her indignation quickly losing steam.

"Not if he was speaking metaphorically," Ed added helpfully.

The flight to Los Angeles felt like it took days, not hours. At one point, Nicolai got up and rummaged through the kitchen and returned with a plate of cheeses, some hard salami, fruit, and a glass of water. He sat the plate down in front of Gabrielle who was sitting on the floor, her back resting against the couch, frequently checking on the injured engineer who was hovering somewhere between consciousness and slumber.

"Eat," he said simply.

Gabrielle nodded absently and he spoke more forcefully.

"Eat. Your day is a long way from over. When we get back to the ship you will take care of Vox, then you will take care of Shen. Right now, *I'm* taking care of *you*, so eat."

"Thank you, Nicolai," Gabrielle said, putting a few grapes into her mouth.

He glanced uncertainly over at Aphrodite. "I do not know if gods eat. If they do, you eat too." His eyes darted from Aphrodite to his employer making his meaning quite clear. While he might be taking care of Gabrielle in the moment, it would be up to Aphrodite to do so when she would be completely spent from taking care of everyone else."

"I'll eat," Aphrodite said, "if you let Gabrielle make sure you're okay." He tried to look indignant but she persisted. "You're the one who said I'm a god, hon. I know you got shot four times in your vest."

Gabrielle was instantly on her feet and looked up at the big man, a very stern expression on her face. "Take your jacket and shirt off now," she said. Without being asked Ed had already produced a double extra-large hooded sweatshirt from a cupboard and had it ready for the large hulking man.

With a grumble he took of his bespoke jacket, then his dress shirt which had four bullet holes in the front. He then removed his Kevlar vest and already had four deep bruises appearing. Gabrielle touched his skin gingerly after putting on a stethoscope to listen to his heart and breathing. She prodded at him briefly, producing a series of annoyed grunts, and then took a step back so she didn't have to crane her neck as much to make eye contact. "Two broken ribs; your lungs lucked out. The other two are just bruises."

"When did you become a doctor?" he asked as he donned the sweatshirt.

"Let's just say that the first time I went to med school, I had to pretend to be a man and leeches were an actual thing we used." She replied with a smile. "If I had a couple of leeches, I could take care of those bruises, no problem."

"I'll keep the bruises," he replied.

"As long as I'm checking everyone," she said turning her attention to Aphrodite, "are you okay?"

"Not so much as a scratch," she said. "Bullets just kind of avoided me. I saw that you got hit a couple of times…"

Gabrielle shook her head dismissively with a subtle glance at Ed who had returned to the cockpit to get an update from the pilot and co-pilot. "I lucked out too," she said, giving Argo a belly rub, "not a scratch."

When they landed at LAX, as she had requested, a team was waiting. A man and woman with a stretcher carefully picked Vox up and carried her out of the plane. The rest of them deplaned and Gabrielle talked to Ed a moment more before joining Aphrodite and Nicolai at the van. Argo was already inside, sitting next to Vox protectively. They road back to the marina in silence and the team unloaded Vox, who remained unconscious.

"Is she going to keep those memories?" Gabrielle asked as they took a second taxi boat to The Amazon Queen.

"I can take them away if you want me to," Aphrodite said.

"No," Gabrielle replied. "I mean if she wants you to take them away fine. Don't do it for me."

Aphrodite put her arm around the bard and gave an affectionate squeeze. "You think she's earned them, do you?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "I guess."

It wasn't long thereafter that Gabrielle had the opportunity to find out for herself. Vox Wandre woke to find her boss sitting in a chair next to her bed, watching the monitors carefully.

"This is awkward," she said wincing trying to force a grin.

"That is a true statement," Gabrielle replied with a smile. "You know, I don't think you can sue me for sexual harassment when it only happens in your mind."

While it was the last thing in the world she expected, Vox blushed. "I would never sue you for that, Gabrielle," she said.

Gabrielle sighed and glanced over at Argo, who had hopped onto the injured woman's bed and was resting her large muscled head on the engineer's legs. She made it quite clear that she intended to spend the night there. "Vox, is this going to be a thing? Because it can't really be a thing."

"No," the engineer replied, with just a hint of sadness in her voice. "I know the memory isn't mine and I expect that Aphrodite will be here any minute to take it away."

"It's up to you," Gabrielle said. "I told her I was fine if you kept it, as long as you're okay with that and it…" she shrugged. "It could make things worse, it could makes things less worse. Sometimes the fantasy of a person is more amazing than the person…"

"No," Vox interrupted, "this was pretty amazing."

"You're not helping," Gabrielle muttered with a frown.

"It's not going to be weird," Vox assured her. "Obviously if it gets weird, you fire me. I respect and appreciate that it is a memory you'd trust me to keep."

"Yeah, well…" Gabrielle said, checking the woman's pulse one more time. "I'm sorry I made such a mess of the feather tattoo, I didn't have a lot of options."

"Now that I might sue you for," Vox said eliciting a laugh from the bard.

"How 'bout I spring for your touch up work when you're healed up. Any tattoo artist you want, anywhere in the world. You can make a vacation out of it." Vox gave her a thumbs up but was clearly in pain. Gabrielle knew she needed sleep. "You take it easy for the next few days," she continued getting up to take her leave. "Everyone is going to keep an eye on you. She paused before leaving, allowing herself to act without overthinking she leaned over and kissed the woman's forehead tenderly. "You did well today Vox," she said softly. "I'm not going to forget it."

As she left the medical room, both Michelle and Elaine were waiting for her. Without speaking she nodded and followed them to the bridge. "Where is Shen?" Gabrielle questioned, her heart heavy with sadness and exhaustion.

"We need to talk to you about that before you see him." Michelle said.

"I'm listening."

"When Jorge contacted me, I assembled the crew and we made a decision while Shen was en route. We want him to live here with you, with us, when he isn't at school."

Gabrielle nodded, so far this conversation was tracking with her own thoughts. "But he isn't going in the guest room," Michelle explained. "The crew voted and we think he would be safer, and more comfortable, on the lower deck with us," she said. "The captain and executive officer are never off duty together so we decided to share the captain's quarters. That frees up the XO's cabin for Shen. It will be more comfortable for him, like living in a dorm at school. We are in close proximity to keep an eye on him, and he's always got someone to talk to."

"So Elaine is bunking with you?" Gabrielle asked Michelle.

"There is a couch in the captain's quarters if we both need to sleep there at the same time," the captain replied. "There is enough room. We think it's what's best for Shen."

Gabrielle shrugged. It may have been the exhaustion, she was tired even before leaving for Greece, or it may have been the stress, or sadness, or any number of things, but she saw no flaw in their plan. "No one has told him have they?" she asked, wishing deep down someone else had.

Michelle shook her head, "We thought it best…"

Gabrielle nodded. "I know," she said.

"He knows something is up, he was scooped up from school by an elite military team, the kid isn't stupid. He's in his quarters now. He's had dinner, we told him to try and get some sleep," Elaine offered.

Gabrielle told the women to set up a rotation so someone could be with Vox at all times and to notify her if anything seemed amiss. She also gave instructions to depart for Cabo San Lucas immediately. She left the bridge and descended to the lower deck and the crew cabins and knocked on the door to the cabin formerly known as 'executive officer's'.

"Come in," an uncertain voice said.

"Hey kiddo," Gabrielle said, her voice warm, but unable to force a smile.

Shen jumped out of bed and ran the couple of steps to the door to hug the bard. In moments he was crying, already assuming the worst.

"Grandma has been in an accident, hasn't she?" he asked.

Gabrielle held onto the boy tightly as sobs shook his thin frame. "Yes, honey," she said soothingly, "she was hurt and she died."

"And I'm in danger?" he asked, pulling away a little so he could look at her.

Gabrielle moved the two of them to his bed so they could both sit down and she could look directly at him. "We don't have all the answers yet, Shen," she explained. "I am going to try to get those answers. I don't know if you are in danger, but I promised your grandmother that I would never take chances with your safety. That's why you're here right now. I hope you will be able to go back to school soon, but until I'm sure it's safe, are you okay staying here?"

He nodded and looked around the cabin. "Do you see what they did for me?" he asked.

Gabrielle looked around the cabin and was surprised she hadn't noticed the difference when she'd first stepped inside. On one wall was a poster of Gillian

Anderson posing with The Creature From The Black Lagoon that she knew had belonged to Michelle. By the small television set was an Xbox that she knew was Bohemian's. There was a small statue of the Buddha that belonged to Hatsuo. There were a couple of die cast metal action figures that belonged to Wolfgang. Everyone in the crew had put something in this space to transform it from an officer's cabin to the bedroom of a ten year old boy. A very much loved ten year old boy.

"They said Vox had been hurt," he said cautiously.

"She was hurt very badly, but she is going to be okay," Gabrielle reassured him. "You know what the responsibility is for someone in sick bay, right?" she asked the boy.

Shen nodded. "They get to pick the music that gets played throughout the ship."

"Do you know why I have that rule?" Gabrielle asked. The boy shook his head. "Why do you think?"

He considered a moment. "It gives them something to do with the time they're in bed," he suggested. Gabrielle nodded. "And so the rest of the crew doesn't forget about them as they do their regular jobs."

"I think Vox would be really happy for you to help her pick songs, and if you want to pick songs that your grandmother liked…or didn't like…you're absolutely allowed to do that."

He nodded, not quite able to smile. "What about school," he asked.

Gabrielle thought for a moment. "I'm going to talk to Hatsuo about that. For now, you can take some time off if you want, it's okay to take time and be sad. But I think you will do your studies here, with our help, until we know it's safe to go back. I promise we won't let you get behind." He nodded, the exhaustion and sleepiness evident on his own face at three am as it was on Gabrielle's. "There is one more thing I need to tell you," she said as she helped him get back into bed and tucked him in. "We are going to Cabo San Lucas right now. It will take us about three days to get there. When we are there I have an important thing I need to do."

"Is this to get your friend?" he asked sleepily. "Aphrodite told me she was going to help you find one of your friends. I really like her."

Gabrielle smiled. "That is exactly what I'm going to try and do. If I find her she will join us here on the boat. When she is here, she is probably going to need a lot of help from all of us to adjust. I'm not sure where she's been and what she will be used to. I'm saying this because I don't want you to think that I won't have time for you or that I've forgotten you. Sometimes people have a hard time balancing things that are important to them. You are always able to get ahold of me," she pointed to the button on the panel of his cabin's intercom unit. "You also know that the crew can always reach me and they know how important you are to me. Don't ever feel like you're bothering me Shen, because you're not. Okay? I love you, and I really want you to remember that." He nodded, clearly losing the battle with slumber in spite of his grief. Gabrielle kissed him on the forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow, Moose."

"I love you too Squirrel," he said.

Gabrielle returned to her quarters and it took only a moment to know something was very, very wrong. For one, Aphrodite wasn't there. They hadn't spoken much upon returning to the ship because she'd followed Vox to the medical

bay. She opened the door to her closet and immediately saw that the goddess' clothes were missing. She opened the drawers she'd cleaned out for her and instead of the t-shirts, blouses or sweatshirts she expected to see, there was a pair of sai, a hammer and a chakram in the drawer.

Gabrielle paced around her room uncertain of what she wanted to do. Their agreement had made sense. Of course, their relationship would change now that the agreed upon milestone had been met. She had the hammer. She sat down on what she now thought of as 'Aphrodite's side of the bed' and tried to collect her thoughts. The weight of the day's events descended upon her like a tomb. The adrenalin leftover from being shot at and then doing emergency surgery on a plane, coupled with the loss of her most trusted advisor and the new responsibility of raising a child all in one day was nearly too much to bear. Out of the corner of her eye she saw something on the floor, nearly under the bed. She reached down to pick it up. It was the four-page sex scene she'd jotted down for her lover her second night on the boat. This final loss was one too many.

"Come in," Aphrodite said at the soft knock at the door. She wasn't surprised to see Gabrielle enter the guest suite. She was, however, surprised to see the absolute look of devastation on her face.

"You forgot this," the bard said, putting the journal pages on the dresser. She didn't say anything else for long moments, and then turned to go.

"Gabrielle," Aphrodite said gently, "What did you come here to say?"

The bard turned back, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I came here to say that it's too much; too much loss for one night. Susan's death, Vox getting shot, Shen's world turned upside down. I'm a mess and I…" she sighed. "I just want to cry, and have you hold me until everything stops hurting and that isn't very fair to you."

Without hesitation Aphrodite walked over to Gabrielle and put her arms around the bard. As soon as she did the last pretense of holding her shit together melted away and the Gabrielle cried like she hadn't cried in centuries. She sobbed openly, without reservation, and let years of pain kept in check by her self-imposed reserve wash over the woman holding her. In part because she knew that Aphrodite could withstand this storm, and in part because she didn't have anything left to stop it.

For a long time Aphrodite didn't say anything. She simply held onto Gabrielle and let her cry. Finally, she murmured into the top of the bard's head "You're welcome to stand here and cry all night, but it's going be harder for you to cry yourself to sleep standing up."

"I shouldn't stay," Gabrielle said flatly.

Aphrodite moved so she could look Gabrielle in the eye. "This one is on me, sweetie," she said tenderly. "I'm not letting you leave."

Chapter 9: The Birth of Xena

Gabrielle extracted the last of the acupuncture needles from Vox's abdomen before lightly running her hands over the young woman's arms, legs, and torso to make sure no needles were left behind. Moving to the foot of the bed she checked

the pulses in her feet once again. The strains of 'These Things' by She Wants Revenge could be heard playing through the ship's sound system.

"You are healing really quickly," she said, happy and relieved. "How are you feeling?"

Vox sat up and pulled the tank top down over her abdomen, then adjusted the covers back over her legs. "I feel great," she replied. "I'm ready for duty." Argo growled then barked once and she frowned at the dog.

"Your nurse disagrees," Gabrielle commented, as she typed some notes into the laptop sitting on the nearby table. She looked critically at the engineer. "I can get Aphrodite down here for a second opinion. But I'd rather not; I'm your doctor and you really should be honest with me. It could be important."

The butch woman attempted to shrug but winced in pain halfway through. "It still hurts," she said nodding to her shoulder and my digestion is still kind of wonky."

"That could be in part from antibiotics," the bard reassured her. She scrolled back on the laptop, reviewing her notes. "Everything seems okay. I want you to stay up here for at least the rest of the week and then you can move back to your cabin. Same rules apply; if anything changes you tell who is ever checking on you and they will let me know. I want you off duty though for another week or two at least. Enjoy your downtime."

"I enjoy my work," Vox protested.

Gabrielle nodded, "That's one indicator of a fantastic boss," she said dryly. "Besides," the bard added with a gesture to the doors outside. "Sick bay is closer to Shen's room then your cabin is and I think helping you is helping him."

Vox looked at Gabrielle appreciatively, "I suspect you're giving the same speech to him to keep me here."

"Whatever works to take care of my people." Gabrielle replied standing up, not the least bit perturbed that her ruse had been discovered.

There was a knock at the sick bay door and Michelle entered. "I wanted to let you know that we will be at the coordinates you gave us in a couple of hours," she said.

Gabrielle nodded. She went back to the laptop on the desk and quickly did a search bringing up a map. She showed it to the captain. "The Arch of Cabo San Lucas is here," she pointed at a tiny area of land jutting away from the peninsula. Next, she pointed to a spot on the map. "I think we should anchor about here; there are going to be tourists and cruise ships and we want a low profile. I'm not sure if Ares is still following us. It's going to be tricky. Aphrodite, Argo, and I will take the Zodiac to here," she pointed to a specific rocky spot of coastline. "Where is Aphrodite right now?"

"On the sundeck," Michelle answered, not quite able to mask the sympathetic expression that briefly crossed her face.

There was no doubt that the crew knew Aphrodite had moved into the guest stateroom. She and Gabrielle had not spent the night together since the night they returned from Greece with the injured engineer. No one had said anything, and while there was no animosity between bard and goddess whatsoever, there was an undercurrent among the crew that Gabrielle had been broken up with and the

sympathy was palpable. To their credit, no one treated Aphrodite any differently and while the crew was mistaken, she was glad that misunderstanding did not extend to someone she now considered one of her very dearest friends.

"Let me know when we anchor and please have Bo check out the Zodiac to make sure we've got gas and supplies- camping stuff. I'm not sure how long we will be on the beach, but I'll be in touch when we get there and keep you posted."

"Will do," Michelle said with an efficient nod. "Should I have Nicolai or any of the other crew members join you?"

The bard shook her head. "No, it will just be the three of us." Gabrielle paused, choosing her next words carefully. "If we are successful and we return with Xena I will give you a heads up. We may need a few days before I introduce her to everyone."

Michelle nodded. "Aphrodite said she may have amnesia or some other kind of memory impairment. We will give your section of the ship wide berth.

"How is the patient," Michelle asked, smiling over at the engineer.

"I'm going to be DJing for you for the rest of the week at least," Vox said with a slight smirk. "Doctor's orders."

"If you keep playing The Carpenter's Greatest Hits there may be a mutiny before the end of the week," the captain warned.

"The Carpenters is the music of pain and suffering," the engineer parried.

"Their version of California Dreamin' is an abomination," Gabrielle said agreeing with the captain.

"I could always go back to work early," Vox suggested.

Michelle shook her head. "Not until all of your stitches are out, that's the rule. And until your doctor okays it. If we could survive the onslaught of surf guitar instrumentals from Bo's bout with pneumonia last year, we will survive this, but you need to put more stuff like you're playing now into the mix.

"Captain, I will consider the request," she said formally. Argo barked twice. Vox frowned at the dog but rubbed her belly anyway. "Would it kill you to have my back here?" she muttered to the pit bull.

"I'll be joining you for lunch later today," Michelle said to the young woman as she was leaving. "Sarah said to text her what you'd like to eat and I'll see you later." She nodded once to Gabrielle and then left.

The bard was about to follow her out the door but stopped at the last moment turning back to face the recovering woman. "I know you're covering for Shen and that's very kind of you. Susan was the 70's buff."

Vox smiled enigmatically. "I keep your secrets boss, you keep mine."

Before heading up to the sun deck, Gabrielle stopped to check on her godson. The past three days had been a time for mourning Shen's grandmother and continuing with his studies. She knew his grief was not going to abate any time soon, but even now she could see him pushing forward, not allowing the grief to take hold and focusing on his school work, which he greatly enjoyed.

His evenings were spent with a couple of hours of distraction after dinner: a movie, television, a video game, or music. Most of the nights he ate with Gabrielle, Aphrodite, and the rest of the crew, another night he just ate with the bard and goddess. His days were spent helping someone in the crew with their job when he felt up to it. If he didn't, he could often be found with Vox, helping her pick music and just hanging out

with someone else who wasn't feeling that great either. He also spent time working on his studies, having a vast array of tutors to choose from. Depending on the subject at hand he could always find someone also passionate about the topic to help him.

Gabrielle found the boy in the den with Prisha going over the day's history lesson. "Did you guys finish math already?" she asked as she joined them.

"Math is a lot easier than history," he replied as she sat down on the couch. "At least math is either right or wrong. With history there is so much stuff to remember. And who even cares anyway?"

"What period are you guys talking about?" Gabrielle asked, genuinely interested.

A flash of amusement crossed Prisha's face. "Ancient Greece and Rome."

"Lovely," Gabrielle said equal parts amused and resigned. "You know what I think is so fascinating about history?" she asked her godson. "As much as things change, they also stay the same. What's one of your favorite things to eat around Christmas?" she asked.

Shen thought a moment. "Nutbread." he said. "Mom used to make it and she learned it from grandma." A wave of sadness crossed his features and Gabrielle smiled understandingly.

"Your mom learned the recipe from her mom, who learned it from hers, who learned it from your great grandmother Betty." Gabrielle stopped there, not feeling the need at this point to inform the boy the recipe had originally been passed down to her from her mother in Potidaea. "So many of the things we don't think about are the same the world over and have been the same for thousands of years. And then one little thing changes and while the essence of people stays the same, the lives they live become very different. For example, the Dark Ages; What changed in the lives of people living in Europe that didn't change for the people going about their business in North America, or Australia, or the Middle East at the same time?"

The boy was silent for a moment then said, "Rats on the trade ships from Africa brought diseases like the plague and a lot of people died. I guess because of the way they had advanced, with people living closer together, and not understanding about hygiene and stuff they were more at risk of getting sick."

"Exactly. But also, they weren't trading with people from, say North America, which is why the plague at that time left them alone."

"So what's the part that stays the same? Sure, some of the foods we eat are the same, but the foods are different too," He pressed.

"Parents loved their children in twelve hundred AD, same as they do today." Gabrielle replied. "They may say things differently and have different hopes and dreams for them, but parents usually love their kids and want them to do well in life. There are always people who fight, but also always people who try to make peace. There are people who don't worry about the problems they make for others, and always there are some amazing individuals who show up from time to time who worry a great deal about problems that aren't necessarily theirs, they just want to make things better for someone else. That's the part of history that makes me hopeful, moreso than the inventions and stuff. With every great positive invention someone seems to make an equally great negative one."

"Don't they say that if you know history you won't repeat it?" Shen asked, confused.

"They say that, but people always repeat it. Always. It's human nature I guess. Luckily, it's not just the terrible stuff that gets repeated, but the good stuff too. That is also human nature."

"Will you help me when I have to learn the different Renaissance artists?" Shen asked hopefully.

"Of course," Gabrielle replied. "Some of my favorite artists lived in the Renaissance." She gave Prisha a subtle wink when Shen was looking back at his history book. "Say Moose," she continued, "remember when we talked about me going to try and find my friend Xena?" The boy nodded. "We are almost at Cabo San Lucas which is where I think someone is going to bring her to meet up with me. I need to go with Aphrodite and Argo to the beach and wait for her, so I may be gone for a day or so. But you can reach me by phone if you need to or have anyone onboard get in touch with me. I'm sorry I won't be here tonight to have dinner with you."

"I think that the boys were planning a 'boys' night' when you were going to be leaving the ship." Prisha explained to Gabrielle. "They wanted to have a *Guardians of the Galaxy* marathon, stay up late, make s'mores in the fire pit, and have a drum circle."

Shen's face lit up. "Can I go?" he asked hopefully.

"I don't see why not," Gabrielle replied, amusement threading her voice. She found it adorable that the youngster didn't realize it was for his benefit. The comparison was not lost on her, a movie about a young boy losing his mother to be raised by space pirates and later find his own family of misfits. She didn't doubt that there were also some things he might express to Bohemian, Steve, Hatsuo, Wolfgang, Blake, or Nicolai that he might not feel as at home saying to one of the women onboard. No doubt this would become more a factor as he grew up. "I think that midnight or one am is a decent curfew if you're still awake then. Just do me a favor and try to sleep in tomorrow. Your brain can't work if doesn't get enough rest, right?" He nodded and she gave him a hug, kissing the top of his head before leaving the den to look for Aphrodite.

Argo followed Gabrielle up the stairs to the sun deck. The Goddess of Love was reclining on a lounger enjoying the sun and watching the ocean as the yacht sped south.

"Hey," Gabrielle said.

"How's your patient?" Aphrodite asked, patting the lounger and inviting the bard to sit.

"She's doing really well, all things considered," she answered. As if on cue, strains of The Carpenter's hit "Yesterday Once More" could be heard through the ship's sound system.

"Not again," Gabrielle groaned.

"She's processing her loss," Aphrodite countered.

"She's processing how to get out of sick bay," the bard protested. "I know this is also for Shen but it's been all the expected stuff of the seventies, nothing surprising. How many times have we heard 'The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia'?"

"Honey, to most of your crew this is fascinating history. You're going to have to cut them some slack, you know this is how they're honoring Susan. How is Shen, anyway? I haven't seen him since breakfast."

"He's okay. He's the only one not looking at me like I've been dumped."

Aphrodite leaned over and grasped the bard's hand. "When you bring Xena back," she said, "you won't notice how they'll be looking at you. The only eyes you're

going to be interested in are piercing blue ones." Gabrielle looked up about to protest and the goddess shook her head. "Gabrielle, I'm okay. Really, I am. Yes, I miss you, but you're right here. I'm good." Argo barked once and the goddess frowned. "Not cool, Argo. Look, I'm going to give you guys seventy-five or a hundred years and then we talk threesome." Gabrielle blushed in spite of herself and the goddess continued "I am going to hang around until your warrior gets settled and we see what we can do about Ares, but then I need to take off for a few months. I'm being pulled towards Europe. I need to spend some time there and travel around."

Gabrielle nodded and made the decision not to argue with the goddess. They had both agreed to a certain amount of messiness when they began and the present circumstances weren't anything either one of them would want to change. Her feelings of responsibility were mitigated somewhat by the fact that she was dealing with a woman who knew a lot more about love and relationships than she could ever hope to. "We are going to be dropping anchor in about an hour. We should get ready to head over. I need to…get some things out of the safe."

Aphrodite nodded. "First, let's go to your cabin and pack some clothes for Xena. I don't know how she'll be dressed if Poseidon is successful, but we should be prepared for everything, right?"

Gabrielle agreed and led the way back downstairs to her stateroom. Without hesitation, she opened the door to the closet and picked up a duffle bag for the goddess to pack her selections. There was no denying the tension between them. The last time they had been in this room together they had shared a tension much more pleasurable in nature.

"It will get easier over time," Aphrodite said conversationally, as she selected a pair of jeans, underclothes, t-shirt, boots, and jacket.

"I know," Gabrielle replied. On the far side of the closet, on a top shelf she grasped hold of the handle to a nearly square metal box. Almost like a steel briefcase, it was padded with foam inside and had a cutout in shape of an urn. Touching the panel by her bed, the wall slid away and the shelf came forward with Xena's ashes. She undid the bracket and removed the urn, carefully placing it in the case, then closing the clasps.

With each of them carrying a piece of luggage, they left the stateroom the bard leading them below decks to a nondescript bit of corridor in the middle of the ship. She touched a panel and another section of wall slid away revealing a large safe in a heavily insulated area. Gabrielle touched a pad with her hand, entered a code, and then opened the door. She withdrew a second steel briefcase in which she placed Aphrodite's shell and Xena's chakram. The hammer was too large to fit so she handed that to Aphrodite to carry with the small duffle bag.

They continued down the corridor in the bowels of the yacht towards the stern. The immaculate cleanliness of this part of the ship did not surprise Aphrodite, she'd grown to expect nothing less from Gabrielle's state-of-the-art floating fortress. They emerged from a door to the beach deck area where a platform extended at water level. Bohemian Van Lyle was waiting for them next to an inflated Zodiac boat. As he stowed their bag and cases, the opening bars of 'That's Not My Name' by the Ting Tings came through the speakers.

"Whadda ya know, something from this century," he said with a chuckle.

"Look who's talking," Gabrielle replied dryly. "I still hear 'University Blvd.' in my dreams from time to time."

"You've got to admit Los Straightjackets are a classic band and that song is fun to play. You do a great version of it," he countered. The pair boarded the inflatable and he added, "Happy hunting," as Gabrielle started the engine on the Zodiac. "I hope your quest is successful. I'll keep an eye on everything here until you get back."

The inflatable boat was large with a bench across the middle and two benches for seats at the bow. The gear was stowed towards the front so Aphrodite took the middle bench and Argo sat next to Gabrielle who drove from the stern by guiding the handle on the outboard motor.

They passed a number of tourist boats out for the day and a couple of cruise ships, then made their way to a beach area next to the famous rock formation at the very tip of the peninsula. Several large rocks were completely surrounded by water, like tiny islands while the main formation with the arch was at the edge of the beach. At high tide a small section of sand would be surrounded by rock outcrop on one side, water on the other. Argo hopped out of the inflatable and swam the last yards towards shore. The tide was low, so the main part of the beach could be reached. Had they tried to reach the spot by vehicle, they'd have been stopped some distance away where the road ended. As it was the boat was the most efficient means of travel to Poseidon's chosen destination. When they'd reached the shallow water, Aphrodite climbed out as Gabrielle cut the engine and moved the propeller out of the water. The bard jumped out and the two women pulled the boat ashore. They unloaded some of their gear, beach towels and such, then sat down to wait.

"Why here?" Aphrodite asked, wondering how they were going to deal with the crowd of tourists on the beach.

Gabrielle shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. I asked Poseidon how to get in touch with him and he's given me various contact protocols. We meet up every couple of hundred years and he tells me the next location. I get the feeling he travels a lot."

"I'll bet," the goddess replied sounding annoyed. She caught Gabrielle's wounded look and her expression softened. "I'm not angry at you love, I'm pissed at my uncle."

Several hours passed, the time whiled away with friendly conversation punctuated by the repeated throwing of a tennis ball for an enthusiastic pit bull. Most of the other beach goers didn't give them much attention. A couple of curious people wanted to pet the dog then wandered off. As the afternoon wore on, people picked up their towels and coolers and left until it was just the two of them on the beach. The nearby boats also dispersed, leaving the pair quite alone.

"The day is still nice," Gabrielle observed. "I wonder where everyone went."

"I'm sure he has something to do with that," Aphrodite replied nodding to a lone figure that was walking up the beach towards them. As he got closer Gabrielle recognized Poseidon. He appeared to be in his sixties with white hair and a white goatee and mustache. He was physically very fit, tan, and with longish hair. He strolled towards them in shorts, an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, and flip-flops. He looked like he'd probably spent the day surfing. When he was close enough to greet Aphrodite with a warm smile she launched herself at the man shouting "You fucking dick!" and struck him forcefully across the jaw with a solid right cross. He dropped to the sand hard and was quickly back on his feet bringing up his own fist to punch back. In a heartbeat Gabrielle

was between them, her green eyes narrowed dangerously. Aphrodite was shaking out her fist, clearly in pain.

"Not today," she said a warning threading her voice as she protectively stood in front of the goddess.

"You can't hurt me, child," he growled to Gabrielle, the warning and anger evident in his voice.

"You fucked my powers because you were feeling like the Little Mermaid?" Aphrodite continued to shout in protest. "Seriously? Do we need to call you Ariel? You wanted to walk on land and you fucked all of our powers to do it? You fucker!"

"You can blame Zeus or Hades if you're looking for someone to punch," he shot back, rubbing his jaw.

"Well gee, if only I could get in touch with them, BUT I CAN'T."

"Are you finished with your tantrum?" he asked, his voice still rumbling with danger.

"Fuck you," Aphrodite hissed back, not the least bit indimidated.

"I will admit, I don't really want to get in the middle of this family drama," Gabrielle said to Poseidon. "But you are not touching Aphrodite, period." He raised his hands in agreement and the bard stepped aside. "Aphrodite, please don't hit him again, even if he deserves it. I think it would be counterproductive."

"Whatever," the goddess fumed.

"Hades and Zeus picked their realms and while they had the power to travel everywhere, I was confined to the oceans, made of water. Destroying the anvil broke the tether and broke their restrictions on me so I could change my form and move about on land and in the sea." He explained to Gabrielle. "I didn't know it would have the other… extreme effects until it happened."

"The ocean is two thirds of the fucking planet!" Aphrodite exclaimed. "You did this because you weren't happy with only having two thirds?!"

"No," he countered, "I did it because I wanted to have more interaction with humans, and give mortals more control over their own destiny."

"Oh, nice job there," Aphrodite said icily. "Only a couple of thousand years and we're on the brink of mankind destroying the only planet they can survive on. Nice job, Ariel."

"Unlike you, it seems," he replied angrily. "I think that man's greatest creativity and ingenuity comes from moments of desperation. They will devise a solution to save themselves and the planet and don't need the bailing out, nor the game-playing of a bunch of spoiled Olympians."

"I think you give us too much credit," Gabrielle said. "But that isn't my concern at the moment. Are you going to be able to bring Xena back?"

He nodded regaining his composure. "I believe I can."

"Then maybe we can get started on that and you guys can argue later?" the bard asked, looking between the two. "But you're not to touch Aphrodite, I'm serious about that."

Poseidon shrugged, his anger having lost steam. "I'm fine. My niece has the fiery temper but it's probably hormones."

Quickly Gabrielle turned to catch the goddess who had just lunged at him again. “Aphrodite, please,” she whispered in the taller woman’s ear. “We’re on the cusp of getting Xena back; please don’t let him bait you.”

She stopped struggling, and brushed her short hair off her forehead. “Whatever,” she said again, glaring at Poseidon.

“What do we need to do?” Gabrielle asked.

“Bring me the urn of ashes, the shell, and the hammer,” Poseidon said, not looking at his niece.

Gabrielle and Aphrodite went back to the inflatable boat returning with the two metal cases and the hammer. Looking around the beach, the bard found it quite deserted. The sun was setting and the tide was coming in. They would be isolated on this patch of sand. The only boats in sight were distant cruise ships and her yacht, it’s gleaming white form standing out against the afternoon colors. It was anchored a safe distance away from the outer outcrop of rock, where the depth was sufficient for the mega yacht’s hull.

“Why don’t you build a fire, Gabrielle,” Poseidon suggested. “This may take a while.” He opened the square case and extracted the urn with Xena’s ashes. He lifted it, trying to determine its weight. He nodded, satisfied, and scanned the beach for rocks. While he went off to collect a few, Aphrodite helped Gabrielle with the fire.

“Are you going to be okay?” the bard asked, clearly concerned.

“Yes,” the goddess replied. “But I’m still really angry at him. If this were anyone but Xena I’d say ‘fuck it’ and kick his ass, although that punch hurt me more than it probably hurt him. And don’t try to hit him,” she warned. “I was only able to land a punch because I’m like him, and it still hurt me worse. If you were to try to hit him or any of us, you could be looking at a broken hand and angry god for your trouble.”

A healthy fire was crackling by the time Poseidon returned. He had made two piles of rocks. One set larger than the other. “Aphrodite, I’m going to need you to take one of the smaller rocks and stand over there.” He pointed to a spot on the beach. “I want you to toss the rock underhanded in that direction,” he pointed out to sea. “I’m going to have to hit your rock with my rock,” he pointed to the larger pile. “We are only going to get one shot at this which is why we’re going to take four practice attempts.”

“What is it you’re going to be doing?” Gabrielle asked, apprehension threading her voice.

“When I prepare the urn, my niece is going to climb to the top of that formation,” he pointed to the arch where it now extended over the water with the high tide. “Walk to the edge with it and toss it out to the water. I’m going to have to hit the urn with the hammer. If I’m successful, Xena will be reborn in a similar fashion to Aphrodite, from the seafoam.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to just stand in the water and hit the urn with the hammer there?” Gabrielle asked. “You can’t miss.”

“If you don’t mind getting blown up, sure,” Poseidon replied. “Remember what happened with the anvil when the pirates struck it with their weapons? Hitting the urn with the hammer is going to release a lot of energy, destroying everything around it, I’m not sure how far out, which is why it needs to be midair when that happens. If the hammer connects too close to the water, it could hurt the creatures there and obviously I don’t want to do that.”

"And my shell is going in the urn?" Aphrodite asked, concern threading her voice. Poseidon nodded. "And it's going to be destroyed." He nodded again. She looked away from the god and bard, her expression unreadable.

"And you are going to have to be the one to put it in there," he added.

Gabrielle took a deep breath. Things just got complicated. "Why tonight?" the bard asked, desperate to get Aphrodite's mind away from the shell and parting with it.

"New moon has the flatest tide. The larger the waves, the more can go wrong," he answered handing the goddess a rock.

"And you're certain that this won't undo what Xena accomplished in Japan? That the souls of the 40,000 who perished at Higuchi will stay in a state of grace, out of the reach of Yodoshi."

Poseidon looked down at Gabrielle with the patience of one who is explaining yet again why Santa only arrives when you're asleep. "What I said over 2000 years ago still stands, child. The gods of Japan have no dominion over me. You followed their rules." He shrugged, "besides I'm sure you've considered by now that what you think you saw was simply a hallucination brought about by your grief."

The bard nodded. "Yes, I've considered that. I've had thousands of years to consider that and regret what I didn't do in Japan."

"Well, we are trying to rectify that now. Aphrodite, if you'd toss the rock please."

For the first throw, Poseidon narrowly missed Aphrodite's thrown rock. On the second he nailed it, the larger rock shattering the smaller, the pieces falling into the ocean. Nodding, satisfied, he walked over to the urn and carefully removed the stopper, sealed with wax which had been in place for over two millennia.

"Gabrielle, hand Aphrodite the shell, please," he requested.

"Why do you need her shell?" she asked, as she opened the second case and extracted the luminous, pearl white shell. She was careful not to touch the sharp edge, and handed it to the goddess by the smooth side. Aphrodite's hand trembled as she accepted the gift. As soon as the bard let go, a bright glow seemed to travel through the goddess, making her more beautiful, if that was even possible, and radiate a soft pale white light. The goddess stood up straighter, looked more regal and self-assured than at any time in the bard's memory. The shell fragment did indeed do something to her.

"You're not going to like this next bit," Poseidon said. "That shell is one of the few things that can cut a god's skin, that's why we need it. You need to cut yourself with the shell, spill some blood into the urn, and then cut me to do the same. The hammer hitting the urn with the shell inside it is going to release the energy we need to get Xena back."

Aphrodite caressed the shell looking into the depths of its shimmering surface. "I don't think I can," she said. "I think I need to keep it. I'm sorry, Gabrielle," she said her voice sultry and warm.

Gabrielle was instantly distracted by the sound of her voice, momentarily forgetting about the beach, her task, her dog, everything but the rich sound of Aphrodite's voice. Like hearing the song of a siren; she felt turned on, wanting nothing more than to tell Poseidon to take a hike and tune out the rest of the world; tune out everything but she and Aphrodite. The memories of mere days ago came flooding back; what it was like to kiss the goddess, how her arms felt wrapped around that warm, lithe body- her hands and mouth everywhere. She didn't realize how much she'd missed that…Argo barked once,

then again, and Gabrielle returned to her senses, forcing the erotic thoughts from her mind and focusing on the task at hand.

Taking a deep breath, she walked over to Aphrodite and put a hand on the woman's cheek, drawing her face up to make eye contact with her, tearing her eyes away from the shell. "Aphrodite," she said urgently, "if you can't do this, I will try to understand, I really will. I won't hold it against you."

"Thank you, Gabrielle," the goddess purred and the bard bit her tongue to keep her focus.

"But you will need to destroy me," she said. "I mean this. If you can't help me get Xena back, you have to let me go and kill me instead."

"No, I don't," she demurred. "We can forget Xena. We can enjoy our time together, like it was last week. We felt so amazing together. I want more of that." She smiled a radiant, gorgeous, distracting smile. The bard wanted to get lost. Argo barked again.

The bard shook her head. "Sweetie, you know it's just a matter of time before you tire of me and will look for greener pastures. You said yourself I have thousands of years left. There is no way I'm going to be able to entertain you for thousands of years."

"I'm afraid, Gabrielle," Aphrodite said. "I'm afraid of losing something that reminds me of who and what I am."

"I'm right here. I will remind you. I'm not going anywhere," the bard assured her. "You don't need something external to be what you are. Besides, I can't think of a more loving gift you could give to me or Xena. Please, Aphrodite."

Placid blue eyes kept contact with green as the Goddess of Love quickly drew the sharp edge of the shell across the palm of her hand. She cried out in pain as thick amber liquid, looking very much like acacia honey pooled in her palm. She held her hand over the open urn and a dozen or more thick viscous drops fell inside.

Gabrielle quickly ran over to the Zodiac and extracted a first aid kit. She withdrew several gauze pads and bandages and expertly wrapped Aphrodite's hand when the honey-like blood had stopped flowing. The goddess helped her by holding down a gauze pad, but several drops of the golden blood got onto the index finger of her other hand. Gabrielle was going to wipe it off with another gauze pad when the goddess moved the finger away from her. Aphrodite glanced at Poseidon who frowned, then shrugged and purposefully turned his back on the two and tended to the fire. Maintaining eye contact, Aphrodite brought her finger up to the bard's mouth offering it to her.

Unsure what to do, Gabrielle had a moment of panic. If this were another person offering her a bloody finger she'd politely decline, although she knew enough about various customs the world over, religious and otherwise, to make this not that unusual an offering. Her mind flashed back to what she told herself the very moment she'd known she'd found the goddess. That she would say yes, to everything. That there would be no request she'd refuse. Keeping the tranquil blue eyes in focus, she opened her mouth and accepted the gift. Instantly she felt as though she could see through time and space, look into anyone's innermost desires and fears. She felt supremely powerful and responsible; connected to everyone the world over. She felt so much love that it was almost overpowering, like hearing millions of voices at once, but they were feelings. Falling to her knees, she was able to stop herself with strong arms to keep from falling face first into the sand. Moments later, in what seemed like the distance she heard Argo bark

excitedly, almost howling. In a rush, in the space between heartbeats she relived the most intimate moments she'd spent with Xena and everyone who came after. Every nuance of love was briefly spelled out for her, clear and concise but before she could grasp those threads of understanding they slipped from her grasp. She panted for several moments as the feeling of godhood coursed through her veins and dissipated. While it only lasted a minute or two at most, she felt like she had journeyed through millions of years. She had no doubt if the experience had lasted much longer she'd have gone insane. When she returned to herself Argo was next to her, wagging her tail excitedly.

She stood and hearing her brush the sand from her jeans, Poseidon turned around rejoining them. Without another glance at the bard, he held out his hand to his niece. Aphrodite cut his palm forcefully and he winced; an aqua colored liquid seeped from the wound. He held his hand over the urn as well, and he let three drops fall before drawing his hand back.

"Being a little stingy, uncle?" Aphrodite asked haughtily.

He held out his hand for Gabrielle to wrap, but instead she handed him the first-aid kit. "You're on your own, buddy," she said having no desire to be at one with him or risk contaminating the memory of what she'd just felt. He frowned, but wrapped his own hand.

"Not at all," he said. "Xena already had the…essence… of one god coursing through her veins. I do not want to throw off the balance of who she is by adding too much. There is a chance she may come back…different… than she was before, but I'm trying to minimize that."

"Then why do we need your blood at all?" Aphrodite asked.

"Because Xena is going to be born of the sea and that's my domain. If we were standing at the mouth of an active volcano to birth Xena by fire then you'd need the help of your ex-husband Hephaestus, but he's not here, I am and the ocean is. We're what you've got."

"What do you mean 'come back different'?" Gabrielle asked, sounding worried.

"Like, straight different?" Aphrodite wondered. "A pacifist? Pleasant?"

Poseidon shrugged, "I have no way to know. The Xena you knew had the essence of Ares. Now she will have the essence of Ares, Aphrodite, and myself. But if you want her back, this is the only way to do it at this point in time with what we have available to us. Aphrodite, if you please, the shell." He held the urn and waited patiently. Clearly the goddess was having second thoughts once again, but Gabrielle took her injured hand tenderly and she deposited the shell in the urn. He sat the urn down and reached into his pocket withdrawing a small cigarette case. He opened it and inside was a piece of a flat, slightly reddish, transparent bit of material that looked like a half-melted clump of gummy bears.

"Ambrosia," Aphrodite whispered, looking at the substance hungrily. Briefly the blue of her eyes intensified.

"Gabrielle," he said waving the bard over to him. She released the goddess' hand and stood next to Poseidon. He put his hand briefly over her heart and closed his eyes. She didn't feel any of the sensations that she'd experienced when Aphrodite had done it weeks earlier. She looked at the goddess questioningly. Aphrodite just smiled and winked. Satisfied with whatever it was he was listening for, Poseidon pinched off roughly a third of the Ambrosia and put it in the urn as well. He closed the case with the unused

portion. “I suppose I owe you this, at least,” he said handing it to Aphrodite who accepted it without hesitation.

“Thank you,” she replied. She opened the case and hurriedly consumed the rest of the contents. “I’d forgotten how amazing this is,” she said contentedly after she swallowed. As before, when she touched the shell, a shimmer seemed to transverse her body immediately after eating the Ambrosia. She radiated a power now, standing several feet away, Gabrielle could feel it; it was warm and sensual.

Poseidon put the lid back on the urn, tapping it down carefully with his fingers and then put the urn back into the travel case. “Gabrielle, go with Aphrodite up to the top of the arch. You take the urn; she may still change her mind and try to get her shell back. Aphrodite, you take the two rocks, they weigh about the same as the urn. When you get to the top, signal me and we are going to try two more throws.” Both women nodded and proceeded up the steep incline. The going was slow and difficult, each woman having an unwieldly burden to manage. When they’d reached the top, the goddess signaled Poseidon and threw the next rock. He missed it with his rock by a fair margin. She threw the next one, doing everything she could to keep the arc and distance consistent. He missed again, but just barely.

“What do you think?” she asked Gabrielle. “Do you want me to try again with the urn?”

Gabrielle looked down at where Poseidon was standing. He was waiting, holding the hammer. She couldn’t hear him or even tell if he was shouting to her. If he missed, Xena’s ashes would be lost, but the shell would be recoverable. If he was successful, the shell would be gone and Xena would return. She was about to tell the goddess to wait, to retrieve her shell and end her instead, but as she looked up she saw that Aphrodite had already thrown it, the clay pot moving in an upwards arc out above the water. From below Poseidon threw the hammer; it traveled end over end in its own arc. About ten feet above the water the arcs intersected, the blunt end of the hammer connecting solidly with the clay pot. There was a brilliant flash of bright light with pottery shards and ashes raining down over the water.

“I was going to tell you to wait,” Gabrielle said, barely believing what she’d just seen. Knowing there was no way now to change course or change her mind.

“I know dear one, that’s why I threw it.”

They made their way back down the rock formation to where Poseidon stood, watching the waves.

“What happens now?” Gabrielle asked.

“We wait,” he said. “It took nine months for your mother to make you. This will happen more quickly, but it’s still a big deal.”

“I’d feel more comfortable waiting if I didn’t know Ares was after us,” Aphrodite muttered.

Poseidon looked at her, alarmed. “What about Ares?” he asked, the worry evident in his voice.

“He knows who I am, he knows I’m trying to bring Xena back, he knows I found Aphrodite,” Gabrielle explained. “He sent forces after us in Greece when we retrieved the hammer.”

Poseidon looked from bard to goddess then back again. “I’m really sorry, but there is nothing more I can do for you, I gotta go.”

Aphrodite was indignant. “You’re that afraid of Ares?” she challenged.

“Look, I didn’t just eat a whole mouthful of Ambrosia. Damn right, I’m that afraid of Ares,” he had already begun to back away from the pair. “Gabrielle, just wait here, when you see the water recede more than normal, Xena should arrive on the next set of waves. I will be in touch with you soon to see how she’s doing. And I’d like your help with a new identity if you don’t mind?”

Gabrielle nodded; saddened at his departure but not faulting him for looking out for himself. He’d kept his end of the bargain, there wasn’t much more she could ask of him.

“I really think you should consider the name Ariel,” Aphrodite shouted after him as he turned and walked purposefully and quickly away from them on the beach. When he reached the place where the rock met the water, he quickly dove in and was gone.

Gabrielle searched the waves, looking for a sign but couldn’t see him. It was getting dark so she returned to the fire and sat down in the sand, listening to the waves, learning the pattern. “So, Greece,” she said. “Bullets just bounced off you, did they?”

“Pretty much,” Aphrodite said, taking the seat next to her. “When I saw that Vox had been hit, I moved in between her and the gunfire. I think I deflected a few shots.”

“She owes you her life,” Gabrielle said gratefully.

“And you!” the goddess said. “Amazeballs surgery, for the win.”

They were silent for a few moments watching the ocean. “So that other thing,” Gabrielle offered. “Are we going to talk about it?”

“We can if you want to,” Aphrodite said.

“Why did you…um…” Gabrielle was momentarily at a loss for words which was not a customary feeling.

Aphrodite chuckled as she unwrapped the bandaged hand. She held her hand in the light of the fire, showing Gabrielle that the deep gash had been replaced by the faintest of thin white scars. There was also no trace of her light honey colored blood on any of the bandages or gauze. “Ambrosia,” she said simply “but something that can hurt a god, can *hurt* a god.” She watched the fire a bit longer. “Maybe I was having an Angelina Jolie moment with the blood?” she asked teasingly. Gabrielle nudged her with her shoulder. “Okay, okay. I know you intimately, no not just that,” she said at the bard’s blushing evident even in the fire-light. “Because I’m a god, I know you intimately. I wanted to share some of that level of intimacy with you. You know, to be connected.” She was thoughtful for a moment then said, “Concentrate, how am I feeling right now?”

Gabrielle thought about it, not expecting any kind of enlightenment since the feeling of godly power had passed. Yet even as she thought the task beyond her, she could indeed sense how Aphrodite felt. “You’re worried for me,” the bard said. “You’re afraid Xena won’t be what I remember, or that she won’t adjust, or that something will be off…and you’re disappointed with yourself for hoping that’s the case.”

Aphrodite smiled sadly at Gabrielle, “I am as open a book to you now as you are to me. But like me, that kind of awareness only happens when you consciously look for it and I have to trust that you won’t do it very often, as I don’t with you.”

“Until just now,” Gabrielle said, “I didn’t think there was anything more precious you could give me than your shell.”

Aphrodite smiled affectionately at the bard and both women returned to watching the surf and waiting. As Gabrielle watched the small waves crash in succession she was

lulled by the rhythmic sounds and thought about all the things in her life that led her to this moment. She could feel her heart pound and the sound of her own pulse in her ears overtook the sound of the ocean. So many small steps had led her here; thousands and thousands of small steps, the culmination of over two thousand years of struggles, hardships, successes and failures. Everything she had done since the moment Xena died, everything she had become, simply everything was directed at this moment.

They waited together for hours. After what seemed like yet another lifetime the rhythm of the ocean changed and the sea roiled. The water line receded further away than what would be normal; like the waterline heading out before a tidal wave. As if on cue, a much larger wave, easily three or four times as large as the small waves they'd seen, crashed onto the sand pushing forward and leaving something behind in its wake. Gabrielle rushed forward as the next wave hit nearly knocking the bard off her feet. She struggled to hold onto the barely conscious woman who was beginning to sputter and cough. As the water receded again she was able to get the warrior to a standing position and noted Hephaestus' hammer dangling from the leather strap around her wrist.

Aphrodite was about to race forward as well when Argo charged in front of the goddess and laid down, stopping her. "I see your point," she said to the dog and waited. This moment was for Xena and Gabrielle.

"Xena, Xena!" Gabrielle shouted, her heart nearly bursting with centuries of pent up expectations.

"Gabrielle," the warrior gasped, pushing her dark hair from her face and looking down at the bard.

At the sound of her name spoken from Xena's lips Gabrielle's eyes went wide. It hit her like a bolt as she looked up into the piercing blue eyes that she knew so well. The piercing blue eyes of the woman she loved for so long. And she realized that she didn't love her. She felt nothing.

The realization rocked Gabrielle to her core. She had to love Xena, surely, she did love Xena, she just didn't feel 'in love'. She supposed that it might be the shock of seeing her after all these years, seeing a face she knew so well, yet almost didn't recognize. The simultaneous distant and familiar; a voice that could make her heart race, yet at the utterance of her name from those lips, it did not.

"Gabrielle" Xena said again and Gabrielle began to cry. Xena looked down, clearly confused, puzzled by the situation as well as the bard's initial expression then outburst of tears. "What's happened?" the warrior asked as another big wave hit them. "I can barely stand."

Hugging her tightly, in part to break eye contact for fear her feelings, or lack thereof were written all over her face, Gabrielle urged the taller woman forward, out of the water. Xena's skin was cold and wet and Gabrielle was grateful that Aphrodite rushed forward with a blanket to wrap around the naked and now shivering woman. Xena stumbled onto the wet sand with Gabrielle and Aphrodite on either side of her.

"I'm so sorry," Gabrielle stammered, as they walked Xena over to the blazing fire.

"What happened?" Xena asked.

Gabrielle had instinctively shifted into Greek when speaking to Xena, but switched to English to ask the goddess a question. "How much do I tell her?"

"Tell me about what?" Xena asked.

Gabrielle and Aphrodite looked at each other puzzled. Then, Aphrodite said something to the warrior that the bard did not understand and Xena answered her, in the same unusual language.

"What was that?" Gabrielle asked.

"Xena, do you know what language you were just speaking?" Aphrodite queried, her voice calm and neutral.

"Elvish," Xena answered, confused. "But I don't know what an elf is."

"Holy shit," Gabrielle gasped.

"I guess that was my contribution to the new Xena," Aphrodite said.

"Can someone please tell me what's going on?" the warrior asked, starting to sound impatient. "Why was I in the ocean and naked? Are we still in Jappa?"

"Xena," Gabrielle said, touching the warrior's arm. "What is the last thing you remember?"

"Being hit with arrows," Xena answered immediately. "The battle. We were fighting the forces of Yodoshi, saving the souls of the people who died at Higuchi. Were we successful? I thought I died."

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "You did die, Xena. You've been dead a long, long time. I heeded your warning. I didn't bring you back with the fountain. I had to find another way."

"What warning?" Xena said. "I just remember being hit with arrows."

"Shit," Aphrodite murmured.

"Why?" Xena asked. "How long has it been?"

Shifting to move into the warrior's line of vision, Gabrielle made certain Xena could see her face when she delivered the news.

"Xena, I'm so sorry. It's been over two thousand years."

Chapter 10: Learning Curves

The first light of dawn was stating to break over the ocean's horizon as the Warrior Princess gazed into the slowly dying fire. She hadn't said much for the last several hours, listening intently as Gabrielle relayed the tale- first of her life after Xena's death to the point where she became immortal and secondly the brief version of the bard's present life and how she'd found Aphrodite, gone to Greece for the hammer, and finished her mission to bring Xena back. Unconsciously, the warrior played with the zipper on the hooded sweatshirt she was wearing as she tried to put the pieces together. There was no denying the truth of what she was being told. Gabrielle seemed different, delivering the information as though by memory after a hundred practice runs. There was something different about Aphrodite as well, she looked at Xena with a sadness and sympathy that the warrior thought out of place with her recent resurrection. Intrigued by the clothes Aphrodite had brought and pleased that they fit perfectly, Xena let herself be distracted by the sound of the zipper and the soft feel of the fabric. Gabrielle had stopped speaking and after an overly long pause the warrior realized she was expected to say something.

"That's a lot to take in," she finally said, quietly. "Being immortal," she was about to say something else, but stopped. Something told her that now was not the time to question the people around her, to voice how wrong things felt. She would need time to

observe, to understand what was happening. “I guess I’m just a little disoriented right now; a bit tired perhaps,” she said instead. Argo was laying down between Xena and Gabrielle and shifted to put her large muscular head on the warrior’s foot. “Your dog is adorable,” she said with a smile, reaching down to give her a scratch behind the ears.

Gabrielle looked uncertainly at Xena then to Aphrodite. “I guess we should go back to the ship then?”

“Before we do,” Aphrodite interjected, “I’d like to test one more thing.” She opened the case that had held her shell and withdrew Xena’s chakram; the two halves fitting perfectly together to make a disk with a cross bar in the middle. “Why don’t you throw this over there,” she said pointing to some nearby rocks. “I’m curious to see if it bounces off and returns to you.”

“I don’t know why it wouldn’t.” Xena said as she stood and brushed the sand off her jeans. The disk was a blur as it traveled across the beach and embedded itself in the nearby rock. Crestfallen, the warrior looked at the goddess for explanation.

“I think the tether to Olympus also gave you some advantages with respect to the laws of physics,” she said then walked over to the chakram and withdrew it from the rock with a hearty yank. “There is a lot that is going to overwhelm you, Xena,” she said returning the weapon. “Just remember that time is on your side, whether you like it or not, and eventually all this will sort itself out.” Xena took back the chakram, disappointed that this too felt almost like a stranger to her now.

Gabrielle led the way back to the Zodiac and the warrior was clearly intrigued by the motor at the back with the propellers. She helped bard and goddess push the boat into the water and Argo leapt aboard. With practiced efficacy Gabrielle started the engine and they made their way out to sea to the yacht. “Are you hungry?” the bard asked, almost shyly. It was obvious to Aphrodite that something was wrong with Gabrielle besides the fact she had not thought about her reunion with Xena past the point of explaining how it happened. Uncharacteristically, the bard was at a loss for words. For all that two centuries of living had taught her, the bard of Potidaea was completely out of her depth.

“More tired than hungry I guess,” Xena replied looking from Gabrielle to Aphrodite and back. “Although having been dead so long you’d think I’d be well rested.”

The goddess shook her head. “You may not like this Xena, but you are essentially a newborn, and a mortalish one at that. You’re going to need extra sleep for a while and probably want to eat more regularly. Your body has undergone quite the metamorphosis, time may reveal different…abilities or senses you didn’t have before. Be patient with yourself. It’s only the beginning but it will get better.”

“Well, I can already walk and talk so that’s a plus,” she quipped, trying for a levity that she just didn’t feel.

As they got closer to *The Hippolyta* the warrior was visibly awed. She looked at Gabrielle with surprise. “That’s your ship?”

“The Amazon Queen, yes, she’s mine, although my Director of Finance might disagree.” The bard steered the inflatable to the back of the yacht where a lone woman was waiting to greet them. “Xena,” Gabrielle said as she handed the tie ropes to the woman. “This is Michelle Fender, she is captain of the ship this tour. Michelle, this is Xena.”

Michelle helped Aphrodite out of the boat and then Xena followed. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Xena,” she said with her hand extended. Unsure of the custom, Xena firmly grasped the woman’s forearm and gave it a shake.

“Thank you,” she said.

Gabrielle got out of the boat last, making sure Argo had cleared the inflatable. “Please have someone stow the gear. We were able to find Xena more quickly than we expected so nothing was really unpacked.” Michelle nodded, waiting for further instructions. “How are Vox and Shen?”

“Vox is fine, she’s getting stronger by the minute,” the captain replied. We wanted to wait for you, but I think the stitches on her head and shoulder can come out.” As if on cue the strains of *For All We Know* by the Carpenters began to play throughout the ship’s sound system. Michelle took a deep breath and continued. “Shen is fine, all things considered. He’s got a lot of company; he’s been talking about loss with the guys. It’s kind of sweet- he seems to have decided that the women onboard are better companions for his school-work and educational pursuits and when he wants to talk about his feelings, he finds one of the guys or Vox. He’s grown really attached to her. The guys are adjusting to having the sensitive chats” Michelle quickly glanced at Xena. “I think Vox is going to want as much ship duty as she can get, more for him than you at this point.”

Gabrielle nodded, relieved that all was okay. “Any security issues?” she asked.

Michelle nodded. “We got word from Technology that someone was trying to hack into our onboard systems. They prevented it and are looking into where the attack came from. We’ve noticed heavier than usual drone activity nearby, some may have been curious tourists, but Wolfgang and Sarah have been using them for target practice and Bo has been retrieving them from of the water. They’re going to take a look and report back. Someone tried to bribe some people in the Mexican army to go after you when you went ashore, but they contacted someone we already have a good relationship with and they read us in so it wasn’t a replay of Greece.

“Good,” Gabrielle said, visibly relieved. “When everything is stowed, please lift anchor. Head back to Marina del Rey. We can regroup there. I don’t want to take a chance with Ares reaching out to someone we don’t know and being successful. I’m going to get Xena settled, I will check in with Shen in a few hours and check on Vox as well. Don’t hesitate to wake me if you need to.”

Xena watched the exchange with interest, clearly seeing the bard in a new light. Gabrielle was a leader, one who had done it long enough that it no longer required conscious thought, it was as natural to her as breathing or storytelling. It took only a short interaction to inform the warrior that this was no longer the Gabrielle she had known. If there had been any residual disbelief about the amount of time that had past, this laid waste to that doubt. While Gabrielle had grown tremendously in their years of travel together, as she had as well, her own progress had been halted by her death and this woman had continued on for an unimaginable amount of time. Xena’s thoughts were unsettling to her, causing a feeling of uncertainty as dramatic as any she could imagine so she decided to simply focus on her surroundings and leave the bigger questions for later. Following the shorter woman through the ship she glanced around, awed by everything she saw.

“I’ll give you a better tour after some sleep”, Gabrielle assured her.

“Gabrielle?” the warrior asked tentatively.

“Yes, Xena?”

“Who is singing? It’s beautiful.” Xena was looking around for the source of the music, clearly confused as to why she could hear it, but couldn’t see it’s source.

Aphrodite chuckled. “Another Carpenters fan,” she said.

“Her name is Karen Carpenter,” Gabrielle said. “But the music isn’t live, it’s a recording.” Not surprisingly Xena looked confused. Having an idea, the bard took out her phone. “We will go into phones in more detail later, but for now,” she opened an app and shot a few seconds of footage of the three of them standing together, she waved at the camera. She showed Xena the screen. “You can record something, and play it back later-repeatedly.”

Xena looked at the screen and the three of them from seconds earlier with Gabrielle waving. “Is it magic?” she asked.

“You will find that a lot of what used to be called ‘magic’ is now called ‘science’ but that makes it no less remarkable,” Aphrodite explained. The song ended and the opening notes of Helen Reddy’s *I Am Woman* filled the air. Aphrodite giggled. “Vox *really* wants out of sickbay, hon.”

They reached the bottom of the stairs where the elegant stairway opened up into Gabrielle’s sitting room. One hallway led towards the guest stateroom and the other towards the bard’s master suite. Gabrielle glanced at Aphrodite uncertainly.

“You kids get some sleep,” the goddess said cheerfully. “I’m going to have breakfast with Shen and then spend some time reading in the library.” She pointed to the room adjacent to where they were standing. “Xena if you need me, you can find me there,” she pointed. She wrapped her arms around the warrior and gave her a warm hug. “I am happy you are back dear one,” she said. “Once the shock wears off, I hope that you are as happy about it as Gabrielle and I are.”

Xena nodded, “Thank you Aphrodite, I am happy to be back,” she said without enthusiasm.

The goddess turned to Gabrielle and hugged her as well, lightly kissing the top of the bard’s head. “You are in almost as much shock as she is right now,” she said gently. “Give yourself some time.”

Gabrielle squeezed her tightly then released her. “Thank you, Aphrodite,” she said. “For absolutely everything.” The goddess winked at her then headed down the corridor.

The bard opened the door to her bedroom and held it open for Xena to enter. The warrior looked around the room then back at Gabrielle. “So, you live in a floating palace?”

Gabrielle nodded, remembering when a barn was a luxurious place for them to stay. “I guess I do. It’s a palace, a fortress, mostly it’s home.” The bard led the way to the bathroom and stepped inside. “Most modern conveniences will seem kind of strange until you get used to them.” Xena listened patiently while Gabrielle gave a tutorial on all of the room’s amenities; she was fascinated by the toilet and intrigued by the Jacuzzi tub and the shower. Next, she was shown the closet, where Gabrielle and Aphrodite had organized the warrior’s wardrobe.

“The clothes are comfortable, soft,” Xena said. “But they don’t seem to offer any protection, except the boots perhaps.”

“The weapons of aggression have changed somewhat,” Gabrielle explained. “Visible armor would cause more social scrutiny than it’s worth and unless you’re wearing Kevlar, which is a type of armor, it’s going to be noticed. You’re not going to want to carry your chakram around.” She was going to talk about the legal ramifications that would accompany Xena’s usual method of problem solving but didn’t; there would be time for all of that later. Instead she just said, “the tools of warfare have become ill-defined.”

They were both quiet and simultaneously glanced at the bed. Inwardly Gabrielle winced at the knot she felt gripping her stomach. Here was someone she knew so intimately, yet felt like such a stranger. She sat down on the edge of the bed and urged Xena to do the same. She took the warrior’s hands in her own. “I promise I will explain it to you,” she said. “All of it.”

Xena nodded and smiled at the bard, the grin not quite reaching her eyes. There was something different in the way Gabrielle looked at her. Not like the woman who could see into her very depths so easily but more like someone who didn’t really know her. “So, you are the leader of your own army now,” she said to fill the silence. “I’m not sure I’d have expected that.”

Gabrielle’s first impulse was to demure or self-deprecate but she resisted it. Xena had always been honest about her abilities as well as her flaws, albeit to a lesser degree. “I am,” she replied. “I will tell you that everything I know about being a leader, about being a good one at least, I learned from you.” She smiled up at the warrior, trying to convey that beyond any internal confusion she may be feeling, she was very happy to have her back. “Xena?” she asked. “Can you tell me the last thing you remember? Did I pull you from the Elysian Fields, or someplace nice?”

The warrior shrugged. “I remember the battle. I remember the pain of being pierced by arrows. I remember you trying to save me. The last thing that I thought about before I died was you; your face, your eyes, your touch.” She brought her hand up and gently touched the side of Gabrielle’s face. The bard was surprised that while essentially a newborn, Xena’s fingers were still calloused. “My regret was not getting to spend another sunrise or sunset with you. I was deeply disappointed in myself for taking you for granted- for not putting you ahead of absolutely everything else.” Xena took a deep breath and sighed. “You know what it’s like, right before you die. You get a clarity about what is really important in life, for me though I guess I’m dense enough that I had to die three times to really see it.” Inwardly Gabrielle winced. Concentrating on keeping her features open and passive, Xena’s words about death, clarity and priorities made her think of Susan Yin and what it would have taken for the woman to choose to end her own life. “After that,” Xena continued, “I remember tumbling in the surf with a hammer wrapped around my wrist. And you were there, picking me up- helping me out of the water.”

In the warm light of the cabin Xena could see Gabrielle clearly and for the first time noticed that she did indeed look older than she remembered. According to the bard’s story a decade or so had passed from the time she died to when Gabrielle became immortal but that was not the extent of it. The youthfulness provided by ambrosia did not mask the maturity of her bearing or the exhaustion evident in her features. “Let’s get some sleep Gabrielle,” she said. “You’ve promised me answers and I will hold you to it, but for now we both need sleep.”

Gabrielle nodded. “You are right. I need to go check on some things. I’ll be back in a bit.” Xena nodded uncertainly and stood to strip out of her still damp clothing. “I’m going to leave Argo with you,” she said as the pit bull hopped up on the bed and made herself comfortable.

Pausing outside her bedroom door, Gabrielle pondered what to do. Briefly she considered walking down the hall to Aphrodite’s cabin but that wasn’t what she wanted and the goddess had said she was going to breakfast anyway. Instead she walked through her office to the study beyond and sat down on the comfortable couch. The Scotch she had shared with Susan Yin was still sitting on the table so she helped herself to a healthy swig from the bottle. Feelings of sadness and confusion fought for dominance with the undeniable sensation of being overjoyed that Xena was alive once again, that her lifelong mission had been a success. Hoping for more clarity when she woke, she stretched out on the couch, covering herself with a quilt she’d made decades earlier. In seconds, she was fast asleep.

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Xena woke with a start. For an instant, she thought she’d been dreaming but the moment was fleeting. She noted the softness of the sheets, the opulence of the room in general, and the fact that she was alone. Neither Gabrielle nor her dog were with her in the large bed. This hadn’t been a dream. She had died. She had missed over two thousand years and it was 2017.

After rolling out of bed and making her way to the closet she noticed a t-shirt on the floor and picked it up. Her clothes from hours before were still damp so she donned a fresh pair of jeans and the t-shirt she was still holding and made her way to the library. As she expected, Aphrodite was sitting in a cozy chair with her legs tucked underneath her reading a leather-bound book. At the warrior’s approach, she looked up and smiled.

“How did you sleep?” she asked.

“Well I think,” Xena replied. “How long was I out?”

“About four hours maybe. Let’s go up on the deck and I’ll fix you something to eat. Do you need to use the bathroom or anything?”

“I, ah, used the one in Gabrielle’s cabin. Have you seen her?”

“No, I haven’t,” the goddess replied, a puzzled expression on her face. “Let me get my phone and I’ll find her.”

Aphrodite led the way down the hall to the guest suite which was smaller in size than Gabrielle’s room but just as luxuriously appointed. The bed was against one wall and on the other side were portholes that looked out to the ocean. Xena noticed that the room looked somewhat lived in which made her question for a moment her assumptions about the goddess and the bard. The goddess’ clothes were casually tossed on a nearby chair and couch with several books stacked on the nightstand. The closet door was open, revealing a chaos of more clothing inside. This cabin did not have the tidiness of Gabrielle’s.

Aphrodite retrieved her phone from the nightstand and quickly sent out of couple of text messages. Xena followed the goddess to the upper deck of the ship. They made their way to the barbecue area with its comfortable couch and loungers. There was a bar by the outdoor kitchen and Xena slid onto one of the bar stools so she could talk to the goddess who took her place behind the grill.
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Opening the small refrigerator, Aphrodite was grateful that Sarah had brought up her request so quickly. Taking two large tumblers, she filled them with ice then water, squeezing a wedge of lime into each and depositing a disk of cucumber. She handed one to Xena and took a sip from the other. Xena followed suit, nodding with approval after her first sip. Curiously she poked at the ice cubes. Next the goddess extracted a plate of chicken pieces from the fridge and after turning on the grill proceeded to season them with salt and pepper. “Normally I’d to a light marinade with honey, lime juice, and sriracha,” she explained, “but I think for the time being you may want your food to taste like what you’re used to.”

“That looks like chicken.” Xena said as she watched the pieces get placed on the grill. Aphrodite nodded. “I have some basic vegetables here as well, I’ll grill those too. There is an amazing world of food that I’ve got no doubt Gabrielle looks forward introducing you to.”

“So. You and Gabrielle.” Xena said it as a statement of fact and took another sip of water watching the goddess carefully.

“What makes you say that?” Aphrodite asked casually. She was surprised certainly, but took pains not to show it. She wondered if the warrior was guessing or if this was some other ability, a godly one.

Xena shrugged, looking for an instant like an older, brunette, more self-assured Vox. “I saw how you were looking at her over the firelight,” she said. “I’ve looked at her that way myself.”

“It isn’t what you think,” she demurred, immensely grateful that Argo wasn’t on deck.

“No?” Xena asked arching an eyebrow knowingly.

Aphrodite regarded the warrior. “When Gabrielle found me, a little over a month ago she had been searching for me for over two thousand years. She had every expectation that the next piece of the puzzle may take years, decades, or centuries to complete. She was really lonely and sad. Both of us treated it like the temporary fling it was; two very old friends catching up and enjoying ourselves. As soon as she knew that the possibility of getting you back could actually come to fruition, she- we- ended it.”

“I see,” Xena said nodding. “I don’t see how you could spend a month with Gabrielle and not fall absolutely in love with her.”

“Well I am the Goddess of Love, so naturally I love everybody.” Aphrodite said, hoping that would end the conversation.

“Uh huh,” Xena replied, dropping the conversation but making it clear that she didn’t entirely believe the goddess. She was thoughtful for long moments, sipping her water then asked, “aside from your relationship- how is she doing? Is she okay? Something seems different about her.”

Carefully Aphrodite turned the chicken over on the grill checking its doneness and gently poking at the various vegetables she’d also placed on the hot surface. “Poseidon knew he was taking a risk by giving her Ambrosia in the first place. I’ll grant that he was careful in the amount he gave her and she didn’t suffer from the insanity that hit Valasca or Callisto when they had it. But when you’re a being designed to live, say, a hundred years and you stretch that out to two Millennia- I was honestly amazed she’s as together as she is. She’s smart; she found purpose and focus in addition to her quest to revive you. I’m not going to tell her story, that’s for her to do. But I will say she’s one of

the most remarkable human beings I've ever met." Xena nodded in agreement. "That said however, she hasn't had nearly the quantity of relationships that you would expect, and loneliness has certainly been a reoccurring theme in her life. The devotion she feels for you is every bit as present in every molecule of her being as the DNA she's made from."

"I didn't understand most of that last bit, but I think I get your meaning." Xena replied with a frown. She turned her head and looked out to the ocean, grateful to see something that looked unchanged. She said as much to the goddess who smiled sadly back at her.

"I wish that was so, Xena." She said and left the grill to stand by the railing. She gestured for the warrior to join her.

"What are we looking at?" Xena asked curiously.

"Just wait a moment," the goddess said. After a couple of minutes of silent observation, Xena saw something out in the distance she didn't recognize. It came closer, it's bright blue and white color scheme contrasting with the ocean around them.

"What is that?" Xena asked.

"A cooler, I think," Aphrodite replied. "It probably fell off the back of someone's boat and they didn't notice it. "I think Michelle spotted it though, we're slowing down." Sure enough, they could see two people on the deck below reach out with a large net and scoop up the trash. "You could be anywhere on the ocean and it's just a matter of waiting to see something manmade float by." She pushed away from the railing and walked back to the grill. "I think lunch is ready."

Aphrodite put several pieces of chicken and some grilled vegetables on a plate and passed it to the warrior, making a second plate for herself. As if on cue, Argo appeared padding her way across the deck followed by Gabrielle.

"Am I in time for lunch?" She asked taking the seat next to Xena. She smiled at the warrior and touched her arm as she settled herself on the barstool. Xena smiled in return but the grin did not meet her eyes. "Did you sleep well?" she asked as Aphrodite passed her a plate of food.

"Well enough," the warrior replied not making eye contact.

All three women ate in near silence punctuated by compliments about the food and idle chit chat about the yacht and the common foods people ate. Aphrodite looked at the pair in front of her with concern but knew better than give voice to the tension. This was not the reunion of Xena and Gabrielle that she expected and no doubt the pair in front of her would agree.

"So, I was thinking," Gabrielle suggested as she finished her lunch, "that I'd take you to meet Shen and some of the crew if you're feeling up to it? The fact that you can speak and understand languages has put us miles ahead of where I thought we'd be. It's going to take us a couple of days to get back to Marina del Rey which is where I've had a home base for the last couple of years. Next would be acclimating you to the ship and the rest of life in 2017."

"That sounds good," Xena agreed. "You mentioned him earlier, who is Shen?"

"You know, I'm going to take these dishes to the kitchen and let you guys have a chat," Aphrodite offered, neatly stacking up the plates on a tray. "You know how to reach me if you need anything," she added with a nod to Gabrielle.

"What was that about," Xena asked as she watched the goddess leave.

"I need to tell you about Shen and that involves discussing some of my somewhat

recent history and it's more of a private conversation I suppose," Gabrielle replied almost wishing that Aphrodite had stayed, to what end she had no idea.

"Gabrielle," Xena said with a frown, "I'm happy to hear it, but first I need to know what's going on. With you- with us." It was plain to the bard that Xena wasn't angry, she was hurt and confused and Gabrielle could not blame her for that. She'd feel the same way were their places switched.

Chewing the inside of her cheek to keep from getting emotional and tearing up, Gabrielle ordered her thoughts. This was never a conversation she expected to have, with Xena of all people. She looked at the warrior, her open unguarded expression looking so out of place sitting on a barstool in jeans and a t-shirt. "Xena, I honestly don't know what's wrong with me," she said. "I love you Xena, I truly do- but the connection I felt to you, that I could always feel so strongly…" her words trailed off and she shrugged. "Something feels different," she tried again. "I can't really describe it. There is just something different. I'm sure it will right itself- but it's just…"

The warrior's jaw was set and annoyance quickly flashed over her features. She opened her mouth to speak but then closed it. She was quiet a moment more before she spoke. "Is this about Aphrodite?" she asked, her tone neutral. For her part Xena was relieved that Gabrielle didn't feign surprise or ignorance about the question.

"No," the bard said simply, "it isn't." Cocking her head, Xena signaled that some elaboration would be appreciated. "I'm not sure how much you want to know," Gabrielle continued at the warrior's urging. "Yes, we're close. No, it's not the kind of relationship you and I had – have."

Xena downed the last of her cucumber water and thought. Gabrielle's use of the past tense stung, especially after her declarations after her arrival on the ship. But at the same time, she was still haunted by the memory of the intense regret she felt when she died. How she had taken her love for granted and had made Gabrielle secondary to her own personal mission of redemption.

The warrior could see herself at a cross roads- not at all unlike the one that had led her to burying her weapons before she first met the bard. She could put Gabrielle first; consider her resurrection a second chance to fully live the life that had been cut short. That would mean giving Gabrielle space and time to sort out her feelings and there was no guarantee that the story would have the ending she wanted. The other option was to indulge her impulse to withdraw. To put her own hurt and sense of rejection forward. Never a fan of talking about her feelings, Xena of Amphipolis was even less of a fan of living in this strange new world without Gabrielle- of that much she was certain.

"Gabrielle," she said, her voice measured. "You haven't seen me for a very long time. Aphrodite said you may be in shock- both of us probably are. I don't expect things to instantly go back to the way they were," Argo barked once and looked at the warrior expectantly. "Is your dog okay?" she asked.

There was a sadness in Gabrielle's eyes as she smiled at the woman who she still considered her soul-mate. The woman who she had felt at one point in time understood her better than anyone could and had made her feel like the very best version of herself. She didn't have the heart to tell Xena that she knew she wasn't being truthful, there was a possibility that Xena genuinely believed what she'd just said. "Argo's fine," she said instead. "you can give her the cucumber slice from your water if you'd like."

“So, tell me about Shen,” Xena said trying to sound reassuring as she tossed the cucumber to the pit bull.

Gabrielle took a sip from her own water trying to decide where to start. “I met this man from China- Chin, in 1912- one hundred-five years ago. His name was Shen Chu and he was new to America. He was part of the second wave of Chinese immigrants to the west coast- basically where we’re headed now. We met in San Francisco. He spoke very little English but I spoke Mandarin and Cantonese and I was able to help him learn. It was my second journey to this country. I’d arrived on the east coast a few months earlier after a pretty extreme disaster and had made my way west to start my life over once again.” Xena sipped her water and nodded, indicating that she was following the story.

“Anyway, Shen was a dear man. He was hardly more than a boy when I met him and he became one of my most trusted employees, a confidant, and a very dear friend. He grew up, got married and had a daughter. When Shen Chu and I met I was going by the name Ingrid Bard at the time.” Debating how best to explain how she’d survived, Gabrielle took a sip of water before continuing. “Xena,” she said. “One of the ways I’ve survived all these years is to periodically change my identity. I learned early on that living longer than people think is possible will cause a lot of confusion, suspicion and personal difficulty. Not drawing attention to oneself has been essential. I might change my name, move to a different village or country, take up a different profession. Create an entirely new life for myself. When I’d developed a business I wanted to keep and grow, changing identities would require years of preparation. I would create children away at boarding school or distant relatives, I’d try to age myself and finally go on some kind of extended trip or retire and my new persona would take my place and take over my business or whatever. I’d have to replace the top tier of people in my company that I worked closely with- I would either find them better jobs or pay them to retire, I’d start over fresh with a new crew from within the company that didn’t work directly with the ‘old me’.

“When the time came with Shen, I could not bear to part company. I did what I could to age myself and when the time came, I turned the company over to Abigail Evans. Shen played along, pretending that he hadn’t seen me every day for the past 18 years. It certainly helped the illusion within the company. His daughter started working for me in the 1950s and for one blissful year in 1970 when her daughter, Susan, started at my company I had three generations of this wonderful family at my disposal.” Xena nodded to assure Gabrielle that she was following along with the story and that it was making sense.

“Susan married her husband Tom about a year after she started, shortly before Shen Chu died. They had a daughter named Beatrix.”

“Did she work for you as well?” The warrior asked.

Chuckling, Gabrielle replied, “no, Trixie was an artist. She was a professional dancer for a time before she had her son, Shen. Trixie and her father Tom were killed last year in a car accident on Father’s Day. Susan was watching Shen so Trixie could take Tom to dinner and a drunk driver killed them. Shen had lost his own father when he was five years old. Dave, Trixie’s husband had a very serious illness called leukemia. For the last year Susan has been raising her grandson on her own.

Gabrielle took a deep breath, hoping she could get through the last of the story before choking up. “There is a custom here where you can designate someone outside of your family to step in as a “god-parent” should something happen to the primary custodian; like what you did with Tyldus for Solon. Susan died a few days ago. Ares captured her and she killed herself to avoid revealing anything about me or my organization. Since I am Shen’s god-mother, I am responsible for him. As of a little over three days ago, I became a parent again.”

With profound sympathy etching her features, Xena looked at Gabrielle. She tried to take in all that the bard had said and fathom a life where generation after generation you watch everyone you care for grow old and die. “All of this and still you came to resurrect me?” she finally asked.

“Xena, of course,” Gabrielle answered without hesitation. “I’ve never stopped looking for a way to get you back.”

The warrior frowned, “And you’ve seen Ares?”

Shaking her head Gabrielle replied, “On the way to Greece- to retrieve the hammer, Ares contacted me with a video message- something similar to what I did with my phone when we first got to the ship. I could see Susan in the background. She was… signaling me as to what she was going to do and I knew she was just waiting to hear if I’d gotten Shen to safety first. I stalled Ares long enough for my team to get to Shen’s boarding school and get him to safety. When I let her know he was safe…” she shrugged, “well that was it.”

“So, the boy lives here now?” Xena asked. “On this ship?”

Gabrielle nodded. “I think he will. He’s ten years old. There is still a lot to sort out. My captain and executive officer, the second in command, have decided to share accommodations so he can have a room down with the crew, sort of like his boarding school. For the moment we are homeschooling him, keeping in close touch with his school and teachers. When it is safe he will go back to the school, if he wants to, and live here when he gets time off. If he doesn’t I’ll get a house or something and live on land for a while. I need to do some research into Susan’s…last wishes, but I expect that I will be legally adopting him.” She could tell by Xena’s expression that she was beginning to confuse the warrior and was frustrated with her inability to explain it better. She also knew that if she often thought of Xena’s son Solon when she saw Shen, there was no doubt that Xena would as well. And that was going to be painful.

“I suppose I should meet him then,” Xena said with a warm smile.

They located the boy in the conference room taking a test with Prisha waiting to review the results. Gabrielle was surprised to see the drum set in the corner of the room. “Are we interrupting?” she asked as she walked in, with Xena and Argo following behind her.

Shen looked up, his expression bright at the sight of his godmother. “I was just finishing a test,” he said. “History,” he added dejectedly. He put down his pencil and passed the paper over to Prisha who reviewed it with a frown. “I’ve already aced a math test, but you know…history.”

“One of my favorite subjects,” Gabrielle explained to Xena. “Shen, I want you to meet my friend Xena that I told you about.”

Shen got up and walked over to the warrior. “It’s nice to meet you,” Xena said, extending her arm the same way that Michelle had previously. “I’m not so good with history myself.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Shen said a bit formally, shaking her hand politely.

The smile on the warrior’s face was genuine, warm but Gabrielle could clearly see the sadness that briefly cloud her eyes. There was no doubt in the bard’s mind that Xena was thinking of Solon and wishing she could have watched him grow up. Gabrielle gave her a moment to compose herself before introducing Prisha Washburn.

The navigator shook Xena’s hand warmly. “Aphrodite mentioned you’re dealing with some memory loss,” she said. “If there is anything anyone on the crew can do to help you out, you just need to ask.”

“That is very kind of you, thank you,” Xena said feeling relieved.

“What kind of memory loss?” Shen asked curiously. Xena was about to answer when she felt Gabrielle’s hand on her arm stopping her.

“Xena had something happen to her which has made her forget a lot of things. Things like history, current events, how things work,” Gabrielle explained vaguely. “She will get her memory back, but it will probably take some time.”

“It's like amnesia?” He asked brightly. “From an accident?”

“Yes, sort of like that,” Gabrielle agreed. “Say, why is the drum set in the conference room?” she asked changing the subject.

Shen’s expression brightened, “Blake said he’d start teaching me if I do well on my tests, these were just pre-tests to see what I’ve messed up.”

“Well I can’t argue with that logic,” Gabrielle replied with a nod.

Prisha passed the test paper back to the boy with certain questions circled. She also passed him a laptop computer and a large coffee table book. “These are the questions that need some work,” she said. Why don’t you try looking up some answers and see what you find? You might also check them against the book you got yesterday, see how the websites compare.” He nodded and looked glumly at his paper.

Gabrielle’s watch chimed and she checked her phone. She replied with a text message and glanced over to Prisha. “Prisha, Michelle has got something for us on the bridge,” she said. “I also need to check on Vox. Xena, would you mind hanging out with Shen until I get back? He can show you around the ship if you’d like.”

Xena nodded. “After he checks his schoolwork of course, sure – I’d like that.”

Shen waited until Gabrielle and Prisha left before speaking to the warrior. “You know, we could probably just do the tour. I don’t think I’d get in much trouble. Gabrielle hardly ever gets mad.”

Xena chuckled, the bittersweet memory of Solon coming to the surface anew. “She gets mad once in a while and it’s kind of a scary sight. Maybe you should do your school work, just in case.” She glanced over at the book on the table. “That’s an impressive book you’ve got there.”

He drew the book towards them and opened it. “Michelle ordered if for me from Amazon,” he explained. “To help with my history.”

“It’s nice to know that the Amazons are still around,” Xena replied.

“Oh yeah,” Shen agreed “It’s a big company, they have everything. She requested one day delivery which is why they got it to me while we were in Mexico.”

Xena nodded. “I’m sure because she’s captain of the ship the Amazons were very accommodating. They’re very dependable. I knew them when they were just a small tribe.”

Shen looked at the warrior with a confused expression on his face. “I think they do the delivery as long as you pay the shipping. The book is a history of the world,” he opened it to the beginning chapters and showed the warrior illustrations about the formations of the planets and the dinosaurs. “Then we get to the ancient world,” he turned some pages to the sights that Xena found familiar. “This is the Middle Ages,” he said, a somewhat dejected tone to his voice. “That’s what my test was on, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. I was going to use the laptop to check my answers first, you can look at my book if you want.”

Xena nodded and watched him for a moment as he opened the laptop and his fingers flew over the keys. She turned her attention to the book and turned the pages carefully, skimming the information, amazed that she could read the printing and understood it for the most part. The images helped and she was equal parts amazed and disheartened with each turn of the page. The people, both celebrated and notorious, the advancements, the struggles, war, more war, still more war leapt off the pages at her. “All of these things actually happened?” She asked as she turned the pages of World War II.

Shen nodded. “You’re pretty safe trusting books, well non-fiction research type books like this one,” he said. “Websites have a lot of fake stuff, so you can’t always trust what they’re saying.”

“Websites is that thingie?” She asked looking at the screen.

He nodded, “It’s faster if you can type,” he explained. “Hey, I’ll tell you what I’ve found, see if you can find it in the book, you can check the index.” He showed Xena the back of the book and how the index words corresponded to the page numbers.

She nodded and set to work learning about the Middle Ages.

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Gabrielle stepped onto the bridge following Prisha. The lights were dim and the room was illuminated by the glow of the monitors and the sunshine coming through the tinted windows of the control room. She was a little surprised to see Aphrodite already there chatting with Hatsuo. Michelle announced her presence and everyone gave her their undivided attention.

“There’s news?” she asked.

Michelle nodded, making a slight adjustment to the onboard autopilot. “Susan’s body was recovered in Montana and has been moved to Quantico,” she said. “The Feds are involved.”

“Any of our people?” Gabrielle asked hopefully.

“No. We’ve got people tangential to the investigation, but the investigators on the case and the pathologist aren’t ours. We tried, but,” she shrugged.

Knowing it was a long shot to have people directly on the investigating team the bard asked, “What do they know?”.

Shaking her head, Michelle replied, “Not much at this point, I’m afraid. We’ve tried to get to the pathologist and have a look at the report. I don’t think they are going to release the body until their investigation is closed.”

“Why did the Feds get involved? Did we just get lucky?”
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"We got lucky with a local investigator in Montana," Hatsuo interjected. "There was the cyanide and it was clear that the body had been moved. When her identity was confirmed, Special Projects was able to raise the profile of the case and get the Feds involved. We've got more people in DC than we do in Montana."

"I was telling Hatsuo that I can get us a meeting with the pathologist if you'd like a first-hand account," Aphrodite offered.

"With investigators, we don't know?" Gabrielle asked, surprised.

The goddess shook her head. "No, I mean I can get you a meeting with them too I suppose. But I mean just with the pathologist, getting us past security and such." Gabrielle still looked confused. "Not unlike my ability to teach your dog new tricks," Aphrodite tried explaining slowly.

"She means it's a 'god' thing," Michelle offered hopefully.

"Oh," Gabrielle said, embarrassed for not catching on sooner. "Yes, absolutely. I'd like to get Susan back for a funeral as soon as we can and I'd like to see what we can do about Ares. Do we have the Gideon Power intel from Special Projects?"

"Yes," Michelle confirmed. "I have it right here. But there are also a couple of other things that need your attention," Michelle added cautiously.

"Of course," Gabrielle said encouraging the captain to continue.

"When Shen was picked up they took everything from his dorm room, his clothes and computer, things like that. But he probably needs more from the house."

The bard nodded. "Okay," she said at last. "First things first. When we get to the Marina, I'll take Shen home to pick up some stuff." She glanced at Aphrodite trying to gauge how much her next words were going to hurt. "I'll take Xena with me."

Aphrodite nodded, which Gabrielle appreciated. "You should also take Argo," the goddess said "Shen will appreciate that." The bard smiled gratefully, well aware that while expected, taking a back seat to the warrior would be painful. "Do you mind if I borrow a car? I've got some errands of my own to run."

"Absolutely- anything you want in inventory is yours," Gabrielle assured her with a glance to Michelle who gave an affirming nod. "Is a day enough time?" Aphrodite agreed that it was. "Great, we'll meet with department heads the next morning, we can head to DC the next day. When exactly do we arrive home?"

"Day after tomorrow, early morning," Michelle said.

"Okay, I know it's short notice but see if Jorge can get everyone together. Please arrange for a car for the airport. I'd like to have Ed and the twins on duty if possible. While I'm thinking about it, why don't I meet with Jorge, Sabin and Fiona before the rest of the department heads- to loop them in on the same stuff I told you guys."

"Oh, the booze meeting," Michelle affirmed, making a note.

"The booze meeting?" Gabrielle asked with a frown, glancing at Aphrodite who chuckled.

The captain shrugged. "Well, it's our shorthand for it. I know what the three of them like to drink, should I have it sent to your study?" she asked innocently.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes but nodded. "Yeah, makes sense. Getting back to the matter at hand, let's see what we've got so far on the pathologist, the investigators, and Gideon Power." The captain handed over her tablet and Gabrielle took a seat on the couch, scrolling through the documents. With her brow creased, she focused, reading and scrolling, tapping the tablet to open one document after the next. "One last thing," she

said. “See if SP can get anywhere with the computers for the investigators. I’d like to know what they know, and please have Blake or Samantha bring up some snacks, this is going to take a bit.”

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Shen looked at his companion nervously. They’d long since finished reviewing the test and he’d explained as much as he understood of historical events from that point on. From time to time Gabrielle’s friend would point at something in the book and he’d tell her what it was, or look it up on the internet if he didn’t know. With each passing chapter, the woman’s mood grew darker. More than once he’d seen her wipe at her eyes. On the one hand, it was a somewhat of a comfort to meet someone who was hurting as much as he was, but he wasn’t sure how to deal with the imposing woman either. After filling Xena in on as much as he knew of the current wars in the Middle East he closed the book coming to a decision.

“Xena, I want to take you to meet a friend of mine,” he said, his tone concerned.

“Gabrielle said to wait here.” The warrior replied reaching for the cover of the book to open it once again.

“No,” he said firmly, which made bright blue eyes widen in surprise. “You can’t absorb everything you don’t know in one afternoon, that’s why school takes a bunch of years.” He stood up and in a tone, that brokered no argument said “Follow me.”

Inwardly Xena winced. The young boy’s defiance seemed so much like Solon. As traumatic as his previous years and days had been, he carried himself with more composure than would be expected. She decided to give him the win and complied with his insistent request. As they walked through the ship he pointed out the various rooms and features of the yacht. Xena asked where the various bathrooms were and he made sure to highlight them as they passed. They stopped briefly at the gym which seemed to puzzle the warrior. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s a room to exercise in?”

He nodded, not understanding why she was confused. “Yeah, so you can stay in shape. There are weights, weight machines, and some treadmills, over there is a stair climber and there is a rock wall that the crew can assemble. They have climbing races.”

“You don’t just stay in shape by lifting things or running and walking?” Xena asked, perplexed.

“Um. No.” Shen said shaking his head. “I mean I can I guess because I play sports at school. But adults sit around most of the time, it isn’t healthy.”

“They sit around because…”

“Their jobs,” he continued to explain. “Most jobs just use your brain and you sit and do brain stuff. I mean, I guess people’s brains are in great shape but the rest of them just kind of…sits.” The warrior frowned but kept quiet.

They continued through the ship to the lower decks. Shen made sure to introduce Xena to all of the crew that they encountered. The warrior offered her hand to each which they shook warmly and welcomed her aboard. There was no doubt that they had been alerted to her presence, since no one was surprised to see her and everyone offered to be of any assistance to her that they could. One man in particular, that Shen referred to as ‘Bo’ complimented her B52s t-shirt. The warrior had no idea what he was talking about but thanked him anyway. Finally, they reached a door at the end of the hallway. Shen
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knocked and when invited inside looked up at Xena. “This is sick-bay,” he said as he pushed the door open.

Vox was sitting up in bed watching something on her tablet. She smiled at the boy’s entrance which immediately faded to a guarded expression at the sight of the tall, dark warrior entering behind him. “Hey Vox,” Shen said. “This is Gabrielle’s friend Xena.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Xena said extending her hand.

“Likewise,” Vox said and Argo, who had been sleeping on her bed, woke up and barked once. “That Argo, needs to stop,” she said tightly.

“Xena and I were talking about history,” Shen continued enthusiastically. “But it made her really sad, and you’ve been really helpful with me when I’ve been really sad, so I thought I’d bring her down here so you can help her too.”

Simultaneously Vox and Xena both looked at the boy, then at each other, then back at the boy. “Ah, dude,” the engineer said awkwardly, “um…I’m helpful to you because you and I know each other and we’re friends. It’s kinda hard to get that kind of help from someone you’ve just met. Like, literally just met.”

“But you guys already have a lot in common you can absolutely be friends. You’re both gay and you’re both in love with Gabrielle,” he insisted, confused. Vox and Xena locked eyes once again. “I thought that might help, having something in common. Aphrodite isn’t gay,” he added as an afterthought “she’s bisexual.”

Vox took a deep breath and let it out slowly making a mental note to have a conversation with Gabrielle so she could then have a conversation with the boy. For the moment though this was her mess to address. “Dude!” she said firmly. “First thing is you don’t just make assumptions about someone’s sexual orientation and then talk about it with someone they’ve just met. It’s totally rude.” She glanced at the dog watching her with interest before continuing. “Secondly, you shouldn’t make assumptions about how someone feels about someone else and again discuss it with someone who you’ve just met and isn’t in that relationship either, it’s a dick thing to do. It’s like you’re talking about Gabrielle behind her back, savvy?”

Shen’s eyes went wide and the boy looked genuinely wounded. “I’m sorry Vox, Xena,” he muttered.

Xena gently put a hand on his shoulder and knelt down to look him in the eyes. “I appreciate you trying to help me make friends, but the way you introduced me to the rest of the crew is the perfect way to do it.” He nodded mutely. “Neither Vox or I are upset with you, we’re just both kind of embarrassed at the situation,” she explained. “I know you’ve been through a lot lately, and I do appreciate you bringing me to someone that you think can help me. That is very kind of you.”

“Yeah, dude,” Vox agreed. “Your introductions just need work, that’s all.” He seemed to relax somewhat but his expression was defeated. “Say,” the engineer added brightly, “Argo hasn’t been on deck in a while, want to go throw the ball for her? You’ve made the intro, now Xena and I can have a chat.”

“You know,” Xena added, “Work on becoming friends.”

He nodded and happily, oblivious to the warrior’s smirk grabbed the tennis ball sitting on the desk. In a flash, the pit bull jumped off the bed and followed him out of the room.

“Well this is awkward.” Vox said dryly.

“So, you’re in love with Gabrielle?” Xena asked cheerfully, with a genuine smile. “I think there is a fair amount of that going around the ship.”

Vox chuckled, impressed that the woman standing across from her was willing to make the embarrassing downright insufferable. “Kids say the darnedest things,” she said dismissively. “I’m an engineer on the crew, that’s all I am to Gabrielle.” She didn’t make the proclamation with any trace of self-pity or sadness, simply a stating of fact.

Xena rolled her eyes, “the Gabrielle I know would no doubt see each and every one of you as family.” The blond woman shrugged. “I do have some questions for you if you’re willing to answer them,” she added sincerely.

“As long as they’re not too personal, go ahead,” the engineer replied. Vox took the opportunity to really study the newcomer. Xena was tall, imposing, nicely filling out an old t-shirt and new pair of jeans. Her hair was down albeit somewhat tousled and messy. Her bright blue eyes were piercing and she looked like a woman unafraid of anything or anyone, yet unsettled and out of place. She could easily picture Gabrielle with this woman and that awareness and the ease of it only served to annoy the younger woman.

“What’s a B52?” Xena asked, looking down at her shirt.

“Oh that,” the young woman said, taking note of the tour shirt. “It’s a band. That’s one of Aphrodite’s shirts, I’ve got to say though, you wear it well.” Vox picked up her tablet and tapped it a couple of times. In moments, a song played through the ship’s sound system. “This is the B52s” she explained. Xena listened deciding that she found the music she heard earlier more enjoyable.

“What’s next?” Vox asked gamely.

Xena’s eyes widened in understanding, “You’re the person responsible for the music?” she said. “The beautiful singing.”

Vox nodded. “Well at least until they let me out of sick bay I am. I’m glad you’ve enjoyed it; the rest of the crew is ready to kill me. Blake has been in here twice offering to take my stitches out himself.”

“Well the ones in your head are ready, so I don’t see why not.” Xena remarked after a casual glance. She looked at the bandage on the woman’s shoulder exposed by the tank top she was wearing. “May I?” she asked.

“You a doctor?” Vox asked dubiously.

“I was a warlord,” Xena said without pride or enjoyment. “I wasn’t a healer specifically but I had an army to take care of.” The engineer nodded and Xena leaned forward to lift the bandage away from the wound. Vox was surprised that her hands were gentle.

“So how do you know Gabrielle exactly?” the blond woman asked conversationally.

Xena lowered the bandage and looked at the younger woman considering her answer. There was something about the younger woman that she sensed she could trust. While she wasn’t certain if it was the other woman’s love for Gabrielle that simultaneously endeared her, and annoyed her or if it was something else, she came to the conclusion that being honest would provide her the most useful information. “We met shortly after I stopped being a warlord. We traveled together and were lovers for a number of years before I died.” Xena replied simply. “By the way, the stitches in your shoulder are ready to come out too.”

The woman's eyes grew wide and she blinked a couple of times. "I'm sorry, did you say you died?"

Xena nodded. "They tell me I died over two thousand years ago. Gabrielle and Aphrodite met Poseidon on the beach in…" she thought for a moment, "Shen called it 'Mexico'. They just brought me back."

"You know Gabrielle from Ancient Greece. And you've been dead? You speak English perfectly."

Xena shrugged. "I will admit it doesn't feel ancient to me, but yes, we met in Greece. I'm not Greek though; I'm…" she thought for a moment for the correct terminology, "Bulgarian-Thracian, whatever. Apparently, I can speak all the languages that Aphrodite can. It seems to be some by product of the resurrection, from her blood. I don't know if there are any side effects from Poseidon's blood…"

"Wait, wait, wait…" Vox said, waving at the warrior to slow down. "Poseidon? The *Poseidon*." As soon as she said it she felt foolish. She'd already seen *the* Aphrodite in a bikini swimming in the ocean with a pit bull, the concept of a real Poseidon seemed obvious when she thought about it." Xena gave her a dubious look. "Yes, I know. I've met Aphrodite," Vox muttered calling out her own foolishness. "So, for you, yesterday was a day that you died in Ancient Greece." Vox nodded at her appearance, "the same age as you are today?"

The warrior shook her head. "No, Gabrielle and I were in Jappa- ah… Japan, but yes I died as I am and it does feel like it happened yesterday." Unconsciously she rubbed her shoulder where one of the arrows had pierced her, "I was shot with arrows. A lot of them."

There was an innocence in the way that the imposing woman spoke that made the engineer inclined to believe her. She seemed guileless and as confused by the world she now found herself in as a person could possibly be. "Okay, here's the deal. For the moment, I'm going to say I believe you, until I spend another five minutes thinking about it and decide you must be nuts." Vox gestured to a nearby chair and encouraged the woman to sit. "I'm surprised that Gabrielle hasn't mentioned this, but you can't say the resurrection thing to anyone else."

"Why not?" Xena asked. "It's what happened."

"Even so," the engineer assured her, "it butts up against people's religions and they will freak out. When people feel shaky about their religion it's easier to attack the person challenging it than to think what they've believed their whole life might not be so. And make no mistake, people *will* freak out."

"What exactly did Gabrielle tell you about me?" Xena asked. It seemed odd to the warrior that if Gabrielle were depending on the highest ranks of her private army, as she assumed the crew was, that they would know nothing of the mission objective. While they might not know the specifics, or all the details, surely they knew something.

Vox frowned, something about the warrior's tone implied that she didn't agree with Gabrielle's leadership and that didn't sit well with the engineer. "She told us what she felt we needed to know. I was with her in Greece, obviously," she nodded at her shoulder. "I knew she was after this hammer which was somehow necessary to find you. We know that she's immortal, we know Aphrodite isn't like most people- but you only have to meet Aphrodite to realize that."

At the mention of the woman's shoulder Xena started looking around the sterile looking room for something to cut the stitches. "You want me to take those out?" she asked. "Like I said, I've done it many times." The engineer acquiesced, happy to distract the woman from questioning anything about Gabrielle's decision making. She pointed to a drawer with a pair of small scissors. Xena tried them out, impressed at their ease of use.

"Why don't you tell me why Shen is so concerned about you," Vox asked, genuinely interested. Xena shrugged as she began to remove stitches and asked about the events in Shen's book.

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Gabrielle knocked softly at the sick bay door, surprised by the sound of conversation inside. The voices weren't heated, but animated enough for Gabrielle to clearly make out the sound of a frustrated Xena trying to understand something. She knocked at the door a little louder and was invited inside. It took only an instant for the bard to notice the tray sitting near her patient's bed with a pair of scissors and the remnants of the sutures that had been removed. In a heartbeat, she was at Vox's bedside examining the wound in the woman's head and shoulder. "You took out the stitches?" She asked Xena, pointedly keeping her voice calm.

"They were ready to come out," Xena offered.

"You're cool with anyone removing your stitches?" she asked her patient as she made sure none had been missed.

"Well she did say she was a warlord and had experience," Vox replied innocently. Gabrielle looked pointedly at the woman's abdomen and without being asked, she pulled up her tank top, perhaps a little higher than was strictly necessary, and gave Gabrielle access to the bandaged area.

"What have you guys been chatting about?" She asked, keeping her voice neutral. Twice Vox inhaled sharply as Gabrielle touched her, the first when the bard's examination lead to a sharp pain and the second when her touch was very much the opposite. Gabrielle apologized for the second and asked Vox to roll over on her side. After a quick examination of the exit wound, she let the younger woman settle herself in the bed once again.

"We've been talking about what's happened in the world that I've missed." Xena said, her tone flat and unyielding. "And I'm having some trouble understanding how this has all happened."

"Your abdomen is healing nicely, but those stitches need to stay in a while longer-front and back." Gabrielle said to Vox, buying herself some time before addressing Xena. "Your shoulder and head are fine. You can move back into your room now, but you are not cleared for work. You're still recuperating. I want you to let me know if the pain gets any greater, or if you feel any heat or swelling. Anything that's different from how it feels now, unless it's better you tell me, got it? I know you're going to be moving around more. And keep taking the antibiotics until they are finished."

"Yes, Doc." Vox replied obediently. "I…ah… suggested to Xena that she may want to keep the resurrection thing to herself, by the way."

The warrior shook her head, "With everything else that is happening, I don't see why that would be the biggest…"
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"Xena," Gabrielle interrupted, not wanting to have the argument that she could feel coming in front of the engineer. "Why don't you and I go on deck and talk about this." She forced a smile to her face and nodded at Vox before leaving the sickbay.

Xena extended her hand to Vox before she left, "It was very nice meeting you," she said. "I am grateful for…the talk."

"Anytime," the engineer said with a smile wondering at the moment who she felt worse for.

The warrior nodded and followed Gabrielle through the lower deck to the stairs that led up through the main deck to the upper deck. They were at the stern of the boat and could faintly hear the commotion of Shen playing with Argo at the bow. Xena breathed deeply of the sea air, enjoying the balmy touch of breeze and spectacular view. Gabrielle cocked her head looking up at the warrior. She was amazed that after all this time how quickly some old patterns reasserted themselves. Then she had to remind herself that for Xena, no time had passed, these patterns weren't old to her. "I had hoped to fill you in on what's happened in the world myself," she said somewhat sadly. "I'm sorry that you've found out like this."

"This has to do with me, doesn't it?" Xena asked, her piercing blue eyes searching Gabrielle's face for an indication that she might be wrong. "Why the world is this way."

"Yes and no," the bard replied. "Yes, the tether to Olympus was broken when I sent a Titan after a giant with the anvil of Hephaestus. The anvil, Titan, giant, and tether all destroyed in one blow."

"Oh Gabrielle," Xena said, her voice saddened and somewhat shocked.

"No, I didn't know that was what was going to happen, and no, I didn't ask." Gabrielle shrugged. "Instead of bringing you back I got the ambrosia, and like Aphrodite and whomever else from Olympus was trapped on earth I watched as the world has changed and evolved over the centuries." She could see the question forming on the warrior's face and answered it. "Aphrodite has already pointed out that had the tether not been broken our gods would have been in better position to fight off the encroaching mythologies." She shrugged. "who knows if that would have changed anything."

"How could it not change everything?" Xena asked dumbfounded. "The crusades, the wars between religions…"

"I have every confidence that people would have found something else to fight about," Gabrielle replied. "If not religion than resources, or territory or god knows what. The 'World Wars' weren't about religion. I think the industrial revolution would have still happened and that has led to a great deal of the mess we presently find ourselves in. Xena, I've had two thousand years to consider the ramifications of what I did and to ponder the possibilities if I had not. Ultimately that point is moot."

With eyes narrowed in anger, Xena looked down at her companion. "I'm sorry Gabrielle, I've had less than a day to digest all of this. I apologize if my questions are moot."

Gabrielle closed her eyes, forcing herself to stay calm. "I'm sorry Xena. I don't mean to be short or appear dismissive about your concerns. But I can't pretend that I haven't already thought about the things I've spent a lot of time thinking about. I'd much rather focus on what I need to do in the here and now about the future. Until less than twenty-four hours ago my primary concern has been working on the things I needed to do to get you back. Sure, I'm upset by the things that are happening; the things that are

obviously attributable to Ares. But that concern has been secondary to resurrecting you. Now I can devote all of my energy into doing something about Ares."

"Great," the warrior said icily. "We have something in common after all. You've had two thousand years to combat the forces of Ares. It doesn't look like you've made much progress. You need to be able to fight on more than one front. Maybe you didn't learn from me as much as you think you did." As soon as the words were out Xena realized she'd gone too far. Gabrielle looked like she'd been slapped and her eyes narrowed the pain and anger evident on her face.

"Fuck you Xena," she said turning on her heel and walking away.

Xena fully intended to follow, to apologize, to rephrase but her feet did not move. Instead she moved to the railing, pacing back and forth as she fumed, angry at her own indecision. She wasn't just angry at the situation in the world, she was angry with Gabrielle and she knew it. Angry that time had passed for only her. Angry that the woman she loved didn't look at her the same as she had just days before. Angry that she wasn't loved in return. She knew that Gabrielle had managed quite well for two thousand years without her; she was surrounded by the evidence of this fact. Yet, she also felt that there was something missing in the bard's strategy of dealing with Ares all these years in spite of the fact that she had not lived those years herself. Looking out at the ocean and around at the yacht where she stood she felt at once lost and trapped.

In the past a disagreement such as this may have led her to Amphipolis to sort out her thoughts away from Gabrielle; here on the bard's ship, she did not have that luxury. She also felt lost without her. Knowing that Gabrielle had turned her back and walked away, and now not knowing where she was on the ship presented Xena with an anxiety that was unfamiliar and unsettling.

She was drawn from her thoughts by the very soft sound of something climbing the stairs. She glanced in the direction of the noise to see Aphrodite followed by Argo crossing the deck towards her. The goddess moved silently, but the metal tag on the dog's collar did not. Xena turned her back on the stairs fairly certain that a visit from this particular goddess was not what she wanted at the moment. She was wearing Aphrodite's t-shirt; from the floor of Gabrielle's closet. The dog however, was a welcome diversion.

Aphrodite approached and casually leaned against the railing looking at the warrior. "You wanna talk about it?" she asked.

"Not especially," the warrior replied dryly. "I'm surprised you're not having this kind of helpful chat with Gabrielle."

"Any chat I'd have with Gabrielle right now would quite likely lead to something decidedly unhelpful," she replied with a shrug. Argo studied the two women through amber colored eyes but was silent.

Xena turned angrily on the goddess, "Why don't you just go to her then? Gabrielle has clearly moved on from me," she said. "In more ways than one," she added her voice pained. The pit bull whined and butted her large head at the warrior's shin urging the tall woman to stoop down and pet her.

The Goddess of Love watched the faint clouds in the midday sky for a moment before responding. "I'll be honest with you Xena," she said. "I am very much considering that. But I also know that if I indulge myself at this point in time, Gabrielle will never forgive me, or herself for that matter, and that I simply cannot bear.

"A part of me," she continued, "is quite content to let the two of you make a mess of things for the next few decades until you both pull your heads out of your asses and come to your senses. But the world is barreling toward a very dark place and I don't know if a few decades is something it has to spare- maybe, maybe not. So instead of just staying out of it, I'm going to give you the cold hard facts and let you make up your own mind."

"Oh goody," Xena muttered sarcastically.

"I knew this was not going to go well the moment Gabrielle told me what she was planning," she said matter of factly. "You've always been the worldlier of the two of you and letting go of that isn't in your wheel house. But the fact of the matter is, no matter how badly you screw things up now – there are very few creatures on this planet that are going to be around for the long term, so you and Gabrielle are kind of stuck with each other whether you like it or not. And I know you both genuinely love each other, so it would really do all of us a lot of good if you could get over yourself sooner rather than later. Furthermore," she added, "you are essentially a newborn. There could be…side effects developing from your resurrection and you need to be kept watch over. For the time being anyway. You're not running away from this."

"This is some pep talk."

"Whatever," Aphrodite replied, dismissively.

"I am not wrong to think that this whole Ares thing could have been handled differently," Xena said defensively.

Aphrodite shrugged studying the warrior. "Maybe. You are a master at strategy, and it's possible you'd have figured out earlier that Ares was on earth when the tether was broken, hell you probably would have figured out sooner what the ramifications of destroying the anvil were. But I'm not sure you'd have made it the two thousand years with your sanity intact the way Gabrielle has. Intellectual curiosity and emotional awareness were never your strong suits.

"Oh, by all means, tell me what you think," Xena continued losing none of her sarcasm. "What have you done to turn the tide of things the last two thousand years?"

Aphrodite turned to face the warrior, her pale blue eyes icy with fury. "Xena, what I've been up to these past two thousand years would fucking break you. I bring love and hope to places that don't have enough of it." Her eyes narrowed and were uncharacteristically cold. "You wouldn't last five minutes. Yes, I spend time intermittently among the financially and emotionally wealthy and then it's back into the trenches. I'm sorry you died, I truly am. And I'm really sorry I didn't know about it to comfort you at the very end. But don't even think that you are in any place to consider you could have made better decisions than I or Gabrielle have made until you live a hundred years or so in this place to make them."

Xena nodded, knowing full well the goddess was right. "I apologize Aphrodite," she said. "I was out of line." She was silent for a moment until the goddess nodded, accepting her apology. "What do you suggest I do?"

"We don't get to Marina del Rey until the day after tomorrow, in the morning. Take that time to sort things out. Gabrielle has some meetings as soon as we land and you will get more insight then as to what we are all up against. I also suspect Shen showed you where people gather to eat, get to know these people. Do what you need to do to get your head straight, that's the best advice I can offer you at the moment. Maybe take a

shower." Xena nodded, looking none too pleased. As an afterthought the goddess added, "I'll have Shen or Vox find you tomorrow and show you how to use your phone," she held up hers as example. "It's the device you'll use to communicate with people as well as look up all the shit you don't know." She turned and walked away leaving the warrior to stare in the direction of her retreating form.

She glanced down at the dog purposefully leaning against her leg to get her attention. "Argo," she said. "Something tells me there is an awful lot of shit I don't know." Argo grinned up at her wagging her tail happily. With a heavy sigh, she smiled in return and gazed out at the ocean.

A short while later she heard footfalls on deck approaching from the opposite direction from where the goddess had departed. Briefly hoping it might be Gabrielle, affording her the chance to apologize, she knew however that the footfalls she heard did not belong to her bard. She was already looking at the newcomer before Elaine turned a corner across the deck, saw the warrior and froze.

The petite woman was shorter than Gabrielle with the build of a retired gymnast. There was a soft fullness to her compact form although her reflexes where sharp. Momentarily startled, she smiled and nodded at Xena, walking the short distance to the railing where the warrior stood.

"I'm sorry," she said in greeting. "I didn't expect anyone to be up here. I hope I didn't startle you. I'm Elaine Jackson. I'm the executive officer of *The Hippolyta*."

"Xena," the warrior replied extending her hand which the black woman shook warmly. "Executive officer?"

Elaine shrugged, "ships don't really have co-pilots. Once upon a time we were first mates." She wistfully looked out at the expanse of blue all around them. "You're Gabrielle's friend."

Her conversation with Vox playing back in her mind, Xena nodded politely but was cautious about what she could share with the newcomer. She was also regretting having been abandoned by Aphrodite and that was not a feeling she enjoyed having.

Elaine smiled gently and Xena had the uneasy sensation of already having divulged too much about her present circumstance. "I've had friends," the ex-o continued smoothly, as if they'd been chatting together for some time, "where we lose touch for years, but then you get back into synch – it can be rough going those first few days."

The warrior listened to the short woman and studied her more closely. She appeared to be roughly the same age as Xena, looked a bit older than Gabrielle appeared perhaps. She had a rough scar that ran down one side of her face, from her temple to jawline. It was clearly visible though given that her dark hair was pulled back in a professional bun. She was dressed in the same manner as everyone else the warrior had encountered, and there was no outward indicator of her rank among the crew. Yet the scar, told the warrior a more expansive story.

It took only the briefest of glances while shaking hands for the warrior to determine that the woman in front of her had been viscously attacked a long time ago but a much larger, stronger person. The fact that her first words were that of placation; to diffuse any tension and assume responsibility for the warrior's potential surprise. She'd also been able to ascertain, in a heartbeat Xena's present mood, her disease at the lack of connection with Gabrielle. Here was a woman with heightened empathy, the kind of skill at reading people honed from years of abuse. With practiced discipline, Xena pushed

aside memories of her own warlord past when her fits of pique and unpredictable outbursts had instilled similar skill in the people she interacted with; at least the ones who survived long enough.

"Gabrielle and I have been out of touch for a long time," Xena acknowledged, answering the woman's unasked question. "I hardly recognize her."

Elaine nodded. "I've worked for Miss. Evans' company for eight and a half years," she said. "I was scouted from the Navy, I've been in the Transportation department the whole time, started on the ship before she had this one. Gabrielle Evans is one of the smartest, kindest, yet most closed off people I've ever met. I feel like in eight and a half years, I know a lot about her, yet I hardly know her." Xena blinked in surprise and the short woman smiled. "I bet you're going to tell me that you knew Gabrielle to be open, and loving and the most generous person you ever knew."

"Yes, exactly."

"She is those things, but while she will ask how you are, provide any help or assistance you need, when it comes to how *she* is, or what you can do for *her*…" the woman shrugged. "I respect her a great deal. I like her as a person, but I wouldn't say I know her." She chuckled, clearly making a joke to herself. "And this is coming from someone onboard who isn't smitten and battling a crush on her. Those poor fools know her even less than I do. I have no doubt you'll reconnect. Friendships take effort like any other amazing work of art.

"Well, I don't want to keep you," she said extending her hand once again. "I always do a stroll on deck when I get off duty. Make sure everything is ship-shape. I come from sea-faring stock since my ancestors were hauled to this country in the holds of ships packed in like sardines. There isn't anything quite like the sea air from on deck, with the freedom to move as you please. Xena, it was a pleasure to meet you, and if you need anything at all, I would be more than happy to assist you."

Xena grasped the offered hand warmly saying, "thank you, Elaine. You are very kind." She would have to think about what the executive officer had said. The Gabrielle she described did not sound like the Gabrielle she knew, who was always searching so desperately for meaning, for spiritual fulfillment for life's answers. She sounded like a Gabrielle who had possibly either found out the solutions to life's great mysteries or had come to the conclusion that there were no great answers to be found. While still angry and confused, she at least felt less alien in this new world. And for that, the warrior from Amphipolis was very grateful.

Chapter 11: Co-Parenting

Xena decided to give Gabrielle space while they were, for all intents and purposes, trapped together on the ship. She joined the bard, goddess and the rest of the crew for meals and managed to sit next to Gabrielle at the table and chat civilly but otherwise chose to stay away for the most part. There was no denying that the bard was not thrilled with the arrangement but was still either hurt or angry enough with the warrior not to voice that objection. The warrior spent her time with Vox and no one was more surprised than Gabrielle at how inseparable the pair had become. The rest of the crew was more than pleased as the parade of hits from the cheesiest offerings of the nineteen seventies abated and a general musical retrospective seemed to have taken its

place. For her part, Gabrielle tried to table her current discord with Xena and focus on what she needed to do over the next few days, which meant constantly working.

Aphrodite leaned against the doorway to Gabrielle's study and for long moments watched the bard work. There was an intensity to her features that would have looked more scholarly if the goddess hadn't known that it came from a place of profound sadness and avoidance. Argo dozed contentedly on the couch against the wall, untroubled by the human concerns in her orbit lulled to sleep by the occasional soft clicking of her human's fingers on the computer keyboard. Several minutes passed until the bard looked up to see herself being watched, and she returned the goddesses gaze. Pushing herself away from her desk she leaned back in her chair. "I'm trying to figure out if you're gloating or not," she said quietly. "I wouldn't blame you if you were."

Taking the seat across from the desk, Aphrodite smiled. "No, love," she said, "I am not gloating."

"What is Xena up to anyway?" the bard asked indifferently, pretending to organize folders and documents on her messy desk.

"She has Vox walking around on deck, getting her strength back."

"What is it with those two?" Gabrielle asked imploringly. "I swear they're inseparable."

Aphrodite chuckled. "You're not jealous, are you?"

"No, of course not," Gabrielle replied rolling her eyes. "I'm just trying to understand it."

"Think about it. Xena is everything Vox wants to be when she grows up. A toppy badass who has you moving heaven and earth to find her."

Gabrielle shrugged feigning disinterest. "And Xena?" she asked.

"In Vox, Xena has found someone who she doesn't mind looking foolish in front of with her questions. Xena knows people, she was a master manipulator long before you reached puberty, my dear." It was clear to the bard that Aphrodite wasn't passing any sort of judgment, just calling it as she saw it. "No doubt she sees your engineer as no threat whatsoever, and certainly has no malicious intent, but is very aware at how much she's being looked up to." Aphrodite shrugged. "She's feeling insecure. Who doesn't want to be around someone who idolizes them when they're feeling insecure?"

"I look up to Xena," Gabrielle said quietly, staring at the wood grain on her desk, unable to meet the goddess's pale blue gaze.

"Sweetie, you did," Aphrodite said gently, leaning forward. "That was two thousand years ago and while Xena has changed zero percent since the day she died, which for her was like, two days ago, you've lived what, twenty-five to thirty lifetimes at least."

The Goddess of Love leaned back in her chair and crossed one leg over the other. She was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt from the Hard Rock Café in San Francisco with the colors of the gay flag in the logo. Gabrielle could tell that she was making a concerted effort to look less spectacular, in hopes of being less of a distraction. The bard didn't have the heart to tell her the effort was in vain. A tomboy looking Aphrodite was every bit as sexy as a dressed to the nines Aphrodite, perhaps more so. The goddess simply couldn't help it.

Aphrodite watched the bard study her a trifle guilty at how much she'd missed the attention of late. She knew Gabrielle was digesting what she'd said and that a question

was coming. A very small part of her wanted to make up the worst advice possible and she smiled to herself as she considered that Gabrielle would know that. Not just because she'd given her the ability to sense her feelings, but because she'd shared enough with this woman that Gabrielle *knew her*. There weren't many people in the history of Earth that could say they really understood The Goddess of Love, but the Bard from Potidaea was one of them.

Gabrielle looked at Aphrodite almost shyly as she asked the question. "You could fix this, couldn't you? Make me feel how I'm supposed to feel." She didn't have to wait for the answer to know how the goddess felt; torn between her own wants and what she knew was best for Gabrielle.

"Honey, if I did that, you'd forever question if any feeling you had for Xena was really yours or something I put there. Sweet pea, you're going to have to do this the hard way." Aphrodite smiled sympathetically.

With a helpless shrug, Gabrielle asked, "So what do I do?"

"Have you considered that it's okay if you're the one that Xena looks up to?" Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak and Aphrodite raised her hand to stop her. "I get that topping isn't really your thing," she said with a slight smirk. "But I know you can be alpha when you want to be." The bard's cheeks flushed crimson but the goddess continued. "Shenanigans in the bedroom aside, you run your company, you tell people all day long what you want done and how you want it. The years have brought you into your own. Don't hide that from Xena. You be you. You are going to be the consummate tour guide for her of the twenty-first century. Yeah, Vox and Shen taught her how to use her iPhone and programmed everyone's number into it and I've seen her google some stuff, but that isn't going to be how she learns to live in this world. Once upon a time she taught you how to live in her world, when you were so determined and tenacious that you could not be kept away. Now you need to return the favor and teach her how to live in yours."

"Great," Gabrielle said without enthusiasm.

"Well, you're in for a bit of luck. I think it's going to rain tonight so it'd be stupid for Xena to sleep on deck again; even if she can't catch a cold or something. I'm not saying jump in the sack with her, unless you want to of course, but you're going to have to let her get to know you all over again. She thinks you're the old you. You're not, she is. At the very least you need to tell her she's going with you tomorrow to Shen's house, start there."

Gabrielle nodded unconvinced, but hopeful.

As the goddess predicted the night did indeed bring rain. Unlike the gentle drops that woke her on the sundeck of what now seemed like eons ago, this rain was hard and it was steady. Argo was reluctant to do her business on the AstroTurff in the onslaught so Gabrielle held out an umbrella for her. Once finished, the pit bull hurried back down the stairway to the decks below. It didn't take the bard long to find the warrior. Xena was sitting on a bar stool at the outdoor kitchen looking glumly out at the ocean beneath the protection of a sunshade. There was enough wind that the warrior was still fully soaked, but at least she wasn't sitting directly in the rainstorm.

"You're not spending the night on deck." Gabrielle said matter-of-factly as she approached. She folded the umbrella and took a barstool next to the warrior, not the least bit perturbed that she was getting wet as well.

"Your ship is fairly full at the moment," Xena noted dryly.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and studied Xena. It occurred to her that the arrangement she presently had with Aphrodite—to know what the other was feeling if she concentrated—would be supremely handy with her soul mate. But even as she thought it, she chided herself. Knowing what Xena was thinking or feeling was indeed part of what made them soul mates. “Xena, there are a variety of places you can sleep on the ship that will keep you dry that aren’t in my quarters if you don’t want to sleep there. You can bunk with Aphrodite, you can crash in the library, or the den- there are comfortable couches all over the ship.” She was quiet a moment before adding “Or you can just use my cabin.”

Silence descended for long moments with neither of them speaking. Green and blue eyes looked out at the rain that was now coming down with gusto. “Do you remember that barn, not far from Thebes – the rain storm?” Xena asked as she studied the downpour.

Gabrielle searched her memory, trying to put aside all the hundreds of rainstorms that had happened since her life in Ancient Greece. She looked at Xena, taking the time to study her face, her eyes. Those piercing blue eyes; it had been so long and the surrealism of their reunion was still uncomfortable. But there was something, something in the way that the warrior looked out at the rain, her glum expression, which triggered something in the bard. “Was that shortly after I left the Bard Academy?” she asked. “We were traveling from Athens to Delphi, we hadn’t quite made it to Thebes because the weather got so bad. And by the gods, that barn leaked like a sieve. But it wasn’t particularly cold because it was the end of summer.”

Xena nodded, happy that Gabrielle remembered, although not entirely surprised. She’d always had an exceptional memory. “Yeah,” she said looking out at the rain. “At the time, I had kind of wished it was colder.”

“Really?” Gabrielle asked curiously.

“I’d have had an excuse to try and keep you warm,” the warrior replied with a shrug.

Gabrielle smiled and Xena felt, for the first time perhaps, that she was indeed sitting next to the person she’d known for years. It was Gabrielle. A few years older than she remembered perhaps, but the way her green eyes sparkled when she smiled, it *was* her. “Follow me,” the bard urged, “I want to show you something.”

Obediently, Xena followed Gabrielle down the stairs. They walked in silence and stopped in the library. Gabrielle walked over to one of the four large bookcases that dominated the room. The polished wooden cases held leather bound volumes of similar height and thickness. Climbing a nearby ottoman, Gabrielle checked the spine of one of the first few volumes on the top shelf of the first bookcase before carefully pulling it free. “These are journals,” she explained. “I rewrote much of what I had in my scrolls and kept going…obviously” she said with a nod to the other cases.

“You wrote all of these?” Xena asked, her eyes widening in amazement. There were dozens upon dozens of books all neatly presented in the cases.

“You are of course welcome to read anything here,” Gabrielle continued with an affirmative nod. “I wrote all this stuff down so I could share the things I’d been through with you in the hope that we’d reconnect someday.” She checked the dates listed on the spine of the volume she held, which was the first one on its shelf. After opening the book,

she quickly turned pages until she found the passage she was looking for. Her finger on the paragraph she wanted Xena to read, she passed the book over.

Nervously Xena accepted the book. Reading had never been her strong suit. While not illiterate, as many warriors were she wasn't much of a reader either, unless it was a map or sea chart. But just like with Shen's book she was surprised and relieved that the combination of languages used to write the text made perfect sense to her and she read the paragraph with ease. She chuckled and closed the book, passing it back to the bard. "You were wishing it had been colder too, huh?"

Gabrielle nodded, not the least bit embarrassed. She smiled. "I remember having such intense feelings, and not really knowing what to do with them, or why I was having them. I mean obviously, I'd heard tales in Potidaea of the women of Lesbos and I had a vague idea, conceptually at least, that there were women who wanted to be with other women…like that. But growing up I never really thought I would be one of them. And then Perdicus and our whole betrothal thing." She shook her head, as if she couldn't imagine ever being that young or naive. "Anyway, it wasn't too long after we met that I knew something was different and even when I'd figured out *what*, you know, the figuring out of *how* is the next hurdle."

Blue eyes scanned the rows of books, moving from one shelf to the next, trying to take it all in. "These first seven volumes comprise our adventures together and if you go to the eight one, that starts my journey after you died."

The blatant perspective hit Xena hard. Seven volumes barely made a dent in the first shelf of the first bookcase. Each bookcase had eight shelves, each shelf housed roughly forty books the warrior guessed. She was looking at hundreds and hundreds of books, and their time together made up seven. "You've lived so much more of your life without me than the time we spent together…"

"No, Xena," Gabrielle said adamantly. "You can't think of it like that I don't. You may have died, but there hasn't been a day I've spent since we met that hasn't been 'with you.' Every single story, in every one of these books is informed and shaped by the impact you've had on my life." She pulled the third volume down and opened the book, handing it to Xena. "Think of Lao Ma," she said. "Would you argue that at any point she stopped having an impact on your life?"

Xena glanced at the story, seeing her own words, as she'd relayed them to Gabrielle, staring back at her. "I'm hardly Lao Ma," she muttered.

The bard shrugged. "Maybe you are to me." The watch on Gabrielle's wrist vibrated and she glanced at it. "Xena, tomorrow morning we're going to get back to Marina del Rey. I need to take Shen to his grandmother's house for him to collect some things and I'd like you to join me. I'd also like you to sit in on a meeting that I will be having with my department heads. That will be the day after tomorrow."

The warrior nodded. "Of course, Gabrielle."

"It's late though and I'd like to get some sleep," she glanced off in the direction of her quarters.

Xena nodded, taking in the spines of the various books once again. "Do you mind if I stay up and read for a while, I'd like to know a little about what I've missed and not have it come from a…" she searched her recent memory for the correct word, "reference book."

Gabrielle took a step towards the warrior and hugged her warmly, it felt good to be on the same wavelength again. “Absolutely. Goodnight Xena,” said and gave her an almost shy kiss. Still feeling awkward about the exchange, Xena watched her go then pulled the eighth volume from its shelf and opened it.

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“Gabrielle, we’re going to be at the Marina soon,” Michelle’s disembodied voice said through the cabin speaker. Opening one eye and then the other, Gabrielle replied to her captain then rolled over and looked at her watch in its charging stand. Turning her head in the other direction she saw Argo stretched out next to her, the muscular dog using the other pillow, dreaming contentedly her legs twitching, but no Xena. She got up and walked the short distance to her library, still in her t-shirt from sleeping. Xena was stretched out on one of the couches, an open journal flattened against her chest; a small pile of several other journals stacked on the floor nearby. She returned to her quarters to shower and got dressed in a comfortable pair of jeans, a soft t-shirt, and mechanic’s over shirt. She also pulled out a business suit to wear to her meeting the following day. While she was at it she decided to select some clothes for the warrior as well knowing Xena would have no idea what kind of attire would be appropriate for their day’s activities. She laid an outfit on the bed, jeans, thin hooded t-shirt and sneakers. She also put aside a suit that Aphrodite had purchased for the warrior for the next day’s business meeting. A moment later a quick note was sent to Blake to see to the ironing.

Returning to the library once again Gabrielle paused before touching Xena to wake her. With her eyes closed in sleep Gabrielle was once again reminded of that fateful day in Japan when she’d tried in vain to save her warrior’s life. It was almost like looking at a memory; the memory of a passion she had felt that she desperately wanted to feel again. Gabrielle had a perspective now that she did not have in her original life as she’d come to think of it. She glanced at the seven volumes on the top shelf of the book case, the seven books that represented their less than a decade together. She had had several relationships since then that had lasted more than twice that length. She thought of Mistos and William and several of the women she had partnered with over the centuries. The transition of a relationship from white hot passion to something more companionable was not alien to her, in some cases as with the men almost a relief, but she didn’t think that adequately described how she felt about Xena now either. She was saved from further self-reflection by blue eyes that fluttered open. “Good morning,” she said smiling down at Xena.

“I must have fallen asleep reading,” Xena said, a little embarrassed.

Gabrielle’s smile grew broader. “I can honestly say Xena, that is a sentence I never thought I’d hear coming from you.” The warrior sat up and rubbed her eyes. “Where did you leave off?”

“You were still in Egypt,” she replied. “Gabrielle, I’m very sorry that you thought I was talking to you all those years. Honestly, if I was a spirit I have absolutely no memory of it.”

“I’ve come to the realization it was my own grief talking,” she said. “Although at the time, it was a comfort to have you around. Our time together was cut unfairly short.” Gabrielle could sense that the conversation was steering in a direction that neither of them were ready to address at the moment so she changed the subject. “I’ve put some
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clothes out on the bed for you, for when we go to Susan's house. There is another outfit laid out for tomorrow's meeting, but those are going to get ironed- just wear the comfortable clothes. Culturally, bathing is a daily exercise here. In other parts of the world, not so much, but here obsessive cleanliness is a thing." The warrior nodded paying attention. Gabrielle had no doubt that Xena intended to master the customs of this place and time as she had with every other unusual situation she'd found herself in. She'd been a pirate, warrior, warlord she'd helped countless people, often by slipping in somewhere undetected, always fitting in. "There is an unusual looking undergarment," Gabrielle went on to explain, "it's called a 'bra' and it fastens in the back, it goes on under the t-shirt. Everything else should make sense. You can either use the bathtub or the shower like I showed you yesterday. Remember, the shampoo is first, then the conditioner."

"Which is just your hair and the body wash stuff goes all over, and the small brush is for the teeth- with the toothpaste," Xena replied carefully wanting to make sure she had it correct. She knew these instructions were basic and was determined not to need it explained a second time. Gabrielle nodded, unsure if she should hang around and wait for Xena to get ready in case there were any questions. "Gabrielle, I'm sure I'll be fine." The warrior said with more reassurance than she actually felt. "I've bested countless armies, remember? I'm not going to be defeated by getting dressed in the morning. Go ahead, I'll meet you on deck when I'm ready."

Gabrielle whistled for Argo who was at her side in an instant. She left the library leaving Xena to her own devices. She fed Argo before making her rounds to Vox, now recuperating in her own cabin, and to the bridge- somewhat surprised she hadn't encountered Aphrodite there. She enjoyed a quick cup of coffee as she touched base with Elaine who had just come on duty. Satisfied that everything was in order, she made her way to Shen's cabin to collect the boy. The door was slightly ajar but she softly knocked anyway.

"Come in," Shen replied. Gabrielle pushed the door open surprised to see Shen sitting on his bed and Nicolai sitting at the small desk. There was a tray sitting on the bed with some empty breakfast plates and a half-drunk glass of orange juice. Both Nicolai and Shen were sipping something hot and steaming from teacups. Immediately Gabrielle could tell that the boy had been crying although he wasn't at the moment. "Nicolai made me some syrniki for breakfast," he said, doing his best to sound cheerful. "And some porridge. I don't want to finish my orange juice; would you like it?"

Gabrielle accepted the glass that Shen handed her and took a sip. "Fresh squeezed," she said with a smile to the sous chef. "Very nice, thank you Nicolai."

The large man was wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt with a bright unicorn on the front- chosen she had no doubt to bring a smile or laugh to his companion. "We are drinking tea," he explained, "like the men do in Russia for breakfast."

"Ah, I see."

"I will take the tray back now," he continued, then to the boy added "you remember what I told you. There is no embarrassment with your family unless it's from too much Vodka. You will come and see me when you get back, I will need help in the kitchen." He picked up the tray, pausing so Gabrielle could deposit her now empty glass and left the cabin. She squeezed his arm in appreciation as he left. His sad smile spoke volumes.

"You know," Gabrielle began gently, 'you don't have to go to your house if you don't want to. I can take care of this stuff for you."

Shen nodded but seemed resolute. "I know. Nicolai told me you'd say that. But you're going to decide what to do with grandma's stuff and my stuff right? What to put in storage or bring to the boat?" Gabrielle nodded knowing it wasn't going to be easy for him. "I think I should be there, even if I'm not sure what to store or what to take." She hugged the boy- a hug he returned very tightly and noted that his hair was still a little damp from an obvious recent shower. She had been around enough children to know that his valiant attempt to be brave, and mature and do all the right things was not going to last. He was nearing his breaking point and a melt-down was imminent- she just didn't know when or where it was going to happen.

She grabbed a jacket for Shen and followed the boy through the ship, Argo trailing behind him to the stern where the taxi boat would meet them. Xena and Aphrodite were already there, the warrior holding an extra jacket that was hers. Gabrielle was taken aback at the sight of the pair of them. Xena, freshly showered with her hair neatly combed dressed as unremarkably as anyone else in the marina in a t-shirt and jeans. Still, she stood out. It was her posture, her remarkably fit body her intense gaze that set her apart from everyone. Gabrielle was happy that the sight of her made her stop and take notice. It was almost like remembering the lyrics to a song you thought forgotten or the steps to a dance from childhood. Aphrodite on the other hand was dressed in a casual retro fifties dress with a cardigan sweater matching purse and heels. Part of the clothing line she'd purchased when fitting out Xena's wardrobe, she looked like she might be going off somewhere for a fancy brunch or meeting. "You guys look great," she said joining them. "Thank you for grabbing my jacket, Xena."

Xena handed over the jacket, smiling at Gabrielle and returned Shen's offered fist-bump. "Hey Shen," she said. He nodded in reply, clearly not really trusting himself to talk.

"I know it's a bit cooler today," Aphrodite said conversationally, "but it might be sunny later on. Shen, I picked these up for you. If it's sunny, I thought they might be useful. Xena I got you a pair as well." With that she extracted two pairs of sunglasses from her purse and hand handed one to each of them. Xena took the case and watched Shen as he opened his, following suit.

"Oh cool!" he said, donning the pair of Wayfarers. "These are like the sunglasses you and Gabrielle wear."

"Not quite as old, but yes," Aphrodite said.

Gabrielle smiled at her knowing full well she'd given them to him so he could cry less self-consciously and was touched by the gesture. She noticed that Xena held onto the case, not trying the glasses on and was grateful for that as well. There was no disguising the look of wonderment and disbelief on Xena's face as the huge vessel approached the spot where it was going to anchor. The marina spread out before them with its vast array of boats, beyond the boats were the neighborhoods and business districts with the ever-present assortment of cars. "This is unbelievable," Xena muttered under her breath.

"Where are you headed today?" Gabrielle asked Aphrodite as the taxi-boat carried them the short distance to the marina.

"I'm going to check in with Dwayne and have lunch with Max's eldest daughter Kara. I'm also going to pick up some things for our upcoming trip to D.C…"

Gabrielle was going to respond when Aphrodite's expression stopped her. She looked pointedly at Xena who was staring in disbelief in the direction they were headed. Aphrodite pointed out a flock of pelicans flying low over the surface of the water and nudged Shen over a little way to get a better view, trying to afford them some limited privacy. "Xena, what's the matter?" Gabrielle asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Is it the cars?"

"By the gods," Xena whispered back, "I saw them in Shen's book of course but I had no idea… this is…science?"

Gabrielle urged the warrior to take a couple more steps towards the back of the boat, further away from Aphrodite and Shen. "Xena, you told me that you learned to swim by Torus tossing you into a local lake, right?" When the warrior nodded, she continued. "Today is going to be like that. There is a lot that you're going to take in that will either seem impossible, or it won't make sense or it will seem silly. This isn't going to be all that different from all those times when you left me at one tavern or another while you had to go fight some bandits. I had to trust that you'd come back for me, but I also had to trust that you weren't bringing me along because I really wasn't ready for that kind of combat. The twist here is, while you're not ready to come along to fight the bandits- I'm bringing you anyway and you are going to just have to trust that I will explain all of the things that seem strange later. Even for a person who has lost their memory, there are things that Shen is going to expect you to be familiar with, or at least not freaked out by."

Xena nodded forcing a smile to her face that almost looked natural. "I hope you appreciate now the wisdom of me not taking you fight the bandits back then." Argo nudged her comfortingly, expecting to get her ears scratched.

"If it's any consolation, none of the things we encounter today will put you in harm's way. Cars are just as safe as horses. Besides, you're immortal now, more indestructible than ever." As they disembarked the familiar face of Ed standing in-between two cars greeted them in the parking lot. One of the cars was the Tesla she'd been driving of late, the other- from storage, was a vintage Mustang convertible, painted candy apple red. Gabrielle looked at the goddess with a smirk. "Figures," she muttered.

"Hey!" Aphrodite protested, "*you* said anything from inventory. It's your car. I'm just helping you out by driving it some."

"Woman after my own heart," Ed said cheerfully as he handed her the keys.

"Be careful," Gabrielle urged, "that thing is a magnet for speeding tickets."

"You'll have to tell me which department to send the speeding tickets to for payment," Aphrodite replied with a chuckle. She gave each of them a hug, including Shen who didn't seem to mind. "I'll text you when I head back to the ship."

"This is us," Gabrielle gesturing at the other car. She opened the gullwing door so Shen could get in the back with Argo, then opened the door for Xena. When she sat down she carefully fastened her seatbelt, watching as Xena followed her actions. Had the circumstances been more jovial, she might have taken delight at the warrior's expression as she started the car and followed Aphrodite in the Mustang out of the parking lot. Trying to casually grip the sides of her seat with her hands, it was clear her companion was as amazed by the automobile as she had been when she'd ridden in her very first Model T. As it was she felt sympathy for both of her passengers, Shen for his pain and Xena for her confusion. Argo was the only one who seemed to be having a good time.

Aside from morning traffic the drive to the Pacific Palisades was an uneventful one. Gabrielle checked the rearview mirror from time to time, not surprised that the boy was wearing his sunglasses even though it wasn't sunny yet. She was also thinking about where they were going, the dinners she'd had in this house. Susan had asked her opinion about the investment when Trixie was small and she and Tom needed a larger place. The room that had once been her daughter's became her grandson's and it wasn't all that long ago she'd helped Susan redecorate it after its stint as a guest room. She parked in the driveway and waited for the others to join her before unlocking the door and stepping inside. It was hard to believe this might be her last visit here. While she'd had countless 'last visits' to houses over the years for a variety of reasons, they were generally nostalgic sometimes painful, like this.

Choking up a little Gabrielle looked around, already making inventories in her head- instructions she'd give to SP personnel about what to put into storage for Shen and what to dispose of, most likely by donation to a worthwhile charity. One advantage of knowing a family for three generations, she had very clear knowledge of which items were of value both sentimental and monetary.

Shen opened the door to his room and stepped inside followed by Gabrielle, Xena, and Argo. He looked around as did his guests. There were superhero posters; Avengers from Marvel, and Wonder Woman from DC, action figures, meticulously crafted models and some glass sculptures sitting on a nearby shelf. "I guess I need my clothes," he said. He was quiet a moment then cleared his throat. Gabrielle could see his eyes misting over as he'd left his sunglasses in the car. "Um…can I…can I have a few minutes to do this by myself?" he asked. The bard nodded and kissed the top of his head before holding the door open for Xena. Argo looked hesitant, not wanting to leave Shen but Gabrielle called her and she obeyed.

The two women walked into the living room, not far from the bedroom, now with a closed door. Gabrielle typed some notes in her phone as to what items from there to store. In moments the first crash was heard and Xena started back towards the bedroom, only to be stopped by Gabrielle. "Let him be," she said firmly.

"Gabrielle, something just fell over in there," she said, concern threading her voice. She started to move again and Gabrielle pushed back, forcefully.

"He's destroying his room Xena," she said. "He's venting. He's a mess right now and he needs some time to be a mess. I did the same thing the first time you died. I destroyed a staff and a palm tree." Her words were punctuated by the sound of another loud sound of something breaking.

Xena shook her head, the worry evident on her features. "Gabrielle, you can talk to him. He needs reassurance. This isn't how you handle grief. He could hurt himself."

"I'm sorry Xena," the bard said, adamant. "But he needs to get this out of his system." The sounds of breakage continued and the warrior looked more frantic.

"But he's destroying…"

"It's just stuff, Xena."

"Gabrielle, you need to listen to me." The warriors voice had shifted from trying to persuade to something more commanding.

"Xena, I've raised 5 children and countless grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I think I know what I'm doing here." As soon as the words left her mouth Gabrielle regretted it. Xena looked like she'd been slapped, not unlike how she had felt

the day before. “I am sorry Xena, I…” Her apology was cut short by a howl of pain from the other room. In a heartbeat, the bard was through the door to Shen’s room to find the boy standing there with a hand to the side of his face, blood trailing down his cheek, oozing between his fingers.

“What happened?” Gabrielle asked calmly as she grabbed a pillowcase from a pillow on the bed and put it to his face to staunch the bleeding.

“I threw the Hulk over there and it hit a glass thing which flew back this way.” He said between sniffles.

“Xena, please make sure Argo stays out there,” Gabrielle said after a brief glance at the boy’s face. Noting that it was a superficial injury and that the glass shard had missed his eye, she relaxed and surveyed the room. “There is glass all over the floor and I don’t want her to cut her feet.”

The warrior had been about to enter the room and stopped short, keeping the pit bull on the other side of the door, although she whined in protest.

Gabrielle held the pillowcase firmly in place then replaced her hand with Shen’s. “The Hulk. It figures. Hold this here,” she instructed. “Let’s go into the kitchen where the light is better and Argo can chill out.” She followed the boy out of the room, firmly closing the door behind her. Argo snuffled at Shen’s free hand until he stooped down to pet her. Once in the kitchen, Shen climbed up on a stool at the bar while Gabrielle turned on the lights and did another quick inspection of the wound. The room was cheery and bright, contrasting mightily with the mood of its inhabitants. “I think there is a first aid kit in the bathroom, I’m going to go get it.”

Once Gabrielle left, Shen was about to lower his hand and Xena stopped him. “Here,” she said. “I’ll hold it.” She kept firm pressure on the wound and regarded the boy. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, matter-of-factly.

“No,” he said glumly.

“Okay.”

“Life isn’t fair,” he added.

“No, it is not,” Xena agreed.

“I was just starting to not be sad all the time,” he whispered. Xena touched his shoulder reassuringly knowing that anything she could say in this moment could sound trite and empty. “I know you’re sad too,” he added. She nodded.

Gabrielle returned with the first aid kid and Xena gently lowered the pillowcase. The bard replaced it with a gauze pad and dabbed at the cut with some antiseptic. “The good news Moose, is that there are butterfly bandages in here we can use instead of giving you stitches, even if stitches might teach a more meaningful lesson.” Shen grunted non-committedly and let her work, flinching a bit at the cold antiseptic. Carefully holding the wound closed, skilled fingers applied several of the small bandages in a neat row. “I don’t think it will leave a scar, but if it does it will just make you look more roguish.” She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment before softly asking “is there anything left in your room to keep besides the clothes?” He nodded mutely in the affirmative, his lower lip starting to quiver.

Reaching down, Gabrielle hugged Shen tightly and picked him up. He burst out crying with the same level of desperation and ferocity that Gabrielle had days earlier when Susan had died. He wrapped his legs around her middle and his arms around her shoulders burying his face in her neck as he cried. Gabrielle wasn’t tall and Shen wasn’t

short but in this moment, he seemed like a much younger much smaller child, frightened and lost. Strong arms held him tightly and securely. Gabrielle walked the living room rocking him and reassuring him that in time, all would be oaky. Xena watched transfixed. This was something she'd never been able to be with Solon, something Gabrielle was not able to be with Hope. It was obvious by her tone and movement that she'd done this countless times before. While Xena ached watching something she'd chosen not to have, she wasn't jealous. Rather she felt awed watching Gabrielle and watching Shen as he quieted and after several minutes, slipped into sleep.

"Xena, could you pick up my phone?" Gabrielle asked softly, not wanting to wake the boy. The warrior nodded and did as she was asked, typing in the security code and opening the app with the bard's notes. The two of them walked through the house and the bard dictated notes about each room, what items to keep and what to donate.

"What will happen to this house?" Xena asked quietly, looking around in wonder at the beautifully appointed home.

"I need to see Susan's official will of course," Gabrielle replied. "But I suspect she owns it free and clear and it belongs to Shen now. I will have it cleaned out, maybe use it as a rental property, for the time being while he's young and when the time comes, turn it over to him with the proceeds from the rent." The warrior nodded, feeling like she understood the gist of what Gabrielle was saying.

"Does everyone live in places like this?"

"No," Gabrielle answered. "My company pays really well because I'm not in it for myself. Some people live better than this, of course but most not as well."

Silence hung in the room like an uninvited guest. Xena looked around; she recognized some of the objects around her and was mystified by others. Not knowing what else to say, she spoke her mind. "So you had five children?"

"Xena, that's not how I wanted to tell you," Gabrielle replied softly.

"I know."

Gabrielle sighed and listened to the rhythmic breathing of the boy in her arms. Confident he was truly asleep she continued quietly. "It was about a hundred years after you died. His name was Mistos. We had a decent life together and my children were wonderful. Two boys, Lyceus and Minos and three girls, Lila, Arianna and Xena." Gabrielle looked over at her companion and could see her eyes misting up- she was touched by the gesture. "They all married and had children and it was excruciating out living them and the grandchildren. I began to pull away when the great-grandchildren came along and had fully pulled away when they reached adulthood. I've had limited interaction with my descendants since then. I know there are still some in Salem- in the United States- and some in Greece and a few other places but I'm not attached." Gabrielle was quiet a moment before continuing. "In the interest of full disclosure, I've had several marriages to men, and a handful of long term relationships with women. Depending where you are marriages to women aren't always legal. I've genuinely loved all of my partners, and it's all in the journals, I didn't hide anything."

"The last thing I would ever want Gabrielle, is for you to be alone." Xena said, her voice soft and sincere. "I won't lie though, it's hard to take all of this in." She felt the urge to hesitate but didn't. "I know you don't feel the same…as you did. I can't expect you to feel like no time has passed when so much of it has." She could see the bard's eyes glisten with unshed tears as they made their way back to the boy's room. "We need to

focus on this Ares thing and then see where we're at. It's not like I'm going anywhere." Xena smiled as she spoke, putting a more positive spin on things than she actually felt. She didn't think Gabrielle believed her, but could also sense her companion was grateful for the gesture and for the space and time that gesture implied. They entered Shen's room once again and Xena shut the door to keep Argo away from the glass. "Should we clean this up?" she asked looking at the mess on the floor. All of the models were broken, the sculptures shattered. Some of the posters were ripped, only the Spiderman poster appeared to have survived. There were a couple of awards, both scholastic and athletic that still hung on the walls and some photos on a bulletin board as well as an autographed picture of Scarlett Johansson with Shen from ComicCon.

"I've got people for that," Gabrielle said. "I'll have a team pack up the place. I think there are a couple of empty boxes in the garage. I want to take his clothes, some of the photos, awards- the Spiderman poster and these stuffed animals with us. There are also a couple of things from Susan's bedroom and the living room I want to take. The rest SP can handle. Let's go back to the living room, and could you bring that bear with us?"

Xena followed Gabrielle with the stuffed bear and watched achingly as the bard managed to get the boy situated on the couch without waking him up. Indeed, there was a practiced ease to how she moved, lifting his arm and wrapping it around his bear, that implied that she'd done this many, many times before. Solon came to mind again and a glance to Gabrielle's face told the warrior that the bard's thoughts were travelling the same path. Even all of these years later there was a haunted look of regret, and an inability to make eye contact that told Xena that Gabrielle still felt remorse about what had happened.

"He's lucky to have you," Xena said, feeling like she should say something; the tension was palpable.

Taking a measured breath, Gabrielle replied, "when I had children of my own, real, human, wonderful amazing children, it brought back how ridiculously naive and foolish I'd been about Hope. I know we got past it, that we forgave each other- but even now I'm still disappointed in myself that…" she stopped and shook her head. "I just wish I'd done better by you Xena," she said. "That's all."

Knowing how hard it is to take the advice that is so easily given, Xena nodded. "I forgave you, Gabrielle," she said. "You need to forgive yourself." The bard smiled at her, a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "We should get back to your list?" Xena asked.

Visibly relieved, Gabrielle nodded and they spent much of the next hour moving from room to room making the appropriate inventories for the Special Projects Division.

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The drive back to *The Hippolyta* had been a somber one. Shen was silent in the back seat, glumly looking out the window through his sunglasses with Argo's large head resting on his lap. Xena and Gabrielle were each lost to their own thoughts thinking about the other. Gabrielle was disappointed that nothing in her two thousand plus years of living had prepared her for her current circumstance. Sure, there had been times in her life, times too numerous to count where someone had stronger feelings for her than she had for them. But this was Xena and that state of being was unacceptable. Still, she knew enough that emotions couldn't be forced, not with any hope of longevity at any rate so she hoped that with time the shock or whatever she
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wasn't feeling would subside and the universe could return to its normal axis. Xena on the other hand inwardly reminisced about first meeting the bard.

Almost instantly she felt drawn to the younger woman. Sure, the interest was strictly physical at first, but given Gabrielle's innocence Xena considered it part of her overall redemption to not indulge her appetites as she would have in the fairly recent past. Knowing now, that on a rainy night in a leaky barn near Thebes that Gabrielle felt the same way she did shifted her perspective. She felt like she now understood how the bard must have felt all those years ago yearning for a connection that she did not feel was reciprocated. Blue eyes gazed out the passenger window marveling at the vehicles whizzing past that at once fascinated and terrified her.

"Are you hungry Shen?" Gabrielle's voice broke the silence as she glanced into her rearview mirror at the boy.

"No," he answered glumly, staring at his feet. Argo lifted her head from his lap and cocked it to the side, chuffing softly.

"Argo says you're not being completely honest," Gabrielle observed, as she smoothly changed lanes.

Shen frowned and looked at Gabrielle, then back at the dog. "That's impossible," he said. "You're teasing me."

"Try it out for yourself," the bard replied with a shrug.

Shen looked at the dog. "I can fly," he said. Argo looked back and reached her head up to lick his face. "See," he said to Gabrielle.

"Moose, you've ridden on the company jet and helicopter more times than I can count. Isn't that flying?"

At first uncertain, his expression changed to serious which Gabrielle saw in the mirror and knew she'd made a big mistake. "Grandma isn't…grandma isn't…" he was starting to get choked up with the question and the bard was furious with herself. What was meant to be a diversion clearly wasn't and she should have considered this possibility.

"I'm three hundred years old," Xena said quickly hoping to distract the boy.

The dog barked once and poked the warrior's shoulder with her nose.

"And I had chocolate cake for breakfast," Gabrielle added, relieved beyond measure that her dog barked once again, this time eliciting a chuckle from the ten year old.

"Cake for breakfast- I wish," he muttered, looking at Gabrielle. "There has to be some sort of trick," he continued seriously. "A dog doesn't know what three hundred years means or know if your breakfast was called 'chocolate cake' or not. I just can't see how you're signaling her."

"A magician never reveals her secrets," Gabrielle assured him, relieved beyond measure that Xena had jumped in and that he'd decided this was a magic trick. "Even so, we're going to get off the freeway and have some lunch."

She stopped at a restaurant that she knew the boy liked. It was fancy enough that that the trio were on the receiving end of dismissive looks from some of the other diners as they rolled in wearing jeans and t-shirts. Xena seemed particularly aware of the eyes following them. Assured that the attention was just from their wardrobe, Gabrielle allowed herself to relax and let her lips crease into a smile as she followed Xena and Shen to their table. Like she'd done so many times in the past, the warrior took the seat

with her back to the rich wood paneling so she could see the entrance. By taking this position, Shen was seated safely in-between the two of them.

"Xena, it's safe," Gabrielle said quietly as they took their seats. "I'm confident we weren't followed, none of his people are here."

"There are a number of people looking at us," Xena whispered back.

Gabrielle opened her menu, wondering what the specials of the day might be. "It's only because we're underdressed," she assured her companion.

Shen was also surveying his menu, often looking out the window behind Gabrielle where he had an unobstructed view of Argo, laying down quite peacefully in the shade of a small tree. "People always get the wrong idea about Gabrielle—I mean Susan," the boy said after closing his menu. The warrior's brows furrowed in confusion as she looked at the bard. "When we're out in public like this, she usually goes by Susan Vincent because it matches her credit card." Shen explained in hushed tones to Xena. "It's so people don't freak out because she's a billionaire." His eyes grew misty and he sat back, straight in his seat "at least that's what Grandma said. If Mr. Pink is here, you'll see. He'll treat, ah, Susan like she's Lady Gaga."

"Lady who?" Xena asked, perplexed.

"Thank you, Shen," Gabrielle said gently. "I'll take it from here." She smiled a bit bashfully at the warrior. "He's basically right. I don't really look the part in places like this unless I really have to and…" Her explanation was cut short when a short bald man with a moustache hurried over to the table.

"Miss Vincent," he said with a slight bow as he took her hand and quickly kissed her knuckles. "So very good to see you again." Several of the other patrons noticed the lavish attention and the ambient noise level in the dining room dropped slightly. "I've sent Sven out to take some refreshment to dear Argo and would love to tell you the specials." He smiled and turned to Shen shaking the boys hand "Mr. Teal, very good to see you sir." Gabrielle could see that he did a double take at Shen's injury and was happy that he was too polite to mention it. Instead, he turned to Xena. "Miss, I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"This is a very dear friend of mine…" Gabrielle began.

"Miss Romanoff," Shen supplied helpfully. Green eyes darted to the boy with a distinct frown.

"Miss Romanoff, you are radiant," the short man said, taking her hand as he had with Gabrielle.

"Natasha, this is Gordon Pink, he owns the restaurant," Gabrielle said smoothly, cocking her head knowingly at Shen who grinned ear to ear, his first genuine smile of the day.

"It's nice to meet you," Xena said as she glanced at her two companions.

With the specials of the day considered, Gabrielle ordered something that she thought Xena might like. As she expected, Xena simply requested the same as her companion. Shen asked for something off the menu and Mr. Pink was more than happy to oblige him.

"Everyone gets a fake name?" Xena quietly asked Shen when Mr. Pink had returned to the kitchen with their order.

"Just the adults I think," the boy replied. "The ones that are high up in the company at any rate. Grandma had a few different passports with different names.

Natasha Romanoff is one of the Avengers. She's called Black Widow and she's a superhero."

"Well that sounds like a great name then." Xena agreed. "I'd like to be a superhero. I think."

When the food arrived, Gabrielle was grateful that Shen dug into his meal with enthusiasm. Sadness tended to eclipse her sense of hunger and she was grateful that the growing boy now in her care did not seem hindered by that affliction. After a few silent moments of eating, the boy looked over at Gabrielle, a genuinely curious expression on his face. "Does this mean you have to adopt me, Gabrielle?" he asked.

There was no hiding the expression of love and concern that he saw reflected back in the bard's face. "Moose, it's never a question of 'have to' honey. It would be a tremendous honor for me to adopt you; but it would be up to you. I think there will be some documents of your grandmother's I will be reviewing tomorrow and she may have left specific instructions. Still, I think she would want me to keep an eye on you which is why your mom asked me to be your godmother."

He listened intently, his expression serious as he looked from one of his companions to the other. "Would you both be adopting me?" Xena could tell that he was nervous, genuinely wanting to know, but afraid of overstepping as he had when he introduced the warrior to the ship's engineer.

"That might be a bit premature of a conversation at this point, Shen." Xena said gently. "I'm still getting back on my feet, and Gabrielle and I aren't… married." Xena glanced to Gabrielle to check if she'd framed it correctly and the bard's gentle smile told her she had. Shen nodded sagely, taking it all in. "But adopted or not," Xena continued, "you can always count on me to be your friend. Like Vox, Aphrodite and everyone on the ship- you have a lot of friends you can count on and as you grow up you'll realize what an important thing that is to have."

He pushed the last few remaining gnocchi around on his plate deciding what to ask next. "How did you two meet…and become friends? And how did you get lost?" Xena smiled at Shen then turned to Gabrielle.

"You're better at telling this story than I am," she said, her rich voice tinged with amusement as she picked up her wine glass, marveling at the wine and the meal she was enjoying. Food had certainly improved in many respects in the twenty centuries she'd missed.

Gabrielle dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin before proceeding. "I was young," she began, "maybe six or seven years older than you are now, Shen. The…city that I grew up in was having some trouble with some…bad people coming to town."

"Like the angry thugs that march for the President?" Shen asked, genuinely concerned. "Or a drug cartel?"

"Sort of," Gabrielle agreed. "More like the thugs than a drug cartel. Anyway, I decided to leave town and that's when I met Xena. She had…left her previous job and was looking to start a new career doing something different. She wanted to use her skills in a different line of work. So we became sort of a team and I helped her. With her work."

"What kind of work?" Shen asked, not the least bit unexpectedly.

“Crime fighting.” Xena supplied, talking around a forkful of fish she’d just put into her mouth.

“Really?” Shen asked, impressed. “Like Black Widow? So you *are* a super hero!”

“I guess,” Xena agreed after thinking about it for a moment. “I mean, we didn’t have secret identities. But we did help people who were being bullied, or solved a mystery here and there. Sometimes we came up against some pretty devious villains.”

Once again Shen looked critically from Gabrielle to Xena and back, clearly trying to determine if the warrior was telling the truth or not. For her part Gabrielle smiled shyly at Xena. The taciturn warrior was not known for her story telling ability but here she’d come up with a fairly accurate and twenty-first century plausible explanation of their years of adventure. Gabrielle readily admitted to herself that she could not have come up with a better story.

“Is that why you run an organization that does the same kind of work now?” Shen asked curiously as he helped himself to another piece of garlic bread.

“Did your grandmother tell you that?” Gabrielle asked, wondering how on earth he’d gotten that idea.

With a shrug, the boy finished his lunch, just as Mr. Pink came by with a tray of assorted desserts, leaving it at the table for the trio to try. “Well, once I asked grandma what you did with all your money,” he explained. “She said that you had different parts of your company set up to help people in different ways. And that the reason you made money was so you could help more people. She said it was for the greater good.”

“That sounds like Gabrielle,” Xena affirmed.

“And you learned how to help people from Xena?” He asked.

“I’d say we figured it out together,” the warrior corrected him gently.

Chapter 12: Battlelines

A crisp and clear night afforded Xena and Gabrielle an unobstructed view of a meteor shower from the upper deck of *The Hippolyta*. The ship was quiet, precocious ten year olds long since tucked into bed, and an efficient crew invisibly went about their nighttime duties. Xena had built a fire in the small fire pit not far from the barbeque and the saltwater swimming pool. It didn’t take much of an imagination for either woman to imagine themselves being many years in the past, traveling from one place to another stopping for the night. Somewhat guiltily, Gabrielle was grateful that Aphrodite wasn’t back yet, or if she was, that she was elsewhere on the ship. For this moment at any rate, the bard felt on the same page as her companion and she did not want to risk any intrusion that might upset the harmony they seemed to have arrived at. Relieved to not be arguing for the moment, they enjoyed an ease in their rapport that hadn’t happened since the warrior’s resurrection.

“This is a thirty-one year old whiskey, from the United Kingdom,” Gabrielle explained, handing Xena a glass. “It’s called Craigellachie.”

The warrior smiled approvingly after tasting the amber colored liquid. “And ‘United Kingdom’ is England, what used to be Britannia?” she asked.

“Yes, with Scotland, Whales, and Northern Ireland. You’ve picked up so much so fast Xena.” Gabrielle took the glass back and quickly rinsed it out with some water, letting the run off spill on the deck. She poured a pale-yellow liquid from the collection

of bottles that covered the table next to her. “This one is a whiskey from Finland. It’s only ten years old and is called Teerepeli.”

“It’s the same color as the white wine from lunch. The chardonnay.” Xena observed as she sniffed the glass before trying its contents. “Definitely not the same stuff. I like it. It reminds me of fruit…and straw, I think. The older one would be better for spitting fire though.” Xena grinned, her mood clearly enhanced by all of the spirits she’d sampled thus far. What are those clear bottles over there.”

Gabrielle allowed herself a giggle before gently pushing the warrior’s hands away from the bottles. “Not so fast Xena,” she said. “There is a methodology here. We’re going in order. The vodka and gin will come after the rum. But first a tequila.” Gabrielle knew she was just pretending, putting loss, danger, and complications out of her mind and enjoying the simple pleasure of introducing her friend to a world of alcohol, but she also knew that these moments of putting everything else aside and enjoying something simple were fleeting. She poured two shots from an ornate hand painted bottle, then handed the bottle to the warrior.

“ Dos Artes Extra, Anejo Reserva Tequila,” Xena said, Reading the bottle. “It’s beautiful,” she added after tasting the dark amber liquid. “Both inside and out. It looks expensive?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “It’s about one hundred twenty dollars a bottle. Hard to adjust that into dinars from the old days. Let’s say it would have been well out of our price range. You’d have been able to get a new sword and armor for the same price.”

Xena looked at the bottle with newfound respect as the bard switched to the next spirit.

“I have a question for you,” Xena asked, trying a sip of the Bundaberg dark rum from Australia she’d been offered. “what’s a billionaire? I mean it sounds like a made-up number. I’ve never heard of a ‘billion dinars’.”

“It means I have a ridiculous amount of money. It *is* absolutely made up.” Gabrielle replied, offering her a spiced rum from the United Kingdom next. “Think about all of the royalty we ever encountered in all of our travels together. King Lias, King Gregor, King Kaltor, Helen- all of them. If you were to add all their wealth together, with their lands, their treasures, everything. I’m sitting on top of many, many times more than that. Here try this coconut rum; it’s one of my favorites.” She passed the glass over and noticed the puzzled look on her companion’s face – that wasn’t about the drink. “Over a thousand years ago I realized that money, and a very patient long view of life, would be key to my survival,” she explained. “I’ve seen governments and armies come and go. The Pharaohs ended, the Knights Templar ended, hell even the Whig political party of this country disappeared. Some endings are great – the Nazis getting put down in Germany was a very good day. Other endings are like a knife to the heart – like seeing the Native American tribes all but wiped out here was tragic. With that in mind, I’ve learned to put wealth aside, let it accrue in value to fund the things we’ve always believed in, the greater good. I also use the resources to keep me safe, to maintain a worldwide network of informants about everything from political movements to financial opportunities- in addition to my search for the intel I’d need to get you back of course. I’d suspect that I’m one of the wealthier individuals on the planet. I don’t know if I’m still the richest, but I’m probably still in the top five. Xena, I know you think I’ve done a terrible job of it, but I have tried to combat the forces of Ares the whole time I’ve been looking for Aphrodite in

order to get you back. Even if I didn't realize how much Ares was taking an active hand in everything, I was still fighting his darkness."

They had moved onto vodka and Xena accepted the offered glass of Russian Zyr without speaking. She downed its contents enjoying the warmth that radiated from the clear liquid as it traveled down her throat. She heard what the bard was saying but had to admit she was only half listening. The orange of the firelight danced off Gabrielle's green eyes the way it always did. If this had been Ancient Greece, the bard might have been wearing her green top, brown skirt and leather boots; her toned muscles thrown into greater relief by the firelight. If this had been Ancient Greece she might have leaned across the small distance between them and kissed her, knowing her kiss would be warmly received and returned with earnest. There were so many times they'd undressed each other in the fire-light oblivious to how cold it might have been and enjoyed each other completely and fallen into a satisfied sleep, content with a horse named Argo to keep watch.

But this wasn't Ancient Greece. Xena studied the woman sitting next to her wearing jeans, a sweatshirt over her t-shirt, and not wearing any shoes. Gabrielle's eyes met hers and the bard looked away, cheeks flushed; embarrassed. Xena knew the ardor was visible on her face and feeling the warmth of the alcohol, she was not inclined to hide it. She smiled, not minding her companion's discomfort. After several different vodkas she tried the gin and frowned. "Okay, I'm not a fan of that one," she said.

"It's better if you have it served as a gin and tonic," the bard said, making eye contact hesitantly. There was no mistaking the stirring that Gabrielle felt, almost like a once forgotten song that comes back to you, the sound soft and warm.

Xena smirked. It felt good to know that she could still read her companion to some extent at any rate. In addition to the 'I said something important and you're not listening to me' look, she saw attraction in those green eyes. It was doubtful she even realized how dependent she'd grown on the bard's love for her, until she felt apart from it. She put the desire to lean over and kiss her companion to the side and addressed the more practical concern. "Have you considered that while what you've built is a fantastic way to fight for the greater good, you might need to shift your forces somewhat to combat Ares directly? Do you know what kind of forces he's supporting? How long he's been active here?"

Gabrielle nodded in agreement. "I suspected Ares was here on earth all along- not on Olympus. I didn't really know for sure that he was in America right now or who he was posing as until just before we got you back. That is a big piece of the puzzle. I've got some people working on uncovering everything there is to know about Gideon Power. When we know who this guy is, what he's involved with we will have a better handle on how to confront it. I've been doing my homework, Xena. It's what we're going to discuss in the meeting tomorrow. We're going to come up with a plan of attack."

Xena nodded and had her attention diverted by Argo who came bounding up the steps to greet them. As the pit bull approached Gabrielle felt a presence at the back of her mind. Almost as if permission was being asked to join them. "I think Aphrodite just returned to the ship," Gabrielle said, scratching her dog behind the ears. "Argo lets me know whenever someone comes aboard if she's not already with me." Her connection to Xena in the moment felt too good to risk damaging it by giving voice to the goddess communicating directly with her in her mind.

"You should have her join us," the warrior suggested. "She's more of an expert on Ares than she lets on. And what did you say about her being able to detect someone lying?" Xena asked, as she accepted the affectionate greeting she was offered by the pit bull.

"It was something Aphrodite did to her." Gabrielle explained as she texted the goddess. "She said it's an ability dogs have to begin with, she just encouraged Argo to be more vocal about it."

"That could be useful if you get her in the same room with the right people," Xena observed.

Gabrielle considered her comment as Aphrodite made her way across the deck followed by Michelle and Vox. There was no doubt that the ship's captain was off duty because her curly brown hair was down, falling in tight ringlets around her shoulders.

"Nicolai mentioned you'd just about emptied the liquor cabinet and I've got to admit I was curious, Aphrodite thought it'd be okay if we joined you guys." Michelle said as the trio approached.

"I had a feeling this wasn't strictly a private party," Aphrodite said with a slight wink to the bard.

"Please, pull up a seat," Gabrielle said as the newcomers joined them. She couldn't help but notice that Vox took the seat next to Xena and the two greeted each other with a fist bump.

Xena shifted, a little uncomfortable before speaking to Michelle, "I…ah…forgot a lot about the spirits of the day and…"

"It's okay, Xena – I know," the captain said grinning broadly at the warrior. "The whole crew. We know you're from Gabrielle's time but that you've been in some sort of stasis, we know that's what the 'amnesia' is." Gabrielle looked over to Aphrodite who shook her head.

"I didn't tell them anything," she said.

"We figured it out on our own," Michelle explained. "I'll admit, it took some effort to wrap our heads around your situation," the statuesque captain continued with a nod to the bard, "but once you get past you being over two thousand, and Aphrodite being *the* Aphrodite – anything after that isn't as heavy a lift."

Gabrielle's eyes briefly met Vox's and the engineer shrugged. "So, is this a booze free for all?" she asked hopefully.

"Have at it," the bard replied gesturing at the bottles with relief. The engineer's tone assured her that she'd kept her word about Xena having died. 'Stasis' was as plausible an explanation as any.

"Great, I've got to introduce you to this great drink that Wolfgang and I came up with while I was still in sick bay."

"You're not supposed to drink in there," Gabrielle replied with a frown.

"Whatever, it was pain management. Anyway…" she said stepping behind the outdoor kitchen counter by the barbecue. She rummaged through a cabinet and extracted five martini glasses. Working with practiced efficiency, she rimmed the glasses with honey then pink sugar from a bottle in the drawer. Not over doing the flare, she handled the bottles and ice like a skilled professional.

"I had a summer job as an underage bartender," she explained as she filled a shaker with ice then added pineapple-mango vodka, then coconut rum. From the fridge

below the counter extracted a Monster Pipeline Punch energy drink and added that to the glasses after she'd poured the shaken spirits.

The quartet of women took the offered glasses and each sipped took an experimental sip. The quartet of smiles was obviously appreciated in the bashful grin they received in return.

"This is fantastic!" Gabrielle said beaming.

"Really nice," Michelle echoed. "What do you and Wolfgang call it?"

With cheeks now flushing pink the engineer mumbled. "Wolfie really wants to call it an 'Aphrodite' and I can't think of anything better so…"

"I must say I'm honored," the goddess said with a wink. "Even if I'm not the biggest fan of the color pink."

Xena looked at her in surprise, "well that's a switch," she said.

"Given enough time we all evolve Xena," the goddess replied. "But a very nicely balanced drink I must say- cheers!"

Clearly uncomfortable with the attention focused on her, Vox cleared her throat and addressed Gabrielle. "Were you guys up here plotting how we take down Ares?"

"Not exactly," Xena admitted as she finished her drink and passed the glass back to the engineer to prepare another.

Aware that she could feel her relaxed inebriation fading as she began to think more seriously Gabrielle admitted a trifle guiltily, "Mostly we were drinking."

"Shen had a rough day?" Aphrodite asked sympathetically as she studied the duo watching the two of them nod in agreement.

"He was due for a melt-down and he had it." Gabrielle explained. "Poor guy has been through so much."

"Fortunately, children are pretty resilient," the goddess replied. "Do you think he's still in danger?"

Taking another sip of her drink, Gabrielle shrugged. "Ares used Susan as leverage against me," she said. "I could see him using Shen as leverage as well, if he knows about him. He was hell bent on us not…reviving Xena, so now that we have, I don't know what his angle would be. There is a viciousness to Ares that feels new, different."

While the beverage left a pleasant sweetness on Gabrielle's palate and warmth radiated from her throat, a chill still coursed through her. "Anyone I'm close to is in danger of being used as leverage, and that includes everyone on this ship or in my company," she said seriously to Michelle. "I hope the crew has had an honest discussion about that very real possibility."

With a somewhat sad smile, the captain nodded. "We have Gabrielle. Especially in the wake of what happened to Susan, it isn't lost on any of us that all of the release forms we sign when taking this job are very real and there for a reason." She glanced at Vox before continuing. "You know the crew meets regularly. We've had blunt conversations that this particular danger isn't like any of the potential dangers we expected when joining your company and moving up in its ranks. But every one of us is behind what you've done. Not only in the work you do, the causes you support, the change you try to effect but who you are as a person. We see how you treat people Gabrielle, what you offer the world around you and what you expect in return. If that isn't something worth working and fighting for, I'm not sure I know what is."

Gabrielle was too moved by the captain's words to notice that Aphrodite was closely watching Xena as the warrior was listening to what was being said about the Bard of Potidaea. "That means a lot to me Michelle, thank you," she said. "I really thought that some of you would make the decision to transfer out, and I absolutely wouldn't blame anyone if they did."

"Someone might transfer, but not for the reasons you think," Michelle affirmed with a nod. "Rebekah Luna put two and two together and is convinced you've been a lawyer in addition to a surgeon, acupuncturist, musician- we're figuring out any number of professions you must have had. She doesn't think she's needed to be onboard legal liaison and is seriously considering a transfer to the home office."

"Home office here or Ireland?" Gabrielle asked with a frown.

"Ireland, I think," Michelle said with a shrug indicating she wasn't sure.

"I'll talk to her," Gabrielle replied. "Just because I've done a thing doesn't mean I want to keep doing it, or have even done it recently or am even good at it."

"She also thinks that if she leaves, there will be room for an onboard tutor for Shen. We can't take the place of his teachers forever," Michelle added in a tone that made it clear that she didn't disagree with the decision.

"We can talk about remodeling the crew's living section and making more room at a later date," Gabrielle said, still not thrilled with the idea of losing a member of her crew. "We're getting a little off track." She looked over at her warrior companion as Xena accepted a second drink from the engineer. The blue of her eyes flickered in the firelight and image of the well-proportioned woman next to her in reveling armor was recalled from memory. Wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, and sneakers she simply looked beautiful, not beautiful and deadly. "Xena," she asked, "do you have any idea why Ares would be so afraid of you…being awake? In this time period specifically?"

The warrior shrugged and studied the flames of the fire before responding. "I have no idea," she said. "Certainly, you and I got the better of him more than once in the past. It might be as simple as that. He has a lot at stake and doesn't want to risk it all tumbling down. I mean, I know how he thinks- I used to know his strategies, but that was a long time ago. I don't think I have any weapons or anything that can hurt him now."

"Let's face it Xena," Aphrodite added. "My brother is in love with you. He's in love with the idea of you leading his army yes, but also in love with you as a person, duh. His 'little brain' overriding his 'big brain' has resulted in defeats in the past, he probably wants to avoid that now. The world is a more complicated place than telling a smelly army 'go raid that village'. His schemes are more comples, more moving pieces and possibly more vulnerable in that sense. You are not something he's factored in and that probably rattles him. And you know strategy."

"Gabrielle has built an army- I don't doubt that you have other people who can strategize, I'm not sure why Ares is so worried about me," the warrior replied.

The captain turned to the goddess sitting on her right. "You're his sister and his equal I'd assume," she continued. "Why isn't he worried about you getting in the way of his plans the way he's worried about Xena?"

Aphrodite had finished her name-sake drink and had moved on to tequila, pouring herself a very healthy portion into the sugar rimmed martini glass. It was clear that she would have helped herself straight from the bottle, but wanted to keep it within reach of the others, should anyone want some. "Ares and I can't directly hurt each other or any of

the remaining Olympians. It's a thing. I punched my uncle recently and it hurt me more than it hurt him, I'm sure. He also knows my ability isn't a strictly destructive one. I mean people can be plenty destructive in the name of love, both to themselves and to others but that isn't my *intention*. I won't directly kill someone or even physically hurt them if I can help it. I guess that makes me no threat. There have been countless wars that I couldn't stop, only comfort the anguish and try to get people to see a different path."

"But wars do stop," Vox observed. "On occasion peace breaks out and people prosper and get a breather from his destruction. There has to be something that Xena's presence triggered…" The young butch woman's ice blue eyes widened and shot from Xena back to Aphrodite and Gabrielle. "It wasn't Xena's arrival that set Ares off- it was the awareness that you were planning…to wake her up. It was only after Ares got confirmation that you and Gabrielle were together in Catalina that he kidnapped Susan."

Inwardly Gabrielle winced. She saw Xena's posture stiffen slightly though she knew that wasn't necessarily how Vox meant the statement. "There had to be something," the engineer continued, "that, by the two of you joining forces worries him. Unless, of course Xena is the only being on Earth who can out think him. I mean, he is a god, right?" She studied the flames for a few seconds more, puzzling through the problem like an engineering puzzle. "What did you use to…wake Xena up?"

This time it was Aphrodite's turn to shrug. "A seashell of mine, which got destroyed…"

"And a hammer which we still have," Gabrielle added. "I picked up the hammer with my sai and Xena's chakram." Green eyes met piercing blue. "The hammer was forged by Hephaestus," Gabrielle said, her voice barely a whisper.

"As was my chakram," Xena replied. "Although Ares won't admit it. It must have been."

"It will be easy enough to tell if we look at it," Aphrodite commented after a thoughtful sip of tequila. Everyone around the small fire stared at the goddess. "What?" Aphrodite said, as though her statement were obvious. "My ex-husband monogrammed everything. There will be a small 'H' somewhere on it. Do you want me to check?"

Instantly the hairs on the back of Gabrielle's neck stood on end. "No," she said quickly and with conviction. "No. It's off the ship, safe. I want to leave it where it is." She looked around at the dark of night around them. There was no one onboard but her crew and she absolutely trusted every one of them, and they were only reachable from the marina by a small boat, or someone with training. Still, she felt uneasy this close to land and wished they were out at sea for this conversation. There could be drones out of sight. "I don't want to touch it until we're ready to use it," she added quietly. "It's safe," she repeated.

"What we need is to figure out is how to get to him," Michelle observed. "Gideon Power, the guy pictured on the internet isn't Ares, but he may be a clue to get to Ares. Maybe SP can get to him first?"

Gabrielle leaned forward, towards the warm firelight. Xena was impressed that immediately Michelle, Vox and even Aphrodite did the same, waiting for the bard's instruction. She leaned forward as well already picking up that Gabrielle did not feel completely safe on deck. "Michelle, you are going to join us for the directors meeting tomorrow," The bard said quietly. "I think that the captain will have a permanent place on the board. There are things that the active crew knows that the rest of transportation

might not and you guys should be represented there. You will debrief the rest of the crew at your discretion and see if their skill sets, and knowledge of…the situation at hand can complement the actions taken by other divisions in the company.

"Xena and Aphrodite will also be at the meeting," She looked around at the nods of agreement and added "Sorry, Vox."

The engineer shook her head. "No worries. I'm happy to assist Michelle on the crew side."

"You put some pieces together tonight," Gabrielle countered. "I want you to keep working that. I'm going to ask for different people's perspective in who else in the company I need to read in on this, I'd like your take on that as well," she added. If Xena noticed the young engineer beam at the compliment, she was polite not to show it.

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It was late, quite late when Gabrielle and Xena arrived back at the library just outside her quarters. The warrior had been a bit unsteady on her feet on the way down the stairs, more than once reaching out to Gabrielle to steady her. Gabrielle was unconcerned and assured the warrior that her tolerance for alcohol would improve and that if she were in danger or startled her mind would clear instantly. Her advice was to enjoy the sensation while it lasted.

"I haven't over indulged this much since…since…" Xena's voice trailed off as she tried to remember the last time she'd been drunk.

"Wasn't it the Artemis festival with the Amazon's when Joxer had followed us to their village?" Gabrielle asked after searching her own memory.

The warrior chuckled, "and Ephiny was so annoyed with us she made him sleep outside the hut we were using and we had to be quiet."

Gabrielle's laughter joined that of Xena's. "We could both barely walk the next morning and he kept asking us why."

"I was so tempted to tell him if only to get him to shut up about it," Xena replied, her laughter subsiding. "Did he ever find someone?"

"Yes," Gabrielle assured her. As she had the previous night she took the ottoman to the first bookcase and on top of the books, at the far end, was a separate volume, larger in size than the others but not as thick. Xena now noticed that nearly every one of the shelves had one of these larger books laying flat on top of the neat row of vertical volumes. The bard opened the book and over her shoulder Xena saw page after page of meticulously rendered sketches. As the pages were turned she saw familiar faces fly by; her mother, Lyceus, Torus, Autolycus, Ephiny, Solari, there were many drawings of her as well as Argo. There was the occasional drawing of people they'd battled, Callisto, Alti, Caesar, even Ares. A number of drawings were of Gabrielle as well as her family- her mother, father and Lila graced the pages. "These are amazing, Gabrielle. Who drew them?"

"I did," Gabrielle said shyly. "I took up drawing and painting awhile back. This is something that helps me remember, and even helps me visualize in my writing. Or I should say that the writing helps me visualize for the drawing. I don't know, goes both ways I guess."

"Awhile back?" Xena asked wryly.
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Gabrielle blushed a little “Okay, maybe seven hundred years ago or so. I mean you can’t really live through the Renaissance and not get into art…oh, here we go,” she announced as she found the page she was looking for. She showed it to Xena and it showed a beaming middle aged Joxer, balding but fit holding a tiny baby with a comely long-haired woman at his side. “Joxer eventually fell for Selene, she inherited an Inn from her parents and Joxer got his dream of spending his days fishing to put dinner on the table. They had a son they were kind enough to name Gabriel. As I recall they had two more daughters then another son they named Xenan. Here…” She flipped through a few more pages and found another drawing of Joxer and his family. This time the children were young adults, smiling and happy, with parents who clearly loved them, each other and the life they’d built together. The expressions on the faces spoke as plainly to Xena as if they’d been talking. The likenesses captured not only their appearance but personalities as well.

Xena touched the paper gently, careful not to smudge the graphite drawing. “And you got to be a part of all of that.” She shifted a little unsteadily on her feet and Gabrielle put the book down and grasped each of the warrior’s arms to steady her.

Green eyes found blue and held them. “Xena, if I could go back, change time and space so we could live out our lives as we should have, I’d do it in an instant. Being that I can’t, I am both sad and relieved that you did not have to live out that time in Greece. There was joy, I won’t deny that; Joxer was a wonderful father, and all of his children where full of happiness and so much less annoying than he was. Solari was an amazing Queen to the Amazons. Minya even became famous in her region for helping people. But Xena, there was a lot of pain too. Your mother passed away first. I was there with her, and she was happy about that and there was no pain- she went peacefully.”

Xena could feel her eyes fill with tears and she wanted to look away, to tell Gabrielle to stop, but she felt that she owed it to the bard to at least hear what she didn’t have to endure. “Solari was killed in battle. I don’t know what became of Hercules, but Iolas died while his wife was expecting their first. He had a serious illness and,” she shrugged, “I didn’t know medicine the way I know it now. Joxer outlived his wife, they were both quite old when they passed away, in the same year, I think. Their children were grown, he had dementia, passed away peacefully in his sleep just as Selene had. Torus married and welcomed twin girls named for you and your mother, also a son named Lyceus. He lived to be an old man, stubborn till the end and died from complications from horse riding accident.” Now Gabrielle’s eyes were welling up as well at the memory. “Off the top of my head I can think of probably a dozen or more children named Xena or Xenan from the people whose lives we intersected with. A few named Gabrielle or Gabriel too of course. We had a positive impact on a lot of lives and you left a legacy that endured and was remembered.”

The pleasantly muddled feeling of the drink was passing quickly as Xena thought about what she might have left behind in the world and marveling at the very idea that the scales might have actually have been tilted toward the positive. Gabrielle gently touched her cheek drawing her from her thoughts. “Did you want to stay up and read?” she asked softly. “I’m going to turn in.”

Xena nodded but she knew she didn’t have it in her to read, not tonight. When the bard took her leave she studied the bookcases following their logical progression to the most recent shelf. As she suspected the books here looked less worn. She checked the

dates on the spine of the last volume and deduced that the present-day book Gabrielle was writing in must be in her bedroom. Xena didn't mind. What she was looking for was the most recent sketchbook. She didn't want to read, she didn't want to see faces from her past, but she did want to see more of the bard's drawings. There was something about the line quality, the precision to the shading that made the portraits come alive and speak to her. She opened up the most recent book of sketches and immediately frowned.

She'd started the book from the back, moving past the blank pages to the most recent drawing Gabrielle had finished which was a scantily clad Aphrodite sitting on a beach mid laugh. The contrast in value had the sunlight highlighting the goddess' face and short hair, her fit form in gentle relief. Xena felt like she was being mocked. She rolled her eyes acknowledging it was jealousy that she was feeling. Skipping back several pages she did indeed see familiar faces, but they weren't from the past. There were drawings of the bard's crew going about their usual routines, clearly unaware they were being sketched unless Gabrielle was just drawing from memory. She didn't recognize all the faces, but she did notice Shen, Vox, Wolfgang, Michelle and the man with the unusual hair- Bo. There was an older Chinese woman that she assumed must be Susan and a family picture of Susan with a man looking over the shoulder of younger couple holding a baby. Even here though, as she flipped through the pages, among so many faces she didn't know she'd see her own face. There would be a drawing of her in her armor sharpening her sword or even drawings with her face wearing the contemporary clothing of the day. Some were just studies of her face or hands, others were fully rendered scenes.

People were not the only subjects of the drawings. There were sketches of her dog Argo as well as buildings, landscapes, other animals- many of which looked fanciful to Xena. One was a funny sort of striped horse, another was a large animal with legs like tree trunks and a long horn on its face. Xena took the phone out of her pocket to google and realized there was no help in typing 'what am I looking at," into the search engine. She turned several more pages and made a mental note to ask Gabrielle or Vox about the animals in the morning. She put the sketchbook back where she'd found it and selected an earlier volume from a higher shelf.

She opened the book to a random set of pages and a piece of paper fluttered to the floor. Xena was going to pick it up but was distracted by the faces looking back at her. It was like looking at her own reflection, but it wasn't. Two women that very much looked like her and Gabrielle, but dressed even more strangely than in the clothes she was presently wearing, gazed back at her smiling, with a dog at their side. She picked the piece of paper off the floor and opened it. The heading said "obituary" and what followed was a story about an elderly couple that had been killed in a car accident. There were pictures in the article showing the two women as they'd been in the drawing and again later in life when they were older. She read the article, pausing to research words like "archaeology" and the lecture series one of the women had been speaking at. While she could only guess at the paper's significance she could tell that this was important so she gently folded it and put it back, turning the page to see other drawings.

Once again, most of the faces were unrecognizable. The occasional crewmember she knew, a few sketches of herself, some of her dog looking more puppy-like. From time to time there was a drawing of Callisto, or Solon, or even Hope as an adult. Clearly Gabrielle was interested in remembering all of her past, not just the happy memories. As

she put the book back Xena considered her place in Gabrielle's life and felt reassured that regardless of who else might be important, her place in the bard's mind and heart was secure. After restoring the book to its shelf, she sighed; she was tired. She considered sleeping on the couch again, which was quite comfortable, but decided against it. Instead after turning off the light in the library and with a nervousness she had not felt in many years, opened the door to Gabrielle's bedroom and stepped inside. They had spent many nights as friends sleeping side by side, she knew she was kidding herself to think this was no different, but persisted regardless.

The room was dark illuminated only by a soft light coming from the bathroom. Xena made her way there and closed the door enjoying the decadence of being able to clean her hands, face and teeth whenever she liked. She made her way back to the bedroom and as Vox had shown her, used the screen of her phone to provide soft illumination to the room. She smiled noting the leather-bound volume on the nightstand near Gabrielle, Argo contentedly curled up in a soft cushion on the floor. After making her way to the other side of the bed she stripped down to t-shirt she was wearing, after noting that Gabrielle was still wearing hers from earlier that day and assumed it was the custom.

Carefully she slid between the sheets amazed once again at their softness. There was something about the room, it's ambient sound- the contented breathing of the dog and the soft breathing of the dog's mistress coupled with the scent of lavender and wood. There was also a very slight rocking sensation as the yacht shifted back and forth on the water that made Xena feel an ease she had not felt in a very long time. She had spent enough time with the crew to know that people were awake, even now as she prepared to sleep, making regular sweeps of the ship in pairs with any number of other security measures also employed to keep them safe. Even at the height of her warlord days, with the same resources at her disposal Xena was not certain she'd have put together as efficient and measured elite team. Truth be told she was curious to sit in on the meeting with the other division leaders for a closer view of how Gabrielle's Army was organized.

She was drawn from her thoughts as her unconscious companion shifted in her sleep, rolling over onto her side. Like magnets drawn to each other, a hand reached towards her and held it, squeezing gently at random intervals. Steadfastly Xena resisted the temptation to wonder if the bard were dreaming about someone else, someone who had recently shared this bed. Firmly she reminded herself that she was the person who was here now; the person who Gabrielle had chosen to end her previous relationship for. While the bard still felt distant, just out of her reach when they were awake- here and now, she was inches away from the sleeping woman who had reached out to hold her hand. It made for the first night in a long, long time when Xena Warrior Princess fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter 13: The War Councils

Gabrielle woke wondering if she'd missed the wake-up call from the bridge. It was rare that she woke up unassisted, but not unheard of. Before she rolled over to check her watch, something dark moved in her peripheral vision. It took only a slight turn of her head for Xena's peacefully sleeping face to come into focus. Quickly searching her memory the events of the previous night came into sharp focus including her retiring for

the night alone. In vain she tried to remember the last time she'd seen the warrior sleeping so peacefully. She smiled, drinking in the relaxed face and peaceful expression of her unconscious companion, pleased that Xena felt comfortable enough to join her. Silently she slid out of bed and after using the bathroom made her way across the cabin to the door only snapping her fingers to wake the dog when she was well into the library. Argo's keen hearing picked up the sound and the dog followed her up the stairs to the deck to do her business.

"You're up early," she heard from behind moments later. Gabrielle turned to see Aphrodite and Michelle approach. The two were walking close together but not touching. Michelle was dressed for her on-duty shift with her curly hair in its professional bun. She wasn't wearing the usual crew attire of jeans and t-shirts or other assorted vacation wear, rather she was dressed for the meeting with the department heads in a dark gray business suit with a crisp white blouse. She looked stunning. Aphrodite opted for a rich navy pinstriped suit and skirt combination with a pale blue blouse and looked beyond stunning, the adjective of diabolical was the first thing that popped into the bard's mind. If anyone maintained focus during the meeting, she suspected they might deserve a bonus or a promotion.

"Hey guys," the bard replied, a bit annoyed with herself that she couldn't keep the suspicion out of her voice seeing the pair together at this early hour.

"Look, who's adorable when she's jealous," Aphrodite replied with a chuckle.

"We were up talking, that's it," Michelle quickly explained with a genuinely worried expression on her face.

Now it was the Goddess of Love's turn to look annoyed. "You don't need to explain that to her, sweetie," she said. "Not only does she not have standing to be jealous, she's more evolved than that," she assured her companion.

Gabrielle, who well knew what endearments could mean when uttered by the Goddess of Love, decided not to pursue the issue. Not only was Aphrodite correct on both counts, she was more concerned about Michelle's vulnerability in the situation than her own feelings and reminded herself that the captain knew who she was dealing with, not to mention being a grown ass woman capable of taking care of herself.

"Everything set for this morning?" Gabrielle asked, smoothly changing subject.

"Yes, with one minor change," the captain replied, relief threading her voice. "You'd requested that Jorge, Sabin and Fiona arrive early for their 'booze meeting' and Heather Martin has also asked to arrive early. She wants to discuss something with you before the general meeting, but I don't know what."

Gabrielle leaned her back against the railing of the ship thinking. "That's fine," she said. "Might as well include her, I was going to read her in, makes sense to do it now."

"The more the merrier," Aphrodite suggested with a grin.

"Let's hope I can do this without having to impale myself," the bard replied with a slight frown. "I also want to have a quick word with the whole crew, please have them assemble in the conference room before the department directors. When everyone is onboard, I want the ship away from its moorings for the meeting. I've got this feeling… I want everyone to stay extra sharp about bugs and drones and shit that can spy on us."

"Will do," Michelle replied with a nod. "Shall I take Argo for her breakfast while you get ready?"

After an affirmative nod, Gabrielle watched the departing form of her dog happily trailing behind the captain for a moment before turning her attention back to the goddess who was intently studying her. “What?” she asked.

“You’re a bit of a mess and I’m worried about you,” Aphrodite said seriously.

“You’re kind of a mess yourself,” Gabrielle replied with a small smile. “What did I say about throwing moves at the captain of my ship?”

Aphrodite shrugged. “I like the captain of your ship. What can I say; you reminded me how much fun it is to spend time with women. Besides, if I seem less available, you might get your shit together faster.”

“Like you having a girlfriend is going to make you any less available,” Gabrielle said unable to hide the genuine amusement in her voice.

“Asshole,” Aphrodite replied with a frown but no further argument.

Gabrielle playfully punched Aphrodite in the arm as they turned to walk back to the stairs that would take her back to her quarters. “I’m not going to ask you to not hurt my crew because I know you wouldn’t,” she said stopping at the stairs. She was rewarded with the million-watt smile that could make the bleakest day seem sunny.

“And you are correct,” she said. “I will tell you though, that you’re going to need a new captain, since I think she may want to join me when I go traveling after this shit with my brother is handled. I know you’ve got plenty of qualified people who can step up.”

“As captain maybe,” Gabrielle replied departing. “Getting someone who cooks like she can is going to be another challenge entirely.”

“That’s your problem, now stop changing the subject.” The goddess replied crossing her arms. “Why are you a mess?”

“I’m not sure what’s going on with Xena. I mean not *with* Xena, I know where Xena’s head is. With my head and Xena – that’s the problem.”

“It’s not your head darling, it’s your heart,” the goddess said sympathetically.

“You know what I mean,” Gabrielle replied, the frustration in her voice clearly directed at herself, not the woman standing next to her. “I love Xena. I know I love Xena. Xena is the other half of my soul for fuck’s sake. I woke up in bed less than an hour ago with Xena sleeping next to me and I had a moment of panic wondering if we’d done anything. We hadn’t, but why wouldn’t we? We’re in love. I can only imagine how this is making Xena feel and that’s probably the worst part of it. I love her, but I’m not ready to be what we were and I feel completely ridiculous staying that out loud. Of all the potential things that could have happened with her return, this is not one I anticipated.”

Aphrodite nodded understandingly. “Gabrielle, you have spent the last twenty centuries rationing how much of yourself you share with someone. I have no doubt that there have been magnificent relationships where you felt like you were nearly as in love as you were with Xena- *nearly* being the operative word here. Maybe you were even eighty percent open with them, in other instances maybe it was sixty or forty or who knows fifteen percent if you were just looking for a distraction and wanted to get laid on a regular basis.” Gabrielle nodded, considering the goddess’ words seriously. “You are old enough and mature enough to know that there isn’t just one ‘happy ending.’ You can passionately and deeply love more than one person, even more than one person at the same time,” she continued with a self-satisfied smirk. “But your heart, as an emotional muscle has atrophied. It hasn’t had to be fully present, fully authentic with anyone until I

showed up." Gabrielle gave Aphrodite a 'aren't you full of yourself," look and the goddess shook her head dismissively. "This is not an ego thing Gabrielle, although hello, being The Goddess of Love an ego thing would be totally warranted here. What I mean is you didn't have to hide who you are with me. Your background, your real history, what you've been up to for the last two thousand years- you haven't had to lie to me once.

"You don't have to lie to Xena either; about your fears, your frustrations anything rumbling through that gorgeous blond head of yours you can tell her like you always would. That was the strength between the two of you. She was cranky and beat people up and you reminded her that even so, she had a soul and was worthy of being loved. She reminded you that you're nobody's fool and can be in charge of your own destiny." Gabrielle smiled and hugged her warmly.

"You really are a goddess," Gabrielle murmured.

"Oh and that you're sexy as fuck," the goddess added playfully in her ear.

"You're not happy until the line is behind you, are you?" Gabrielle asked with mock seriousness when they parted.

Aphrodite winked. "Admit it, I had ninety percent, didn't I?"

Gabrielle shook her head as she turned to go down the stairs. "Don't sell yourself short," she said playfully. "Ninety-six percent, easy."

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Gabrielle returned to her cabin to find Xena freshly showered with a bath towel wrapped around her muscular body. She was standing back straight staring at something hanging in the walk-in closet. "I saw that same expression on your face the last time we saw Caesar," Gabrielle observed.

"At least against Caesar I felt like I knew what I was doing," Xena replied a bit morosely.

"It's not that bad," Gabrielle assured her. "I'll take a quick shower and we can get ready together."

Xena turned toward the bathroom and sat on the edge of the bed while she waited for Gabrielle. Intentional or not, the door to the bathroom had been left open and from her vantage point Xena had a clear view of Gabrielle's reflection in the mirror as she undressed and stepped into the large marble shower. The sight of the dragon tattoo brought her thoughts back to Japan and she shuddered involuntarily.

"How did you sleep?" Gabrielle called from the shower, breaking into the warrior's unhappy thoughts.

"I slept well," she answered, loud enough to be heard over the running water, looking at the mirror once again. The bard was making quick work of shampooing her hair and washing herself. Xena stared transfixed. She knew every square inch of the bard's skin intimately. She saw several small scars on her legs and when Gabrielle turned around to rinse her hair, she saw the small round scar left by the arrow that had pierced her, just above her breast. What surprised the warrior was that she had so few scars that were new to her and how clearly she noticed them.

As her mind wandered she remembered being a small child, walking past one of the rough-hewn homes of Amphipolis where she could smell the most amazing scent of a feast being prepared knowing that she would not be invited to dinner. That was how she felt this moment gazing at the woman in the shower.
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Gabrielle turned the water off and reached for her towel, glancing into the mirror as she did so, making eye contact with Xena. The warrior looked away, embarrassed that she'd been caught staring. "This morning I'm going to meet with the crew, then several of my department directors before the actual departmental meeting," she said conversationally. She'd wrapped a towel around herself the way Xena had and was towel-trying her hair as she walked back into the cabin. "Let me dry your hair before we get dressed," she said leading the warrior back to the dressing table. She continued to speak conversationally as she used a blow dryer on the warrior, briefly showing Xena how it worked before getting started. "Breakfast will come right before the departmental meeting. These meetings have been known to get quite heated, I'm hoping to keep everyone on the same page today."

"I've had lieutenants like that," Xena said as she watched their reflections in the mirror. There was something decadent and enjoyable with Gabrielle's touch on her scalp and her hair and she was in no hurry to have it stop. "I looked through some of your sketchbooks last night."

"Really?" Gabrielle said, sounding delighted. "I hope it didn't make you home-sick."

"I looked at some of the more recent books. There were some amazing animal drawings, Gabrielle. You're certainly the one with many skills now." Xena smiled as she said it and the bard quickly checked their reflection in the mirror to make sure that there wasn't anything else behind the comment. "I recognized the elephant, but the horse with the stripes and the large thing with the tree trunk legs and the long thing on its face- are they real or imagined?"

Gabrielle stopped what she was doing and studied Xena in the mirror. "Xena, there is a larger, more amazing world out there than you can imagine – and I promise to show you every corner of it." She put the blow dryer and the hairbrush down and put her palms on the warrior's shoulders, squeezing for emphasis. "I think you were looking at some sketches from Africa. The horse with stripes is a zebra and the thing with tree-trunk legs and the horn is a rhinoceros. There are giraffes, lions, and ibex; we will go on a safari soon and see them all- it will have to be soon, they are all racing towards extinction. People are making a mess of the world."

"I saw Africa in Shen's book, on the map, it's enormous. Why did you settle here, in North America?" As she spoke Gabrielle had finished with the warrior's hair and had turned Xena to face her, applying makeup. While the warrior wasn't sure why she needed the disguise, she had no intention of stopping her. It felt nice, really nice, to be the center of the bard's focus and have the light touch of familiar hands on her face.

"I wouldn't say I've 'settled' here necessarily. I've been here, North America at least, for a little over one hundred years this last time. But I do move around pretty frequently, hence the boat. The United States is a very young country and there is a lot of growth, it has opportunity but it's also been fairly easy to change identities as I need to and move money around. It's pretty easy for me to blend in. In many places in Africa it doesn't take much before I'm considered a dangerous spirit. Other places like much of Asia, it's almost impossible to blend in. Europe is great and I feel right at home there, but I've spent hundreds and hundreds of years traveling all over. Here it was new, everyone is descended from some kind of immigrant, and there was adventure and excitement. Unfortunately, the genocide against the original inhabitants of this land was very nearly

complete so it has a downside too. Every inch of this country was taken from someone else and they don't like to reminisce about that part of their history." She had finished with the warrior's makeup and encouraged Xena to look at her reflection. Xena blinked in surprise. The change wasn't drastic, but dramatic. She looked…different. She had to admit, even to herself, she looked really good. "I promise there will be time, plenty of time, for you to see all of it. The fact that you can already speak all of the languages will have you feeling right at home in no time," she added with a smile.

Xena nodded absently, thinking about America and how she would view it as a warlord. "This sounds like the kind of place Ares would be interested in as well," Xena observed as she watched Gabrielle apply her own makeup. "The ability to blend in, move his resources- many of the things that appeal to you will also appeal to him. Only he's interested in causing unrest, not combating it. He's not able to change form?"

Gabrielle paused in the application of her mascara to shake her head. "Aphrodite says that she can't change form, disappear, or affect the world from as far away. She says she needs to travel. I would assume it would be the same for Ares. His hair grows and he'd have to have it cut and he can change his beard or shave it off but that's about it. When I saw him he looked the same as he always did but in different clothes and without the facial hair."

When she'd finished with her makeup Gabrielle turned to her companion. "Xena," she said softly, changing the subject. "I'm glad you came to bed last night. I…" she stopped herself, starting to get choked up. After a calming breath she continued. "I know this is not easy for you. Not only the shock of the world that you find yourself in, but me not being…not being…"

"In love with me," Xena finished for her. The bard's eyes narrowed. Not necessarily in anger but in intensity.

"Me not being *what you remembered*," Gabrielle corrected her.

"It's okay, Gabrielle," Xena said reassuringly and the bard didn't know whose statement she was referring to. "We said we'd focus on Ares, I need to get used to the world, you need to get used to me. We've covered this. It's okay."

Gabrielle nodded and led them both to the bedroom. The bard dressed slowly and methodically enough that Xena could follow and not feel self-conscious. "Is there a significance to you wearing a skirt and me wearing trousers?" Xena asked. "Is there a symbolism in the color scheme? You'd described this as a war council of sorts …"

With a shake of her head Gabrielle gestured back to the closet. "Aphrodite bought you several business outfits, I picked this because I think it will look great on you. I picked this light gray one with the vest for me because I just felt like it." She held up the light blue blouse to her chest. "What do you think, this one or a white one?"

"The blue, it draws out your eyes," Xena commented as she fastened the belt around her waist. "Blue and green," she added absently. "Like the ocean."

They finished dressing and looked at themselves in the full-length mirror. "These shoes are insane," Xena grumbled disapprovingly. She was wearing black narrow slacks, black high-heeled shoes, a white blouse and the drop-wasted jacket was almost a cross between a smoking jacket and a tuxedo. The gray and black pattern was modern with rich black lapels.

"Xena you look like a million bucks," she said appreciatively. "I know heels are the worst and were it anything other than these meetings you'd be in different footwear. Trust me, when we go to D.C. we'll be wearing something with more sanity."

The warrior took a couple of experimental steps. Gabrielle was impressed she didn't stumble, but knowing Xena's core strength and remarkable balance she wasn't surprised that after striding across the room once, she looked like she'd been wearing heels for years.

Nearly all of the crew was assembled in the conference room when the pair arrived, only Elaine and Vox were noticeably missing. "Elaine is watching the monitors on the bridge," Michelle explained as they approached. "Vox is hanging out with Shen below deck as a safety precaution. I was going to fill them both in after the director's meeting."

Gabrielle nodded gratefully and looked around the conference room at the assembled faces as Steve and Hatsuo finished the security sweep of the room and sealed it, the soft blue light indicating complete privacy. "I will make this quick since I know you've got work to do to get us underway," she began. "If anyone hasn't had the chance to meet Xena, I wanted to give you that opportunity," she continued with a nod of her head in the warrior's direction. Xena's cheeks grew hot as she felt nearly all the assembled eyes shift to her. She keenly felt the absence of Vox the engineer who she felt she knew the best of the crew so she glanced as Aphrodite and was rewarded with a reassuring wink.

Five of the crew either nodded an acknowledgement to the warrior or raised a hand in greeting. "Xena, this is Rebekah Luna our legal liaison, Samantha Ramirez who is serving as a steward this tour with Blake, Hatsuo Eko who is head of security, our bosun Steve Hagstrom, and Ingrid Kamaka our mechanic extraordinaire. Guys, this is Xena." The warrior smiled in acknowledgment and was relieved when the attention shifted back to the bard. Gabrielle took a deep breath before continuing, taking a moment to make eye contact with each of the employees seated around the large rough-hewn table. "As you all know, the effort to find Xena has taken a very high toll from all of us. Shen's presence on this ship is testament to that and I want to thank all of you, from the bottom of my heart for stepping up the way you have to make him feel safe and more importantly, loved." There were nods of agreement and acknowledgment.

"While you are all aware that I'm slightly older than I look…" she paused for the well-meaning snickers from around the table, "you might not be aware that I've known Susan's family for a very long time. I met her grandfather in 1912 when he was a young man and he was a very dear friend of mine until he passed away in '70. Susan's mother Betty started in '52 and worked for me until she retired. All of you knew Susan and we all mourn her loss. I mourn it very profoundly; I was the first person outside her family to hold her as a baby. As I am Shen's godmother, I was also Susan's god-mother and before that, Betty's." As the bard spoke Xena could see a new awareness dawn on the faces assembled of the practical implications of Gabrielle's predicament. "I tell you this because I want to make it clear that I value life, specifically all of yours, in a way that you might not consider. I don't want any of you thinking for a second that because I don't have skin in the game physically, that I'm not profoundly aware of the risks that all of you are undertaking by being in any proximity to me. Xena and I are reunited which Ares wanted to prevent, but that does not mean that Ares is not a threat or going to drop the

issue. In fact, I believe that now he will take active measures to gain some kind of leverage over the three of us." As she spoke she nodded to the goddess and warrior standing to either side. "Susan was a casualty here, and I tell you very honestly and sincerely that it is unlikely she will be the only one. All of you have to understand that. You are all in very real danger."

The mechanic with long auburn hair tentatively raised her hand. "Ingrid, this isn't class, you can just talk," Gabrielle said reassuringly.

"Um, yeah, hi," the mechanic said awkwardly. "Is Xena…ah…you guys knew each other from Greece so you're…age wise I mean…like Aphrodite…but still…" The mechanic's words kind of trailed off and she shrugged helplessly.

"I think she's asking if I'm immortal like you," Xena added helpfully.

"Or if you're as indestructible as Gabrielle is," Bohemian added. "Don't feel bad, none of us are fluent in Ingrid."

Xena glanced at Gabrielle and Aphrodite and the goddess spoke up. "Yes, she's immortal, in the way that Gabrielle is, but since she's been in stasis she doesn't have two-thousand years of experience to impress you with at trivial pursuit. As for the indestructibility, does anyone have a pocket knife?"

Immediately several pairs of eyes shot to the nicked area of the table where Gabrielle had been impaled only weeks earlier. "No, absolutely not," Gabrielle said fiercely; Xena was taken aback, looking between the two, confused.

"Just to cut the tip of her finger, silly," Aphrodite explained with a reassuring look around the table.

"What are you talking about?" The warrior asked.

"They were having a hard time believing Gabrielle before, so I stabbed her," she explained as Xena's narrowed dangerously. "And I only did it because they were being stubborn and it all worked out okay so calm down," she added hurriedly.

"You should know if you're indestructible, right?" Bohemian asked as he fished a small Swiss army knife out of his pocket and slid it across the table. In a smooth movement Aphrodite picked the knife up and folded out a small blade before handing it to the warrior, handle first.

"Cut the tip of your finger," she said. "See if it heals up."

Xena shrugged and did as she was asked, drawing the blade across her index finger and holding it up as several crimson drops splashed on the table. Hatsuo took a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it to Aphrodite. Almost instantly the bleeding stopped and the skin knit together. Surprised, the warrior touched her finger to her thumb then shrugged again. "Well, that answers that," she said.

"I'm still a little confused as to how you battle a god?" Rebekah asked. "We've gotten a small taste of what Aphrodite can do, I can't help but think that Ares has similar powers?"

"That is the problem we're presently wrestling with," Gabrielle replied. "Michelle will keep all of you looped in when we've had the director's meeting and moving forward. I wanted to personally thank all of you, but also stress the very real danger each one of you are in and give you an out should any of you decide this isn't for you."

"What is your next move?" Bohemian asked curiously. "None of us are going anywhere. Is there anything we can do to help with whatever it is you're planning? If you don't know what to do about Ares, are we any closer to getting Susan's body back for

burial?" Several of the assembled crew nodded their head in agreement making it clear that Susan was one of them.

"I will be meeting with Fiona shortly. HR will have her file, her will, final requests, etc… that each of you have filled out," Gabrielle replied. Purposefully she kept the ache out of her voice, making it clear that this conversation could befall any of them. "Aphrodite, Xena, and I will be going to DC to meet with some people and hopefully get Susan's body released." As an afterthought she added, "I should probably take a bodyguard. I'll be traveling as Susan Vincent. Nicolai?"

The large Russian man shook his head. "No," he said. Gabrielle blinked. That was not the answer she was expecting. Several surprised glances were shared around the table. "I will stay here and guard Shen," he explained. "You three are indestructible, the boy is not. You don't need a bodyguard, you need someone who *looks* like a bodyguard; who can play a bodyguard; take Ed." Spontaneously the rest of the crew either clapped or pounded the table in approval. There was a chorus of 'bravo', 'well said', and 'right on' from around the conference room. Gabrielle shrugged taking his point.

"Very well," she agreed. "I couldn't agree more." For a moment she silently considered each of her crew, their individual strengths and weaknesses gleaned by years of having them in her employ. While they were all perfectly capable of making their own decisions, there was a maternal drive in her that wished some of them would choose differently. Inwardly she stopped herself. This was not time for Gabrielle the nurturer; it was time for her to lead. "I've said my piece about letting each of you off the hook. If you're going to stay let's move forward on full alert. I want everyone wearing comm units. If you're moving about the ship, do it in pairs. Wearing weapons might not be a bad idea. They won't hurt Ares, but I have my army – we'd be foolish to think he doesn't have his and if they are the kind of right-wing yokels Gideon Power appeals to, they will be overjoyed at the chance to use their guns. Wolfgang, I want you and Vox to coordinate with us when we're away from the ship and with Transportation and SP. We will take Ed to DC and you will loop each other in. The same level of attention to detail that we've used more than once to get medical supplies past pirates and terrorists, that's what is going to be needed now. I don't know how or when Ares might come at us directly, but I'm nearly certain he will."

"Before we go," Hatsuo interjected his face grim, "all of us have access to the same cyanide device that Susan was wearing. I would suggest we all employ it."

Gabrielle studied the security chief's face for several moments before replying. She saw the nearly-microscopic pull to his facial muscles betray the fear he was experiencing but determined not to show. "I am not going to ask any of you to die for me. I am not going to say that if any of you are captured I won't do everything in my power to get you back. I will say though, that Ares has been around a long time. His fingerprints are on the Spanish Inquisition. His fingerprints are all over Auschwitz. His hand is in conflict large and small the world over. If he captures you, you very well may wish you were dead long before you have the chance to be rescued. There are no secrets I'm asking you to keep. If you are captured, please feel free to talk. Nothing any of you could possibly say is worth dying over. If Ares didn't know about Shen when he grabbed Susan, he probably knows now and I do want him protected. But he would naturally assume he would be on this ship. We will be expecting an attack." No one spoke but it was clear that her message had hit home. "You're all dismissed," she added quietly,

releasing them to go do the work they were trained to do. Without comment chairs were pushed away from the table as the crew filtered out. “Sarah, Samantha, if I may have a word,” Gabrielle said to the chef and steward as they prepared to file out of the conference room. “I’m about to have a booze meeting with Sabin, Fiona, Heather and Jorge. You know what they drink?” she asked the chef who nodded.

“We’ll take care of everything,” Samantha assured her with a nod as Michelle approached looking at her phone.

“The early directors are at the dock, may they board?” the captain asked.

Gabrielle nodded then added to the chef and steward, “please have a pitcher of Bloody Marys sent down, today is going to be a long one.”

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“You guys go ahead,” Gabrielle said to Aphrodite and Michelle. “I’ll meet you at my study. I just want to get some air on deck, let Argo do her business before the next meeting. Michelle, you can handle the introductions.” The captain nodded and turned to go, waiting for Aphrodite who hesitated a moment before joining her.

“Mind if I stay with you?” Xena asked not quite certain of how the bard might answer.

“Not at all,” Gabrielle replied, leading the way up the stairs to the upper deck. Argo trailed behind the two and quickly found a ball on deck which she proudly brought back to her mistress. The bard threw it a couple of times, wistfully looking out to the open ocean. “I wish I knew what Ares was up to, why he would even care if you’d been resurrected. People are going to get hurt…” she trailed off seeing her own concern reflected in the face looking at her.

“You’ve become quite a leader,” Xena observed. “I think Ares is afraid of me, not even realizing that you would be more of a threat to him at this point.”

“I think Aphrodite is right, he’s afraid of his feelings for you and how they distract him,” Gabrielle demurred somewhat distracted by her dog. “And besides, you’re the warrior in the family.”

“Uh huh,” Xena replied before throwing a solid punch at the bard’s face.

Without thinking Gabrielle parried the blow, grabbing Xena’s wrist and taking a step towards the warrior. As she moved past Xena she pulled the warrior’s arm behind her back holding the wrist at a painful angle. The move took but a second and as quickly as the bard performed it, she let go, worried she may have hurt or startled her companion.

“Xena, I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s a reflex.”

Blue eyes twinkled with humor as she nodded. “I can see that.”

“How did you know?” Gabrielle asked after she’d released her companion, adjusting the collar of the taller woman’s shirt and jacket.

“In part how you carry yourself, Gabrielle.” Xena replied. “You move like someone who has had a lot of training, like a fighter.”

“Like you?” The bard asked, almost smiling.

Xena shrugged. “As gifted a bard as you are, I wouldn’t think you could survive for two thousand years without having to fight as well. Beyond the fighting that we did, or that you continued in Egypt. Bigger conflicts need larger forces, armies. And you don’t lead an army without knowing how to do what they do. You’ve clearly endured some big conflicts.” Gabrielle nodded. “So, remember that. When you talk to your
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directors, when you talk to your people. You've been fighting Ares this whole time even if you didn't know it was him and he didn't know it was you." Xena looked down into shining green eyes for a moment. She stopped herself from telling the bard that she was proud of her. Proud that she'd managed to replicate the positive things that she became without having to endure the negative part of the journey first. Something made her keep silent. Instead she smiled and hoped that it would convey the same message.

Gabrielle thought about Xena's advice as she led the warrior and Argo back below deck to her study behind her formal office. "Did you train in Jappa? Or Chin?" Xena asked as they descended the stairs. With a shake of her head, Gabrielle stopped them, just outside her office. "Xena, after you died I couldn't go back to Japan for a very long time. It was at least a thousand years. I've picked up training in the martial arts from all over, like everything else about me I guess. And yes, eventually I did do some studying in Japan and China as well, but believe me, to this day every time I set foot on Japanese soil, I'm taken back to the awful, awful day you died."

"Not anymore," Xena replied with a grin as she opened the door to the study for her companion.

The scene inside of Gabrielle's office was a cozy one. Sabin, Fiona, and Jorge were seated on the leather couch by the wood paneled wall; the coffee table in front of them laden with a variety of pitchers, bottles and a cast iron tea pot. Heather was seated in one of the two chairs across from the bard's desk while Aphrodite occupied the chair behind the desk. Michelle stood in the corner against the bookcase trying to look unobtrusive. Gabrielle motioned for Xena to take the empty seat next to her Director of Finance. Argo padded over to the dog bed next to the couch and made herself comfortable.

"There you are," the goddess said in greeting. "I was about to start your meeting without you."

"Nice." Gabrielle replied with a mock frown as she flipped the switch that indicated that the room was sealed. "I'm glad all of you have met Aphrodite, I'd like all of you to meet Xena," she said with a nod to her companion as she leaned against the edge of her desk. "Xena, this is Sabin Jha head of Special Projects, Fiona O'Brien, head of Human Resources, Jorge Hernandez head of Transportation, and Heather Martin who is head of Finance." At each of their names a hand was extended and Xena rose from her seat to grasp each one politely. "Heather, you asked to speak to me before the director's meeting, what's up?" The apprehension from the brunette was subtle, but there so she added "Oh and before I forget- Aphrodite and Xena have class one clearance and I'm making the serving captain of the ship a member of the Director's board. You're free to discuss anything you'd like here."

If any of the four directors assembled were surprised at the announcement they did not show it. The realization dawned on the finance director however that she'd inadvertently crashed a private meeting. Her cheeks flushed crimson and she quickly scanned the assembled faces before speaking. "I ah…just wanted to make it clear that you have my full support for whatever resources you need to get the people responsible for Susan. I know you don't always feel like I'm behind you when it comes to spending your money – but this is different. Susan was a friend to all of us," she nodded over to the couch to include the three seated there. "Whatever it is you need, the Finance Department

can make that happen. Also, I suspect Shen will be living onboard, and for that a remodel is probably in order. You have my support there as well."

Gabrielle grinned as she turned to reach for a folder under the chaos of scattered papers on her desk. "I mentioned after the last meeting that you and I would meet with Susan and go over some financial stuff," she said briefly opening the folder to make sure it was the right one before handing it to the brunette. "This should put your mind at ease, financially speaking at least."

Heather quickly scanned through the small stack of paperwork, a perplexed expression on her face. "I don't get it, are these holdings that you have relationships with?"

"In that I own them, yes," the bard replied.

The finance director adjusted her glasses and scanned the paperwork again. "This is impossible," she said dubiously. "With Bardic & Company and what's in here," her green eyes darted back to the pages as she flipped them over to do the math, "you'd be worth over seventy billion dollars. That would make you one of the richest people on the planet. And the richest woman by far."

Gabrielle shrugged. "Some of those assets are easier to get to than others. And I've got various cashes of gold or diamonds stashed around the world- again not easy to get to, but I know where they are. I've been careful to keep holdings under different identities, the last thing I need is for Forbes to request an interview every other month, but yes, the money is mine."

"Do you mind?" Fiona asked the finance director who wordlessly handed over the folder. She scanned its contents as Gabrielle walked the couple of steps to the coffee table and poured a Bloody Mary cocktail into a tall glass that had been rimmed with seasoned salts with a celery stalk and crisp piece of bacon standing at attention. She passed the glass to Heather before pouring one for herself.

"It's not a little early to be drinking?" the brunette asked accepting the glass.

"You won't think so in about five minutes," Gabrielle assured her as Aphrodite chuckled from her place behind the desk.

"These companies go back decades, over a hundred years?" Fiona said, passing the folder back to the finance director. "Are you saying you inherited them?"

"No." Gabrielle replied. "Before I drop this bombshell on the four of you, I'd like to point out the refreshments on the coffee table. Sabin, I know you don't drink alcohol – the kettle has your favorite green tea in it. There is tequila for Fiona and Whiskey for Jorge; your favorites of course." Her directors stared at her with obvious confusion so she turned her laptop computer so they could see the screen. The final slide from her power point presentation with the various images of herself over the years was displayed. "I wish I had the luxury to not just dump this on the four of you all at once, but time is of the essence. To make a very long story short, I'm over two thousand years old. Those companies are my companies. I change identities every few decades, change the names of my companies, bury my assets, horde stuff in warehouses, have holdings all over the world and speak dozens of languages, many of them dead ones." She nodded to Aphrodite and Xena before continuing "Aphrodite is *the* Aphrodite you've undoubtedly heard of and Xena has been the focus of much of my companies' energy for the last two thousand years. She was missing, in a state of stasis, and I needed to find Aphrodite and

enlist her help in reviving her. The *Olympus Project*," she added with a nod to Sabin, "is all about Xena.

"Ares, who is *the* Ares incidentally, kidnapped Susan in an effort to gain leverage to make me abandon the quest to revive her. I've read-in all of the crew serving on *The Hippolyta* and they believe me. Our next step will be to take the fight directly to The God of War. I want to make sure he isn't a threat to Shen and the rest of my people." She took a deep breath. "So, questions?"

For long moments no one spoke. Argo absently scratched an ear with one of her hind legs. Heather sipped her Bloody Mary steadily as she watched as Jorge help himself to a drink. Fiona poured a cup of tea, handing it to Sabin before pouring a shot of tequila for herself. "Would anyone else like a refreshment?" the HR director asked as if she were serving at a tea party.

"Tequila sounds great," Aphrodite replied enthusiastically.

"The thing she's drinking looks interesting," Xena said with a nod to the woman sitting next to her. "Why is there meat in your drink?" she asked Heather directly.

The finance director turned and looked at the woman sitting next to her; studying her piercing blue eyes looking for any hint that an unfunny, poorly timed, and inappropriate joke were being played on the Bardic & Company directors. Not finding any duplicity in the warrior's face she extracted the piece of bacon from her Bloody Mary and handed it over. "Try it," she said.

Xena shrugged and took a bite of the bacon that had been submerged in the drink. She nodded approvingly. "This is pretty good," she said.

Fiona stood and passed over a second Bloody Mary to the warrior and Xena added the now half eaten bacon to her own drink. Heather looked down at her glass with sadness, the realization that she wasn't getting her garnish back dawning on her. "You look pretty good for being over two thousand," she finally said to her boss, it being the only thing that came to mind to say.

Gabrielle looked at the four of them sympathetically. "I know it sounds insane. Believe me, over the years I've been locked up and institutionalized more than once for telling someone this."

"Why exactly are you telling us this? And why now?" Fiona asked as she poured herself a second shot.

"I decided I needed to tell Susan when Aphrodite had been found and it looked like we were making very real progress into getting Xena back," she said. "She is the one who encouraged, demanded really, that I at least tell the people who do ship duty. And she was right, of course. From there it didn't seem right to have Jorge's people know something he didn't. Of all my directors I decided it would be essential for the three of you to know, and Heather made sense as well. I will seek your counsel before deciding to tell the rest of the directors, if we feel they all need to know."

"How did Susan take it?" Jorge asked carefully as he sipped his whiskey. Gabrielle could see the caution etched on his features, he ran his hand through his short salt and pepper hair which he always did when he was uncertain.

"She was more surprised at my sexual orientation than she was at my age," Gabrielle replied. "But I've known Susan's family for three generations so she had a head start on the rest of you."

"You're gay?" Heather asked dumbfounded.

"I knew it," Fiona added, with an air of validation.

"As much as I want to know how *that* came up in conversation," Jorge added, caution giving way to amusement, "I realize it isn't the point," he looked askance at Fiona and Heather who sheepishly inspected their drinks. "Sabin, you were the last to see Susan at work, how did she seem? You knew her the best of all of us, except Gabrielle of course."

The Nepalese man smiled, remembering something and sat the teacup and saucer down on the table. "I recall a mission we were on years ago in Tibet," he said. "We'd finished our business and she insisted that since we were in the neighborhood that we stop for several days in Nepal so I could visit some extended family. She was so insistent she stayed and did some sight-seeing meaning the company plane wasn't going anywhere so I had no choice. We'd had a long talk, on the way back about the importance of family and how generations of her family had worked for generations of your family," he nodded at Gabrielle as he spoke. "There was something about how she spoke that made it seem like she was retelling a family legend, something you know isn't true but you buy into the lore of anyway. I know about her mother and grandfather so I did find it strange that she seemed to think the story more fiction than fact."

"We had our talk about a month ago." Gabrielle looked over to Aphrodite for clarification about the date. The goddess nodded aware of the unintended frown on the warrior's face across the desk. "Did she seem any different after that?"

Sabin pushed a long strand of black hair that had not been included in his loose ponytail away from his face. Dark eyes sparkled with humor as he recalled the conversation. "For the last several years she's been talking about retirement and turning over parts of her portfolio for me to manage. I'd hoped to come to last month's directors meeting but didn't because of my broken leg. I still had the cast on and was having trouble getting around. I've been managing Brian Glass pretty closely and the last conversation I had with Susan had started out as a conversation about Brian. He'd requested some vacation time, which he had on the books but we found it odd so soon after getting a new assignment. That led us to talking about strange things at work and she commented that if I were ever in a meeting with you and a bottle of Scotch was present, just go with it and suspend my disbelief." Pointedly, he glanced at the coffee table and the bottle of Scotch still sitting there, from Gabrielle's talk with Susan.

"I find it a little hard to believe that all of the crew take this at face value," Jorge said looking at Michele. "What say you?"

In any instance but on *The Hippolyta* Jorge would be the person Michelle reported to. The transportation division trained their candidates for a variety of positions and missions within the company and the ship crew were selected and rotated in and out of its ranks. Michelle stepped away from the bookcase before responding. "We didn't take it at face value," she said. "Not by a long shot. We were convinced- quite dramatically in fact. From there Xena's situation and the existence of Ares, Poseidon, and the rest make much more sense.

Gabrielle reached behind her and opened the top drawer of her desk. She extracted a towel and a knife. "I hate this part," she muttered before slicing her arm from elbow to wrist, carefully catching the drips in the towel so she didn't bleed on her desk. There were gasps from the people in the room surprised by this. Then a "holy fuck," from

the finance director as the laceration stopped bleeding and knit back together. “This is what makes me immortal, for lack of a better term for it. I heal really well.”

“And what makes Aphrodite *the* Aphrodite?” Jorge asked his disbelief clearly wavering.

“Aphrodite, can you do something that isn’t super invasive, given that HR is right in the room with us?” She said as she cleaned off the blood on her arm with the towel. Her mind wandered as she worked, wondering what the Goddess of Love would do that would convince them that she was more than just an incredibly pretty face.

Quite unexpectedly the memory surfaced of she and Xena at the hot springs of Loutra Pozar outside of Thessaly. She blushed remembering the sight of the warrior waist deep in the bright turquoise water that was reflecting off the azure blue of her eyes. She had lunged at Xena that day, leaping into her arms, wrapping her legs around the warrior’s waist, kissing her so hard that she nearly knocked the two of them over. But Xena had held her with ease and carried her to a spot by the waterfall where the two of them could be more comfortable. They hadn’t seen another soul for days and felt quite alone in their private paradise. They weren’t alone however, and when a family approached with young children who commented about the two women “wrestling” in the waterfall, bard and warrior made the unspoken decision to ignore them. Vaguely a comment registered in the bard’s consciousness when the man gruffly said that the family would set up camp nearby and come back later but that wouldn’t have made any difference. In that moment, the passion between the two had been so intense that a legion of Roman soldiers would not have stalled their efforts.

The taste of Xena’s mouth, the feel of strong muscles yielding to her touch, the warrior’s expression, and the sounds she made all seared itself into her memory. She was fierce when she claimed the warrior’s lips, their front teeth clashing together almost painfully. A hunger had been released that demanded its tribute. At first there was no gentleness in the way that they grappled together, desperate to consume every bit of each other. There wasn’t anything Xena wouldn’t let her do and in return nothing she wouldn’t let the warrior do to her. The zeal of the late morning yielded to afternoon and some of the most languid, sensual hours that the bard had ever spent. The warm healing waters a fitting backdrop as they isolated themselves from everything else in the world. Back and forth they pleasured each other and themselves to a soundtrack of their moans, sighs, laughter and heady conversation. While it was not the first time the two had been together as Gabrielle recalled, that afternoon had been one of the best. Only when night fell and they heard the family, loudly tromping down the trail did they chuckle and beyond satisfied and content reach for their clothes and sneak away into the dark to find Argo and leave the family in peace. To this day, all these years later that particular shade of blue from the spring by the waterfall was still Gabrielle’s favorite color.

There was something about the memory of that shade of blue that brought another recollection to the bard’s mind. The place where the waterfall met the thermal pool was a decidedly lighter hue almost an icy blue; the same color as Aphrodite’s eyes. Gabrielle had seen those eyes look at her, completely unguarded as she’d pinned the goddess down on their second night together. In a heated rush those memories came to the forefront. Her fingers interlaced with those of the goddess as she’d leaned down slowly to kiss her, watching the anticipation build on the perfectly sculpted face beneath her. She remembered the things she’d done to the goddess with her hands and her mouth, the

demands she'd made and how readily they were granted. She'd felt a sense of power that night, a power that had certainly been given to her willingly of course, but one that she'd used well. She'd made the goddess beg and had rewarded Aphrodite's pleading well enough that she had responded in such a way that Gabrielle had to be woken from a near coma and found herself covered in bruises. Almost as soon as the second memory came to mind it abruptly halted leaving her to feel as if she'd looked into a room not meant for her.

"No one in this study is a virgin and I'm very gratified that while all of your experiences may vary in terms of awesomeness, no one here has had to deal with anything non-consensual. Because of that, each of you just each remembered one of your fondest sexual experiences. You're welcome." Aphrodite hadn't moved from behind the desk, her expression inscrutable she passed her shot glass to Fiona to refill. She continued, "if anyone needs any more convincing about me being who I am, I'm happy to tell you exactly what it was you were remembering, where it happened, who it was with, blah, blah, blah."

Gabrielle looked at Xena and saw the warrior grin at her weakly. The expression was as open as any book the bard might pull off her library shelf. While her assumption had been that Xena might have been thinking about her, it was clear that the warrior did not think she was the one being thought of by Gabrielle. After two thousand years, it made sense she supposed that Xena might feel that way and then it dawned on her that the reason was sitting behind her desk. Of course, Xena would assume that her best sexual encounter would be with the Goddess of Love. Who wouldn't think that. And she had thought of Aphrodite, but as soon as that thought entered her mind, she realized it was not the case. She looked at Aphrodite who would not meet her eyes, instead studying her now empty shot glass. Her thoughts had been of Xena, Aphrodite's had been of her and the goddess knew that she knew it.

"It would be really fantastic if you guys would just believe me so we can move on from this," Gabrielle said, her heart aching for both warrior and goddess.

"I'm sold," Heather said in a rush only to have the other three directors nod in unison.

"Before I forget," Fiona said, the crimson of her cheeks fading from Aphrodite's demonstration, "Susan updated her HR file. It must have been just after you two had spoken. She gave me this letter and had said she would rewrite it when she had more time, but wanted it updated immediately. I also have her other paperwork, her Trust, Will, and such which you can go over when you're ready." She opened a leather folio she'd been carrying and extracted a sealed envelope. "I thought it better to deliver this to you outside the regular meeting. While I am sorry for all of our loss, I am especially sorry for yours Gabrielle, especially now that I know just how long you'd known our friend."

Gabrielle accepted the envelope and opened it to find a handwritten note on company letterhead. Silently she read it to herself using a clean part of the towel she was holding to dab at her eyes.

> Dear Gabrielle,
>
> If you are reading this, I have died unexpectedly and too soon after learning your truth. While I'd hoped for many occasions to discuss history with you at length over a bottle

or two of wine, I am so very grateful to have had the opportunity to learn your given name and real identity. Please, do not grieve for me Gabrielle. You, more than most, understand how fleeting life is. Every trip around the sun is precious and I do not feel that I've wasted any of them.

Be there for Shen. It is my wish that you adopt him. He is the sole beneficiary of my estate, details of which are in my file. I think that around his 18th or 21st year might be an appropriate time for him to know your secret (the longevity one dear, not the gay one – I trust you to be up font about that already) he may figure it out on his own sooner, given his passion for super heroes. Go with your gut and when he's ready, read him in. Your life, your passions, your friends, Aphrodite- share all of that with him; do not compartmentalize anything from him. He will grow to be a better man the more he knows of you, as knowing you- even a limited capacity, has made me a better woman.

I hope that you are successful in your quest to find Xena and I pray that together you continue to devote your time and energy to the positive force that this company has proven to be. In the span of three generations my family has watched you create a nimble and efficient enterprise that can be a force for good in the world. Just remember that in the quest for The Greater Good you have to look as much at your present surroundings as in the world you hope to create.

It is with love and devotion that I sign this,
Ever your friend,
Susan

Gabrielle folded the note and put it back in its envelope. Briefly she closed her eyes and took a calming breath. No one spoke in the room but she could hear their individual breathing patterns. An alert vibration on her watch drew her attention and she briefly looked at her phone. She passed the device to Michelle. "Would you please let Elaine know that the rest of the directors may board, then we can leave the Marina. Have them start breakfast while we finish up here. We'll join them in the conference room when we're ready." Michelle accepted the phone and began to type.

"There are a couple of things I will only say here, with the six of you," the bard continued. "Ultimately, we need to find a way to get to Ares. It is possible that I have a weapon that can hurt him. My hope is that if I hurt him he will leave me and mine alone and hopefully take some time out of his busy schedule of fucking up the world."

“That is a very concise plan,” Fiona observed. “Do you think you can actually kill the god of war?”

“I don’t think you could eliminate war from this world any more than you could eliminate love,” Aphrodite replied thoughtfully. “I for one certainly hope not, and not just for my sake obviously. But it is possible to diminish his influence, and I think that is your best-case scenario. Also,” and she said this more to Gabrielle than anyone else, “if I’d been able to keep ahold of that piece of my shell all these years, it’s likely he’s kept something as well. Something that reminds him of his power. If we could find it, it may be key in getting him to go where you want him to go if you’re planning some sort of ambush.”

“We need to find him first,” Xena replied. “And hope that he keeps it with him.”

“We can talk strategy in the next meeting,” Jorge interjected. “But to be clear we will address Ares as the alias he’s using at the moment- Easton. We should table this to get everyone’s input.” He put down his glass, clearly contemplating another drink.

“Speaking of alias’” Fiona added. “Zuma Ocean contacted us for a new identity. He wants the name Ariel Waters.”

Aphrodite chuckled. “My uncle is a jerk but he’s got a sense of humor, I’ll grant him that.” Jorge poured himself the drink he’d been contemplating.

“And for Xena, you wanted paperwork created for the Xena Amphipoli identity? I still need to get a photo. Was that Greek or American passports?” Fiona asked with her pen at the ready to jot down notes.

“Actually,” Xena interjected. “Shen gave me the name Natasha Romanoff. I’d like to use that.”

Fiona briefly glanced at Gabrielle before making the notation. “One passport and identity background for Black Widow coming right up,” she said, the amusement evident in her thick Irish brogue. “Do you speak Russian?” she asked.

“Da,” Xena responded, somewhat surprised with herself.

“Russian and American passports,” Fiona amended.

Pushing herself away from her desk Gabrielle nodded. “You heard the Avenger. I think we’re good here. Fiona, you may want to make a notation of some sort to help me keep track of who is read in on this stuff moving forward. Xena, like Aphrodite, will be tangentially assigned to SP- for HR purposes. We are heading to D.C. tomorrow; can you get her a package by then?”

After a brief glance and a nod from Sabin, the HR director replied, “I will have it waiting on the plane. Also,” she added with a glance at the goddess, “I will have the identification that Aphrodite requested earlier in the week, the FBI stuff. What about the crew there? Have you read in Ed and the twins?”

“I will, but not for this trip. I don’t want to fly with someone who’s just been freaked out by this information,” Gabrielle replied.

“Probably a wise decision,” Sabin agreed.

“Alright, let’s have some breakfast and see where we’re at with our opposition research.” Gabrielle said turning off the switch that unsealed the room and opened the door for her guests.

As everyone filed out, Aphrodite hung back and touched Xena’s arm to indicate that she should do the same. Gabrielle gave them a questioning glance but was assured that they would be along shortly.

"What's this about?" Xena asked as the goddess knelt down to pet Argo who'd meandered over for affection.

"Xena, I'm generally all about keeping people's confidences…"

"When it suits you," the warrior remarked watching the blond woman scratch the muscular dog behind the ears.

"That said," the goddess continued as if she hadn't been interrupted, "there are occasions when I need to say something to keep stupid people from doing stupid things." Xena refused to take the bait and waited for Aphrodite to continue. The goddess stood up so she would be eye level with the warrior. She was taken aback by the vulnerability she saw in the pale blue eyes looking at her. "Gabrielle had the same fond memory you did," she said simply. Xena was about to protest, accuse her of making something up when Aphrodite pointedly looked down at Argo who was contentedly panting, her attention equally divided between warrior and goddess. She hadn't barked, whined or growled.

Xena wasn't sure how to respond. "She doesn't love me," she said and immediately Argo barked once and butted her head against the warrior's legs. Xena leaned down to pet the dog and amended, "she isn't *in love* with me." Argo whined quietly and nudged her again.

"Your Gabrielle, the lover, is waking up from a very deep sleep. I tell you this because she is going to be in conflict with Gabrielle – Shen's Mom and Gabrielle – The General and I don't want you to get all sulky. Gabrielle will have enough difficulty juggling these three and she will need your support, not wounded-warrior attitude." Aphrodite pointed her finger at the open door and Argo trotted out of the study to join the rest at breakfast.

"And what of your Gabrielle?" Xena asked as she followed the goddess up the stairs.

With a smile void of enthusiasm Aphrodite answered, "I may meet up with her again at some point, but for the time being, she's where she needs to be and that is out of the picture." Xena stopped and turned to face the goddess feeling more sympathy than she ever expected given the circumstances. She was searching for something to say that would be both honest and not sound trite but found herself at a loss. Aphrodite shook her head. "It's okay Xena. I know, and thank you."

The buffet line was nearly empty by the time that the late-comers arrived. Xena helped herself to some food, mimicking the selections made by the goddess in front of her then took the open seat next to Gabrielle. Michelle and Vox had been joined by Aphrodite at the table, the warrior's presence filling the fifth seat.

"Everything okay?" the bard asked quietly.

Xena nodded, watching how everyone else was eating before digging into her own food. "Yes, Aphrodite just wanted to clarify something for me." She nodded towards the dog who was shaking down one person after another for a handout. "You need to make sure she's in all your meetings," the warrior suggested. "Being able to tell when someone isn't being truthful is really helpful."

"You need to get Argo in a room with Brian Glass and figure out what is up with that guy," Michelle concurred. "Sabin mentioned he's already on vacation and you don't just do that a week after switching departments."

Vox shrugged as she made quick work of her waffles, "maybe the guy had a wedding or something planned?"

“Then Susan and Sabin would have known when he transferred, right?” Michelle asked.

The engineer shrugged uncertainly as she scratched at her abdomen.

“Please try not to poke at those,” Gabrielle warned. “I know the stitches are ready to come out, I’ll try to get to that after lunch.” Vox nodded and left her abdomen alone.

“Speaking of which,” Aphrodite offered amiably. “I know you’ve got an ‘all hands on deck’ thing going on right now but I thought that tonight I’d take Xena, Vox and Michelle out to dinner so you could spend some time with Shen before we head to D.C.

“Where is Shen?” Xena asked looking around

“With Nicolai,” Michelle and Vox answered in unison. Their table was a fair distance from the nearest table with non-crewmembers but the two leaned in none the less. “We’re not advertising that he’s onboard,” Michelle added quietly. “Just in case.”

Gabrielle looked at the other four equal parts grateful and jealous not to be joining them later. “If everything looks okay with Vox when the stitches come out she can join you. But be on your toes, okay? Ares would be stupid to go after the two of you but you never know - and don’t stay out too late, we have an early flight in the morning.”

“Aww thanks mom,” Aphrodite said with a chuckle, knowing full well that only she or Xena could get away with such a comment.

“Xena, can I ask you a question?” Vox asked as she finished off her waffles. The warrior shrugged, waiting for the engineer to continue. “I’ve noticed that when we do our meals, you always walk away with a plate of food identical to whomever is standing in front of you in line.”

The warrior shrugged, impressed that the younger woman had picked up on that detail. “I’m unfamiliar with all of the food to begin with and don’t want to waste time obsessing about choices that ultimately aren’t that important. I figure if I try out what other people are eating I’ll eventually decide what I like and don’t like.” She gestured to Bohemian Van Lyle sitting a couple of tables away from them, “you’ll notice I don’t follow Bo in line anymore. Once was enough.”

“That dude is into some weird food combinations,” Vox agreed. Their attention was diverted by several department directors shouting and pointing at something off the starboard side of the ship. “Sounds like a whale sighting,” Vox commented judging from the excited cheers. “Probably humpback.”

The warrior shook her head. “No, it’s several blue whales. There is some mating going on.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth she looked at Aphrodite. “How did I know that?” she asked.

The goddess grinned, “I never said the gift from Poseidon would be very useful,” she replied. “As time goes by the…side effects… will likely present themselves. Tell me, where are the closest dolphins?”

Xena thought a moment and replied, “there are four of them darting back and forth under the hull of the ship. A larger pod is just behind, they’re doing their morning hunt for fish. These four have eaten their fill and are playing.”

Aphrodite shrugged. “I’m not sure how we’ll use such a talent, but I guess it’s good to know that you can do it.”

“You guys just get weirder, and weirder,” Vox said with complete seriousness.

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The afternoon meeting went fairly quickly, much to the bard's relief. After introducing Xena and Aphrodite to the directors and explaining that they would be permanent fixtures within her company, she was able to move on with the departmental overview. The biggest revelation was a suggestion to fund an organization that provided moving expenses for people from Puerto Rico to red districts in Florida. The needlessly cruel handling of hurricane Maria's aftermath on the island left everyone in agreement. Heather Martin made no objections to supporting the group as well as other relief efforts and that fact raised more than one eyebrow around the table. With the briefest of summations by most departments they were able to quickly focus on the matter at hand. Gabrielle was grateful that with Fiona, Sabin, Jorge and Heather already on board and clued into what was at stake, they were able to quickly focus the meeting into a strategy planning session.

Sabin brought up several images on the wall-mounted monitor at the end of the conference room. Several were of Ares and an equal number were of an overweight, bloated, and generally unhealthy-looking man in his sixties.

"The man on the right is Gideon Power, or rather aspirational actor Henry Scruggs who is playing the character of Gideon Power as a full-time occupation." Sabin began as he stood and addressed the assembled directors. "Special Projects has uncovered a money trail going back nine years which is when the Gideon Power *Power Hour* show started. Typical right-wing conspiracy theories; nutty enough to be confined to radio, most of the stations owned by Patriot Media which when you get through their shell corporations trace back to Fire Industries."

"And the guy on the left, who doesn't look like walking gout?" Leticia Sanchez asked.

"That guy is a bit more of a puzzle. We think his name is Heinrich Easton, these photos show him going in and out of the White House. We believe him to be an off-the-books adviser to the President and his Administration. He is also tangentially connected to Fire Industries, which incidentally has money connections to Russian Oligarchs and a lot of trails that dead end in the Cayman Islands and in Swiss Bank accounts. Has he shown up on the radar of the Politics department Ms. Chen?" he asked looking over at Victoria Chen.

The dark-haired woman shook her head, a puzzled expression on her face. "We thought we'd uncovered all of the players in the Administration but this is a new one," she said. "Mr. Jha, is the working theory that Easton is supplying the funds for Scruggs radio show? Or that Easton is the one doing the radio show and just having Scruggs go around in public as the Gideon Power persona?"

"The latter," Sabin clarified. "We have tracked down several production studios in the DC area as well as in Montana, Wyoming, and Alabama where these shows are recorded. There is a lot of secrecy about the show, they tout how much the deep state is after them and then hawk a variety of useless products. We're fairly sure we've found the compound out in the middle-of-nowhere Montana where Srcuggs lives- Easton is proving to be more elusive."

"We think that everything about Gideon Power show is created and directed by Easton but that public appearances are done by the actor- he's the face of the radio
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show," Jorge Hernandez elaborated, "there isn't a companion webcast to the show which in today's market is unusual. It's just the voice and then this guy making appearances."

"To what end?" Mike Tiller asked. "Why would the guy want a walking advertisement for Alcoholics Anonymous walking around pretending to be him? How does that troll get him more listeners?"

"Because he's more relatable," Xena interjected. "The listeners are going to identify, believe that Gideon Power is one of them or even feel superior to him. The question is- what is Easton getting from the radio show?" She noticed an approving glance between Jorge Hernandez, and Sabin Jha at her question.

"This guy is taking the brain-washing mission of Fox News one step farther," Fiona O'Brien replied. "Convincing millions of people of erroneous information, taking their money, judging their gullibility, collecting data on voter habits, buying habits, social media habits that can then be exploited, exactly how I'm not sure…"

"I think I can shed some light there," Sabin continued. "We were able to analyze a fair amount of traffic going into the servers ostensibly for the radio station and show and see what other traffic is going into and out of those same computers. It's not just radio show stuff. There seems to be a backchannel between the home station, the firm in DC that the President owns, and a media company in Macedonia that is really a bunch of hackers working out of a warehouse. They're pushing traffic through social media and monitoring responses, shifts in polling data; essentially weaponizing the false narratives that swing elections. They are also working to organize a variety of volatile groups; white-supremacists, neo-Nazis, and other anti-government types. When violence flares up Turner's people have an excuse to crack down on nearly everything- except the people instigating the violence of course." Sabin touched his tablet and the screen changed to a chart illustrated connections between companies and groups associated with either the radio show, the administration, or Fire Industries. "It isn't just the USA that's being targeted. Germany, France, the UK, Italy, Japan, Sweden, India- this is an orchestrated effort to destabilize governments."

"When a building falls down the first one on the scene gets dibs on rebuilding it," Xena observed.

A bald black man cleared his throat before speaking. "It may be out of the depth of the Philanthropy department," he said, "but how do you plan to combat something like that. It looks like a fairly well-organized machine."

"Just to play devil's advocate for a moment," Aphrodite interjected. "Do you want to combat this machine here? In America?" The directors around the table looked at the blond woman with varying degrees of surprise on their faces. "Has the argument been made to save your resources to work in another part of the world to prevent this sort of takeover and leave this country to its own devices? Is this where your company wants to make a stand and fight this battle?"

For the next forty-five minutes a heated argument ensued between the directors discussing the pros and cons of doing something about the threat to democracy posed by the players illuminated on the chart versus leaving it to someone else and simply moving the business elsewhere. The division clearly seemed to be a pragmatic approach of what would make the most financial sense versus an altruistic strategy that would benefit democracy and freedom. Through it all Gabrielle listened attentively, occasionally jotting down notes and from time to time looking over at Xena who was also paying rapt

attention to what was being said. Finally, when she'd heard enough the bard stood and the rest of the room went quiet waiting for her to speak.

"Firstly, I want to thank everyone for their insight on this. This is not the last conversation we're going to have about this matter and I will be in touch with all of you to some degree moving forward as we address it." She looked around the table, studying faces and gaging the impact her words were having. "I've decided that we're going to confront this here because if we don't, if we lose this country to authoritarianism we will have that much taller a mountain to climb the next time from the next location. Some strategy here seems self-evident- Fire Industries has hackers in Macedonia, I have them here and elsewhere. Special Projects has over two dozen of the best hackers on the planet. We are going to turn them loose on Easton and any business he is involved with."

Nods of agreement went around the table and Fiona O'Brien spoke up, "If you'd like to fight fire with fire, you might consider leaking what we know about Gideon Power. You can't come right out and expose him- that's too obvious and easy to write off, but make him, Scruggs, out himself. Get people clamoring for interviews and highlight the differences there with what's said on the show. If he could be exposed as a fraud…"

"From the political side of things," Ms. Chen added, "we can try to expose these lobbying connections. Try to shine more of a light on what's happening, as well as raise the volume about the lack of transparency with the Administration and demand to know who the players are coming and going. The right information left in the proper hands could generate a lot of questions from the press. Questions Easton and his organization aren't going to appreciate."

"It also wouldn't be a bad idea to channel funds into progressive radio programming, moving forward. Right-wing radio vastly outnumbers alternative voices because the money is so lucrative. If you're not worried about making money, let's start buying stations and change the conversation," DeShaun Johnson suggested. "From there you can support groups that turn out the vote- beyond what you're doing for Puerto Rico. Organizations like *Run For Something*, a host of groups that combat crosscheck and Jim Crow 2.0, there are a lot of places to invest in democracy." There were nods of agreement around the table.

"The element of surprise is going to be key. It would be smart to coordinate your efforts, get everything ready to go, horde your information, and then in one well planned attack try to overwhelm his organization. In addition to taking the fight to Easton," Xena said solemnly, "given what happened to your colleague, all of you should increase whatever defensive measures you presently employ. If it's security, add more of it. If your people are fighters, add more drills. If you generally operate out of one location, start moving around. As soon as you start to disrupt this well-organized machine, it will take Easton no time at all to figure out where the threat is coming from and retaliate. Be prepared for that." Again, nods of agreement circled the table at the warrior's suggestion. She looked directly at Michelle who was seated between Aphrodite and Heather the Finance director. "The same should go for the ship's crew. If they don't regularly do combat drills, they absolutely should."

"Would it help to have time face to face with this Scruggs guy?" Mr. Johnson asked looking at his tablet. "Because there is going to be a fundraising, black-tie affair for media elites in DC this weekend. You said you were heading there tomorrow, yes?"

“Where you find Scruggs you may find Easton lurking in the shadows and pulling the strings,” Fiona O’Brian added.

Gabrielle nodded- thinking. “Get me an invite to the gala,” she said coming to a decision. “If Easton is there, he may have something nearby that we can get as leverage. Some of this will be left to chance but it’s probably our best shot. Everyone- have the appropriate teams talk to each other, share information. There is too much going on to reinvent the wheel here. I want strategy groups brainstorming every conceivable way to mess with Easton’s whole universe, from the money pipelines to his organization. Start some soft attacks, let’s see if we can figure out what the extent of his forces are and where we might find them.”

As the director’s meeting broke up, the directors themselves broke into small groups to travel back to the Marina by helicopter. Fiona, Jorge, Sabin, and Heather remained behind to be in the last group.

“Will you need your apartment in DC cleared out?” Fiona asked, opening up her folio once again to jot down notes. “It’s presently being used, but we could have those agents move to a hotel, or we can book you at the Omni Shoreham where the fundraiser is being held?”

Gabrielle nodded. “Book a presidential suite at the Omni, I should also have a car readied; a reinforced one.”

The Irish woman opened an app on her phone and quickly scrolled through several screens. “You’ve got the Jaguar in DC and it has been customized.”

“That’s great.” The bard agreed. “I think that one should do nicely if things get messy.”

“Suitable for James Bond or Jason Borne,” Fiona agreed offhandedly as she made some notes.

“Will we be working with them as well?” Xena asked.

The Irishwoman chuckled and extended her hand to Xena one more time. “It was a pleasure to meet you Ms. Romanoff,” she said. “When I’ve had a chance to truly process all I’ve seen today I look forward to having those chats about history that Susan had been hoping to enjoy.”

Xena grasped her hand warmly, “You remind me of my friend, Bodecia,” she said. “I look forward to those conversations.”

Heather, Jorge and Sabin also bid their goodbyes and made their way for the returned helicopter. Xena watched with obvious amazement as the quartet boarded the vehicle and it took off. “Another example of ‘science’?” she asked Aphrodite as the helicopter rose skyward.

“You are catching on much faster than I expected,” the goddess replied with warm smile.

Chapter 14: The Fear of Flying

Xena stood apprehensively at the open door to the walk-in closet looking at the vast array of clothing. She’d watched with envy as Gabrielle had strode in, selected a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt and then headed to the bathroom to remove her makeup. The warrior chose a pair of jeans and the boots that reminded her of her old armor. That was as far as she’d gotten when the bard joined her at the closet.

"You know, you're not expected to instantly just know all of this," Gabrielle said encouragingly.

Xena nodded, "Aphrodite said it was dinner at some kind of club, maybe dancing. She said dress casual, does that mean an actual dress?" she asked pointing to the more businessy section of the closet.

"No, she means be comfortable and I think you're off to a great start," Gabrielle replied. "It was a lot simpler before, huh," she added with a grin as she looked through Xena's section of the closet. She had flashbacks to Dwayne choosing Aphrodite's outfit for Santa Barbara and was amused to find herself in that role.

"The armor fit the mission so yeah, simpler."

"In a way, things haven't changed as much as you think," Gabrielle countered gently. "The outfits we had on today for the meetings, projecting a sense of professionalism and power. Tonight, I'm going to have dinner and enjoy a movie with a ten year old so I'm dressing not only more comfortably for me…"

"But more approachable for him," Xena supplied, understanding.

"So, tonight – I guarantee you Aphrodite is going to look amazing, because she wants to impress Michelle, and I'll wager Michelle will do the same, for the same reason," Gabrielle continued. "Vox, who knows? I think she'll try to look dressed up and dressed down at the same time because she wants to look amazing, but doesn't want anyone to know she's given it the slightest thought."

"But she's interested in you not me," Xena protested.

"She is getting over being interested in me," Gabrielle clarified. "She may want to look enticing should she meet someone, even if just to have a flirtatious evening. It's not just about what you wear of course, but that is some of the psychology that goes into it. What message do you want to send tonight?" she asked.

The warrior rolled her eyes, "That I'm not recently resurrected and actually belong here," she muttered. "What about these?" Xena asked selecting a soft light blue t-shirt and a crisp leather blazer. "I like this jacket," she added pointing to the biker jacket she'd worn a couple of times since rejoining humanity. "but I think that would be too hot to dance in."

"You are absolutely right and I think you've made a fantastic choice. You're going to look amazing. Change your clothes, and I'll redo your makeup."

The warrior complied, putting the outfit she'd been wearing in the bin that Gabrielle indicated would have them laundered and pressed. After she'd dressed, Gabrielle withdrew a small stack of money, neatly folded in a money clip, from the drawer by the bed and handed it to her. "In case you need dinars for dinner or drinks. I'm guessing Aphrodite will pick up the tab, but just in case." Xena put the money in her pocket then sat down to have her makeup adjusted for evening.

When she'd finished, Xena studied her reflection in the mirror while the bard selected a necklace from a jewelry box on the dressing table. The difference between the professional-looking makeup of the morning and the evening look was striking. Her eyes were darker, bolder and portrayed a fearlessness that the warrior didn't really feel. Xena had disguised herself on enough occasions in the past to instantly see what Gabrielle's aim had been. The dramatic makeup countered the otherwise casual choice of clothing, giving those choices more intention. "You're really good at this," Xena admitted turning her attention away from the mirror.

Gabrielle shrugged, “what can I say, I’ve had practice. Here, this will finish off your outfit.” She placed a simple necklace made of translucent pale blue, aqua and green beads around the warrior’s neck and fastened it in the back. While understated, it finished the outfit nicely.

“This is beautiful Gabrielle,” Xena said, inspecting the beads. “What is it?”

“That, my friend, is sea glass.” She shrugged her shoulders. “There is a lot of garbage in the ocean and this is the only material that actually comes out better than it goes in. Glass gets weathered, washes up on beaches and you get this.” Xena looked at her, profound sadness etched on her features and Gabrielle nodded. “Yeah, I know how crazy that sounds. You’d better get going, I’m sure Aphrodite wants to avoid traffic if she can.”

Xena had to admit that Gabrielle had been absolutely right when she joined the others on deck. Aphrodite was wearing a low cut backless dress and heels. The color black brought out her hair and eyes and the contrast was striking. Michelle on the other hand was wearing a pair of black leather pants and a sultry white blouse- the top several buttons left undone, a simple gold necklace catching glints of light. Vox was dressed more like her in jeans, boots, a buttoned vest and sports jacket. She also wore a collection of necklaces with various pendants dangling from them.

“Did you forget your shirt?” The warrior asked as they boarded the taxi boat to take them to the marina’s parking lot.

“Absolutely,” the engineer answered with a smirk.

“Where are we headed?” Vox asked from the back seat as Aphrodite drove the Mustang from the parking lot. Without discussion or comment the engineer and captain had taken to the rear, letting Xena sit up front with Aphrodite.

“You ever been to The Edison?” the goddess asked with a glance into her rearview mirror. “It’s in downtown LA.”

“I’ve been meaning to try it,” Michelle chimed in, happily. “But I never think to make a reservation,”

“Fortunately reservations aren’t something I need to worry about,” the goddess replied with a chuckle.

The traffic was typical, which afforded the warrior an unobstructed view of the slow-moving vehicles and the Southern Californian denizens driving them. She didn’t speak, but stared out the window awed.

“What is it that’s the most unsettling?” Aphrodite asked gently. “The actual vehicles? Or the quantity?”

Xena glanced at her unaware that her wonderment had been so evident. “I think it’s the sheer number of people more than anything,” she replied. “I’ve seen hundreds of people at once on a battlefield, but this is…” she shrugged not having the words to describe it.

“For what it’s worth,” Michelle offered sympathetically, “I doubt I’d handle this kind of a shock with half the grace that you’re managing.”

Vox reached over from her position behind the warrior and squeezed her shoulder encouragingly. “It’s because she’s a badass,” she said.

Aphrodite chuckled, “you have no idea,” she added.

“What do you think would surprise us the most if we woke up in your world of two thousand years ago?” Vox asked curiously.

Xena turned in her seat to glance at the pair who were waiting for her answer, curiosity piqued. “I’m not sure,” she replied her tone void of humor, “perhaps the giants or maybe the centaurs.”

“Really?” Aphrodite asked with a quick glance in her rearview mirror. It was clear that captain and engineer thought the warrior was joking. “I think it’d be the harpies.”

“You guys are joking, right?” Vox asked a little uncertainly.

Xena made sure she had eye contact with the engineer when she asked “Does it look like I’m joking?”

The preponderance of traffic near the beach did little to prepare Xena for the onslaught that was LA. “By the gods…” the warrior breathed as the vista of sky scrapers came into view.

“While it isn’t for everyone,” Aphrodite acknowledged, “I’m a fan. There is amazing food in downtown Los Angeles.”

“The Angels?” Xena asked curiously.

Vox snorted, “Hardly,” she said. “It’s the second largest city in the United States. Almost four million people live here. It’s weird because unlike New York which is really compact, and dense, Los Angeles is sprawling. From the beach to the San Fernando Valley and from Chatsworth to Alhambra. That’s over 500 square miles.”

Michelle rolled her eyes. “I’m sure Xena understood zero of that,” she said. “I’m from Santa Cruz and I barely got it.”

“It’s big, I get it.” Xena assured her companions. “But those buildings are so tall. Who would want to live up at the top…the climbing.”

Vox and Michelle exchanged glances. “Xena, don’t take this the wrong way,” Michelle replied enquiringly, “but you’re really making me appreciate a lot of things I take for granted. This thing called an elevator transports people from the bottom to the top, stopping at the requested floors.”

Xena looked over to her companion. “Science?” she asked, to which the goddess replied with an affirming nod.

Aphrodite stopped the Mustang at the valet station outside The Edison. The building itself was fairly non-descript- a white building with the lounge on the bottom floor and several other floors above. Once inside however, it was like walking onto the set of a cool steampunk movie. The warm glow of the polished copper and red brick interior made everything look inviting. There were luxurious curtains of crushed deep burgundy velvet restrained with thick gold ropes and eerie illumination from old fashioned Edison bulbs. The embossed tin tiles of the roof reflected the sound and the ambient noise was significant. They could see into the lounge blow noting the glowing bars and dark booths and chairs providing spaces more of an illusion of privacy and intimacy than actually existed. There were antique fixtures, old boilers and engine parts, some old film projectors. Xena’s eyes were still adjusting to the dark as the goddess walked up to the host’s stand and gave them her name. In moments they were ushered to a table.

“Whose table did we steal?” The warrior asked as they were seated.

“I honestly have no idea.” Aphrodite replied easily. She was beginning to look over her menu when her attention was distracted. Placid blue eyes narrowed as she studied a couple at a nearby table. Picking up her purse, she excused herself walked over

to the table and seemed to drop something. As she stooped to pick up her phone, she briefly touched the woman who helped her as she communicated her thanks. She nodded curtly to the woman's male companion and made her way back to the table.

"What was that about?" Xena asked as the goddess resumed her seat. Briefly the warrior's piercing blue eyes landed on Michelle who had hopped out of her seat to help Aphrodite with her chair. Xena didn't acknowledge the gesture only by force of will, Vox was not as understated, a small smirk making itself at home on her lips.

Aphrodite smiled in appreciation at the captain who blushed then she nodded at the table she'd just visited. "You see that couple over there?" she asked her companions. 'That guy is a rapist. I sensed him the second we walked in. This is a first date, I'm making sure she doesn't take him home, or see him again for that matter." Her face scrunched up a bit as she seemed to listen to something no one else could hear. "There are two more of those assholes here tonight, I'll have to make the rounds to make sure that they don't hurt anyone either."

"How can you even tell?" Vox asked, clearly awed.

Aphrodite shrugged. "I just can."

"Can't you give them permanent erectile dysfunction or something?" Michelle asked, concern threading her voice as she looked at the woman Aphrodite had just saved.

The Goddess of Love shook her head sadly and returned her attention to her menu. "I could, but you'd have more mass murderers that way. Your gun epidemic has really gotten in the way of my problem solving." She sighed, "best is can do is encourage them to be sloppy so that law enforcement has a better shot at catching them. Try to steer them away from children, that sort of thing. From time to time I've been able to foster a suicide, but I have to be really careful how I do it to make sure no one else gets hurt."

"Jesus, that's heavy," Vox replied. "And the women, you have to touch them to get them to safety."

Aphrodite nodded, "Unfortunately yes. It wasn't always this way, but yeah to save specific people I have to be in contact with them and I can't be everywhere at once so…" Everyone was quiet a moment moved by the reality and responsibility that Aphrodite carried with her. "I can say though that my general proximity will have unexpected positive benefits to everyone downtown tonight. People will be in better moods, quarrel less, feel better about themselves…"

"Get laid," Vox cut in with a chuckle.

"That too," the goddess agreed with a grin.

"Just maybe not this table," the engineer continued with a frown.

"Hey! Speak for yourself," Michelle replied with a conspiratorial nod toward Xena.

Xena smiled unconvincingly in return and picked up her menu. "Any sign of Ares?" she asked looking over the selections. While she could make out all the words, much of the meaning was lost on the warrior. Aphrodite noticed and when the waiter came over, she took the liberty of ordering drinks and food for the table. "I think small plates are in order," she suggested. "Let's try a little of everything. And no, no trace of my brother."

"Can you just tell when another god is around?" Vox asked curiously.

Aphrodite shrugged. "I'd say it's a 'disturbance in the Force' if that gives you any clarity." She replied.

"Actually, it does," Vox agreed. "And these drinks look amazing. I have no idea what a 'Dead Man's Hand' tastes like, but I have to try it."

Xena smiled, relief threading her voice, "Nice to know I'm not the only one flying blind with our culinary options."

It didn't take long for the drinks and food to arrive, Aphrodite seeming to foster exceptional service everywhere. Drinks with exotic sounding names like The Edison, The Mistress, Pimm's Cup, Black Magic, Southside Fizz and Algonquin #2 were consumed. There was no denying that the goddess had a knack for knowing what food and beverage would appeal to each of her companions and ordered accordingly. In time Michelle asked for the story of how Xena and Gabrielle met which the warrior retold, occasionally making eye contact with Aphrodite to make sure she was not revealing anything that might be problematic. Vox listened to the tale, her expression unreadable. When Xena finished the engineer downed the rest of her drink, signaling the waiter for another round.

"It almost doesn't sound like Gabrielle," the engineer said, looking at Michelle for confirmation.

"I'd have to agree," she said looking from Xena to Aphrodite. "The Gabrielle we've always known has been the smartest most self-assured…"

"And nurturing," Vox interrupted, the alcohol clearly taking its toll. "Don't forget nurturing."

"And nurturing," Michelle amended, "person we've ever met. There isn't anything she doesn't know, but she doesn't come across like a know-it-all."

"Unless it's trivia night," Vox corrected. Michelle nodded in agreement. "She's an insufferable know-it-all on trivia night," the engineer muttered into the 'Southside Fizz' as it was placed in front of her.

"Do you know specifically what quality it was that made you fall in love with her?" Michelle asked, then added hurriedly, "if it's not too personal. I'm such a sucker for romance," the captain added under her breath.

"Noted," Aphrodite said quietly, as if it were a revelation to her.

"Why was my first relationship such a train wreck?" Vox asked completely out of left field seemingly unaware that Michelle had just asked Xena a question.

Without saying a word, the captain moved the engineer's drink glass out of her reach and pushed a plate of Tesla fries closer to her, hoping the sweet potato would balance out some of the alcohol in her system.

Aphrodite sighed with the resignation of someone familiar with being blamed for someone's break up. "Because honey, you were stupid and dated one of your college professors."

"Did it have to hurt so much?" Vox asked, her voice pleading.

The Goddess of Love looked at her sympathetically but her words were gentle and firm. "Would you have learned as much if it didn't?"

The engineer seemed satisfied with the answer and reached for a deviled egg when the fries were finished.

"Getting back to you, Xena," Michelle said, rolling her eyes briefly at her companion.

"It's hard to say just one thing," Xena replied considering the question, grateful for the engineer's interruption and the extra time to think. "Gabrielle has an unlimited capacity to love, to bring out the best in everyone she comes in contact with. I guess it's

the nurturing," she said to Vox's affirming nod. "It's hard not to fall for the person that brings out the best version of yourself. She's a magnificent person who doesn't seem to realize the positive effect she exerts on the world around her." Xena glanced over to Aphrodite who was gazing thoughtfully into her drink. It didn't take an oracle to know that not only did the goddess agree with her, she felt the same way.

Vox looked over to Aphrodite, almost as if she were seeing the goddess for the first time. "Can I ask you something?" she said, her voice free from any condescension or attitude, her expression surprisingly vulnerable.

"Shoot, Tiger," the goddess replied affectionately.

"What's it like to have people worship you, pray to you? Can you actually hear the prayers?" As she spoke, Aphrodite made eye contact with the waiter and signaled for another round after delicately taking a bite of deviled egg and dabbing at the corners of her mouth with her napkin before answering.

"Firstly, I will tell you that prayers and worship are about the people doing the praying and worshiping and not the other way around. That is a common misconception. When you pray to whomever, it's because you've got stuff you need to work out, or remind yourself you're grateful for or whatever, and that's all well and good but the… entity you're praying to doesn't have a horse in that race." The drinks arrived and she sipped hers thoughtfully before continuing. "While it's been awhile since I've had temples and people bringing gifts and doing the worshipful stuff, I've gotta say, that part of the gig isn't half bad. Who doesn't want to be worshiped? Although very rarely does someone drop off a bad ass statue and not want something in return. They always want something in return."

"Can gods hear prayers?" Michelle asked sipping her own drink.

"When you listen to music you can hear the vocal, and the guitar, keyboard, bass, drum- the different drums even, kick drum, snare, hi-hat all at once right?" The captain nodded. "I hear people like that. Millions of instruments simultaneously, often in discord playing very different kinds of music, but sometimes in harmony, and that's what I work towards."

"Wolfgang thinks we invented gods," Vox said blinking and clearly losing the battle with inebriation.

"Well people certainly invented the word 'god' and the concept. I never called myself a goddess until other people started doing it. Think of it this way- humans and dogs. Both mammals living on the same planet, yet with two very different life spans and very different abilities. To the dog, you guys are gods. To other humans, you're just you." The expression darkened on the goddess face and she seemed to be considering a life she no longer lived. "While I might not have the same…abilities…I once had- that only changes external stuff. I've still got the same responsibilities, good days-bad days that I had before. While I might not be perfect, I'm still more perfect than you lot." She said the last with a joviality that Xena could tell she clearly didn't feel.

Wanting to change the subject for Aphrodite's sake, but not obviously so, Xena looked from Vox to Michelle. "I have a question for the two of you," she said. "I want to know how you met Gabrielle?" While still on her first drink, Xena sipped it thoughtfully not wanting a repeat of the inebriation she'd felt the previous night in an unfamiliar setting. The fact that Vox was already demonstrating the effects of the cocktails gave her pause as well. Music had started to play and a few people were beginning to dance.

"I've been with the company for twelve years," Michelle explained. "I served in the Airforce and was recruited from there. I started with the Technology department and actually met Gabrielle in my first year when she came by the warehouse where we were working on a project. She'd was getting an update from our director. I had no idea who she was." The captain smiled, her brown eyes twinkling at the memory. "She asked me a few questions about the project and…" she shrugged.

"You were in looooooovvvvve," Vox said giggling to herself. "Why does she have to be so damn perfect," the engineer moaned, clearly losing her battle with the spirits.

"Wandre, get a grip," Michelle warned, not amused.

"Leave her be," Aphrodite disagreed gently. "I invited you guys out, and you're off the clock- you can't hold anything against her. It's safe, let her be." She cocked her head, listening to the music. "Let's go dance," she suggested. With a nod, the captain took her hand and the two headed for the dance floor.

"What about you?" Xena asked the engineer. "How did you meet Gabrielle."

Vox reached across the table picking up the remnants of Michelle's 'The Mistress' and downing it before responding. "I was getting ready to go to spy school," she admitted, moving her head closer to Xena and speaking in hushed tones. "I'd gone to the Naval Academy and really aced the program and was getting head hunted by the government. At the same time, I'm approached by this Chinese lady. People usually don't start in Special Projects, but I'm an exception," she was clearly proud of her achievement and grinned at the warrior even as she scoured the plates on the table for something else to eat. Finding an unclaimed piece of flatbread, she continued. "I was in SP for four years and then Susan recommended I transfer to Transportation. That's where I met Wolfie and Ed. I didn't meet Gabrielle until then, two years ago." Her expression grew dark and she wiped a tear from her eye, working hard to make it seem like that wasn't what she was doing. "Susan had a knack ya know? She just knew where people fit. What would be good for them and the company. Anyway, I immediately tried out for ship duty and tested well so I did the training and this is my first tour." She nodded the alcohol seeming to lose a bit of its grip on her. "Gabrielle spends time with the folks at Transportation. I mean anyone working on the ship is basically going to live with her. She can see people, ya know? Kind of like Aphrodite. She has this ability to make you feel understood and it's kind of intoxicating." The engineer nodded towards the dance floor where Aphrodite and Michelle were laughing and dancing. Of all the couples on the dance floor, the two of them seemed the most at ease, in their own world even though they were the only two women dancing together. That wasn't counting the four women wearing matching bridal party sashes who weren't exactly dancing, more like keeping each other from falling over.

The movement of two women standing at the bar caught Xena's attention. She could see them over the engineer's shoulder. It took but a moment to suss out what the pair were up to and she looked at her companion. Vox moodily gazed into her drink; talk of the departed Susan and unrequited love for Gabrielle clearly having taken its toll on her mood. Xena hesitated briefly before making eye contact with one of the women at the bar and nodding at Vox. If either woman had an ulterior motive or was dangerous, Aphrodite would have known and said something. Even as this occurred to her, she saw the goddess on the dance floor reach out and touch a woman dancing with a man,

ostensibly to keep from bumping into them. Moments later, the woman left her companion and headed off in the direction of the rest room.

"You guys thirsty?" The pair of women said as they approached the table.

"Absolutely," Vox replied without thinking and accepting the offered drink. Xena politely nodded towards the two empty seats, inviting the women to sit. "Which one is this?" the engineer asked after an experimental sip grinned.

"Tennessee Twist," the shorter of the two women replied with a smile. She appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties, short red hair in a stylish pixie cut, dressed in a black pinstriped suit, her suspenders contrasting nicely with her shirt and matching her wingtip shoes perfectly. "I'm Jenna," she said with a smile. "This is Veronica." Her companion had light brown hair which was done up in a relaxed, almost 'Gibson Girl' type bun. She was also wearing a suit but deep crimson in color with a more relaxed fit than her companion.

"Nice to meet you, Jenna and Veronica," Vox replied. "I'm Vox and this is Xena."

"Cool names," Veronica, said with a wink to Xena. "Your drink is a Damasco Brasa. Hope you like it."

Xena tried the cocktail and smiled approvingly. "Very nice."

"Would you ladies like to dance?" Jenna asked hopefully, looking out at the dance floor. "I see your friends already are."

"We'd love to," Vox announced not giving Xena a moment to think about it. "Come on Warrior Princess, time to cut a rug,"

Xena did her best not to frown unhappily as she stood up. She wasn't pleased that the engineer had over done it with the alcohol and certainly wasn't thrilled to be put on the spot dancing in a manner and environment that were entirely foreign to her. At the same time, she decided to be a good sport because her friend had been hurting and there wasn't really anything to lose. She allowed herself to be escorted to the dance floor after she and Vox had taken off their jackets. Vox's companion seemed especially pleased at the bare tattooed arms that encircled her.

The song was mid-tempo and it didn't take much effort to match steps with those of the people around her. "Warrior Princess, is an interesting nick-name," Veronica said, leaning close to Xena's ear to be heard.

Xena nodded in agreement. "It's unusual, but it's mine." She glanced over at the engineer and saw her confident smirk as she danced close to Jenna. Xena grinned, remembering what it was like to be young and cocky.

"You don't strike me as someone overly concerned by what other people might think." Jenna asked as she looked up at Xena, mistaking the smile as being directed towards her.

There was something about the woman and the situation that struck a chord with the warrior. She felt impossibly young but in actuality was probably not more than five or six years younger than Xena. There was something innocent about her that neutralized any physical attraction the warrior might have otherwise felt. "It depends on the person I guess," Xena said kindly which was greeted by a knowing sad smile.

"There's someone else?" Veronica asked not trying to disguise the bit of disappointment she felt at the news.

"I'm afraid so," Xena said with a nod, although her warm smile made it clear that it was a situation she did not regret in the least. There was no denying that Veronica was beautiful and had her circumstances been different Xena could have seen herself dancing with this woman all evening and making small talk. But even for a friend, she did not want to give this woman the wrong impression.

"Where is she?"

"She's at home spending some time with her son," Xena replied, easily following Veronica's dance movements. "We're about to go on trip."

The brunette smiled approvingly. "Good for you," she said sincerely. "You're a pretty solid wingman for your friend," she added with a nod towards Vox and Jenna, the pair clearly oblivious to anyone else.

The song ended and a slow one started as Aphrodite tapped the brunette on the shoulder. "Mind if I cut in?" The goddess asked.

"It was nice meeting you," Veronica said as she stepped away, off to join her friend.

The warrior arched an eyebrow questioningly as she took Aphrodite's hand, settling the other one on the goddess' waist, her fingers briefly brushing against the bare skin of her back. Momentarily she flashed on how well Gabrielle had been acquainted with that warm, smooth skin and stopped herself. Inwardly she acknowledged that the jealousy was natural but she would not let it control her.

"I can slow dance with you and not have you fall absolutely in love with me," Aphrodite explained. Xena nodded and moved them on the dance floor, well aware that she was leading because the goddess wanted her to. Again, the steps were simple and she was grateful that dancing had stayed fairly similar to what she remembered.

"What's it like for you?" She asked Aphrodite. "Knowing what everyone is feeling, being able to see into their most hidden recesses?"

After a proficient twirl the goddess smiled warmly. "Sweetie, I've never known any different," she explained. "You weren't always the bad ass warrior babe that you are now. You were once a little girl, then a fighter, then a more skilled fighter and so on. You acquired your abilities through a lot of work and determination." She shrugged, "I started out with my abilities as they are. Yes, I've evolved over time, changed somewhat- grown and adapted to the new world I find myself in- the core of who and what I am hasn't changed. Just like it hasn't changed for Ares, or Hades or even my stupid uncle Ariel."

They moved a bit more and the goddess nodded in the direction of Michelle who was helping Vox don her jacket. "I sent Michelle off to collect Jr." she said affectionately. "She's feeling radiant thanks to the flirting and dancing. Very good instincts on your part," she said approvingly. "Incidentally, there is a guy over there," she gestured with her head, "who is planning to jump us as we leave the club, before we get to the valet stand. He was planning to go after your new friends- the redhead and brunette, but I changed his mind because I figured you could handle it better than they could."

With a nod of agreement Xena asked, "If you can see the future, should I ask how Gabrielle and I work out?" blue eyes flashed over the goddess' shoulder, taking note of the man who was eyeing them with animus.

"Xena, I see a lot of futures. I see you and Gabrielle together- in the near future, or maybe something happens and you guys don't get together until the more distant

future, or something really goes sideways and it's not the two of you until the far distant future. You will be together, it just depends on when Gabrielle gets over herself and if you can keep from fucking it up," she smiled warmly to make sure Xena knew she was teasing. "As for that ass hat, all he's been thinking about since he saw you dancing is stabbing someone with the knife he's stolen."

"Why would someone take issue with us?" Xena asked. "Is it one of Ares' guys?"

"He's homophobic," Aphrodite explained with a rueful shake of her head. "Just a jerk; nothing to do with my brother. Although homophobes do seem to adore dear Ares. I don't know what gets into these people. He's got feelings he can't grapple with because of his chosen mythology and is too scared to take on men so he goes after women."

Xena nodded, understanding. "Did you find the third woman who was in danger?" the warrior asked as the song ended and they parted.

"Yeah. One of the bartenders, over there," she replied with a nod. "She's decided to walk to the metro with one of her friends so the jerk at the end of the bar is going to think better of following her."

They made their way back to the table and sat back down for desserts and settling up the bill. Both Vox and Michelle chuckled when the goddess tossed her black American Express card onto the plate.

As they left the club, Xena was completely unsurprised by the greasy smelling man that jumped her. The knife fell from his hand as he impotently staggered backward to the brick wall, both hands going to his throat where Xena had jabbed two fingers. Aphrodite stood with her arms crossed disapprovingly as Vox and Michelle looked at each other, shocked and surprised by what was going on.

"I've just cut off the flow of blood to your brain," Xena explained quietly looking around to see if anyone was going to mistakenly come to the man's aid. People made their way to the valet stand, completely oblivious to what was taking place ten feet away. The warrior assumed that had to be Aphrodite's doing.

"The problem with attacking unsuspecting people," Aphrodite lectured unsympathetically, "is that sometimes they fight back. Keep this in mind, asshole," she continued, "*all* queer people know how to do this. The men, the women, the people transitioning- the next person you attack may very well kill you so why not just question your orientation in private and leave the rest of us out of it." With a nod to the warrior, Xena jabbed him again and he keeled over inhaling gulps of air, rubbing his throat.

"You got something to say?" Michelle demanded, looming threateningly over him. He scrambled backwards, using the wall to regain his footing, fear etched on his face.

"Beat it!" Vox growled at him as he got to his feet and he ran, limping down the street.

Michelle looked at Aphrodite, concern clouding her face. "If he thinks all gay people know hand to hand combat, won't he just get a gun?"

"He's missing two toes from a stupid fourth of July mishap years ago. He's afraid of guns or he'd have used one now. But yes, he is now absolutely convinced that every queer person can kick his ass."

"Man, I wish I was a god," Vox muttered as they waited for the Mustang to arrive.

“You wouldn’t use your powers for good,” Michelle countered. “You’d totally use them for your own selfish desires.”

Xena laughed, surprising herself with how infectious it sounded, “like that disqualifies you from being a god.”

Aphrodite frowned, not appreciating being the butt of a joke but didn’t really feel like she could argue. She was still frowning when Xena slid into the passenger’s seat and winked at her disarmingly. After some significant pleading from the engineer in the back seat, an all-night ice cream shop was located and pints purchased before the red Mustang wound its way back to the parking lot in Marina del Rey.

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Xena followed Aphrodite into the den which was central to Gabrielle’s private residence. Situated between the library with its imposing book cases and musical instruments and the hallway that lead to the guest stateroom. It was a warm nurturing space. It took only a cursory inventory of the room to tell that a fair amount of nurturing had recently taken place. The television was off, it’s large screen dark so the room’s only illumination came from a couple of light sconces built into the wall which cast a warm glow. Two pieces of half eaten pizza were all that was left on a large plate, and two bowls contained the last dregs of what had once been an ice cream sundae. There was a box of tissue on the coffee table and a number of discarded tissues on the table and floor. Argo was curled up asleep at one end of the large comfortable couch. Shen was in the middle, wrapped in a blanket, sound asleep with his head on Gabrielle’s lap, her arm draped protectively around him. Gabrielle was asleep as well, leaning back with her head at an angle, her breathing slow and steady.

“They’re both sound asleep,” Aphrodite whispered to the warrior. “Shen was grieving,” she explained. “Gabrielle too. You can feel the sadness in the air- despite the pizza and ice cream.”

“Should we wake them?” Xena asked uncertainly.

Aphrodite looked critically at the unconscious pair on the couch considering the warrior’s question. Xena noticed that the blue of her eyes intensified slightly then went back to its usual placid hue. “Shen would be fine if we left him, but Gabrielle is pretty wrung out.” The goddess took the couple of steps to the end of the couch and gently pet the sleeping dog, who groggily raised her head.

“Not the world’s greatest guard dog,” Xena observed critically.

“Only because she knows us,” Aphrodite replied with a chuckle. “Had we been strangers we wouldn’t have made it to this room.” She looked at the dog and pointed in the direction of the stairs that would lead up to the deck. Obediently Argo jumped off the couch and trotted out. “She will take every opportunity to be lazy but is dedicated where it counts. While she’s taking care of business, why don’t you tuck Gabrielle in? I can take care of Shen.” A momentary flash of uncertainty crossed the warrior’s features, but she didn’t object. “She’s really wiped out,” Aphrodite assured Xena. “I don’t think she’ll wake up.”

Inwardly, the warrior bristled at being read so easily by the goddess, but she moved toward the couch. Aphrodite leaned over and in a graceful movement that surprised Xena, picked up the boy and held him as if he were nearly weightless. “I had a nice time tonight,” she told Xena, leaning forward and giving the warrior’s cheek a chaste
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kiss. “Thank you. I have our outfits for tomorrow in my quarters, tell Gabrielle to wait for me to get dressed in the morning.”

Xena nodded and thanked the goddess then leaned down to pick up Gabrielle. Argo returned from the deck above and trotted past the warrior to the bedroom, making herself at home on the dog bed next to the bed. As she stood, Xena could feel Gabrielle shift in her arms, resting her head on a strong shoulder and sighing contentedly. Xena carried her aware that she instantly recognized the faint fragrance that she identified with Gabrielle, even if it was accompanied at the moment by traces of garlic and onion.

Gently she laid the bard down on the bed and considered her next course of action. She turned back the covers of the bed and situated unconscious companion. Next, she removed the sneakers and socks, then her jeans, tucking Gabrielle’s legs under the covers. Deciding that the sweatshirt would be too warm to sleep in, she made her way into the closet and pulled a soft t-shirt from a drawer. Back at the bed, she pulled the sweatshirt over the bard’s head and unfastened her bra. Aphrodite’s predictions were correct, and Gabrielle didn’t wake up. She slept soundly, her face relaxed and free from the tensions of grief, parenting, and running a large enterprise. Inwardly, Xena suspected that Aphrodite may have had something to do with the steadfast unconsciousness of her companion. While she knew Gabrielle to be a sound sleeper, there were many a night when she’d woken the bard with the lightest touch. Often when they heard the steady snoring of Joxer or waited until the sounds of activity in the Amazon village quieted down.

It took only a moment’s investigation to realize why Aphrodite might have tampered with Gabrielle’s consciousness, her cheeks were stained with tears and her nose was red. There was no doubt that while a moment of closeness with Shen, their evening had been one of painful mourning. Xena dressed Gabrielle in the t-shirt, wondering absently who Adele was and why an image of the woman’s eyes was on the garment in the first place. She stripped out of her own clothes, down to her t-shirt after removing her bra as well. Memories came to mind of the times when she’d cared for Gabrielle, when the bard had been shot with a poisoned arrow, or when she’d been quite ill. Or of times when Gabrielle had taken care of her, when Callisto had thrown a poisoned dart which hit her in the neck, or when she’d been caught in the log trap before the first time she’d died.

She slid in between the sheets and reached over Gabrielle to pull the covers around her shoulders. As she moved, Gabrielle turned towards her, moving closer. Absently, Xena brushed the hair from her forehead and within moments her breathing fell into rhythm with the bard’s. In a scene that had played out so many times in the past, Gabrielle’s arm snaked around the warrior’s waist and the blond let out a contented sigh as she relaxed into a comfortable position against Xena’s breast. Smiling to herself, Xena enjoyed the sensation of the familiar, well aware that the morning would bring distance and a whole host of things that were unfamiliar and unsettling. For now, in that moment, the universe felt as it should be and she was not going to waste a moment of it. She held onto Gabrielle as she slept, staving off unconsciousness for as long as she could until she was finally overcome. When she did slip into sleep though, it was the most peaceful and contented since her resurrection.

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Gabrielle woke slowly, almost as if from a dream. She was comfortably warm and felt more content than she could remember. Upon opening her eyes, dark hair obscured her vision and it took but a moment for her hands to report that they were wrapped around Xena and that she was holding the warrior close. A momentary flash of awkward made itself known and dissipated as Xena held her, strong arms tightening to keep her from a panicked bolt.

"Hey," she said softly, moving so she could look at the warrior's face. "Good morning."

"Hey yourself," Xena replied with a smile; her arms releasing their hold so Gabrielle could lean up on her elbow to make eye contact. "You sleep okay?"

"I did," she replied returning the smile, albeit bashfully. "Shen and I had a bit of a rough night. There was sadness, but it was good too. I think he let go some of the hurt he's feeling. He's processing it. What time did you guys get in?"

"I think it was sometime after two," Xena replied. "Vox overindulged a bit and we found this all-night ice cream place. Ice cream is pretty amazing." The warrior's thoughts wandered and it was evident on her face.

"What is it?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena leaned up on her elbow as well so she could see Gabrielle's eyes, look into the face of the person who knew her more intimately than any other, often better than she knew herself. There was no point in anything but honesty. "I feel like I've misjudged Aphrodite," She said ruefully. "A part of me really wants to be jealous but at the same time I've realized that beyond crushing responsibility, what a genuine loving heart she has and…" she shrugged "I can see how you guys would be good together. She can understand you in ways that I can't."

If she expected Gabrielle to disagree with her, to deflect or say that it wasn't so, she would have been disappointed. Instead the bard reached over to brush a strand of hair away from the warrior's face and gently touched her cheek. "Xena, I have no idea what it's like to wake up and be surrounded by the inconceivable and have to take so much of the indescribable on faith. I think we're even when it comes to our difficulties understanding each other. Besides," she added, "I've learned that while time is a finite resource, love is not. Yes, I absolutely love Aphrodite. I absolutely love you too and I am choosing to spend my time with you. Time that isn't Shen's or needed for my work is yours. Not out of any sense of duty or obligation but because you're my heart Xena, even if my heart is somewhat defective right now and trying to wake itself the fuck up."

Gabrielle studied Xena's face and was satisfied that the smile she received was genuine and that she'd been heard. Impulsively she leaned forward and gently kissed the warrior's lips, marveling at their softness and feeling a familiar electricity in return. She leaned in to kiss her more forcefully a second time when the ship's intercom cut in with Michelle's voice.

"Gabrielle, it's six. Would you like breakfast onboard before going to LAX?" Xena smirked at the bard's obvious frustration having their moment interrupted.

"Breakfast for Argo," Gabrielle replied after hitting the comm button. "Maybe something light for us, I think we might eat on the plane."

"I can whip up some crepes," Michelle countered. "No trouble at all, it's going to be better than whatever Ed can reheat."

"Sold. We should be on deck by seven."

“Aphrodite said to let her know when we were up,” Xena explained as she got out of bed. “Something about her having our outfits for today.”

“I’ll let her know we’re awake and showering,” Gabrielle replied reaching for her phone. “I’m sure she’ll be happy to have breakfast on board. Did she and Michelle have a good time last night?”

As she spoke Gabrielle watched Xena stride confidently to the bathroom and strip out of her shirt before getting into the shower. She stared at the warrior’s reflection in the mirror remembering the sight she’d seen so many times long ago. There were countless streams, lakes and the occasional hot tub they’d shared naked together even before they were lovers and those memories bubbled to the surface as if being unpacked from a thick wrapping of opaque tissue.

“I think they both had a good time,” Xena replied after making eye contact with Gabrielle in the mirror. “Vox got to flirt with someone and that seemed to cheer her up. Aphrodite and Michelle danced a bit. We went to this place called The Edison, do you know it?”

“Downtown LA, right?” Gabrielle asked. “The steampunk looking place.”

Xena had her eyes closed, lathering her hair with the shampoo. After rinsing she replied “I have no idea what that means,” and inwardly the bard winced.

“I do think I’ve been there,” Gabrielle affirmed, then explained, “Steampunk means something loosely inspired by 19th century technology- steam engines and such. It’s a kind of Science Fiction although I admit that explanation doesn’t really help.” As she spoke she noticed a stack of neatly folded clothes on the chair from Xena undressing her the night before. She smiled having forgotten about the warrior’s fastidiousness.

Xena stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her body, and another wrapped around her hair. Gabrielle took that as a signal to take her shower. There was no denying that the bard was torn. There was no good reason not to shower together, certainly this particular shower had accommodated herself and two other women easily in the past. There was even that particular party where she’d shared it with three other women although she had to admit that was crowded, not that she’d minded at the time. For someone who had been with a fair number of people sexually, regardless of what Aphrodite thought of her quantity of relationships, she couldn’t stop feeling like the insecure bard from Potidaea when around Xena. It almost seemed to Gabrielle like she was starting her relationship with the warrior all over again even though she knew memories of the two of them together sexually would still be quite fresh in Xena’s memory.

“I understand the science part of it” Xena replied, combing out her long hair. On a whim she tried out an expression she’d heard many of the crew use. “It’s all good, no worries.”

“Well look at you, sounding like a native.” Aphrodite remarked from the open door.

“Don’t you knock?” Xena grumbled, turning around.

“Not usually, no,” the goddess answered with a smirk.

Aphrodite was dressed in a stylish dark suit that would have looked right at home on one of the later seasons of The X-Files. She was holding two matching garment bags that she deposited on the bed.

“A Scully suit suites you,” the bard remarked as she joined Xena, wrapped in a matching towel.

“Since we’re impersonating federal agents I know I didn’t buy anything like that for Xena when I did her shopping and I wasn’t sure about your wardrobe,” the goddess explained.

“Very generous of you,” Gabrielle quipped, knowing full well she’d paid for the clothes. She and Xena unzipped their bags and withdrew suits of similar cut and color. They didn’t identically match, but the three of them certainly looked like co-workers. “We will need to do more than look the part if we’re going to make it past security,” Gabrielle continued as she inspected the serviceable shoes that the goddess had purchased for them as well.

Without being prompted, Xena discarded her towel and walked naked over to the walk-in closet where she opened the appropriate drawer for undergarments. Aphrodite beamed as Gabrielle valiantly tried to not make eye contact with the goddess. That battle lost, she endured the wink Aphrodite gave her and proceeded to get dressed.

“Will Shen join us for breakfast?” Xena asked Gabrielle matter-of-factly. She dressed with the same aloof professionalism she’d exhibited when she’d competed in the Miss Known World competition. Never one for modesty, to the warrior this was just another mission requiring a costume.

Aphrodite closed her eyes as if she was listening for a moment. “Shen is awake, he will probably be on deck when we arrive. As for your question,” she said turning to Gabrielle who was adjusting her bra, “I had Special Projects make us some badges which should fool anyone looking at a video feed. When it comes to the security personnel themselves, I’ll handle that.”

“We should plan on several days at least?” Gabrielle asked as she opened a small suitcase and proceeded to pack additional clothing, both business and casual for herself and Xena. She was about to say something to the goddess when Aphrodite raised her hand.

“Way ahead of you, boss,” she said with a nod to the small suitcase left just inside the bedroom door.

On deck, the trio sat at one of the large dining tables used by the crew near the galley. Looking out the long bank of windows, Gabrielle could see the thick marine layer obscuring visibility. It made her feel vulnerable and she didn’t like it. Shen joined them moments later, accompanying Argo from the kitchen where she’d clearly had breakfast, still licking her chops.

“Good morning Gabrielle, Aphrodite, Xena,” he said politely, greeting Xena, who sat across from him with a fist bump, the other two with a hug.

“You’re up early, Moose,” Gabrielle said warmly. “You sleep okay?”

The boy nodded. “I think I slept better than I have for a long time,” he said.

Xena and Gabrielle both glanced at the goddess who smiled sheepishly back at them making it clear that if blushing had been Aphrodite’s thing, she would have been.

“You guys look great,” Michelle commented as she deposited a plate of warm crepes in front of the four diners.

“Why thank you,” the goddess replied with a wink.

Gabrielle smiled her thanks and after accepting her plate told the captain, “soon as we leave I’d like you to take the ship out. This lack of visibility makes me nervous.”

“It’s harder to sneak up on us in open water,” Shen informed the table. “Does this mean that I’m still in danger?” he asked conversationally as he dug into his crepes.

“We’re trying to stay cautious, Moose.” Gabrielle assured him with a meaningful look at the captain.

“We’re going to practice some drills,” Michelle explained to the boy. “You’re going to be included. Practice drills on getting to the safe room, stuff like that. We want to see if we can beat your current record.”

“Is Argo going to stay here?” he asked hopefully.

Gabrielle looked like she was considering leaving her dog with her son when Aphrodite shook her head. “She needs to come with us kiddo,” the goddess said gently.

Shen’s expression brightened “You guys are going on a spy mission?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Xena agreed with a grin.

The boy looked thoughtful for a moment. “If that’s the case,” he said reasonably, “I’ll wait for you to call me – I won’t try to call you,” he said with a nod, satisfied with his decision. “Wouldn’t be helpful to have your phone go off if you’re doing spy stuff. Even if it’s in silent mode.”

“That’s very good thinking,” Gabrielle agreed, tousling his hair. “I’ll call you when we land, how’s that.”

“Say Xena,” the captain asked after passing the warrior another fresh crepe, “that…ah…thing you did last night after we left the club, you think you’d have some time to show us before you leave? We’d like to practice that.” As she spoke she held two fingers together and jabbed. “Gabrielle has taught us some similar hand to hand techniques, but it’s always good to get a fresh perspective.”

“What happened last night?” Gabrielle asked, concerned. “You mentioned all night ice cream, not getting attacked?”

Michelle winced at Xena’s expression, painfully aware that she shouldn’t have mentioned the homophobe in front of her boss.

“It was a jerk at the club,” Aphrodite demurred. “Nothing to do with you know who.”

“Now it sounds like you guys are going after Voldemort,” Shen observed dryly.

Xena glanced at Gabrielle considering her response. “Do you think we can spare an hour?” she asked after taking a sip of juice.

Gabrielle nodded mutely making sure she did not glance at Shen as she did so. Anything her crew could learn from Xena could provide additional safety. An hour would give them a little something to work on and practice until they could get back.

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After breakfast Gabrielle, Xena, Aphrodite, and Argo made the ride in a chauffeured town car to LAX in near silence each lost in their own thoughts.

“Xena,” Gabrielle said cautiously. The warrior turned from watching the stream of slow moving cars to give the bard her undivided attention. “Remember when I said you were getting thrown in at the deep end before your first ride in a car?”

“Yes,” the warrior replied her voice tinged with wariness.

“I think today is going to be stranger.” Xena took a deep breath and waited for Gabrielle to continue.
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The bard was silent a moment and then Aphrodite said “there” while pointing out the window of the town car. The warrior looked to where the goddess was pointing to see something streak across the sky.

“That’s an airplane and we are going to ride in one.” Gabrielle explained. “I can tell you how they work if that helps.”

Xena looked at her dubiously. “I don’t think that will help.”

“Let me guess,” Aphrodite said, amusement threading her voice. “You have your pilot’s license for jets as well as helicopters?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “It was something to do after pastry school. Actually,” she continued, returning her attention to Xena, “I thought with your love of kites that you might enjoy this.”

Xena looked out the window again as another airplane came into her field of view. “Perhaps,” she said. “Is this one of these things where I need to act like I know what’s going on?” There was a wariness to her voice that Gabrielle instantly picked up on.

“It’s probably really draining, isn’t it?” She asked sympathetically. Xena forced a smile, inwardly kicking herself for letting the exhaustion show. “The Omni has an amazing tub in the presidential suite.” Gabrielle continued. “You should take some time to relax when we get to DC.”

As they drove onto the tarmac of the Los Angeles International Airport, Aphrodite explained to Xena that the airport was a hub of global activity. She ran through some statistics of the different planes and how many passengers they were accommodating as well as how long it would take to fly between various places that the warrior was familiar with. The goddess’ years spent as a flight attendant and the knowledge gained in such a pursuit became very apparent. Xena seemed interested and her weariness seemed to dissipate as they watched a large passenger aircraft race down the runway and become airborne.

As before, they parked near Gabrielle’s plane and were met at the bottom of the steps by Ed Schecter, dressed in his dark suit wearing sunglasses and an earpiece, looking every inch the bodyguard. Gabrielle could see the twins Isra and Kismet just inside as she led her group towards the plane.

“Ed, you remember Aphrodite,” Gabrielle said as the muscular man shook the goddess’ hand gently. “Anna Winter is the alias she’s using.”

“How has Vox recovered from our adventure in Greece?” he asked.

“Good as new,” the goddess assured him warmly.

“And this is Xena,” Gabrielle continued. “Or Natasha Romanoff if anyone asks.”

“Vox has mentioned you,” Ed said warmly, shaking the warrior’s hand. “She says you’re alright and from her that’s pretty high praise.”

“She’s not so bad herself,” the warrior replied with a grin.

Gabrielle led the way up the stairs and introduced the twins who greeted everyone graciously, chatting for a couple of minutes while Ed stowed their luggage.

“The plane looks good.” Gabrielle remarked with approval glancing at the area of the floor where she’d performed emergency surgery on her engineer a couple of weeks earlier.

“Transportation sent a team and they replaced the carpet when cleaning it didn’t meet Jorge’s approval,” Isra explained. “If you are ready to go we just need to let the tower know and get in the queue.”

Gabrielle nodded and waved her hand toward the couch. “Xena’s never flown on a private jet,” she explained. “Let’s try to keep the turbulence to a minimum. Xena, why don’t you take the couch, I’ll sit next to you.”

Xena took her seat as Argo jumped up next to her with Gabrielle settling herself on the other side. Aphrodite took the recliner that Nicolai had occupied on her last flight and Ed settled himself in the other recliner.

Argo shifted, resting her gray and white head on Xena’s thigh. Aphrodite smiled at the gesture then looked at Gabrielle curiously. “You never told me how you got Argo?” she asked.

Xena looked at Gabrielle, waiting for the story, absently petting the dog and momentarily distracted from the movement of the jet as it made its way to the runway for takeoff.

“It was three years ago. I wasn’t planning to adopt a dog so soon after Thor’s death,” she explained. “But I was in Louisiana checking out this farm that our animal charity had purchased for a sanctuary. A group of dogs were being brought in, rescued from a dog fighting ring that found their financials and a host of other evidence dropped on the doorstep of a federal agency by our friends at Special Projects.” The plane shook a little as it made the first of several turns to the main runway and Xena glanced warily out the window.

“Part of your Philanthropy division?” the goddess asked, knowing the answer was yes, but trying to shift focus from the tension that was radiating from the warrior.

Gabrielle nodded “We’ve got animal charities all over the globe. Dogs, cats, circus animals, farm animals, exotic animals, endangered animals you name it. Obviously human charities too – human trafficking, refugees, women’s shelters, medical services… anyway this particular sanctuary was for rescued and mistreated dogs and farm animals, there were a fair number of cats there too.” She looked affectionately at the dog resting happily in Xena’s lap. “This one was a puppy and started following me everywhere. She just decided she was going to stay with me and would not take no for an answer. When it was time to leave and I started to drive away in the car. Well, one look in the rearview mirror with this little one tripping over her feet racing after me...” she shrugged. “That was that. We’ve been co-workers ever since.” She looked once more at her dog; muscular gray and white head with amber eyes and floppy ears. “I think she was destined to be a bait dog,” the bard explained. “At that time, she was small for her age and they hadn’t bothered to clip her ears for fighting. Once she moved in with me and got fed regularly and got some decent exercise she filled out to the sweetheart she is today.”

Xena had stopped petting the dog as the plane hit its last turn and after a momentary pause, began to speed down the runway for takeoff. Without making eye contact, Gabrielle reached out reassuringly to Xena’s hand that wasn’t resting on Argo. After seconds that stretched out in silence, the jet lifted and began to soar upward. The warrior from Ancient Greece tightened her grip on the bard’s hand and stared transfixed out the window as the houses and cars below shrank and looked like toys, moments later it being impossible to make out individual homes and vehicles. “By the gods,” she breathed quietly.

Ed grinned broadly at Xena's amazement. "Small jets always give me the feeling that I'm actually soaring too," he agreed. "The difference between this and a commercial plane are like night and day."

Xena glanced at Gabrielle before smiling briefly at the muscular man. "You are absolutely right," she said.

With a chuckle at the exchange, Aphrodite pulled her iPad from her purse and began to scroll through various email and articles. "Do we have any kind of plan after we meet with the pathologist?" she asked.

"That reminds me," Ed said with a grin, hopping out of his recliner and getting a large envelope from the cupboard. "Sabin dropped this off early this morning as we did our pre-flight." He handed the sealed envelope to Gabrielle.

As she expected, three matching sets of FBI credentials were contained inside as well as their regular 'alter ego' identification papers. The fake badges had names that Gabrielle didn't recognize but the DC driver's licenses were for Susan Vincent, Anna Winter and Natasha Romanoff respectively. There was also an invitation to the fundraising gala, her name in gold leaf embossed on textured linen paper. Gabrielle put the contents back into the envelope then put the envelope into her purse. She withdrew a small laptop computer and opened a file folder. "Did Jorge read you in?" she asked Ed as she found the document she was looking for.

"About the troll who plays Gideon Power and his handler Heinrich Easton?" Ed asked as he accepted the laptop that his boss handed him. "That's the guy who killed Susan," he said, looking at the documents. "You called him 'Ares' at the time."

Gabrielle nodded "think of Ares as a code name. He's going by Heinrich Easton and probably a dozen or so other alias as well. Scruggs is the actor playing Gideon Power. We think they might both be at the Gala tomorrow night."

Ed looked at the back of the plane where he'd stowed the small suitcases and then looked at Gabrielle critically. "You ladies got ball gowns in those tiny suitcases?" he asked dubiously.

The bard's eyes grew wide realizing her mistake and lack of forethought or planning. "Fuck," she muttered in frustration.

Aphrodite chuckled and immediately started scrolling through her phone. "Relax dears," she said reassuringly. "I know a guy. I'll text him."

"A guy who can alter formalwear in a day?" Ed asked dubiously.

"Maybe not in your size pumpkin," she replied affectionately, "but for us, sure. We can go pick out something after our meeting with the pathologist and have it delivered to the hotel tomorrow. This may surprise you, but I have a way with people."

Ed beamed at the goddess, "Oh, I'm not surprised at all. And not to worry," he added to Gabrielle as he opened a thin closet behind rich wood paneling, "I remembered to bring my tux."

"Someone is getting an extra bonus this year, that's for sure." Aphrodite replied approvingly.

Xena listened with detachment as Gabrielle, Aphrodite and Ed discussed their plan for the afternoon and evening. Her eyes were riveted to the window, watching as the world moved below and marveling at the view of clouds from a parallel position in the sky. The landscape changed from the rocky, brown desert of the south west to shades of

green and circular shapes which she learned were the farms of the Midwest. She could not believe how vast the world looked from this perspective.

She half listened as words registered in her consciousness. Bodyguards would not accompany federal agents, so Ed would stay with Argo and the car when the three of them met with the pathologist, Dr. Kate Sprucehill. After the meeting, they would find formalwear. At the hotel they would perform some kind of reconnaissance on the building and make a plan for the following day. During the gala, the mission was to find Gideon Powers and see if that led them to Ares. Ideally, they might discover where Ares was staying and if that might provide an opportunity to steal something of his that he might value enough to be lured into an open confrontation far enough away from innocent bystanders to be practical. It wasn't the best plan she'd ever heard of, but she and Gabrielle had accomplished much on their adventures together with even less planning than this.

After several hours of flight, Ed excused himself to prepare some food. He was a kind and charming man but moved with the practiced precision of a dedicated warrior and Xena liked him instantly. "Sarah sent over some food early this morning." He explained as he rummaged through the small galley. "We've got some vegan lasagna and a savory pie, I think it might be chicken. I could also make a salad, or there is some butternut squash soup in here that I had the other day, it's really good too. That with some crispy garlic bread? I see some panna cotta here, and there is some really tasty banana bread made with Michelle's apple sauce. Oh, and some decadent rice krispy treats- damn- made with homemade marshmallow!"

Gabrielle shrugged, considering her options. "Lasagna and salad sounds good to me." Aphrodite nodded as did Xena. Argo was treated to a bowl with some pieces of raw vegetables; zucchini, bell pepper, cucumber, sweet potato, and broccoli which she munched on contentedly. As they finished their lunch, Ed withdrew a deck of cards from a drawer and flashed a winning smile. "You ladies fancy a game of cards?"

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Gabrielle casually glanced at her cards then impassively raised her eyes to Xena. The warrior looked back at her equally nonplused. It was all the bard could do to keep from grinning from ear to ear. Xena's calm demeanor brought back memories, remembrances of fighting incalculable odds and besting countless foes.

In the moments between Ed suggesting cards and cleaning up the remnants of their lunch both Gabrielle and Aphrodite had casually texted Xena on the basics of poker so she would not seem out of her element when it came time to play. They told her the suits, the hierarchy of hands, and the fundamentals of the game. The bodyguard was none the wiser and sat down with the trio in earnest. Xena's natural nonchalance gave her an opportunity in the first several hands to simply fold and watch how play progressed as Gabrielle and Ed battled it out. Aphrodite offered to be the dealer, the two women understanding what an unfair advantage she'd have even if the bodyguard didn't. When Xena began to play, raising and calling her opponents strategically, it didn't take long for the warrior and bard to take all of the bodybuilder's chips.

"That's me, done," he said as he showed his cards; a weak two pair. After a nod in the direction of the recliner he asked, "do you mind if I take a catnap?"
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"Absolutely not," Gabrielle replied with a shake of her head. "I know it was an early morning for you and the twins. Unlike Isra and Kismet – you don't get to stay with the plane in DC and I don't know what the next few days will bring, so by all means, rest up now."

He smiled gratefully as he settled himself in the recliner, pulling a pair of headphones from a drawer. "You need anything boss, don't hesitate to wake me," he said as he donned the headphones and selected something on his phone before settling back with his eyes closed.

Gabrielle leaned forward and whispered to Aphrodite, "Can he hear us?"

The goddess shook her head. "He's listening to the Hamilton soundtrack," she replied as she dealt the next hand to Xena and Gabrielle. She looked at him again and the blue of her eyes intensified for the briefest of moments. "And now he's sleeping, so speak freely."

Gabrielle looked over at Ed and sure enough he was snoring softly, his breathing measured and steady. With a casual glance of her cards the bard continued. "Do you have any idea what it is of Ares' that we might be looking for – what could possibly be important enough to get him to go where we want?"

"The source of his godhood was his sword do you think he'd still have that?" Xena wondered, then raised Gabrielle by tossing several chips into the center of the table.

Aphrodite shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. I've seen him a time or two over the years- the last time was during world war two and he certainly wasn't wearing that giant sword then. He might just have a fragment of it, there is no way to know.

"I kept my shell at one of my temples," she explained as she dealt three cards face up to the center of the table. Without looking at her cards, Gabrielle casually measured out some more chips and pushed them to the center. Xena countered and then the goddess put down the turn card. "When the tether to Olympus was cut," she couldn't help but glance at Gabrielle, "I went into hiding for a long time. Things were just too weird and I couldn't deal. When I returned to my temples they'd been largely looted and were in bad shape. My shell had been broken, most of it missing but there were a few fragments left which I picked up and kept with me. I don't know if there is something similar for my dear brother or not." She put down the river card and the last round of betting began. Gabrielle won the hand and collected her chips.

"If you and Ares are evenly matched," Xena wondered, "and Gabrielle and I are…well not like most people at this point – do we think he may have some similarly gifted people on his side? Indestructible lieutenants perhaps? Do we need to plan for more than Ares?"

Aphrodite shuffled the cards as she considered the question. "For the record," the goddess disagreed, "Ares and I are not evenly matched. I'm stronger than he is and I probably will be for the next several centuries."

"How do you figure that?" Xena asked as she casually stacked and restacked her chips.

"I had Ambrosia right before we resurrected you," she explained. "Uncle Ariel – I've gotta say the name is kind of growing on me- measured out what it would take to give you and Gabrielle comparable life spans, then he gave the rest to me. I've been fed- unless he has a stash of the stuff I'm for sure stronger, although his wheelhouse is still his and mine is still mine." She smiled as she cut the cards and shuffled again. "And when I

say ‘food’ of the gods,” she clarified, “think nutrient rich energy bar, not a doughnut.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “I can’t say I’ve given it much thought, but maybe that’s what separated gods and mortals initially. We had access to a superfood.”

“How would you get it?” Gabrielle asked.

“It was always on Mount Olympus. I’d pop in every now and then have a bite. Can’t say I’m a fan of the family drama but that’s where the Ambrosia was,” she shrugged. “I’d usually stash a little in my temples so I wouldn’t have to go home as often, but the risk of course was mortals having access to it.” She smiled sweetly at her companions, “No offense of course.”

“None taken,” Xena replied dryly. “Can you please pass me another of those rice krispy thingies?”

Aphrodite passed her the dessert plate and picked up a tiny crumb, a single piece of puffed rice. “I found a piece like this in the 1960s. I was working as a stewardess for Pan Am. I was living in San Francisco and worked a flight to Greece so I visited the ruins of one of my temples during my layover.” She popped the crumb into her mouth. “The Summer of Love was not an accident,” she said.

“So, if you’re in your lane and Ares is in his,” Gabrielle asked for clarification, “how does that make you more powerful?”

Aphrodite shrugged. “I’m not sure that it does in any way that is meaningful,” the goddess explained. “I could kick his ass at arm wrestling right now, out lift him at the gym, I could probably sway a few of his neo-nazis to grow a conscience. I’m just…I don’t know…rejuvenated?” She fell quiet a moment, thinking. “You know the Bible verse ‘love is patient, love is kind’? It’s one of the few things they got right. Love **is** patient, and eventually I will win out. I can see a million ways this all plays out and love wins. What the world will look like, that is an entirely different matter. There is no guarantee that ‘justice’ will win, but ‘love’ certainly does.” The goddess’ expression became inscrutable and she looked at Xena almost as if seeing her for the first time. There was a look of recognition and respect that the warrior had never seen Aphrodite direct at her. “I think the fact that Xena embodies traits of three of us is going to be key,” she explained. “She can think like Ares, she’s picked up things from me and my uncle as well. As for lieutenants for Ares; he’d need Ambrosia and unlike my uncle, he wouldn’t give it to a mortal. He’d find that really offensive.”

“How is it that Poseidon is the only one who seems able to get it?” Gabrielle wondered, mostly to herself. She was taken aback when Xena’s eyes grew wide, the warrior’s cheeks flushing pink with excitement. Quite unnecessarily Xena glanced at the sleeping bodybuilder before speaking and when she did it was in barely audible tones.

“I know where it is,” she breathed. “I know where *all* of it is, where it grows – what exactly it ***is***. It’s like I just remembered, but I feel like I’ve always known it.”

“What are you saying?” Gabrielle asked. “You know what Ambrosia is? Besides being Ambrosia?”

Xena nodded and smiled, very pleased with herself. “It’s a very slow growing kind of seaweed,” she whispered. “Don’t ask me how I know that- I just do. It is transparent underwater, impossible to see but when it matures it gets a little bit less translucent. Once it’s picked and brought to the surface it becomes opaque. Poseidon would have it harvested by dolphins or other sea creatures and brought to him. It’s further

down than mortals can swim and the other gods never went in the ocean so… That's why he is the one who supplied it to Mt. Olympus."

"How would he get it up there?" Aphrodite asked, not sure she could believe what she was hearing.

"Don't you see?" Xena asked in a rush, "seafaring birds, pelicans or albatross or whoever he could convince to do it. Poseidon was tied to the water, but he had this other duty to his family as well. And he didn't appreciate being relegated to one zone and expected to provide for the others. Probably an additional reason he wanted to break free to be able to move to and from Mt. Olympus on his own. He didn't foresee that the tether would be broken there too. He only thought it would break the tether between him and the ocean, not because he wanted to be rid of it, but because he wanted to be able to go to Mt. Olympus as well. You never saw him on Mount Olympus did you?"

The Goddess of Love cocked her head, searching her memory. "No, I only saw him when I'd go to the sea, but I like the ocean so I would see him fairly regularly. He was decent enough when Hephaestus and I split up." She shook her head in disbelief. "Holy shit," she breathed. "This is a game changer."

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle asked, glancing at her hand of cards.

"It doesn't matter if we find something Ares is passionate about. I mean if we do, great- but if we don't- you use Ambrosia as bait, I guarantee he will show up to get it," Aphrodite explained, every bit as excited as Xena.

"But we don't actually have any," Gabrielle said, thinking that part was self-evident.

"That's easy enough to remedy," Xena countered. "Do you have a map?"

Gabrielle reached for her laptop and the warrior shook her head. "No, an actual map. Shen doesn't trust those things to not spy on you and I'm inclined to agree with him."

Gabrielle nodded, seeing no reason not to be cautious. She walked over to the small closet built into the plane where Ed had hung his tuxedo. There was a rolled map of the world and she removed it, unrolling it onto the table with Aphrodite's help.

"Show me where you guys brought me back." Xena said, studying the map.

Aphrodite pointed to the tip of the Baja peninsula and Xena touched that area of the map. We could get some here, she pointed to an area of the ocean nearby, or here, or here. She pointed to two other places on that side of the map. There is also some here, and here, and here…" she pointed to various places and both goddess and bard were stunned. "But I don't think those plants are mature yet."

"You are seriously telling me there is Ambrosia in the Hudson Bay?" Gabrielle asked dubiously. "And the Bay of Bengal- those two places are nothing alike. How could the same plant grow in two totally different ecosystems?"

"It grows all over, it just grows really, really slowly and when I say 'it' I mean one plant. The size of a head of lettuce. There may be one tiny plant in all of the…" she looked at the map, "Norwegian sea and it may take centuries for a single leaf to grow. The Ambrosia that you tossed into the river of lava was easily tens of thousands of years old." The warrior explained excitedly. "That's why mortals haven't found it. One lettuce sized transparent plant on the sea floor, the ocean is just too vast if you can't sense where it is."

"What Ambrosia got thrown into a river of lava?" Aphrodite asked, her brow furrowing.

"So, we know where it is," Gabrielle rushed on quickly, purposefully ignoring the goddess, "you said it's deeper than people can swim. Do we need a submarine? Because I have one, it will just take time to get it relocated to the west coast."

"Why not just ask a dolphin to do it?" Xena said sensibly.

Aphrodite and Gabrielle looked at each other than back at Xena. "Are you saying that you can talk to sea life?" the bard asked, hoping for clarification. "Like Poseidon did? You can just talk to sea life?"

"I think so, I mean not all sea life," Xena explained. "A lot of sea life isn't the least bit interested in anything I have to say, and honestly is that any weirder than me being able to speak elvish?"

Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak and closed it. The warrior had a point.

"But this is important," the warrior added in a rush, "Ares has to be the one to figure out that we have it and demand it from us. It has to come from him. If we try to offer it, he is absolutely going to see it as bait."

"If Ares and I are in the same room, that will not be a problem." Aphrodite assured the duo. "He will immediately know I've had it and it will rattle him and he will be desperate to figure out how I came across it."

"Aphrodite," Gabrielle said turning her attention to the goddess, something that had been puzzling her bubbling to the surface. "Poseidon/Ariel- whomever put just a little bit of his blood into Xena's urn. She can talk to sea life, understands the secrets of Ambrosia, can determine where various sea life is just by sensing it," she turned to the warrior, "am I missing anything?" she asked.

"I think I can surf and hold my breath longer than I used to be able to," the warrior added.

"And you added more than twice the amount of blood into Xena's urn," the bard continued looking at the goddess, "and she can read and write every language. Is that it?" she asked curiously.

"No," the Goddess of Love replied.

"Then…?" the bard prompted and Xena turned her head also interested in the answer.

Aphrodite arched a knowing eyebrow in Gabrielle's direction and the bard, getting her drift blushed furiously. *"Oh,"* she said quietly.

"Besides *that*," the goddess continued, "let's agree that Xena is much nicer this time around. She's got more patience and empathy, she befriended your love-sick engineer instead of disemboweling her, clearly she's getting that from my side of the family."

"I'm trying to be serious," Gabrielle persisted.

"Gabrielle," Xena said quietly, realization dawning on her. "I think she is being serious. I feel like I have this strange…insight."

"The bard's eyes darted over to Aphrodite and the goddess shook her head. "No hon," she said gently, "not *that* insight."

Xena knew that while she wanted to ask what the goddess meant, that it wasn't her place to do so. That it was a private thing between the two of them but that it also was not a threat to her or any feelings that she and Gabrielle felt for each other. She let it go.

"It may grow over time, and you will learn to control it- know when to tune in and when to tune out," Aphrodite reassured the warrior. "It will take practice but you will get the hang of it. Looks like the 'sensitive chats' are eventually going to be your thing too, dear." She chuckled as she looked back to Gabrielle. "And you were worried she'd come back straight."

"Poseidon was the one who commented that in essence she'd genetically have two dads and a mom," the bard protested.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. "Honey *none* of the gods or goddesses are straight. Not a single one. We're all queer."

Both warrior and bard looked confused. "I know Ares…" Xena protested.

With a dismissive wave, the goddess helped herself to another piece of pumpkin bread. "Bitch please," she said. "I know for a fact that he's blown off steam as a bottom at a leather bar in New York on more than one occasion. Not that there is anything wrong with being a sub in a leather bar in New York." She shrugged anticipating the next question. "Look, this is just shit that I know, I can't tell you how I know. The thing is, when there are only a couple of dozen of you and you live for tens of thousands of years, you're going to get really bored if your only option for companionship is half that limited number of partners. That's why the dalliances with mortals, the incestuous relationships with other gods even though they never work out. I'm not saying we're not a fucked up people, we are all *so* fucked up. Just not as fucked up as the rest of you." She dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin. "My point being, is that Xena isn't straight, yes she has qualities of three deities pumping in that fit physique of hers, and yes, she's less obnoxious that she was.

"We have a real shot at Ares here," she continued. "Whether we find something that matters to him or not. Ambrosia *will* matter. Unless he had a killer stash stored away somewhere, he will be ravenous for it. With one more element, this plan might actually work." She said the last with reservation and turned her head. Both Xena and Gabrielle looked at her. "Ares isn't going to go to any meeting where he doesn't feel like he has the upper hand," she explained. "He needs to have something of yours that you will do anything to get back. That's why he kidnapped Susan." Gabrielle followed the line of Aphrodite's vision to see what the goddess was looking at and her sleeping dog on the couch came into view.

"Absolutely not," she said flatly. "There has to be another way."

Xena looked at Gabrielle then turned to Aphrodite then back to Gabrielle. "In a lot of ways she would be safer," the warrior said gently. "He isn't going to torture her, she can't tell him anything."

"I know how you feel," Aphrodite added, "I know my shell wasn't a living thing, but I was really attached to it. I won't say there isn't risk, because there is. But I think she will be okay. Let's just say I've bestowed a couple of enhancements on her besides being able to spot deception. All I want you to do is consider it, you don't have to make a decision now."

Gabrielle studied the grey dog sleeping soundly. Her large square head tucked back towards her body, ears flopping over in relaxed bliss. The bard smiled at the thought of the love and devotion those amber eyes held when Argo looked at her. "Argo can't consent," the bard protested. "I can't offer her up as a hostage when she doesn't know what's going on, that's beyond wrong. Why don't we let him take me as a hostage?"

"We can't have him take you because it will take all of us if we're going to try and wound him enough to leave you alone," Aphrodite explained. "Using the hammer and the chakram is a two-person job. I can try to goad my brother into anything, but I can't directly lift a hand to hurt him, nor him me. It's just how it works. It's going to take the two of you, probably why he didn't want Xena to come back among countless other reasons. And Argo *can* consent and she has. She would do absolutely anything to make your life better. It's just how dogs are. You're welcome."

The bard frowned. "You're responsible for dog's behavior and can talk to them?" It was clear that even after two thousand years of living, Gabrielle found some things just too unbelievable.

"Do you doubt that you love Argo or she loves you?" the goddess asked archly.

"Well, no but…" Gabrielle protested.

"Love is my thing, the whole rainbow of it. From the time that first woman shared a meal with a wolf, my influence has been in that. Of *course* I can talk to them."

"Cats not so lucky?" Xena asked dryly.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. "Cat's haven't forgotten they were worshiped as gods by the Egyptians, blame them."

Gabrielle nodded mutely. After all she had asked of Aphrodite and the goddess sacrificing her last bit of home she felt like she couldn't say no, but at this point in time couldn't say yes either. The card game forgotten, she moved to another drawer and extracted a shoulder holster and gun, part of her disguise as a federal agent but also a reminder that even though she and Xena were not in mortal danger, the people and dog nearest her were as were the people nearest Ares.

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Aphrodite led the way as warrior and bard walked up to the security desk next to a pair of walk through metal detectors and two scanning machines in the federal building. They showed their badges and Gabrielle noticed the blue of Aphrodite's eyes intensify slightly.

"We're here to see Dr. Sprucehill," the goddess announced. "We have an appointment." The first of the three security guards checked a sheet and then picked up a phone. Gabrielle opened her suit jacket to show the gun in its holster which was noted by the second security officer. After a moment, they were waved past the machines as a woman in a lab coat came walking towards them.

Dr. Kate Sprucehill extended her hand in greeting, briefly shaking hands with each woman and checking their counterfeit badges before leading the way down the sterile corridor to a large antiseptic room.

"Will you be taking over the investigation from Agents Andrews and Rodriguez?" She asked conversationally as they passed six empty, gleaming autopsy tables. There was a wall of refrigeration units in the back, the well-lit examination tables and a small office off of the lab. The office was a bit warmer, showing evidence that a living human being worked here. There was a family picture on the desk with two young boys in super hero Halloween costumes and a picture of the woman with a man that Gabrielle assumed was her significant other. There was also a small metal action figure of Captain Phasma from Star Wars holding onto an iPhone cord that the bard found quite adorable.
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"Yes," Gabrielle replied smoothly, drawing her eyes away from the doctor's desk to look at the pathologist. "We were just assigned and are getting up to speed." Dr. Sprucehill appeared to be slightly younger than Aphrodite appeared which was a little younger than she and Xena appeared. She was tall and blond with her long hair pulled back into a professional ponytail. Her eyes were the same hue as the goddess and they were the same height. She was beautiful and Gabrielle felt a pang of guilt that what they were doing would most likely result in the woman losing her job. Absently she wondered how she might use the services of a pathologist in her organization.

"Ah, very good then," the doctor replied, drawing the bard from her reverie and gesturing that they take a seat across from her desk. She briefly rummaged through a stack of folders before selecting one and handing it to Aphrodite saying, "These are the findings." The goddess glanced at the paperwork inside before passing it over to Gabrielle who could make sense of the medical jargon. "Cause of death is straightforward," the pathologist continued. "Cyanide poisoning. She was wearing a tooth favored by old-fashioned spies that contained a small chamber with the poison. She bit down on the capsule and that was that."

"Do we know where she was killed?" Gabrielle asked, intently looking at the documents in the folder. There were toxicology reports, photographs of Susan's body, notes from the autopsy; the exam had been through and complete. "She lived in Southern California."

"I believe that is where she was abducted." Dr. Sprucehill replied "While her body was found in Montana I don't believe she was killed there, I found pollen in her nostrils, plant material under her fingernails from the DC area. She was held hostage for a day or so in DC before she killed herself then taken to Montana to thwart an investigation." There was bruising from restraints, probably handcuffs. She smiled sympathetically in the direction of the refrigerated units. "It seems like she was doing her best to collect information to point to her abductor. There was a symbol scratched into her shin and another strange set of marks. The angle, depth and position point to self-inflicted." The doctor pointed to two photos in the file that Gabrielle was holding. In turn Gabrielle showed the photos to Xena.

"Looks like the sign of the zodiac for Aries." Aphrodite commented.

"I agree. Do you mind if we take a look at the body?" Gabrielle asked.

The doctor looked confused for a moment, then answered "No, not at all."

"Before I forget," Gabrielle added before the doctor could stand. "We've been sent the paperwork to release the body," she continued. "A van will be by in a couple of hours to pick it up." As she spoke she withdrew a file folder from her leather briefcase which contained a blank piece of paper. The doctor looked at it and with a professional nod signed it at the bottom.

"This way please," the pathologist said leading the trio to the refrigerated units. She stopped at a specific drawer and pulled the door open, smoothly sliding out the tray that contained the body of Gabrielle's former vice-president. With a fluid motion, she pulled the sheet back exposing Susan's head and shoulders, neatly folding it across the Chinese woman's chest.

Gabrielle grimaced as she looked at the deceased face of her most trusted employee. While she might not have been like a regular friend, this was her god-daughter, someone she'd known since birth. The reality of her circumstance may have

kept them from being close, but Gabrielle loved her all the same. “Are you alright?” the pathologist asked gently, concerned at the smaller woman’s obvious reaction.

“I’m fine,” Gabrielle assured her, working hard to make sure her voice didn’t break. In her peripheral vision, she saw the concern on Xena’s face. Quite unexpectedly Xena dropped the file folder she’d been holding, stooped to pick it up then banged her head soundly on the drawer as she stood. The crash echoed in the sterile room as did the warrior’s howl of pain.

“Gah!” Xena said painfully, drawing her hand from her forehead which had been cut by the drawer, there was blood.

“This way,” Dr. Sprucehill said, leading the warrior back to her office, “lets sort you out.”

Gabrielle watched the pair depart then back to Aphrodite with a questioning expression on her face.

“She wanted to give you a few minutes with Susan,” the goddess replied, beaming proudly.

The bard turned her head in the direction of the pathologist’s office where Xena was sitting, her cut being administered to with a bandage. She knew how hard Xena must have smacked her head to get a wound that didn’t heal instantly. She turned back to Susan, her face not the peaceful expression of sleep, but untroubled by worries of the corporeal world all the same. After grasping a cold, unyielding hand Gabrielle leaned forward and kissed her friend’s forehead, a tear landing on the waxy skin. “Goodbye my dear friend,” she said softly. Without saying a word, Aphrodite had passed her a tissue and she blotted the moisture away then dabbed at her own eyes.

Gabrielle had composed herself by the time they were rejoined by pathologist and warrior, now sporting a Band-Aid on her forehead. She greeted Xena with a smile of gratitude then turned her attention to the pathologist. “Where did you say the scratches were?” she asked.

With great care and respect, the doctor went through her findings and the details of her examination, answering all of Gabrielle’s questions. If she found it odd that her two companions remained largely silent she didn’t say anything. When they finished she assured Gabrielle that all would be ready for the transfer of the body and offered to answer any additional questions should the need arise. All three women shook hands and thanked her for her time before making their way back to the parking lot.

Chapter 15: Second Time Stories

“Vox, how do we sound?” Gabrielle asked quietly as she took her seat at the bar next to Xena and Aphrodite. Ed stood nearby, keeping a watchful eye looking every inch the bodyguard that none of them needed.

“Loud and clear boss,” the engineer replied from the control room on *The Hippolyta*. “The picture is clear too, the necklace is working like a charm. You got checked in okay? Wolfgang called ahead to make your arrangements, I think his crush on Aphrodite is showing.”

Aphrodite chuckled overhearing the exchange in her own earpiece. “Tell him I appreciate the mountain of bath bombs, oils and salts in that palatial bathroom,” she

replied with a light laugh as she accepted a drink from the bartender. “The champagne and chocolate covered strawberries were a nice touch too.”

“That tub is impressive,” Xena had to admit marveling at how the in-ear monitor and mic concealed in her blouse worked with the small transmitter in her purse. “Nearly as impressive as that face-time thing you did this afternoon with Shen.”

“No,” Aphrodite disagreed, “impressive is letting a ten-year old pick out your ball gown. That gown looked wonderfully Mackiesque”

Xena shrugged, accepting her drink from the bartender, “I figured he’d do as good a job at it as I would.”

“Will the alterations be done in time?” Vox asked as she adjusted some of the controls onboard to get better sound. “I don’t think we have any magic mice that can bail you out in time for the big dance.”

“They’ll be done in time,” Aphrodite assured the engineer as well as her companions. “With what you paid for those dresses,” she added to Gabrielle, “I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s enlisting his entire team to get it finished.”

“Hey guys, what’d I miss?” A male voice asked through the monitor as he took his seat next to the engineer.

“Dude!” Vox protested. “You’re off duty now, this is my shift. You can keep tabs on them when I go off shift, like we discussed.”

“I was bored,” Wolfgang protested. “Come on, tell me what’s happening? Did they provide the accommodations for Argo? I was pretty clear about that when I called in.”

“Ladies, ladies you’re both pretty,” Aphrodite complained quietly from her seat at the end of the bar when the bartender walked to the far end of the bar to fill a drink order. To the casual observer it simply looked like three friends talking together but anyone in earshot would know better. “Argo is all set. Look, mommies need to work now, please get it together.”

“Fuck, I didn’t know we were live,” Wolfgang sputtered, embarrassed. “My apologies, boss, Aphrodite, Xena, Ed.” The bodyguard made a soft grunt but didn’t say anything.

“Is there anything in the system about Scruggs staying here? Or Easton?” Gabrielle asked, sipping her old fashioned, green eyes scanning the crowd. The soft clicking of a keyboard could be heard through the monitors. “Scruggs is listed,” the engineer confirmed, “but no Ares or Easton so he’s probably using another name or isn’t staying at the Omni. Based on what you found out from the pathologist, he probably lives in DC.”

“True, but he still may carry an object with him if it brings him power. Could I get another look at the picture?” Xena asked, leaning close to Gabrielle, keeping her voice low and quiet. “Of Scruggs.”

A long-forgotten shiver went up the bard’s spine at the sensation of the warrior’s breath so close to her ear. “Here,” she said, taking a moment to engage her brain and remember how to unlock her phone, “I’ll text you the photo. This is the guy we’re looking for.”

The warrior nodded, sitting up once again, casually looking around the bar. They’d chosen the nicest watering hole in the opulent hotel and the number of people making their way to the club was slowly picking up. The trio watched as political

operatives, lobbyists, wealthy donors and the Washington elites met, exchanged pleasantries and in some cases, went off to discuss business. With the aid of the camera Gabrielle was wearing, the duo in California worked feverishly with the assistance of facial recognition software to identify the players as fast as they could.

Ed cleared his throat purposefully and Gabrielle looked around to see what he'd alerted her to. Her eyes went wide at the sight of Brian Glass chatting amiably with someone. In moments that someone was identified as a low-level advisor to the president's administration. Gabrielle turned her face before being spotted and quickly tried to figure out how she wanted to handle the situation.

"What is it?" Xena asked, her voice calm but concerned.

Gabrielle nodded to the bartender for another round so he'd move to the other end of the bar to prepare their drinks. "The guy over there, Brian Glass, works in my company. He just transferred to SP and Susan and I have suspicions about him, there is something really misleading about him."

"He went on vacation right after transferring to a new department which is kind of strange," Wolfgang added over the monitor. "He isn't listed as staying at the Omni under his own name," the navigator added.

"How do you want to handle this, boss?" Ed asked as he casually brought his cuff up towards his mouth to speak into the mic.

The warrior's eyes brightened and she nodded to the goddess. "You need to get that guy in your suite with Argo," she suggested. "Question him there, Argo will let you know when he's lying. You go ahead and wait for him, I'm sure Aphrodite can convince him to follow her there. Ed and I can keep watch down here in case Scruggs shows up."

Aphrodite shrugged appreciatively, "Warrior has a point," she agreed.

Gabrielle had to admit that she couldn't think of a better plan and she did want to get to the bottom of her employee's activities. She appreciated that Ed stayed silent, not commenting on things he was hearing that obviously would have made no sense to him. She'd have to read him in next, of that she was certain.

She left her companions and made her way back to the spacious suite, receiving an enthusiastic greeting from her dog. She couldn't help but grin at the 'amenities' that had been set up by the balcony of the suite for Argo's use that Wolfgang had taken steps to insist on. Besides several dog beds throughout the suite, there was also a feeding area and a place for her to do her business. "We've got some good people, don't we girl?" she asked as she scratched the dog behind the ears and got an affectionate lick on the face for her trouble.

Several moments later the door to the suite opened and Brian Glass entered with Aphrodite, clearly startled to see his boss there. "Hey Brian," the bard said casually watching his reaction carefully.

His momentary expression of surprise quickly vanished as he looked from one woman to the next. "Miss Vincent," he said. "I had no idea you were in town." Both women looked at the dog who looked back and forth between them, clearly with an expectation of treats. "I was just…ah…she invited me up…" he said referencing her companion.

"I gather," Gabrielle replied. She nodded towards the couch across from her indicating that he should sit and fixed him a drink. Aphrodite sat down next to him and accepted the copper mug that the bard handed her as well. "What are you doing in DC?"

Gabrielle asked pleasantly, taking the comfortable chesterfield chair across from the matching leather couch.

"I was visiting friends in town for vacation," he replied easily. "We're going to meet up here a bit later. They're in town for the ball tomorrow."

Argo barked once and ambled over to the chesterfield, flopping down at her mistresses' feet. "See, the thing is, I don't think that's true." Gabrielle said, taking a sip of her Moscow mule.

Glass shrugged, his broad shoulders and muscular arms barely contained by his sports coat. He looked slightly smaller in build than Ed, but less sculpted and refined. He was all soldier, built for utility only with no time for vanity. "Honestly Ms. Vincent," he replied, "with all due respect, where I go on my vacation time isn't really any of your business."

"In this case it is," Gabrielle disagreed amiably. "I suspect you don't really work for me I mean sure, I'm signing your pay checks but someone else has your loyalty."

"That's crazy," he said and started to stand, ready to leave in a huff. Aphrodite put a gentle hand on his arm and he sat back down, clearly surprised with himself.

"Do you work for Ares?" Gabrielle asked pointedly, setting her drink on the black lacquered coffee table that sat between them.

"Who's Ares?"

Argo remained silent and rolled over to give Gabrielle better access to her belly. "How about Heinrich Easton?" she asked.

"I don't know who that is either." A soft bark had Brian looking with concern at Gabrielle. "Is something wrong with your dog?" he asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Aphrodite muttered under her breath.

"Thing is," Gabrielle continued leaning forward and studying his face intently. "You know who Heinrich Easton is. Do you work for him- yes or no."

"No, I don't work for him," Brian replied hotly. Argo was silent so Gabrielle continued.

"Are you with the feds?" she asked.

"I work for you," he insisted, looking at the dog suspiciously when she whined.

"FBI?" Gabrielle asked calmly.

He didn't speak, only shook his head, looking at the dog nervously beginning to catch on. Argo was studying him as well and cocked her head but remained silent.

"CIA?" the bard continued with the patience of one who could play this guessing game all night.

He shook his head once and Argo chuffed at him then ambled over so he could pet her head.

"Well that answers that," Aphrodite said with a satisfied sip of her drink.

He reached down to pet the dog's head and looked at Gabrielle, his expression equal parts confused and astonished. "I haven't told you anything."

Gabrielle nodded, "not yet at any rate," she said pleasantly. "Why is the CIA so interested in Bardic & Company that they'd put in someone undercover for so long? And why is the CIA interested in Heinrich Easton? And is Lynyrd Skynyrd really your favorite band?"

He chuckled at that last question and grinned bashfully at the bard. “Yeah, I knew I’d stepped in it there during the interview,” he admitted. “Tell me how you trained your dog to do that?” he asked hopefully.

Gabrielle shook her head. “Nope,” she said pleasantly. “We’re going to have a chat and you’re going to wish you were hooked up to a polygraph.” With that Aphrodite got up to get them fresh drinks and Gabrielle leaned back in her chair, beginning the interview.

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Xena listened with interest as Gabrielle questioned Brian Glass, smiling inwardly at how remarkably effective Argo was at interrogation. It took no time at all to determine that the loudness of a bark correlated to how far an answer was from the truth where a subtle chuff or whine indicated a more nuanced deviation. Even when the Agent refused to speak, the fact that questions were being asked led to canine assisted revelations of truth. Not wanting the conversation taking place upstairs to distract her from the mission at hand, she turned down the volume on the speaker in her ear and continued to scan the throng of conservative elite milling around in front of her.

She sipped her third drink and shifted her head from side to side. Her muscles were stiff and while the alcohol helped some, there was no doubt that she was developing the tolerance for liquor Gabrielle had mentioned. She was certain that if she concentrated for several moments, the buzz from the alcohol would vanish and the stiffness in her neck would intensify. It had been a long day and while she felt her stamina increase daily, she was tired. She thought about Ares and the battle that was to come; thoughts of her most recent battle returning unbidden. If she was going to fight the God of War once again, she would need to rest and gather her strength. The pain of death, not the physical pain although certainly that was part of it, but the pain of separation from Gabrielle and the things in her life left undone were too great to risk again. She did not want to go into her next battle in any condition other than her best.

“Is this seat taken?” a soft voice to her left inquired.

Xena looked up, a bit startled that she hadn’t heard or seen the woman approach having been so lost in her thoughts. “Please,” she said with a nod at the seat most recently occupied by Aphrodite. The woman smiled her thanks she reminded the warrior of the woman she’d seen in the photograph with Shen from the ten-year old’s bedroom. She had red hair that came to her jawline, gently framing her face with hazel eyes that looked gray in the warm light of the bar. She was wearing a short black dress that left her shoulders bare, with a dark choker that had cut stones reflecting the ambient light.

“What are you drinking?” the warrior asked getting the bar tender’s attention.

“Stolichnaya Elit,” she replied favoring Xena with warm smile. “If you have it Steve,” she said to the bartender who she clearly knew. “The New Zealand version.” He nodded in the affirmative and produced a couple of chilled shot glasses to pour the drinks.

“Make that two, my tab,” the warrior said, mimicking what Gabrielle had mentioned to Steve earlier when they’d first sat down.

“I’m Jennifer,” she said toasting the warrior with her shot glass.

“Natasha,” Xena said returning the toast.

“You in town for the gala?” Jennifer asked taking a sip of vodka.
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Xena nodded, “Sort of, you?”

She nodded in the affirmative. “At the confluence of public relations and entertainment, events like these are working weekends. What do you do Natasha?”

Grateful for the conversational practice she’d had with Vox, Xena put her past experience into contemporary terminology. “Private military contractor,” she replied.

Before she could say anything else a fat man with unkempt gray stubble in an expensive looking suit walked up to them openly leering at Xena’s new companion.

“Crystal,” he beamed not the least bit concerned that he was intruding. “I was hoping I’d run into you here – Let’s connect tonight.” Almost as an afterthought he seemed to notice Xena. “You and your friend, I’ll even pay double.”

The warrior’s eyes narrowed as she quickly got the gist of the conversation. “Sorry friend,” she said with a voice tinged with danger. “She’s already got plans for the evening.”

Confused, he looked around for a man. Xena sat patiently, cocking her head to the other side waiting for him to catch on. He finally did and his eyes went wide, first in surprise then clearly thinking a joke was being made at his expense. “That’s a good one,” he said. “Like you can afford her.”

“You do have a point,” Xena allowed, getting annoyed by the boorish man. She leaned forward which drew him in. “I’m only paying for dinner,” she said, the threat now fully evident in her voice. “The incredible sex is absolutely free, and if you don’t want to pay for a new nose, I suggest you take your repugnant visage elsewhere.”

Shock and anger were veining for dominance on his face “Do you have any idea who I am?” he demanded hotly. He grabbed her arm as he spoke, the spittle collecting at the corners of his moth.

“Besides a loser who has to pay for sex?” Xena asked sweetly. “I have not the faintest idea.” She took her thumb and middle finger and slowly reached over to his wrist. In an instant, his eyes went wide with pain and he let go, backing away, shaking out his hand.

“Cunt,” he muttered as he stormed off.

Jennifer chuckled into her drink, signaling Steve for a second round. “That was fucking priceless,” she said. Then after one look at Xena added, “You don’t recognize the guy, do you?” Xena shrugged accepting the drink. “My tab this time Steve,” she added. “That was a very powerful senator, Beaufort Hastings, foreign affairs committee.”

“Friend of yours?” Xena asked dryly.

Jennifer smiled seductively sipping her vodka. “He is a client on occasion, he wasn’t making that up.” When Xena’s expression didn’t change she smiled broadly, a genuine grateful smile. “And I take it that doesn’t bother you in the least?”

The warrior shook he head, “Of course not. I’m not about to judge you for how you make a living.”

“And I take it spending the night with me isn’t anathema to you either?” she asked coyly.

“I’d need to run that by my girlfriend first,” Xena replied with a shrug and a grin which prompted another round of laughter from the escort. They chatted amiably and Xena sent out a silent thank you to her friend onboard *The Hippolyta.* The time she’d spent chatting with Vox during the engineer’s convalescence, was paying dividends.

"So, what's your girlfriend doing that she's leaving you alone in a bar filled with repugnant creatures like Hastings? Sure, you can take care of yourself, but still…"

"We're going through a bit of a thing at the moment," Xena replied honestly. "I'm helping her with some work, we're figuring stuff out." On the one hand, she well knew that Aphrodite would be all too happy to take credit for any facet of her personality that was positive and she didn't want to read too much in to any abilities she may or may not have inherited from the goddess. But on the other hand, she had to admit that she did feel a certain insight that she'd never experienced before. Deciding to trust her gut, she pulled out her phone and showed the escort the photo of Scruggs standing next to Ares. While the angle was not ideal, the image was from a surveillance camera, their faces were still clear.

Jennifer looked over at the screen and studied the photo. "I'm looking for these two men," Xena elaborated. "Henry Scruggs and Heinrich Easton, I don't suppose you know either of them?"

"I don't," Jennifer replied drawing her fingertip across the top of the warrior's hand holding the phone. Xena smiled at her warmly. She was enjoying the attention. Different from the woman she was dancing with the night before who seemed young, Jennifer seemed like a woman whose experience may have mirrored her own in some ways. "Give me your phone," the escort added. "I'll text myself the photo and see what I can find out for you. I've got friends," she added with a wink.

The warrior's smile broadened, "I'd appreciate that."

"You know," she continued, moving a bit closer, "If things go south with the girlfriend, I think we could have some fun enjoying each other's company."

"Look who's making friends," Aphrodite commented as she and Gabrielle returned to the bar. The goddess arched a disapproving eyebrow at the warrior who looked away.

The bard was uncharacteristically at a loss for words. Her conversation with Brian Glass had been informative and she was looking forward to filling in her friend. What she was not expecting was to see Xena sitting close to a gorgeous red head, who was intimately touching the warrior's hand and forearm, leaning close and whispering in her ear. Even more alarming was the warrior's obvious enjoyment of the attention. The genuine smile on her face and the vivid blue eyes that darted to the interloper's cleavage when she leaned in for the warrior's ear. At their approach both women pulled back a little. The red head looked defiant and interested, Xena's expression however was tinged with some embarrassment.

"Anna, Susan this is Jennifer. Jennifer this is Anna and Susan," Xena said politely, pointedly not making contact with Aphrodite.

Jennifer smiled warmly shaking their hands in turn. "Let me guess," she said. "Your girlfriend," she said with a nod to Gabrielle. "And your sister," she said smiling at Aphrodite who did not look amused.

Xena coughed, clearing her throat. "Yeah, something like that, older sister."

The escort laughed again and ordered a round for the group. "Well it was lovely meeting you all, and very nice making your acquaintance Natasha. You have my number, feel free to give me a call. I will leave you ladies to your evening." With that she pushed away from the bar and kissed Xena briefly before departing into the growing throng of hotel arrivals.

"Who's your new bestie?" Aphrodite asked, clearly angry.

"She said she works in public relations and entertainment," the warrior explained.

"We left you here for a half an hour and you managed to pick up an escort?" Gabrielle asked, clearly confused.

"She found me, then this annoying senator – someone called Hastings came by. How did it go with Glass?" Xena asked changing the subject.

Gabrielle quickly took stock of her feelings. While uncomfortable, she suspected the white-hot jealousy coursing through her was a good sign. She also felt like she had little to no standing to criticize Xena flirting with anyone if she wanted to. Since the warrior's return it had been she who hadn't felt their connection. The realization began to dawn that inevitably if she didn't reconnect with the warrior, there would be no reason for Xena not to connect with someone else. "The thing with Glass went surprisingly well." Gabrielle explained, making sure she didn't sound hurt or angry when she spoke. "Right now, he and Ed are reviewing files."

"You got him to share his intel?" Xena asked impressed.

"No," Gabrielle replied with a shake of her head. "We're sharing ours. He works for the CIA which is spy agency that is only supposed to work in other countries. They've had their eye on a lot of Easton's activities with Russia and other countries for some time. Ed is sharp, if Glass slips up and shares anything we can use, he will catch it."

"Where are they?" Xena asked rubbing the back of her neck with her fingertips. "I think I'd like to retire for the evening, but I don't want to get in the way if they're using the suite." Xena explained.

"They're working in Ed's room, conferencing in with Vox and Wolfgang on the ship." Gabrielle replied, looking concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Just tired," Xena reassured her. "Scruggs hasn't shown up, I don't think he will and there has been no sign of Ares. I might make use of that huge bath tub and that mountain of bath stuff Wolfgang demanded for Aphrodite."

"Of course," Gabrielle replied hurriedly. "It's been a really long day." She smiled at the warrior in a way that she hoped was comforting. Inwardly she chided herself. Xena looked exhausted, she was chagrined she hadn't seen it before. There was a tightness to her expression and a drained looked to her eyes that was uncharacteristic for the warrior. She'd seen the look before of course, there were times when they'd been pushed miles past their limit of endurance but that had been a very long time ago. Seeing the expression now brought those memories flooding back.

The warrior smiled and brought her hand to Gabrielle's shoulder. The touch was warm, and grateful. "I'll catch up with the two of you later," she said after a brief glance to Aphrodite.

Gabrielle watched her depart, continuing to stare at the direction she'd left long after Xena made the turn that would take her to the elevators and up to the opulent suite of rooms at the top of the hotel. Finally, Aphrodite had had enough and simply nudged the bard in the shoulder. "Have you ever known Xena to take care of herself like that?" Gabrielle finally asked, turning her attention back to the goddess.

Aphrodite shrugged. "I'm telling you, this Xena is a lot better than the last one."

Gabrielle's frown made it clear that she didn't appreciate the ribbing at Xena's expense, even if the goddess perhaps had a point when it came to self-care.

"I need to get my shit together when it comes to her or cut her loose so she can move on herself," Gabrielle said, more to herself than to her companion.

"I guarantee that Xena wasn't interested in the escort," Aphrodite reassured her. "Sure, she enjoyed being flirted with by someone who knows how, but she wouldn't have done anything. Xena is as devoted to you as she ever has been. Besides," she added with a slight smirk, "I think everyone in DC felt that flare of jealousy you shot at her. Yeah, you tried to play it cool, but honey, that was intense."

Before Gabrielle could respond someone in the uniform of hotel staff approached the pair and nodded respectfully. "Ms. Winter," he said. "This note was just left for you at the front desk with instructions to deliver it immediately." He handed the goddess a folded piece of paper. She read it then passed the paper to Gabrielle without saying another word. Gabrielle read the handwritten note and then passed it back.

"Looks like we were successful after all," Aphrodite remarked as she put the note into her purse. She signaled Steve for another round. "This vodka is quite good," she said after passing the other shot glass to Gabrielle.

"Are you going to go meet him?" the bard asked, looking thoughtfully into her shot glass.

"We wanted to know what Ares was up to, if he's inviting me to a sit down he may give something up."

"Or think that you're going to give something up," Gabrielle countered. "I don't want you going if it's not safe."

Aphrodite smiled warmly and winked at her ex-lover, "You are a treasure," she said affectionately. "I will be perfectly safe," she reassured the bard. "He can't try to hurt me directly, we just don't do that sort of thing. I have nothing to fear from his legion of mortal minions and if for some bizarre reason he tried something, I'm the one who's had Ambrosia- I'd kick his ass."

Gabrielle looked out at the throng of people now crowding the bar. Someone here had been watching them, at least enough to identify Aphrodite and alert Ares to her presence. She needed to be smart, stay sharp and outthink a god. "He's probably doing a lot of the same things we are," she said with a nod to the crowd. "He's got his people watching for us, we're looking for him… I'm concerned that innocent people could get hurt in the crossfire."

"It's a valid concern," Aphrodite agreed. "But keep in mind that if anyone is stupid enough to follow him, put themselves in harm's way for him – they're responsible for those choices not you, dear one." Placid blue eyes found warm green and the goddess was both surprised and saddened by the steadfast acceptance she found there. Gabrielle knew that people were going to die, quite likely by her hand in the battle against Ares and she had fully accepted that.

"I know," the bard said quietly, her voice threaded with steely resolve.

"One thing I can offer you," Aphrodite continued brightly changing the subject, "is an evening off. Ares isn't going to have his people make any move while I'm meeting with him. He's going to take one look at me and want to play twenty questions about Ambrosia. You should relax, join Xena in the tub see where the night takes you; unwind and rejuvenate yourself."

Gabrielle nodded, having to agree that spending some time with Xena was indeed what she wanted. Easily a half-dozen moments came to mind, hot-springs, hot-tubs,

waterfalls, summer days, snowy nights- the sensations came back in a rush and Gabrielle experienced a hunger that she thought impossible to ever feel again.

She looked at Aphrodite suspiciously. “No love,” the goddess reassured her with a small smile, “that’s all you.”

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The Goddess of Love allowed herself to feel heartache the first half of her cab-ride to the restaurant. Knowing that this was what was best for Gabrielle helped some, and knowing that the future could bring the most amazing of surprises also helped. Months ago, she had no idea that Gabrielle or Xena even existed in the here and now, or her uncle, or even her brother for that matter. She had a new sense of hope that there were other members of her family, possibly her children out there waiting to be rediscovered and reconnected with. She missed the romantic connection she shared with the bard but felt confident that it was a connection put on hold as opposed to severed. She would patiently wait and see where things progressed for the warrior and bard. She had all the time in the world and could be patient. Gabrielle’s yacht captain came to mind; patient didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy herself elsewhere while she waited.

A familiar landmark out the window of the cab made her focus. She was nearly halfway to the restaurant and needed to center herself for the confrontation that was to come. Her feelings of pain and loss acknowledged and explored, she put them aside and meditated for a moment. She felt her power, her ability – all of the things that made her special and different and let that come to the surface, to fill her. She spent much of her day to day life tamping down what made her exceptional to be more relatable to mortals, to pass as one of them. This was no time for modesty or humility. She was like no one else on earth and now was the time to be grateful for that. Ares would be looking for information, to seduce her to his way of thinking, to garner an ally. He would be deceptive, he might threaten or perhaps try to bribe her, she needed to be ready for anything.

The car came to a stop at the cab stand and Aphrodite paid the driver and walked the few feet to the restaurant, nodding with a smile at the host as she passed him. A sense of aggression and danger hung thick in the air. When her eyes adjusted to the dark she found herself surrounded by a lush, throwback interior that would have been at home in any number of mob movies.

“Over here sis!” a playful voice called and Aphrodite saw Ares sitting at a cozy booth in the back. She walked past numerous tables either occupied by oblivious diners or none too subtle bodyguards and henchmen. It took a fair amount of restraint for the goddess not to roll her eyes at the scene. She could feel it; she was the most powerful person in the restaurant, easily. Clearly the God of War sensed it too because the self-satisfied smirk on his face vanished when she approached. “You are positively radiant,” he admitted, taking a sip from his wine glass. “Found some Ambrosia, did you?”

Gracefully, she slid into the booth. “It certainly appears that way,” she replied smoothly with a smile. She studied him as she took a sip of wine from the glass he poured for her. It tasted heavy and bombastic as she swirled it around in her mouth. She thought of Gabrielle and how a mortal with a few extra years of living could become a much better judge of good wine than an immortal. “You called this meeting,” she finally
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said as she put down the wine glass. “So, meet. What is it you want to say that you couldn’t put in an email?”

“Come on sis,” he replied trying to regain some of his previous bravado. “Can’t a brother visit with family? Haven’t seen you since the forties.” Aphrodite flinched and he chuckled. “Yes, I knew that was you. I’ve been keeping tabs on you. I’ve been keeping tabs on every Olympian I can find, trying to figure out what happened as well as shape and enjoy this new world order.”

“Fascinating.” Aphrodite replied flatly. “Who else have you come across?”

He shook his head, “Not so fast sis. Why don’t you tell me where you got the Ambrosia? I know it wasn’t one of your temples, I raided them years ago.”

This time the Goddess of Love allowed herself an eye roll. “You’re that certain you knew where every one of my temples were? And how rude is that by the way.” Waiting for his response she studied her brother. As usual, he was handsome, rugged looking, exuding a base lust for power that could be intoxicating if one was in the mood for that sort of thing. Aphrodite crossed her arms and said nothing.

“What are you doing in DC?” He asked changing the subject.

Aphrodite could feel him studying her, looking for deception. He expected her to lie to her, the lie possibly being more informative than the truth. “We’re here to arrange for the transportation of Susan Yin’s body back home.” She took another sip of wine and grimaced. “Playing stupid isn’t your thing Ares. You know that Gabrielle runs in circles that would have her staying at the Omni with all the power players in town.” She could feel her brother moving into her mind, looking for signs of deception. She reached for the wine bottle to pour herself a second glass to avoid eye contact. Maintaining an oblivious, calm façade; secure that her own secrets were safe. She let him feel her power, her sense of assurance and like looking into someone’s house when they leave the front door open, she sensed it. Carelessly, his own secrets laid bare she glimpsed the field journal where he kept meticulous notes on the location and identities of the other Olympians he’d found.

Were it not for the recent ingestion of ambrosia, Aphrodite doubted she’d be able to sense without probing something he wanted to keep private, much harder still to keep her own sense of discovery hidden. But secrets and privacy were every bit as much in the prevue of love as they were in the games of war. With a relaxed posture that comes from well-warranted confidence, she endured his invasion with good humor, not letting on. In moments her power and confidence unsettled the God of War enough to have him withdraw from her mind, falsely believing that she was none the wiser.

“Fine,” Ares said with a shrug. “Because we’re family I’m giving you one warning. Stay out of this thing with me and the irritating blond. Cut her loose. You don’t want to get in the middle of this.”

Aphrodite laughed in spite of herself. “You admit to sacking my temples, stealing my Ambrosia, and now you want to tell me who I can’t hang out with because of some kind of familial loyalty? You’re a riot.”

“How did she survive anyway? She seems too together for someone who’s had ambrosia. Is there some relic of Athena’s stashed somewhere we’ve overlooked? Some kind of deal with the fates? Hades? Do know how she did it?”

“Perhaps,” Aphrodite admitted with a chuckle knowing an outright lie would be easily spotted.

"Did you do it?" He demanded.

She shook her head knowing that he could tell she was telling the truth. "Do you know what happened? How we all lost touch?" she asked wondering if he'd figured anything out yet.

He shrugged as if it wasn't something that he'd given much thought. "I have no idea," he admitted. "Although if Gabrielle is still alive this is probably somehow her fault. I'd prefer a hundred Callistos to one of her," he fumed. "If there is trouble, she's going to be in the thick of it."

The Goddess of Love shuddered at the thought of a hundred Callistos. "Fortunately, that doesn't seem to be up to you."

"Come on sis," he tried again. "Where'd you get the Ambrosia? Are you in touch with family? Do they have it? I'll give you my list if you give me yours."

"You sound like an addict," Aphrodite said without emotion or judgement.

Ares frowned, he could not remember the last time that the goddess wasn't the least bit intimidated by him. "All's fair in love and war…"

"Why do they say that?" she interjected. "Because we're really not at all alike. I'm awesome and you're a jerk."

Ares downed his wine and poured himself another glass. "I know you've found Ambrosia before," he tried conversationally, "the late sixties – that was all you."

"That was with the smallest crumb that you somehow overlooked," she explained with a shrug. "From my temple in Athens. Imagine what I'm going to do with a decent meal?" The warning was evident in her voice that she was tiring of this game. "Besides, I know you've had a bite recently as well. You've gotten a lot of mileage out of getting some guys to fly planes into buildings."

He grinned broadly. "Yeah, I found some stashed in one of Hades' remote temples. It's not like he's gonna need it. The tiniest bit but still, I must say that has worked out even better than I expected. You know what I like about this country? It's all about survival of the fittest, the ruthless, the strong. America is no place for peacenicks who want to coddle everyone else." Now the warning was clear in his voice and he looked at Aphrodite, his eyes cold and hard. "America is the land of endless war. War on its own people, war on everyone else, war on the ideals they hold most dear, war on knowledge, wall to wall war. They build the weapons that they sell to people to use on its own citizens, it's amazing. It was made for me, and that, dear sis, is something you can't do shit about."

The Goddess of Love leaned back in the booth, gracefully crossing one leg over the other. With a casual glance, she let her eyes rest on one of Ares' men. A skinhead with a tattoo of a swastika on his neck. He had been keeping a watchful but unobtrusive eye on his boss since she sat down. A look of confusion crossed his features and he rose from the booth, then staggered out of the restaurant. The God of War had nothing but cold fury in his eyes when Aphrodite turned back to him. "That guy just came to his senses," she explained. "He's going to stumble out of this restaurant and into a tattoo parlor where a husband and wife team do cover-up work for free on reformed white supremacists and other hate groups. He's going to be so grateful he's going to work for the family and in his free time he's going to get an education and then pay if forward by volunteering to tutor African American women in prison. You can play cat and mouse all

night bro, and by morning I'll have this restaurant emptied of assholes." She winked at him, not intimidated in the slightest. "Except you of course."

"Fine," he growled. "I want Gabrielle out of my way. Ambrosia or no Ambrosia. I know Xena is back," he put his phone on the table displaying a photo of the three of them at the bar earlier that night. "I want Xena of my way. Preferably I'd like Xena and Gabrielle out of each other's way, but I'll settle for the blond moving to some remote island and Xena following after her. Look," he continued trying another angle, "I was going to be nice. Offer some compassion with my conservatism. But I don't have to. I can shape this place into an authoritarian wasteland."

Placid blue eyes narrowed. "For someone who kidnapped Gabrielle's closest friend and then killed her, you're in a hysterical position to think that they'll just drop this because you want them to. You involved her, dumbass!" Aphrodite replied. "And upsetting Gabrielle is the quickest way to make Xena really, really angry. Duh. You know that."

"That bitch killed herself. I needed information, not a body," he shot back defensively.

"That was a really nice woman," the Goddess of Love hissed in return. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Now it was Ares turn to roll his eyes. "There is nothing wrong with me 'Dite," he said. The Goddess of Love's features furrowed into a frown at a nickname she detested. "Gabrielle's lacky was a mortal. Hardly more than a pawn in a universe where we're the kings and queens. You're the one with the problem when you start to treat mortals like us. A tryst here and there, fine- we all have itches that need to be scratched – but I saw you two in Catalina. Sis, that was disgusting," he said looking genuinely repulsed. "The look of adoration on your face the way you're following Gabrielle around like a love-sick puppy…"

Aphrodite laughed harshly, unable to stop herself. The venom filled chortle made Ares' eyes narrow with anger which only made her laugh more. "That's rich," she gasped around laughs. "Do you even here yourself? Honestly I don't know what's more hysterical- that you think you know anything about love or the hypocrisy of Xena's little bitch lecturing me."

"Fuck you," Ares spat, his anger getting the better of him. "Xena isn't entirely mortal. She's not like Gabrielle."

"You're no better than a racist," Aphrodite replied dismissively. "And that limited world view is going to be your undoing but whatever. Apparently, you think Xena and Gabrielle can stop you. Why is that? Oh yeah, they always stop you."

He frowned then his eyes brightened as a new strategy occured to him. "Fine. You're into pussy now. Obviously, I can relate. When you tire of Gabrielle, I can get you all the tail you want," his eyes narrowed dangerously, "or I can start having all the queers rounded up and sent off to camps, up to you. I've got connections and I know how much you like visiting people in camps."

"What is it with you guys?" Aphrodite replied making no attempt to hide her disgust and anger. "On Friday night's it 'I hate the gays' and on Saturday nights it's a trip to the leather bar to pull a train. Your kink is your business, I don't give a shit. But it's the hypocrisy that kills me. Sometimes you like to bottom- who gives a fuck? Oh, and you're gonna help ***me*** score?" To prove her point she stared at the God of War while she

casually dropped her napkin on the floor. A bartender immediately walked over and picked it up, returning it to her.

"Miss?" the brunette bartender said politely. "You dropped this."

"Awww, thank you," Aphrodite replied warmly as she accepted the napkin her fingertips brushed against the hand of the woman who had stooped to pick it up. It was clear that the bartender was smitten. The woman adjusted her glasses and walked away, turning around once to smile at the goddess then returned to her station at the bar.

"As you can see," Aphrodite continued, "I didn't glamour her in any way so enough with you getting me dates."

"Great," Ares replied sarcastically. "My sister the succubus. Okay, how about this? Back the fuck off or it's world war three. You know I have the juice to do it."

"What is the fucking point?" Aphrodite asked imploringly. "Sure, we can survive. I can thrive even with Xena getting me Ambrosia- but to what end?"

"Ah ha!" he said victoriously. "Xena is the key to Ambrosia, I knew that was how the brat survived." Aphrodite grimaced at her mistake. "Look," he said trying to sound reasonable. "I know you like people, bringing them joy and happiness or whatever – as long as you don't mess up my plans I'm good to have you do this- but no war protests this time. You stay in your lane. You fuck with me and I will pull the pin on this grenade, I've got all the players right where they need to be." He shrugged as an idea came to him and leaned closer, Aphrodite was annoyed that he smelled nice. "You share your stash of Ambrosia with me and maybe I wait for the next autocrat? Xena keeps me in supply of the stuff and maybe you get your supreme court back for another generation? I can be patient if properly motivated. These people don't deserve your concern- they'll sell their mothers for an extra tax cut. But those little people, I'll let them live a little longer maybe?"

Aphrodite nodded slowly considering his offer. "I'll think about it," she said. "Give me three days."

"You have twenty-four hours," Ares replied firmly.

Aphrodite smiled. "Fine, I'll take two days." He shrugged in agreement thereby dismissing his sister. The goddess didn't mind, in fact she was grateful that he couldn't see her face and the self-satisfied smirk she wore as she left the restaurant.

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Xena eased herself into the fragrant foamy water luxuriating in the warmth and quiet. It was hard to imagine a bathing space more opulent than the one on *The Hippolyta* but the marbled bathing area in the presidential suite was indeed that. She considered that if amenities such as this were as readily available in her warrior days, she might have spent less time on the battlefield. She let the water rise up past her shoulders, extending her legs and resting them, crossed at the ankles on the far edge of the tub. The space was so large she could easily float if she wanted to. The heat permeated her stiff muscles, urging them to relax and her mind followed suit. She let the thoughts come and go, clearing her consciousness of the clutter so she could look at what was important and eventually let even those thoughts recede until her mind was a blank canvas.

Like stripping away a painting to get to the under-painting then the sketch then gesso, then the canvas surface she thought about Gabrielle and her place, not only in the bard's life but in the cosmos in general. There was much she didn't like and even more
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she didn't understand about this new world but the basic struggles and triumphs were the same. Her feelings about Gabrielle had not wavered. In fact, a newfound respect and admiration had emerged intertwined as it was in her disappointment that her feelings she'd been so assured of in the past did not seem to be reciprocated. Her bard had lived an astonishing number of 'lives' after making a decision she would have to admit was immature. She had kept the core of who she was even as she forged a skill set Xena had no doubt rivaled or surpassed her own. Who was she to Gabrielle now? After dunking her head back to feel the hot water on her scalp, she sat upright once again and closed her eyes letting the relaxation seep in, the sizzle of a candle and sounds of the water with bubbles popping filling her senses. Unbidden, her mind flashed upon moments not that long ago with Jennifer. It was nice to be desired, wanted, even if superficially. She considered her interaction with Gabrielle when they'd woken up this morning. Gabrielle had kissed her, a kiss that felt familiar and made her pulse race with the memory. She would wait. While it might not have been true of the Gabrielle she had once known, she had no doubt that the Gabrielle of today would make her desires known when and if she was ready.

Xena had no idea how long she'd rested in that place between consciousness and sleep, that blissful space where you could dream while lucid enough to direct the pageant that played out. Eventually the warrior became aware of a presence in the room with her. Without opening her eyes she knew it was Gabrielle, the fragrance of the perfume she'd been wearing giving her away. Feeling too relaxed to even acknowledge the bard's presence, Xena simply waited assuming that Gabrielle had entered the bathroom to retrieve something. Her ears perked up at the soft rustle of fabric then she felt the displacement of water as Gabrielle joined her in the tub.

Opening her eyes, the warrior saw the bard's breasts slip beneath the suds and Gabrielle smirked slightly, watching her.

"All that's missing is Minya bringing the hot water," the bard observed.

"Much better to get it out of the faucet," Xena replied with a smile. "Things alright at the bar?" she asked adjusting her legs so the bard had more room.

"Ares sent a note to Aphrodite to talk so she went to meet with him." Xena arched an eyebrow and she continued, "I'm not worried. She's feeling the Ambrosia and is certain that she's more than his equal for the time being. I don't know if she'll get anything from him, but I've little doubt she'll be able to get information from the people around him, and he does seem the sort to have an entourage. If nothing else she said to take the night off as he wouldn't try anything before seeing what information he could glean from her."

"Assuming that he's told his flunkies anything," the warrior groused. "But a night off is well deserved." She tilted her neck which omitted a loud 'crack' and several vertebra popped back into alignment.

"Still stiff?" Gabrielle asked. Xena nodded and without further comment Gabrielle picked up one of the warrior's feet under the water and began to massage it, expertly hitting the requisite pressure points that had the warrior sighing with pleasure.

Xena looked at Gabrielle through blissful eyes but there was something else to her expression and Gabrielle could see it. "What is it?" she asked.

Blue eyes studied green before Xena took a deep breath and said what was on her mind. "Before I met you I searched out people to learn from them for one reason only-

skills that would help me be a better, more skilled, more formidable warrior. Even people like Lao Ma or Cyan, what I sought was power, brutal skills. I can tell that you've put as much energy into learning healing arts as you have into the martial ones."

Gabrielle thought about it and smiled. The sense of the surreal was receding, this was Xena; she was alive, she was here to stay and simply chatting in a steaming hot bubble bath was the most perfect moment imaginable. Like old times. She loved the sound of Xena's voice, the warm low rumble. For the time being saving the world was pushed to the side and this evening she was selfishly keeping for herself. "I've tried to balance what I've studied. I've been drawn to science, which is why I love the medicine of different cultures." Xena groaned happily as the bard coaxed a particularly tough knot on the ball of the warrior's foot to release. "But you taught me the basics of reflexology and acupressure before I even knew what those words represented," she said as she worked. "I just continued to learn down the paths that you showed me."

"Tell me a story," Xena urged splashing a little water in the bard's direction, feeling self-conscious at the compliment. "Do you still remember how to do that?"

"What kind of story?" Gabrielle asked, enjoying the warmth of her connection with Xena as much as she was enjoying the warmth of the water.

"Tell me about when you first came here," the warrior suggested settling herself back into the water. Gabrielle continued the massage and Xena let the touch and familiar timbre of her storytelling voice envelope her. She leaned her head back and couldn't think of a time she'd felt more content.

"Well," the bard began, "the first time I came to this country was from Italy in the mid 1800s. I made my way to Oregon City. My company was called Chakram Enterprises and was being run by agents of mine in Europe. I went by Adele Sparrow then. The trip out west was to look for some business possibilities as well as my ongoing search for Aphrodite or any clues as to what became of the other Olympians. It was the 'wild west' and there weren't many opportunities for women so I actually posed as a man for the fifteen years I lived out here back then. Samuel Stafford was the name I used as a man."

Xena opened an eye and looked at Gabrielle. "How'd you pull that off?" she asked.

Gabrielle pushed some bubbles around before answering. "I dressed the part, had a man's haircut. I could fight, I could shoot. People thought Sam was a young man," she shrugged, "I had a reputation in town as a young man that while small in stature was scrappy in a bar fight, especially if there was a broom nearby." She smiled and Xena grinned back at her remembering the hours of work the bard had put into honing her skills with the staff. "I was also really good with guns," Gabrielle added, drawing Xena from her thoughts. "I spent so many hours mastering how to shoot. Rifles, six-shooters, didn't matter. I could hit anything. I had this six shooter, Odessa…"

"Your gun had a name?" Xena asked opening her eyes. "I never named my chakram."

"*I* didn't name it," the bard replied. "The previous owner did. I won it in a poker game from a grifter passing through town. Anyway, more than once I've severed a hanging rope with a single shot."

Xena nodded, impressed. "So, dressing the part and fighting was enough to convince people?"

Gabrielle's cheeks flushed a little and she was glad that Xena had her eyes closed. "There were some ladies that worked upstairs at the saloon in town. I was a gunslinger, and hired myself out- did a fair amount of work with the Pinkerton Detective Agency as muscle well, as a good shot at any rate. Anyway, I'd visit the girls as often as the other boys did. That seemed to do the trick."

"You visited a brothel to convince people you were a man?" Xena asked, her voice threaded with amusement. "Did the women have any idea?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "If they knew, they kept my secret," she said. "When I'd visit I'd never fully undress and I'd insist on it being dark. I'd made a dildo and…" she shrugged. "No complaints from the ladies, in fact my personal hygiene and respect for them made me really popular. And I paid well."

"Dildo?" Xena asked.

Gabrielle looked pointedly at the water.

"Oh, a phallus?" Xena suggested with a chuckle.

"Exactly, they're called dildos now."

"That's a silly name." This time Gabrielle arched an eyebrow and the warrior chuckled, "Yeah, I guess that fits. I'm sorry, please continue."

"When I got married I didn't need to keep visiting the prostitutes and she knew I was a woman so that made it easier," Gabrielle paused, "you know, that's the only time I've been legally married to a woman."

"This is a story I've got to hear," Xena urged with a twitch of her foot in the bubbly water. "What was her name?"

"Her name was Bess, Elizabeth actually, and Xena she seemed so young. She was in her early twenties with long brown hair and these light brown eyes that were really striking. She and her husband Caleb lived in town and he was a farrier. I rented a room in the hotel on the far side of town but I knew her enough to tip my hat and say hello. We'd exchange pleasantries on the Sundays when I'd see her at church. Her husband had a nasty reputation as a cruel and violent man. Most folks in town gave them wide berth. Naturally, I'd been on the lookout for a reason to get involved but until this happened all I'd heard were rumors, nothing I felt I could act on.

"On this particular day, I happened to be in the mercantile when Bess came in. I was buying some fabric to make myself a new shirt and the proprietor, Joseph was determined to sell me something I didn't want for twice as much. Bess was waiting to get Joseph's attention. I suggested Joseph help her first, but she demurred." Gabrielle paused in her story to collect her thoughts. She looked around the opulent bathroom with its polished marble and shining fixtures and considered all the different lives she'd lead.

"Caleb comes in angry," she continued, "he had no patience to loose and he blows up that she's buying brown eggs instead of white ones. Bess tried to explain that the brown ones were cheaper so she could also buy the liniment he wanted as he hadn't given her enough money. So, then he starts berating her for embarrassing him in public." Xena could hear the tension in Gabrielle's voice tighten, still angry about the incident over a hundred years later.

"I'd had enough," the bard went on, "and said that while he was doing a great job embarrassing himself all by his lonesome, I'd bet him ten dollars he couldn't tell a brown egg from a white egg once cooked. He took a swing at me which I blocked, he tripped

and then fell headlong into a display of flour in sacks and came out of the altercation looking like a ghost. He challenged me to a gunfight to take place at noon the next day."

"Did Elizabeth want her husband dead?" Xena asked, finding herself engrossed in the story. As Gabrielle wove the tale images filled the warrior's mind from Shen's history book; the wooden sidewalks, horses tethered outside of the saloon and the dusty streets. She envisioned the cowboys in their hats and chaps and how Gabrielle must have looked dressed in that garb. Without a trace of jealousy, she was simply mesmerized by the tale and wondered in silent astonishment at how many other amazing stories the bard would be able to tell.

"Actually, no," Gabrielle explained. "When Bess came to my room that night at the hotel she was a mess. Several bones in her face had been broken including one of the ocular bones near her eye. One of her shoulders was dislocated, which I was able to fix. Caleb had beaten her most savagely. It was only then I started to consider going through with the gunfight. I asked her if she had any children and she told me she was barren, one of the reasons Caleb was always angry at her. She explained that as much as she hated him he was an evil she knew and if I killed him she didn't know what would become of her. She didn't have much of an education so teaching was out. She was beautiful but that would have led her to saloon work. She also told me quite pointedly that she couldn't pass as a man."

"So, she knew?"

"Yes," Gabrielle answered and paused to release Xena's foot and pick up the other one, repeating the massage. "She said that she knew the very first time she saw me and saw no reason to divulge my secret. Quite impulsively," the bard added, "I suggested that if Caleb insisted on a gun fight and I won, which I was obviously confident about, that I would wait a respectable amount of time, court her in the usual fashion and then marry her. That way she'd have the time and space to decide what to do with her life. I honestly assumed in a year or two she'd figure things out and move away."

"And you won?" Xena asked.

"Caleb was dead before his gun even cleared its holster," the bard replied without pride or enthusiasm. "I waited several months then true to my word courted her like any young suitor would. That solved my situation with the women at the saloon, although two of them were very disappointed. A year and a half after killing her husband, Bess and I were married by the local reverend.

"Did you love her?" Xena asked quietly.

Gabrielle was quiet a moment, the only sounds in the bathroom coming from the flickering candles and the slight movement of the water in the tub. "I'd say I grew to love her. I cared about her, certainly. I obviously felt responsible for her safety. I was gone a fair amount of the time working for Pinkerton so we got a small bit of land just outside town. The house was modest since we obviously didn't have children. It wasn't much to take care of. I had two horses, Whiskey and Tequila and two dogs, Bourbon and Sarsaparilla. There were some chickens, a couple cows, goats, and a cat. The whole homestead was small enough for her to manage by herself while I was gone and with my reputation, people left her alone. I taught her to read and write and she devoured every book I could find for her. She was quiet and reserved at first but in time grew in comfort and confidence and became more than my equal when it came to chatting." Gabrielle

smiled tenderly at the memory. “I told her that if she met someone we could work something out but that didn’t happen.

“At first, we took turns one of us sleeping in the bedroom, one of us sleeping on the couch in the parlor. We spent our time together when I wasn’t working, we got close.” Gabrielle chuckled, remembering something fondly. “I thought about you so much in those years Xena,” she said. “I saw so much of the girl from Potidaea in Bess. I saw feelings awaken in her that I’m sure you saw in me and like you, I gave her the time to figure things out.” Xena arched a knowing eyebrow and the bard continued. “She found her own way to let me know. At first, she was concerned that I needed to greet her like the other men did with their wives, with a kiss, for appearances sake of course. Then she decided that the sensible thing was to just share the bed because it was big enough for the both of us.” Gabrielle shrugged.

“One thing led to another?” Xena suggested helpfully and the bard blushed again. “How long were you together?”

“Counting our courtship, we were together for eleven years and we spent the last eight of those years as lovers. She got a really bad case of Scarlett fever and died. The medicine I knew at the time was enough to keep her comfortable but I couldn’t save her. I stayed in Oregon City until Whiskey and Tequila passed away and then I moved back to England with the dogs where I resumed control of the company. Later married a man and didn’t come back to the United States until 1912.”

“The first time, how did that happen?” Xena asked curiously, enjoying the story and the images that Gabrielle wove for her as she told it.

Gabrielle smiled, remembering not only her first time with Bess but how that had contrasted so dramatically with the first time she’d shared that intimacy with Xena.

It had been such an eerie, surrealistic day that she and Xena had spent traveling from Delphi to Thebes. A thick blanket of fog rolled in making them stop early to camp for the night. The full moon refracting off the mist had painted everything with a cool glow. Between the eerie white haze and the moisture that clung to everything made Gabrielle feel more of a chill than was probably in the air. All the same, she had been more than happy to join Xena on her bedroll that night; their bodies keeping each other warm. Sleep was the farthest thing from her mind at that early evening hour. There were no stars to count, no fire to tend- the moisture making a cheery blaze impossible. She lay there, in Xena’s arms absently touching the skin of the warrior’s hands with the pad of a gentle finger. From there she stroked the inside of a wrist and heard the sharp intake of breath in response.

“I’m sorry, did I hurt you?” she had asked, her voice quiet in the misty night.

“No,” Xena had whispered back, “that feels nice.”

“So you don’t mind if I…”

“No,” the warrior had whispered again cutting her off. “I don’t mind at all.”

Given permission to explore and touch, Gabrielle made the most of it. She drew her hands across strong forearms and could feel the heat that was rising from the body behind her. Her own pulse was quickening. She felt an anxiety that scared her with its promise. She turned in Xena’s arms to face her, to touch her cheeks, lips and throat with a light finger. The desire in the warrior’s eyes was obvious, even in the dim light of the mist. All the while Xena had remained still, neither helping nor hindering the bard’s efforts.

They were close enough, having known each other as long as they had, that nonverbal signals were very plain to Gabrielle. Xena would be a willing participant for whatever she wanted, it was up to her. She leaned forward with a confidence she didn't really feel and gently placed her lips against Xena's, delighted at their softness and the way they felt against hers. She felt warm arms circle around her. Her fingers brushed against the warrior's throat revealing a heart hammering every bit as hard as hers.

She deepened the kiss, oblivious to the fog, the chill, the night sounds. Her whole world had focused down to the pair of them; Xena letting her explore at her own pace, responding with enthusiasm, rewarding her curiosity at every turn. While it was true that she had been with Perdicus, that clumsy and rushed fumbling through their marriage night would have in no way prepared her for what she was presently feeling. The engagement of all her senses and her heart – that made it different. There was a safety and security in Xena's arms to be found in equal measure to the excitement and passion that they promised. They spent an extra day at the campsite leaving Gabrielle with little doubt as to the depths of her feelings for Xena and that they were completely reciprocated.

All of this flashed through Gabrielle's mind as she considered Xena's question. There was no trace of jealousy in the warrior's tone, rather she seemed intrigued to hear the tale. "I had come home from a month-long stint with Pinkerton," the bard explained. "I was tired. She heated some water for me for a bath while I fixed the barn door. Tequila was too smart for her own good. After my bath Bess asked me to try on a shirt she'd started for me while I was gone. She was a skilled seamstress and an amazing cook.

"As she's fitting the shirt on me and adjusting the pins she tells me about this conversation she'd had the week prior with Ruby- one of the girls from the saloon. Bess was quite the conversationalist." Gabrielle elaborated when Xena smirked in her general direction. "She and I would talk about everything from the books she'd read to local news, philosophy, you name it. Anyway, Bess asked me if I missed seeing Ruby and the others. I said that I didn't really. I mean perhaps on occasion, but not really. Then she asked me why I hadn't tried to do anything like that with her, given that I was technically her husband and could demand it." Gabrielle smiled sadly to herself. "Xena, it breaks my heart but in that place, at that time, Bess didn't have the faintest clue about her own agency or the concept of consent. She told me that Ruby had gone into quite vivid detail as to what transpired between us and Bess said she was curious, and perhaps a bit jealous as well."

Xena allowed herself a small chuckle at the bard's expense imagining Gabrielle with someone as talkative as she was. "So, it wasn't like our time in the mist?" she asked.

"No love," Gabrielle said with a warm smile. "This was sweet, and it was nice, but it was in no way like that amazing night and day in the mist." Xena smiled and nodded for the bard to continue. "Bess was curious and asked me about everything. There was no guile, no sense of embarrassment. She wanted to know how someone decided to kiss how they kissed. Or why they chose to touch a certain way. She didn't want to lead, but she did want to discuss and process… to a certain point that is." Gabrielle added with a wry grin. "We started in the parlor where she was fitting my shirt then finished in the bedroom, as you do. It was lovely," she added "but she wasn't you, Xena. None of them have ever been you."

Xena looked at Gabrielle, taking in the way her hair framed her face, the sparkle of her green eyes, the contours of her nose and lips with an inscrutable expression on her face that the bard had never seen before. “How did it feel?” she asked quietly.

Gabrielle didn’t need to ask for clarification. She locked eyes with Xena as she spoke. “How did it feel to watch a young woman fall in love with me? To see her become aware of her own sexual desires? To watch her wrestle with the confusion, but look at me lovingly when she thought I wouldn’t notice? Or how she’d find reasons to touch my arm, or my hair? I think you know exactly how it felt Xena. I felt powerful. I felt desired. But I also felt a great sense of responsibility not to hurt her, or do anything that she might later see as a mistake or a lapse in judgement. There was fear mixed with that power.”

She put Xena’s foot down and moved her hand up the warrior’s calf under the water. “Is that how you felt?” she asked. She leaned forward moving her hand up the thigh. She could feel her own pulse quicken in a way that had been missing for over two thousand years and it felt delicious.

“Yes,” Xena whispered as the bubbles gave way to Gabrielle’s movement as the bard settled herself, straddling Xena and brought her lips to the warrior’s, kissing her fiercely. Strong arms encircled her, holding her close as she threaded one hand through the wet black hair at Xena’s neck and with her other hand, let her fingertips resting lightly on Xena’s throat, feeling the quickening heartbeat there.

It was almost like she could feel a dam breaking, the walls she’d built around her memories of Xena to keep them safe were cracking. For years after the warrior’s death Gabrielle had thought about her, imagined her, relived in her memories their adventures, including the intimate ones. Over time it became too much, became too painful and Gabrielle knew that she had to put those memories away, put them down on scrolls and in journals and keep them from her conscious thought or the sadness and loneliness would be too much. A tide of emotion was surging through her and the bard from Potidaea was not the least bit interested in containing it.

The warrior from Amphipolis was a willing recipient of the lust fueled onslaught. While Gabrielle had never been shy or unskilled in the past, there was no denying that two thousand years of life experience had left their mark. Warm lips parted as Gabrielle’s tongue demanded entry, walking that tightrope between loving and fierce. When they parted Xena saw the shimmer of unshed tears in the bard’s eyes, instantly becoming concerned. “What is it?” she asked.

Gabrielle rested a palm on each of Xena’s shoulders, steadying her. “I think I know what’s been off with me,” she began quietly, looking into the depths of azure blue eyes. “It’s been equal parts disbelief that you’re really here and fear that you may be gone again. I don’t want to endure that. I can’t.”

“Gabrielle, I’m not going anywhere,” Xena assured her. “I am here, apparently for a very long time.” The warrior was about to say more but hesitated. If she were to be sure of anything in life, she was certain that she knew Gabrielle. Since her resurrection, however that certainty had been tested. The person straddling her hips was simultaneously the Gabrielle she knew and a woman with experiential wisdom that she didn’t. For the first time in a very long while Xena felt like she was a nervous, inexperienced youth and that feeling was as thrilling as it was frightening. Briefly she considered telling Gabrielle this, that she felt out of her element but she smiled, instead saying, “Kiss me again,” startled somewhat by the pleading of her voice.

Gabrielle complied enthusiastically, bringing her hands to the sides of the warrior's face. Her movements were unhurried. She kissed Xena delighting in the softness of the warrior's lips and the warm wetness of her mouth. As their tongues moved against each other's, she kissed like a woman rediscovering the love of her life.

She kept her movements careful, aware, delighted, and aroused by the feel of the hot water around them. Not wanting to lose the hot foamy water to the marble tile floor, she moved with graceful intention kissing Xena's mouth then down her neck, across her collar bones and down to a breast playing with the nipple of the other with her hand. The warrior released her arms from around the bard's waist and braced strong arms on either side of the large tub. This gave Gabrielle more freedom of movement and she utilized it, much to Xena's delight. In the salted water of the roomy bath tub it took no effort at all for Gabrielle to lift Xena at the hips raising her legs to the surface of the water to float.

The whole scene gave Xena the sensation of submersion into decadence. The scent of bergamot and mint with just the faintest touch of eucalyptus filled her senses. The hot water that supported the back side of her body contrasted with the chill of her skin no longer submerged. She wasn't about to complain though. She watched the crown of blond hair lower to the juncture between her legs and felt Gabrielle's touch, first with her lips and tongue then joined by her fingers, giving her gooseflesh for an entirely different reason. There was a languid, unhurried confidence in the way the bard moved against her. Like a woman who had been away from this for far too long, she intended to take her time getting reacquainted with Xena's body. Clearly the bard was as focused on her own pleasure as she was on the pleasure she was providing her partner and that awareness was an absolute turn-on for the warrior.

"Gabrielle, please," Xena pleaded after a suggestive thrust with her hips was ignored. Much to her dismay, the bard pulled back to look at Xena, keeping her fingers where they were, three in one of Xena's openings, one in the other. She continued to thrust her hands rhythmically, slowly and blue eyes shone brightly with desire.

"Do you have any idea how long two thousand years is, Xena?" Gabrielle asked seriously. "How excruciatingly long I've waited. How I thought I'd never get to touch you like this again?" Gently, smoothly she extracted the single digit from Xena's backside so she could shift forward to kiss her warrior again. "To rush me would be unkind," she whispered in Xena's ear before kissing her yet again. "I want to etch every second of this indelibly into my memory."

"What if I promise that you get to do it again?" The warrior asked with a smile. Gabrielle gave her a wink and then went back to what she was doing. "Gabrielle, that feels impossibly good," she whispered. The bard murmured agreement which sent vibrations through all the sensitive parts of Xena's anatomy. The warrior took a deep breath, steeling herself for the amazing ride ahead not wanting it to end too quickly. Not that she had any say in the matter, apparently.

There is a fine line where the denial of one's passions shifts from heightened arousal to annoyed frustration and Gabrielle understood that. As much as she enjoyed the sounds, smell and taste of her warrior she was keenly aware of the pulse throbbing against her fingertips. She slowed down as many times as she dared, letting Xena catch her breath, letting the heartbeat slow and then, before the warrior could become annoyed she quickened her pace, using her tongue and the wetness of the warrior and the tub to her advantage. The soapy water was not ideal, but the taste of her lover was what she

focused on. There was splashing, water and suds treating the tile of the bathroom like the canvas in a Jackson Pollock painting, but the bard didn't care. That Xena was driven past the point of her usual cool reserve was supremely gratifying. It hadn't been two thousand plus years for the warrior since they'd been lovers; she did a quick calculation in her head and would wager it hadn't even been a month. Still the warrior cried out in her release loudly, involuntarily slapping the water with a strong arm and splashing the bard full on in the face. Gabrielle closed one eyelid tightly, it taking only a moment for the stinging to stop, her eye repairing itself almost instantly. She kept still with her mouth, and with her hands, until the surging and thrusting of the warrior's orgasm passed. When Xena was through Gabrielle gently lowered her body back into the water where she could be enveloped in warm water.

Quickly Gabrielle dunked her head below the surface, her hair already mostly wet from Xena's thrashing. At least this way she could push it out of her face and have it stay. She smiled at Xena who looked at her with equal parts adoration and amazement. Finally finding her voice. "I believe Vox has told me that the appropriate comment at this moment is 'oh my fucking god," Xena said with a wide grin.

"Welcome home," the bard replied.

Xena's grin shifted into a smirk, her eyes narrowing slightly into a look that was both seductive and ravenous. "Come here," she demanded and kissed Gabrielle again tasting herself on the bard's lips. She shifted her lover's position so that the bard's back rested against her front. As strong arms encircled Gabrielle, she had her hands free to explore the bard's body, slick from suds, bath oils and water. She moved one hand to a grateful breast alternating massaging the pliant flesh and lightly pinching the nipple. The other hand found her where she was slick and wet from more than the bath water.

With a chuckle Xena considered that this position almost made her feel like she was touching herself however instead of receiving the feedback through her skin she was hearing it through the gasps and aroused moans of her lover.

"Xena, this is hardly fair," Gabrielle protested between breathless pants. She had reached one of her arms behind her, tangling her fingers in Xena's hair as she turned her head to the side, pulling the warrior's lips to her. With her other hand the bard played with the nipple that Xena hadn't laid claim to.

"Weren't you just saying something about savoring the moment?" Xena murmured before biting down hard on the bard's neck.

"Ahhhhh" Gabrielle gasped, feeling pleasure and pain in equal measure. As the warrior had hoped, the red marks from her teeth vanished a second later.

"Let me guess," Xena purred seductively, her voice low and rich. "You've spent a few nights like this, haven't you? Doing exactly this and imagining it was me," as she spoke her right hand moved steadily between Gabrielle's legs with the bard's hips bucking in syncopated rhythm.

"Xena, I thought about you," the bard panted, speaking with difficulty as her body slid back and forth against the warrior's. "When my grief had subsided enough to let me think about moments like this." Xena smiled enjoying the sensation along her body, the splashing of the warm water, the froth of suds flying everywhere. Sure, she wanted to turn Gabrielle around to face her, to taste her but she decided that there would be time for that later, this was just too damn fun. "Xena," Gabrielle continued, "I've thought about

your hands on me, in me. The taste of your mouth, the way your breath feels against my skin, the way your eyes shine with desire when I'd pin you down…"

Beaming with pleasure, Xena let the images that Gabrielle's words conjured fill her mind; the lust filled tableaus and loving, sensuous exchanges. The imagery fueled her movements, thrusting with new urgency.

"Harder," Gabrielle demanded, "yes, right there," she gasped when Xena complied. Powerful spasms shook her body, strong muscles clamping down on the fingers pressed against her. To Xena, it felt like she could feel the bard's heartbeat everywhere. Gabrielle was still, catching her breath. After several moments, Xena gently withdrew her hand, releasing her and the bard slid back into the warm water and turned around.

They sat across from each other grinning when Gabrielle finally spoke. "I don't know about you," she said, her eyes still shining with desire, "but I'm ready to get out of the tub."

"You read my mind," Xena replied with a wink.

Chapter 16: The Party

Gabrielle dressed with apprehension. The weather had turned stormy and the bard had not noticed until well into morning. She couldn't help but wonder if the present status of her relationship with Xena and The Goddess of Love's possible feelings about that could have had anything to do with the lightning, thunder, and cold rain coming down in sheets. Still, she resisted the urge to tap into the goddess' feelings because such an action would be an invasion of privacy.

After giving Xena a final kiss, the bard from Potidaea once again resumed the mantle of one who helmed a large company and was prepared to confront Ares. She texted Aphrodite and Ed then ordered a selection of breakfast offerings to be delivered to the room along with vast quantities of coffee and espresso.

Aphrodite arrived first, almost immediately after the text was sent. "You kids have a good night?" she asked, her tone not quite reaching the levity and humor that she was striving for.

Xena looked from Gabrielle to Aphrodite then announced that she was going to take Argo and stretch her legs. The bard muttered "coward" under her breath as Xena passed her and she heard the warrior's light chuckle. Both women stared at the door where warrior and dog had departed before turning to face each other; Aphrodite not able to return the bard's concerned gaze.

"Don't." Aphrodite said when they were alone.

"Don't what?" Gabrielle demanded gently. "Check in to see if you're okay because I care about you?"

"Yes," said the goddess. "Because worrying about me isn't your job."

"Bullshit," Gabrielle disagreed. "Of course it is; I love you. You know my feelings for Xena don't lessen my feelings for you; you of all people understand that."

"I know," Aphrodite replied, clearly frustrated with herself. She sat down in a huff on the sofa in the central part of the suite. "I get jealous."

"I've noticed," the bard replied taking a seat next to the goddess with a glance to the rain coming down in buckets outside.

“That? I’m not Zeus; I don’t do weather,” she demurred.

“Even when you’ve had Ambrosia?” Gabrielle pressed, gently nudging her shoulder.

With a shrug, the goddess glanced out the window. “Okay, maybe a little weather,” she allowed. “Seriously, do I need to ask how perfectly things went last night?”

With a smile that she couldn’t have kept from her face if she tried, Gabrielle nodded. “It was nice. A part of my life I thought was gone for over two thousand years and you brought it back to me.” Gabrielle put her arms around the goddess, hugging her tightly. “I can never thank you enough.”

Aphrodite put her arms around Gabrielle, allowing herself to enjoy the closeness and scent of the bard’s freshly washed hair if even just for a moment. “Yeah, well… whatever,” she murmured before gently disengaging and stepping away.

Xena returned with Argo excitedly holding out her phone to show the other two. “I got a text message,” she said.

“Yay you?” Aphrodite said with an eye roll but Gabrielle looked at the warrior’s phone with interest.

“This is from the woman last night?” she asked reading the text.

“What?” Aphrodite asked, intrigued. “The escort? She wants a date? She was cute, what’s her number?”

“No,” Xena clarified. “I showed her the photo of Scruggs and Ares, asked if she’d seen them, she said she’d ask around. This says that Easton moves around between several different residences, but that one of them is the penthouse of this hotel, leased under the name of Atmos.”

Gabrielle picked up the laptop sitting on the dining table in the suite and opened one of the files on the desktop, quickly scanning its contents. “Here it is; Atmos is a company that is a subsidiary of Fire Industries. Ares is using that company to pay for his penthouse. I suspect that is why the gala is being held here,” the bard surmised. “Easton pulling strings.”

“Which means I wasted my time last night,” Aphrodite said with a rueful head shake. Both Xena and Gabrielle looked at her with a questioning glance. “After our chat at the restaurant, my dear brother had me followed. They thought they were being discreet. I led them on a wild goose chase all over the city all night long. I figured as long as they were waiting for me to lead them to you, you guys would be safe- have a night off. At about eight o’clock this morning they gave up and I followed them hoping they’d lead me to where Ares was staying but they came back here, I thought I’d been made.”

“What did Ares have to say?” Xena asked.

Aphrodite shrugged. “He knows you’re back; all three of us were at the bar. I guess in hindsight we should have kept you under wraps, but then we wouldn’t have this detail. He is intrigued by Ambrosia, determined to get his hands on some and not to have you and Gabrielle back in business. He thinks I slipped up by admitting that you were the source of the Ambrosia and he has the pieces in place to start world war three. No doubt his hooks run deep in the administration, that was confirmed. He thinks that Fire Industries is under wraps. Has no idea you know about Scruggs or his Easton identity.” Her blue eyes moved from warrior to bard and back. “It was a productive meeting. He’s rattled. I don’t know what it is about the pair of you, but he’s freaked out by it.”

“Is he here now? In the building?” Gabrielle asked, equal parts excited and worried. The goddess closed her eyes for a moment, as if she was listening for something then shook her head.

There was a knock at the door and Ed entered followed shortly behind by Brian Glass. Gabrielle did a double take. “What are you still doing here?” she asked, then shrugged apologetically.

“I don’t blame you,” He replied with a smile.

“Brian is redeeming himself,” Ed added with a nod to the CIA agent. “We did a deep dive last night on all the intel we had gathered and he suggested some new ways of looking at it as well as…strategies… for containing Easton or fucking with him at the very least. We were up all night with Vox and Wolfgang. We’ve even got a drone in the air.”

The agent nodded in agreement, “I’ve got some leeway with how I do my job,” he explained referring to his real job in a federal agency. “I respected Susan and mourn her loss with you. The more you rattle Easton the better chance he has of screwing up in areas that we can address.” Gabrielle nodded appreciatively urging him to continue. “About Susan - I actually did some research last night into that and I see her body has already been delivered to a mortuary in California and she was cremated. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“Only that we need to have a funeral and there isn’t anything further the feds are going to learn from her body. I saw the report,” Gabrielle replied. “I hope this…mix up… doesn’t reflect badly on the pathologist who released her.”

“She’s probably going to be fired, but I suspect that you know that and probably have a job waiting for her,” Brian said, knowingly.

There was a knock at the door which Ed answered to receive not only the room service but also to sign for several large boxes which he deposited on the coffee table in the central room of the suite.

“See, I told you the ball gowns would be altered in time,” Aphrodite said happily, examining the contents of the various boxes.

“Why don’t we sit down,” Xena suggested eying the food, “have something to eat and figure out how we’re going to handle tonight. It will probably be helpful to have an extra pair of hands to help out,” she added with welcoming nod to Brian.

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“I don’t understand why this is more sparkly now than it seemed in the shop,” Xena complained as she finished dressing. She was looking at her reflection in the mirror dressed in an elegant black and silver gown that almost looked like a cross between a dress and a tuxedo. Gabrielle was clothed in shimmering, form-fitting gold and Aphrodite wore an impossibly sexy ice blue gown.

“Because Aphrodite’s designer was clearly influenced by Bob Mackie,” Gabrielle explained, pausing for the moment, in applying the warrior’s makeup.

“And these are going to help us blend in?” Xena continued dubiously.

“I promise,” Gabrielle reassured her.

Aphrodite was strangely quiet since finishing her own hair and makeup. She sat on the couch petting Argo and the pit bull exuded an aura of sheer bliss at the attention.
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Gabrielle joined the duo on the couch and Argo stood on the unsteady cushion and lazily flopped over on her other side so she could put her head in the bard's lap.

"She better not be saying 'goodbye'," Gabrielle said, looking seriously at the goddess.

"Goodbye for now," Aphrodite clarified. "Gabrielle, we need someone on the inside. She knows what she needs to do, she knows how to do it. She and I are close, I will be able to zero in on where she's at. I don't see how else to track his movements and I think she'll be oaky."

Gabrielle looked down at her dog thinking for a moment of all the dogs she'd loved and lost over so many years. Like people, every time was excruciatingly painful, even when you knew that in time you'd recover and go on with your life. She looked down into amber eyes that looked back at her with utter love and devotion. "You know you don't have to do anything you don't want to do, right girl?" she said quietly to her dog, who took that opportunity to lean up and lick the bard's face. She sighed. Fighting for the 'greater good' had its downside.

"We're all good with the plan?" Xena asked looking empathetically at Gabrielle. She knew what Gabrielle was feeling; the sensation of putting someone you felt responsible for in harm's way. She'd felt it enough where the bard had been concerned in the early days.

Gabrielle nodded touching the earpiece she was wearing. "Command do you read?" she asked.

"Loud and clear, boss," Wolfgang answered from across the country.

"Lookout?" she asked.

"Lookout online," Brian Glass answered from Ed's room adjoining their suite.

"Backup?" she asked.

"I've got eyes on valet and the door," Ed confirmed after adjusting his bowtie and nodding politely to a passing DC socialite.

She looked at Aphrodite and Xena then gave the dog one last kiss on the top of her head before adjusting the dog's rhinestone studded collar and standing.

They rode the elevator down to the gala in silence. Several couples in formalwear joined them, giving them space after one glance at the pit bull. One inebriated woman was the exception and knelt down to pet Argo after commenting that pit bulls made wonderful service animals.

They stopped at security just outside the ballroom where Gabrielle extracted the invitation from her purse and in moments was scanned and ushered inside. She adjusted the glasses she was wearing which provided the video feed to *The Hippolyta,* Vox and Wolfgang providing necessary intel on the people and players around them.

"Showtime," the bard whispered as she entered the elegantly dressed throng.

If Xena had any doubt that their sparkly gowns would help them blend in, the scene unfolding in front of her made it clear and gave the three beautiful women the perfect camouflage. Everywhere she turned there were glints of sequins, rhinestones, diamonds, sapphires, and gold. The men, nearly all dressed in black tuxedos provided a counterpoint to the women who mostly dressed in black or white while splashes of color from other gowns created a pointalistic scene in front of her. Smartly dressed wait staff carried trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres and mingled through the throng of the wealthy and powerful. Most of the denizens of the gala were older, nearly everyone was

white and Aphrodite couldn't remember the last time she saw such a large gathering of people with so little to offer. A man crossed the goddess' path, stopped mid-step and nearly knocked her over as he took off again.

"What's so funny?" Vox asked, responding to Xena's audible chuckle minutes into the party.

"That's the guy from last night," the warrior commented as the fat senator made eye contact with her and hurried off back the way he'd come.

"The guy at ten o'clock," Wolfgang announced in their collective ear, "that's Chester Adams. Chief clerk to the guy who's in the stolen Supreme Court seat. He's one of Easton's goons."

"One of Turner's actually," Glass clarified. "If what you surmise is true, Easton probably put him there, but the president thinks that guy is his man. He was paid handsomely for that appointment, one hundred, seventy-five million sitting in the Cayman Islands."

"Who sells out democracy for money you're not going to live long enough to spend?" Aphrodite wondered aloud after adjusting her earpiece.

"You know something about the President we don't?" Brian asked suspiciously.

"Many things," the goddess answered. "But specifically, one only need to glance at that pasty, obese excuse of a golfer know that his arteries are going to have to give way at some point. There is a finite number of McNuggets that one can consume in one's lifetime. They always get you in the end."

"Susan," someone to the right of Gabrielle called. "Susan Vincent, is that you?" The bard turned and was warmly greeted by a tall redhead speaking with a Greek accent. "I must say, I'm surprised to see you here, dear," the newcomer said warmly after kissing each of Gabrielle's cheeks.

"Arianna, good to see you," the bard replied. "I could say the same thing about you, could I not?"

"These used to be my people," Arianna Huffington explained with a warm smile. "You don't convert people by just speaking to the choir."

"I couldn't agree more," Gabrielle agreed as she stopped a passing waiter and relieved her of four glasses of champagne. "We are on a similar mission."

Someone behind the author and entrepaneur tried to get the author's attention and Gabrielle hugged her briefly. "Go, you and I will catch up sometime when you're back in LA."

Arianna smiled and nodded to each of Gabrielle's companions before disappearing back into the throng of wealthy, sparkly dressed people. As the trio continued to move through the elegantly dressed crowd, Gabrielle made small talk with several people that came up to her, either because they knew her, or wanted to after hearing from others who she was. On occasion, she introduced her companions, Anna and Natasha, but often the exchanges were so quick that she didn't get the chance.

Xena was impressed by the size of the room; chandeliers had been hung and tables set up throughout the space that encouraged people to mingle. There was a stage at the far end with a large dance floor in front of it. The lighting was not overly bright, but also not the theatrical seediness of The Edison. In this setting the warrior gleaned even more information about the dual life her lover lived. Gabrielle chatted comfortably with a variety of people in several different languages. In her role as Susan Vincent,

representative of Gabrielle Evans, she could claim this world as her own but she clearly didn't. In fact, more than one person made a cutting remark about her 'seeing the light' and she responded that she was here to meet a donor for a climate change initiative. The look of annoyance she received in return for the comment was indeed priceless.

The warrior was drawn from her thoughts when finally, they came to the center of the ball room; a grand piano stood just off to the side of a stage where a band would be playing later. The elevators were just across the dance floor on the other side. If a crowd gathered here it would make navigating the space all the more difficult.

Gabrielle stopped by a standing table to chat with someone and gave a brief nod to Xena who departed with Aphrodite. The goddess looked at Argo and motioned with her head and the dog obediently followed behind. Gabrielle fought to keep the anguish off her features as she briefly watched them go and turned back to her superficial conversation.

Xena, Aphrodite, and Argo approached the elevators on the far side of the dance floor. One elevator had two not so subtle guards standing watch so it was easy to tell which elevator went to the penthouse. Aphrodite extracted her phone from her purse and pretended to read the screen.

"Excuse me," she said with the over annunciation of a truly inebriated person to the guard closest to them, "is this the elevator to Mr. Easton's flat?"

"We have an appointment," Xena added with a drunk sounding chuckle.

"Mr. Easton isn't in," the guard said dismissively.

"I know silly," Aphrodite replied. "He told us to get started without him."

She turned to Xena who was not the least bit surprised that the goddess kissed her. The guards stood transfixed, staring as the two women went at it. When Aphrodite dropped her phone, the closest guard reacted on instinct alone to bend down to pick it up, which gave the goddess the opportunity to touch his hand without the other guard seeing it. Blue eyes briefly intensified and the first guard turned to the second.

"I'll take them upstairs and watch them until Mr. Easton shows up," he said and the second guard nodded, too distracted to come up with an alternate plan of action. Instead, he feebly adjusted his pants.

They entered the elevator and the guard used a keycard to swipe an access pad, entered a code then pushed the button to the penthouse. They rode in silence until Aphrodite shrugged and looked at Xena. "So. You and Gabrielle," she said.

Xena looked at her, with eyes filled with kindness and empathy, "Because of you," she said.

The goddess chuckled. "Dude, you really did come back nicer this time."

"I think I get it from my mother's side" she added with a wink when the goddess got her drift and frowned.

Just inside the penthouse, Xena let the guard enter first and deftly hit him in the back of the head, knocking him unconscious and taking his keycard. "We're in," she said quietly knowing the mic in her ball gown would pick up the sound.

"Excellent," Gabrielle replied with a light laugh, seemingly in conversation with someone at the gala.

"How do things look from the lookout?" Aphrodite asked knowing that Gabrielle couldn't work that into a conversation at the moment.

“No alarms or other alert signals,” Brian confirmed studying his computer screen. “Looks like the code he punched was 7452. Ed how is it outside?”

“All’s the same here,” Ed added. “People continuing to arrive, no sign of anyone who sucks worse than the rest of these rich assholes,” he muttered under his breath.

The warrior looked around the penthouse, it’s décor leaving no doubt in her mind that Ares frequented the space. It was opulent, decadent, hedonistic, overdone and ruthless, much like the man himself. Black, red, and gray seemed to be the favored colors with chrome or brushed metal providing counterpoint. The furniture was industrial chic and the art was severe; candles, weapons, and lush fabrics were everywhere. “Man, they could have filmed fifty shades of bad fan fiction in this place,” Aphrodite commented with a frown. “You know behind one of these doors is a sling, a rack, and a collection of butt plugs.”

“Any clues where to look?” Xena asked the goddess. “Hopefully not in the butt-plug room.”

Aphrodite closed her eyes for a moment then opened them. “This way,” she said leading the way to the bedroom which was palatial, overly elegant, and sported furniture that looked like it came from the set of a gothic Tim Burton porno movie. The entire ceiling of the room was hammered tin which had been polished to a mirror like surface. Not quite as nineteen seventies as an actual mirror on the ceiling, it clearly served the same purpose.

“We’ve got movement down here,” Ed announced shortly after the two had begun to search the bedroom. “Scruggs just arrived in a limo with Easton.”

“Someone just said something on an unsecured channel about elevators,” Brian added hurriedly. “You were right about this being a potential trap.”

“That’s a beautiful piano,” Gabrielle said talking to the couple she was presently chit chatting with.

“I’ve heard that you can play,” a wealthy gentleman said smiling over his whiskey. “Play us something Miss. Vincent.”

“Well if you insist,” Gabrielle said quickly, not being able to get to the piano fast enough. She started with a composition by Scott Joplin called Weeping Willow, and as she’d hoped, people began to congregate, drawn by the sound of live music. In moments, the way to the elevators was congested with wealthy party goers.

As Gabrielle played she muttered the word ‘update’ into her mic.

“We’re looking,” Aphrodite said, her voice tense. “I know it’s in here, but I just can’t tell what, everything is reading the same to me. I just know there is something here.”

“Company arriving any second,” Brian said calmly. “The first four at any rate.”

Xena stopped what she was doing and stood there. She closed her eyes checking to see if she could feel anything different about the room. Almost like a warm breeze she did feel something, the same something she assumed the goddess had felt a moment ago. She took the earpiece out of her ear, not wanting the panicked distraction that was going on between the engineer, navigator, CIA agent, and flight attendant.

With Xena focused on the symbol of Ares’ power, Aphrodite followed suit, relaxing and focusing her mind and energy on the God’s most guarded secrets. While power and brute strength were on occasion characteristics of love and romance more often than not it was a desire to hide and keep secrets. Like a beacon the secrets called

out to her and she turned her head in the direction of a book case to the side of the opulent bedroom. One shelf only held a façade of books which disguised a safe behind it. The lock was electric and coded to a thumb print. Gently she touched the reference pad and sparks emitted from her fingers shorting out the system and rendering the lock useless, the safe opened. “Any sign of the knife?” Xena asked glancing in her direction.

“No,” Aphrodite replied. “Keep looking.” The warrior walked past her towards a back wall of weapons while she rummaged through the contents of the safe.

Pushing aside the fake passports and bound stacks of money, gold coins and an assortment of gemstones she came across a thin volume, a well-worn field notebook. It was compact, durable, waterproof with tear resistant pages. As soon as she touched it she knew she had what she’d been seeking. Sparing only the briefest of glances to the interior pages, she felt the rising panic of the men on the coms shouting warnings to her and the warrior.

She let her voice drop to a calming tone, relaxed but poised. “Xena – don’t think about it too much, what is calling to you in this room. You’re connected – feel that.”

The warrior looked around the room, with fresh eyes this time and her gaze came to rest on a wall at the back covered with swords and daggers from all over the world, many of them ornate and ancient looking. As if they were vibrating on different frequencies; one in particular caught her eye. It was a simple knife in a sheath with a bone handle. She grabbed it and could feel it’s warmth in her hand.

Aphrodite was instantly nodding in agreement. “That’s it,” she said.

Four guards charged in, weapons drawn and Argo charged at them barking and growling savagely and a guard took aim with his gun before being stopped by another. “Mr. Easton says get the dog, alive. He’ll stop the other two.”

“Argo, here girl,” Xena called hoping against hope to get the dog out of the room unscathed. Argo obeyed, but on her run back was hit by a taser and stopped running, twitching helplessly halfway across the bedroom floor.

The warrior had grabbed another knife from the wall and was about to throw it when Aphrodite stopped her, urging her out of the bedroom. “Don’t give them a reason,” she said.

“Stop right there,” two guards said simultaneously as the other two held weapons on them at a distance.

Xena’s hands moved in a blur as she disarmed the first guard then used the butt of the weapon to knock the second unconscious. Before the other two could fire, warrior and goddess were out the door shutting it and locking it behind them. Xena shoved the tip of the second knife she’d taken from the wall into the seam where the electronic lock mechanism was housed. At Vox’s suggestion, she pulled at the wires, snapping them, locking the door.

“Plane now,” Gabrielle said quietly as she finished her song and moved into a dramatic classical piece causing more people to crowd in to see who was playing.

“Ed, you get that?” Aphrodite said as she and Xena made their way down the stairwell as quickly as they could. “We need that car up from valet and the twins ready to get that plane in the air.”

“I’ve got a five-hundred dollar tip to the person who gets me my jag in under three minutes,” Ed said clearly to the valet crew.

“Vox,” Xena asked urgently, “what’s it look like outside?”

“You’ve got some cars mobilized from the other addresses your escort gave us,” the engineer said. “It’s going to be a big party. Get out of there now!”

“The weather?” The warrior asked.

“Oh, literally outside. It’s still raining. There have been a few accidents, police have their hands full at the moment,” the engineer confirmed.

“Can you please do something about that?” Xena asked Aphrodite as they hurried down the stairs as fast as the designer gowns would let them. In frustration, Xena kicked off her shoes managing much better in her bare feet.

“Oh, right.” Aphrodite said as they reached the landing of the next floor down.

The door opened and two armed men stormed in taking aim at Aphrodite who had arrived at the landing first. Xena launched herself from the stairs above, landing on the pair, in a moment she’d immobilized them both. “You know they can’t hurt me, right?” the goddess asked.

“It’s a habit,” Xena said, unperturbed.

“Go out the door,” Glass urged through the earpiece. “There aren’t any more guys on that floor. They are converging on the stairs. You can get the elevator the rest of the way down.”

Taking the advice, goddess and warrior hurried to the elevator, incapacitating the one guard inside and rode it down to the gala level. They made their way around the periphery of the mob that Gabrielle had been able to conjure with her piano playing, taking requests from rich donors who placed bets with each other trying to come up with a song to stump the piano player.

“Gabrielle, now!” Xena urged as they came parallel to her.

“Sorry, guys – gotta go,” The bard said halfway through Vanessa Carlton’s A Thousand Miles. Xena could hear the groans of disappointment and a familiar voice shouting for people to get out of his way.

Xena looked around but didn’t see Ares; still she knew he was there, too close for comfort. “Gabrielle, as fast as you can. Ares is nearby.”

“Sorry dude, but you have this coming,” Aphrodite said to Senator Hastings as she passed him with Xena. She touched his hand and he immediately grabbed for her but missed, his open palm landing instead on the groin of a federal court judge. Immediately the judge took a swing at the senator, knocking him to the floor. Shouting and commotion ensued giving Gabrielle the time she needed to clear the ballroom.

“I’m driving,” the bard shouted as they approached the valet stand. “Aphrodite – you and Ed in the back. I think we’re going to have company.”

True to his word, the well-muscled flight attendant had the car ready and running when bard, warrior, and goddess all fled the gala at once- a cacophony of chaos and confusion in their wake. Faster than one might think his large form would allow, Ed climbed into the backseat right behind the goddess. A second later Xena had shut the door on her side and they were on their way. Almost immediately following their departure from the hotel entrance three cars were approaching, each with gunmen taking shots at them from behind.

“Fuck,” Gabrielle said as she expertly released the clutch and gearshift racing the sports car through the wealthy Kalorama district of DC.

“I’ve spotted you with Glass’ drone,” Vox said urgently. “We’ve got eyes on you. All three chase cars are behind you but it looks like they’re about to split up.”

“Roger that,” Gabrielle said, downshifting to take a corner at high speed. “Xena, get my gun out of the glovebox.”

“Is this Odessa?” the warrior asked, handing the gun over?

“This?” Gabrielle replied with a chuckle, glancing at her side mirrors to see the car behind her get closer even on the slick wet streets. “No, this is a Glock 23 .40 caliber handgun. It holds 13 shots not 6.”

With the gun in her lap, she shifted again to take a corner against a red light, nearly causing an accident in the intersection. The car behind her swerved to avoid the hit but was still on their tail. She didn’t want to shoot at them, especially since they could be killed when three quarters of her car’s occupants wouldn’t, regardless of the shootout. But then a bullet hit the side mirror on Xena’s side of the car and another dinged the side panel of her reinforced sports scar. Gabrielle took a deep breath, reminding herself that this was not the first unusual scrape she’d been in and that any of Ares’ people made the choice to serve him. She fired several shots, intentionally missing, hoping that they’d back off but it didn’t work. If anything, they began to shoot with more enthusiasm.

“Ed, get down,” she urged as two shots came in quick succession shattering the back window. “Aphrodite…”

“I’ve got him,” the goddess finished for her instantly knowing what the bard wanted done. She leaned over Ed who seemed confused and upset as to why he wasn’t protecting the blond.

Trying to split her focus between watching the car steadily gaining on them in the rearview mirror and watch the road ahead which had some puddles and potholes in addition to asphalt slick from rain. The downpour may have stopped, but the driving hazard was ever present. She had a limited number of shots and needed to stay calm and focused. “Hold on,” she instructed before taking a corner hard. The turn resulted in a near collision that the bard’s expert driving skills enabled to her avoid. It also slowed down the car behind her letting her gain some distance.

A sound came through the expensive sound system indicating that someone was trying to call Gabrielle’s iPhone. A glance at the in-dash screen let her know it was coming from *The Hippolyta*. She smiled, taking another corner as fast as she dared, she hit the button on her steering wheel to connect the call. “Hello?” she said suspecting she knew who was on the other end.

“Hi Gabrielle,” Shen said cheerfully, “are you busy?”

Gabrielle downshifted, narrowly avoiding a moving truck as she headed out of the residential area. “I’m kind of working right now but I have a minute, what’s up?” she asked.

“It’s history,” he complained “Prisha wasn’t too happy with my essay on the fall of the Roman Empire.”

She dodged a pothole happy to see the car behind her hit it square on when they got to that patch of road. “What was the problem?” she asked, glancing once again at her side mirror.

“She said my reasoning was too simplistic. I said the empire fell because of military overspending, like we’re doing now.” He sounded adamant, defiant even, and Gabrielle thought for a moment on how to put her own experience into something a ten year old could understand.

“Moose, you know there is rarely one single reason for anything. Sure, there was military overspending and other economic issues. Remember they’d been in a constant state of war, also like now.” She turned the wheel hard, narrowly missing the curb, the back end fishtailing a bit on the wet asphalt and Xena gripped the side of the door to steady herself.

“Right, the overspending on the military was because of the constant state of war,” he complained.

“Don’t forget government corruption,” Aphrodite added from the back seat. “Also like now,”

“Oh hey Aphrodite,” Shen said brightly; the tapping sounds of the keyboard showing that he was taking notes. “Are you guys in the car? Going somewhere?”

“We’re actually on our way back to the airport, to come home,” Gabrielle said pushing the car faster,

“Don’t forget the weakening of the Roman Legions,” Xena added, trying to keep her voice casual and not being entirely successful as the bard sped through a red light. “Spending money on the military doesn’t help you if you don’t have the properly trained forces to fight.”

“Oh, Hi Xena,” Shen added, the sounds of typing continuing.

“And the invasion of the Goths,” Ed added from the back seat as another shot came dangerously close to the car.

“The people who wear all black and makeup?” the boy asked, confused.

“No,” Gabrielle said, making a decision about her pursuers. “The Visigoths, you should research them too. Look Moose, I’ve got to go, but we will be home soon and I’ll be sure to come by and say ‘hi’ if it’s not too late, okay?”

“Okay,” he replied, satisfied with the answers to his question. “This was really helpful, drive safe, Squirrel. G’bye.” Gabrielle cut the connection to the call and gave the rearview mirror another glance before turning her attention to the warrior at her side.

“Xena, I’m going to take my hand off the shift so I can shoot for real. When I say ‘now’ you need to shift. If I need to go fast you shift down,” she said pointing at the diagram, “If I need to slow down you go the other way. Think about riding a horse on wet cobblestones.” Xena nodded, picturing the image in her mind, understanding.

Gabrielle used her side mirror to aim as the Jaguar raced through the streets of the nation’s capital, she held her right hand with the gun out the window pointed backwards, keeping her other hand steady on the wheel. “Now,” she said, hitting the clutch with her foot. There was a little grinding but the warrior got the hang of the gear shift. Gabrielle fired off two more shots, hitting the chase car twice and it immediately backed off.

“Cops have been alerted to the commotion,” Vox urged. “Get to the airport as soon as you can. Car coming at you from the west, next intersection.”

Grateful for the warning, Gabrielle was able to slow down, swerve to avoid the case car and shoot out one of their tires as she passed it. In moments, they pulled over to the side of the street and stopped. It proved to be a useful technique; with Vox relaying the information Wolfgang got from the CIA agent’s drone, Gabrielle was able to disable the second chase car in short order. Only the third car proved to be more persistent, firing two more shots into her Jaguar, one of which grazed her shoulder painfully. The road was slick, and wet reflecting the street lights above which proved an advantage to the woman who had been driving since the invention of the car. While the car behind them

occasionally fish tailed, Gabrielle's expert maneuvering had them drifting, turning, speeding, and at one point doing a one hundred eighty degree turn in an open intersection all completely under the bard's control.

"Now," Gabrielle said urgently as Xena shifted giving the bard more power, heading onto a straight patch of road. Aphrodite kept Ed down, much to his vocal complaining. They were heading into a wooded park area and Gabrielle took steady aim backwards with the aid of the side mirror. Staying calm and focused she pointed the gun and squeezed, a loud shot hitting the front tire causing the car to swerve and crash into a nearby median.

Gabrielle put her gun down and resumed control of the car driving as quickly as she dared to the airport. "Tell the twins to fire up the plane," she said.

The Jaguar had barely come to a stop when its inhabitants exited and raced up the steps of the white private jet. Kismet met them at the top of the stairs her expression sad at the sight of no pit bull accompanying the quartet. "The police are asking questions," the co-pilot mentioned as Ed closed and locked the cabin door.

"Get Rebekah Luna on it," Gabrielle suggested kicking off her high heels, adrenalin still surging through her body "get us in the air as fast as possible." The co-pilot nodded and returned to the cockpit, closing the door behind her.

Ed waited until the door was fully closed before turning to Gabrielle angrily. "What the actual fuck," he said hotly as the plane began to move.

"What?" Gabrielle said, completely confused. Xena was immediately at her side, nearly eye-level with the large bodybuilder.

"What the fuck is she?" He demanded pointing at Aphrodite.

"Oy," Vox said with startled surprise in their earpiece. "I just cut the feed to Brian. I think this conversation needs to stay in the family. It's bad enough that he heard everyone calling 'Susan' 'Gabrielle'. "

Gabrielle and Xena both frowned, not knowing the genesis of the outburst and certainly not appreciating the aggressive tone. For her part, Aphrodite made herself at home, kicking off her heels and moving to the galley section of the plane. Quite calmly she began to open various cabinets and cupboards, looking for something.

Ed held out his other hand which held a flattened piece of metal. "A number of shots came through that back window," he said, "and hit her. I picked this up from the floor of the backseat. I didn't say anything," he continued with a glance to the cockpit, "in front of Kismet or Isra because they are flying this plane and we could die if they freak out. Or could we? Is it just her? Is it the two of you as well? Am I the only one here who runs the risk of dying?"

"If you don't watch your tone you might run that risk sooner than you anticipated," Xena said quietly, the threat in her voice apparent.

"Ed," Gabrielle said calmly in a tone that was both commanding and empathetic, "sit down, get a grip and I can explain."

"Yeah Ed, calm down," Vox urged from the yacht. "Aphrodite is oaky. Honestly, I'm not her biggest fan and I'll still totally vouch for her. She's okay."

"Awwww, thank you sweetie," the goddess said with a genuine grin as she handed Ed and Gabrielle each a drink. "I knew I'd grow on you."

The muscled flight attendant glanced at the bottle of Scotch on the counter and then glanced at his drink with suspicion. “Oh, for fucks sake,” Gabrielle said in exasperation and downed her shot.

“Dude,” Vox urged again, “you know me, I am telling you she’s okay.”

The large man downed his shot and sat down in the recliner, passing the glass back to the goddess for a refill, “Is she a robot?” he asked suspiciously. “Some prototype from Special Projects that Transportation hasn’t been read in on?”

There was laughter from the goddess which set the frown more doggedly in Ed’s expression. “I’ve been called a lot of things,” she commented as she handed back the refilled glass, “but that’s a first for robot.”

“I assure you she isn’t a robot,” Gabrielle said adamantly. Xena looked at her questioningly. “I’ll explain what a robot is later,” she added to the warrior.

“Her name is *Aphrodite*,” Vox said in the earpiece.

“So, what?” he shot back. “She’s named after an Ancient Greek go…” his eyes went wide, catching on.

“Always with the ancient with these people,” Aphrodite complained passing a drink to Xena as well. The jet hit the main runway and took off, although the inhabitants of the plane, save for Xena, scarcely noticed.

“No fucking way,” he protested in disbelief. “No. Absolutely not.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and got up from the couch as soon as the steep part of the climb subsided. She rummaged through some drawers at the back of the plane and found some sweats. It was a slim hope, but she fantasized that getting out of the ball gown would somehow improve things with her employee. She passed a set of clothes to Xena and Aphrodite as well.

“Are you like her?” Ed demanded, although some fear and uncertainty crept into his voice. “And her too?” he added with a nod to Xena. “And why doesn’t she know what a robot is?”

Gabrielle sighed, “Xena, could you please unzip me?” she asked and the warrior complied. She began to slip out of her dress and turned her attention back to her employee. “Look Ed, I don’t mean this in a harassment kind of way, but you asked.” She slid the dress down, exposing her bra and pulled part of it aside revealing the scar where she’d been pierced by an arrow. “This was from getting shot,” she said deciding that not elaborating with exactly what she’d been shot by was necessary. She stepped out of the dress and in her bra and panties turned to put on the sweat pants. “I’m not a goddess.”

When her back was turned, Ed exclaimed again, “Jesus Christ, that’s a huge tattoo.”

After tying the string on her sweatpants she pulled the sweatshirt over her head before turning back around. Vox was chuckling in their ear. “Fuck! I could have won the newbie bet with him,” she muttered.

When the bard turned back around she was gratified that Ed at least looked embarrassed at his outburst. “You just don’t look the type, big tattoos and all…”

“I am fairly confident that is not the most surprising thing about me,” she observed before launching into explanation of her longevity, her massive wealth, her quest for Xena, and their opposition to Ares who went by the name Easton at present. Vox supported the bard’s claims as did Wolfgang through the ear pieces but it wasn’t

until the demonstration of her healing abilities as well as a brief demonstration by The Goddess of Love that the flight attendant sat shaken but convinced.

Aphrodite had settled herself in the other recliner giving Xena and Gabrielle the couch to share. Xena listened to her lover's tale but was distracted by how empty the couch felt without the gray pit bull joining them. Gabrielle sat close to Xena, who had draped an arm over her shoulders. She leaned against the warrior's body and felt the unspoken reassurance and support as she wove her tale, answering Ed's questions to the degree she felt appropriate.

"That is a tremendous thing to do for the love of your life," he finally said. Gabrielle nodded in agreement then smiled at Xena with an expression that said she'd do it all again in a heartbeat. He was about to voice his confusion though, suspecting that bard and goddess had been together but after a glance at Aphrodite and the almost imperceptible shake of her head, he dropped it. Instead he said, "you read mythology-about gods wreaking havoc in the lives of men and don't think of it as something that happens in the present. You don't think of 'god' as a term people invented to describe other people we didn't understand."

Aphrodite chuckled, "let's be honest kiddo. Man invented the concept of 'god' to exert control over other people as a way to govern them. They still use it that way." After noticing Xena's arched eyebrow she continued, 'I will admit my family let it go to our heads and were willing participants, but I mean, come on – some of those temples and sculptures were pretty bad ass. And thank you for calling me 'people' honey, I will take that as a compliment."

"Are we good, Ed?" Gabrielle asked, shifting the conversation back to her employee. He smiled at the goddess and nodded apologetically as Kismet opened the cockpit door and hurried into the cabin.

"Gabrielle, we've got a video message coming in," the co-pilot said with urgency. "Same guy as before, Easton, same channel."

Ed was immediately on his feet getting the laptop out of a drawer and setting it on the table. "Give me a minute," Gabrielle said with a glance to her companions. "I'll have Ed signal you when we're ready to have it connected." The co-pilot nodded once and returned to the cockpit, leaving the door open. "He knows you're back" she said, turning to Xena. "Might as well have you front and center. How did you leave things with him?" she asked the goddess.

"He wants me to stay out of his way, I told him I'd take a couple of days to think about it," The Goddess of Love replied.

Gabrielle nodded, trying to strategize quickly. "Xena, sit next to me," she positioned the warrior in front of the laptop. Aphrodite, you stand by Ed. I can use sign language out of view of the camera and you can relay it back to Xena," she said quickly moving her hands, which the goddess relayed and Xena nodded, understanding what was being said. Xena took Ares' dagger out of her purse and put the sheathed blade on the table to the side of the laptop.

"Might be better to make him think I'm not with you guys," Aphrodite added as Gabrielle opened the laptop and prepared to make the connection. "Tell him I had a jealous fit or something, he'll buy it."

Gabrielle nodded and tapped an icon on the screen, connecting the transmission. Once again Ares sat smirking back at her but unlike before, this time he was in a plush office, not a sterile interrogation room.

"Xena!" he exclaimed cheerfully, "You're looking well. I see you found the irritating blond."

"Never felt better," the warrior replied with a thin smile. She and Gabrielle were sitting comfortably on the couch. Xena had one arm draped casually around Gabrielle's shoulders, one leg casually crossed over the other. Gabrielle sat tucked at the warrior's side, her hands out of range of the camera, her arms relaxed.

"You're not going to believe who got left in DC?" he said, tugging on a leash. In moments Argo came into view moving unsteadily on her feet. After an additional tug, she jumped onto the couch and sat next to the God of War, briefly licking his ear which seemed to surprise him as much as it annoyed him. Xena could feel Gabrielle's body stiffen and she reassuringly squeezed the bard's shoulder. A movement that did not go unnoticed by the god. "You know," he continued conversationally, "I've never tried dog. I know it's commonly served in China. I bet my chef could whip up something tasty with this, what do you think? Should I have your dog for dinner?" Argo barked once but it did little to reassure Gabrielle.

"If you hurt my dog, so help me…" Gabrielle began as Xena reached for Ares' dagger and took it out of its sheath, casually examining the blade.

"Look what didn't get left in DC?" She smirked when she saw his eyes narrow. "I suspect you might want this back in one piece as opposed to pieces," Xena said calmly. "You might want to think about that before you threaten anyone."

"Funny you should mention anyone…" Ares replied with another low chuckle as he tugged at another leash. With a lurch Jennifer, the escort from the bar at The Omni Hotel, came into view. Her hands were bound with zip ties, she had a collar around her neck which had the leash attached and she looked fearful and shaken. "Seems I picked up a pet belonging to each of you." Keeping her face passive Gabrielle began to sign to Aphrodite, telling her what was on screen. "Does expensive hooker go with dog? Does that call for a white wine or red?" Argo barked again and wagged her tail.

"What kind of deal are you looking for Ares?" Xena asked, keeping his focus on the escort and not Gabrielle. "That woman doesn't have anything to do with this. Your issue is with Gabrielle and me, no one else."

"What about my sister?" Ares asked. "Is she there? You guys working on a threesome or something?"

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, annoyed at the god's lasciviousness. Xena chuckled and shook her head. "None of your fucking business," she said flatly. "What do you want for the dog and the girl?"

"Ambrosia," he added with a smirk. "'Dite had some, said she got it from you. I want twice what she had. And you and blondie stay out of my way. I'm working on something big and I don't want the two of you anywhere near it. The stunt in DC was not appreciated. And yeah, I want my dagger back."

"Let's say I know where to find Ambrosia," Xena offered amicably. "That and the dagger is more than enough to swap for the girl and the dog. Gabrielle and I aren't in much of a position to get in your way. I'm just getting my bearings here."

"Not good enough, Xena," the god disagreed with a shake of his head. "I've spent too long putting everything in place. I'm not going to have you and the brat fuck it up at the last minute. Do I need to pick up some more of Gabrielle's people to force you to make a deal? Who do you think you are anyway, bard?" he taunted Gabrielle. "You think your private militia is gonna do squat against the United States Government? I know how many people you've got on that overpriced party boat," he snarled. "My guy in the coast guard filled me in. You're no match for an actual strike team."

Argo remained silent and Gabrielle began to move her hands, signing to Aphrodite who repeated the hand movements so Xena would know what she was saying. After a nod to Ed, the goddess silently stepped to the cockpit door, opened it and slipped inside, followed by the flight attendant who closed the door after him.

Isra and Kismet looked up at their entry, the conversation playing out on a small screen to the side of the control console. "What can we do?" Kismet asked as her sister focused on piloting the jet.

"Gabrielle said to patch Brian Glass in DC in on the recording – the parts that pertain to the military and Easton's plans. Have Vox and Wolfgang splice something together. She also said to signal the yacht. Contact Michelle Fender, Gabrielle wants *The Hippolyta* to start moving back towards Mexico. She thinks an attack by Easton's people is imminent, they need to be on high alert. When we land at LAX she said we'll take the helicopter and catch up with them."

"Is this guy insane?" Isra said, after checking in with air traffic control. "Some of the stuff he's ranting about doesn't make any sense. Ambrosia?"

Aphrodite and Ed briefly made eye contact before the goddess answered. "Let's just say he's speaking in metaphor. He's a drug dealer among other things. It's not going to make any sense to you, but Gabrielle knows what he's talking about."

The answer seemed to satisfy the twins who nodded in understanding. Aphrodite and Ed returned to the main cabin, staying within view of bard and warrior, but close to the cockpit door in case they needed to step inside again.

"Three days, tip of Baja – Cabo the beach by the arch. You meet us there and we do the exchange," Gabrielle said, her voice cool and controlled.

"I don't think you're in any position to call the shots," Ares shot back. "Bring the Ambrosia to DC. I like the city."

"What you like is manipulating the power players in the capitol." Gabrielle replied. "You want the Ambrosia, meet us in Cabo."

"Fuck you bard. I'm not doing what you want, you don't have anything over me," he growled, annoyed but the smirk stayed put.

"I disagree," Xena said her voice cold and calculating. "I've got Hephaestus' hammer. Dying to try it out on something, like this dagger maybe."

Slowly the smirk vanished from the God of War's face to be replaced by genuine anger and worry. "If you want this pair of bitches back in anything other than pieces, you'll leave my dagger the fuck alone," he warned. Argo barked once. He tugged on both of the leashes for emphasis. Getting her attention, the pit bull began to climb into his lap and lick his chin. With a frown, he pushed her off of his lap back on to the floor. "Stupid dog," he muttered.

"Ares, I'm giving you a shot at fresh Ambrosia. More powerful than the dried-out stuff you've been picking up off the floors of forgotten temples. It's in Cabo, I know

where. Take it or leave it. Three days," Xena repeated. "We do the exchange, you get your Ambrosia, the dog and the girl remain unharmed." He was about to respond when she closed the laptop cutting the connection.

No one spoke for a moment and Gabrielle looked over to Aphrodite. "She's fine," the goddess reassured the bard. "I think Jennifer is fine too, she's more frightened than Argo but for the time being I think they're both safe."

She nodded, trying to calm by sheer force of will the tension she felt in her core. She was not only worried about her dog and the escort but at her present altitude, felt incredibly far away from her crew and godson. "You noticed that Argo didn't bark when he talked about coming after the ship. We need to get back there as quickly as we can."

"We need to have some kind of plan when we arrive as well," Xena added with a sad smile.

"I agree," Aphrodite said as she feverishly tapped away some messages on her phone before finally turning her attention to the bard and warrior.

To Gabrielle it seemed a world away from her time with Xena in the bath tub when in reality it had barely been over twenty-four hours. Ed and Aphrodite had resumed their seats in the recliners while she leaned back in the couch, Xena's arm draped affectionately around her shoulders. Planning and strategizing once again, with Xena next to her it at least felt like they were working towards something positive and achievable.

Chapter 17: Boss Battle

"Are you ready, Moose?" Gabrielle asked as she straightened the ten-year old's tie. He was dressed in a black suit which matched the black dress and heels his godmother was wearing. With a warm smile, Gabrielle smoothed his shoulders and drew him in for a hug, planting a kiss on the top of his head.

He had asked to get ready in her bedroom, having more room to lay out his suit and get assistance from the bard with his tie. Gabrielle knew it was for the large bath tub but she didn't mind. She ironed the suit while he bathed, chatting with him as he was momentarily distracted from his sadness by the suds enhanced by the jets in the tub.

Once again Gabrielle was amazed at Aphrodite's efficacy and ability to motivate people to do the near impossible. When the jet had landed at LAX and they rushed to the helicopter, they were met by a courier from the Transportation division of Bardic & Company with Susan Yin's ashes in one container, a tremendous assortment of flowers in another and the boy's suit and dress shoes in a garment bag. She'd looked at Aphrodite in amazement and the goddess shrugged "You gave me class one clearance," she had said as they climbed into the helicopter. "You also mentioned a funeral for Susan so I put two and two together and made some requests. I know people."

Ed and Xena had helped stow everything on the helicopter as they took off. Here Xena's utter amazement wouldn't have been out of place even if Ed hadn't been read in on the warrior's history. "By the gods!" she exclaimed looking out the window and marveling at the bard's ability to fly the craft.

Gabrielle smiled at the memory, drawn from her thoughts by the small hand that reached for hers and held on tightly. She and Shen left her quarters and made their way to bow of the yacht where the rest of the crew was assembled. There were a lot of reasons for the bard to be proud of her people and she was not shy about letting them know. But

looking at the assembled faces she could not recall a better reason to be reassured in the choices she'd made in assembling her team. Gone was the usual vacation wear favored by her crew, all of them instead choosing suits; several of the men and women opting for ties as well. Everyone looked their best out of respect for their fallen colleague as well as the young boy grappling with that loss. Even Bohemian was scarcely recognizable in his three-piece suit, tie, and his dreadlocks pulled back into a ponytail. Shen let go of the bard's hand and he took his place between his godmother and Aphrodite who was dressed in a subdued floral print. He hugged her briefly and nodded to Gabrielle to begin the service.

"I've known Susan a long time," Gabrielle began. "She was someone I looked up to, someone who's counsel and friendship I valued. She was loyal, to her family – her parents, to Tom and Trixie, to Shen and to me and this company. She believed in things beyond herself, the greater good, and felt those things were worth sacrifice. Susan valued every one of you. No one stands on this deck without meeting the highest standards in the Special Projects and Transportation divisions. Susan was proud and honored to consider all of you family, as am I. It is my intention to see her vision realized, to work to the best of my ability for a world where the good in people triumph over evil. Knowing people like all of you, and people like Susan gives me hope that it is indeed a possibility." She looked down at the boy who had begun to cry, silent tears streaming down his face. "Did you want to add anything?" she asked him gently.

He sniffled, wiping his eyes with the handkerchief that Aphrodite had handed him. "There is something they say in the Spiderman movies and comics. That with great power comes great responsibility." He shrugged. "I think this applies. I am sad that my grandma is gone, but I am not sad that she died doing work that she believed in. I think she would have preferred that to just dying for some random reason. I am glad that I have all of you in my life. I don't think I could handle this without you guys." He nodded to indicate that he was finished. He returned to his place next to Gabrielle who put her arm around him and squeezed affectionately.

Hatsuo went next to describe what he admired most about Susan. Bohemian talked about what he would miss, Michelle talked about her fondness for cooking. Every member of the crew took a couple of minutes to share a reminiscence about the woman. The impact she had on their lives; what they would miss what they treasured. Aphrodite spoke last. "I only met Susan recently," she began looking out at the clear crisp day. They had stopped the ship for the ceremony, and the breeze was minimal, stopping completely as soon as Aphrodite started to speak. "She was warm and welcoming, kind, and funny. She had a lot of love in her heart and she felt that love fiercely. The love and respect you all felt for her, she knew that, the united belief that you all share in what a better world looks like, she was with you there too. She worked the hours she did and as hard as she did because she enjoyed your company and was dedicated to your purpose. And she saw no better legacy she could leave Shen, then a world that was in better shape than she found it. That reality might be hard to fathom right now, but that's why it drove her. People never really leave us when they live in our memory; when you think of the dead- the dead can hear your thoughts."

When she finished Xena began to sing and Gabrielle choked back tears at the sound. The notes struck a nearly forgotten chord with the bard, having heard the mournful and soothing tones while standing before so many funeral pyres. She could hear

occasional sniffles from her crew and Shen wiped his eyes again before handing flowers to everyone. Then he and Gabrielle opened the container of ashes and the bard held him steady as he leaned over a section of railing and spilled the ashes into the ocean. With no breeze, they traveled neatly down. When he finished he took the bouquet of flowers that Aphrodite had been holding for him and tossed them overboard. Xena continued to sing while each mourner assembled followed suit finishing the song and tossing over several sunflowers herself.

The ocean's current had moved the flowers as they were tossed and instead of a mass of flowers, they wound their way in a line from the boat away from the ship off into the distance. Shen watched them silently. Gabrielle knew that he was thinking about his mother, his father and his grandfather and etching the moment for his grandmother indelibly into his memory. It had been too much loss for a young boy and she was determined to protect him with everything she had. Susan Yin would have expected nothing less.

"What do you think, Moose?" Gabrielle asked while the rest of the crew looked on.

The boy nodded then turned away from the flowers. "I think grandma would be happy with this. I think she'd want us to have the cookies and ice cream now." Gabrielle nodded approvingly and the group began to make their way to the tables set up with plates of cookies and bowls for the ice cream.

"Hey Shen," Vox said as she approached with Ed following behind her. "You did really good today kiddo." He nodded mutely and gave her a hug which had her wiping her eyes and shaking her head, determined not to cry. "I want you to meet a friend of mine, this is Ed."

Shen looked past the engineer to the large black man standing behind her, his eyes growing wide with amazement. "You're almost as big as The Hulk," he said, clearly in awe.

"Thank you?" Ed replied with a bashful grin as he extended his hand which did indeed look massive compared to the ten-year old's.

"Oh, it's a compliment," the boy clarified. "Anyone who is like an Avenger is cool in my book. Have you met Xena and Aphrodite? They're kind of like super heroes too."

"I have met them, I came in on the helicopter with them yesterday," Ed supplied helpfully. "Gabrielle did an amazing job landing it on the yacht going as fast as it was."

Shen nodded. "She's like a superhero too. Are you going to join the ship's crew? I can put in a good word with Gabrielle, she's my godmother."

Nervously Ed glanced from the boy to Gabrielle then bashfully caught the eye of both Xena then Aphrodite. "I'd like that Shen, thank you." he said.

Gabrielle smiled at the pair then nodded to the ship's captain who quickly came over. "We need to have a meeting as soon as people get their cookies and ice cream. I need to get something out of storage then we can start. Let's get back underway, you can join us by monitor. I want someone in the control room at all times." Michelle nodded then glanced down at the boy. "Shen is going to join us for the first part of the meeting," Gabrielle continued, "then maybe he can give Ed a tour of the ship since he's going to be joining us."

Nicolai had been standing nearby and approached hearing the conversation. “I have some clothes he can wear. Tuxedo is nice for funeral but unless he’s James Bond…”

“Thank you, Nicolai,” Gabrielle replied. “I do think you’re the only one onboard who has anything remotely in Ed’s size. I’m not sure where we’re going to have you sleep.”

The bodybuilder shook his head. “I got a couple hours sleep on the couch in the control room last night and it was fine. I’m more than happy there. Elaine got me a blanket and a pillow- everyone has been great. I’m fine boss. Shen, why don’t you show me to the conference room while Gabrielle goes to storage?” Satisfied Gabrielle nodded and left the group. She returned to the conference room a short time later with a metal briefcase and took the seat Shen had saved for her. He had chosen to sit in between herself and Xena. It was a small gesture to be sure, but it seemed to the bard like the youngster was going out of his way to let both Xena and Aphrodite know that they were important to him.

When everyone was settled, Wolfgang shut the conference room door then activated the switch to indicate that the room was sealed. The screen of Gabrielle’s phone showed Michelle in the control room, watching the array of readouts, guiding the large yacht towards their destination.

“Okay, this first part of the meeting I wanted to include Shen, because we all need to be on the same page here,” she began, scanning the faces of her assembled crew. “Shen, in all honesty, *The Hippolyta* isn’t the safest place for you right now. The problem is, we are the safest people for you to be around so while I’m not happy about having to take you into battle, I wouldn’t want you surrounded by anyone else besides everyone in this very room. We are on our way to Mexico and whether it’s before we get there, or after we get there, we are going to be attacked. I wanted you to be in this part of the meeting because you have to know that everyone one here would put their life on the line to protect you, because it’s what Susan would have wanted and because it *is* what I want. But you have to understand, that if you don’t do exactly what we ask you to do – even if you don’t want to- *especially* if you don’t want to– from now until I give the all clear – not only would you be putting your own welfare at risk, you’d also be endangering anyone trying to help you. Even a delay of a minute or two could keep someone from being at the next place they needed to be, and that might be protecting someone else.” Shen nodded solemnly and Gabrielle knew that her words were resonating, the meeting coming on the heels of a funeral may have had something to do with that.

Gabrielle turned her attention to the rest of the crew, “from here on out, I want everyone armed. Always stay in pairs, all of our security protocols must be followed, taking absolutely no chances. Wear your defensive gear, stay on the comms, don’t take any chances. Your downtime will be minimal, use it wisely. Easton’s people will be a well-trained private militia force; black-ops people, ruthless professionals. They won’t hesitate to attack us at sea and they will try to slip on board and take people out using stealth. They may come by helicopter and it is not by mistake that we are leaving US waters. We will fare much better answering to the Mexican government if we are required to shoot at people, helicopters, boats you name it. She turned her attention back to her godson. “Moose, I want you to take Ed on a tour of the ship, while we finish our meeting. Nicolai is going to go with you as well. I want you to inventory the food and water in the safe room. Make sure there is a laptop in there, some books, a pair of

headphones. Make sure the bathroom in there and everything else works. When the fight gets going, and I don't mean 'if' I mean 'when', you are going to have to seal yourself in there which will free up the rest of us to fight. You will be able to communicate with us, but it's possible you may be in there for even a day or two or more. Honey, you are going to be a big target and we can't let that happen okay? If you were to leave the safe room, for any reason, even if you thought you were helping…"

Shen nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. "If I were to leave, people would be taken from the fight to protect me and that means they can't protect you, or help you. I *was* listening." Gabrielle nodded, beaming at the boy. "It's going to be okay," he added, "You'll see. And on our tour of the ship, we can stop at Nicolai's cabin so Ed can get some new clothes."

"Ed," Gabrielle said turning her attention to the flight attendant. "Nicolai will brief you on the ship, and get you some gear. Wear your comm units and you can hear the rest of the meeting." She hugged Shen briefly and sent him on his way, the boy looking tiny walking in between the two hulking men. He'd taken each of their hands and the bard couldn't but smile at the sweetness of it. While not safe, he was still probably safer here than elsewhere.

Once they'd left and Wolfgang had resealed the room she turned her attention to the rest of the crew. "I wasn't exaggerating for Shen's benefit," she said. "When we were in DC we learned some things about Ares and his agenda. The guy has no qualms about starting World War Three. He's adamant about having no one- especially us- getting in the way of the insane Turner Administration. In addition to Argo as hostage he has a woman named Jennifer who doesn't need to be involved in any of this."

"We will arrive in Mexico the day after tomorrow – first light, do we know when Ares will get there?" Michelle asked, after consulting her tablet for an updated ETA.

"Ares is going to arrive at the beach by land," Xena replied casually. "We need to have this fight in the light, he's going to want it in the dark."

"How can you know that?" Hatsuo asked, frowning slightly.

The warrior shrugged. "It makes the most sense," she explained. "He can have more people around him, make less of a scene when he gets there by arriving overland. As for nighttime, he doesn't want to do any of the things he's doing in the open. He has always been more comfortable pulling the strings from behind the scenes."

"An armada of ships going after a pleasure yacht is going to get people's attention," Aphrodite added. "Whereas a caravan of SUVs isn't as out of place."

"So, we meet him on the beach." Bohemian said, then asked, "What then?"

"Not so fast," Gabrielle interjected. "Xena, Aphrodite, and I will go ashore, and we will take three people with us. I want the rest of you on *The Hippolyta*. Protecting Shen and this ship." She looked at the faces of her crew and decided upon her next course of action. "Vox and Wolfgang – the two of you will stay onboard on the comms with Brian Glass in DC. He has agreed to liaison for us with his people, to an informal degree. We can probably get some satellite imagery from him. Nicolai, you are staying onboard, close to Shen. The rest of you are free to volunteer to go ashore, no judgement if you feel that your talents are better spent onboard." It was no surprise that every hand went up around the table. Gabrielle picked up her phone, prepared to text Xena and Aphrodite to confer with them as to who she should choose to accompany them but then she put the phone down deciding that this decision was hers alone. She knew the crew better than

they did and if things went wrong, she did not want to share the responsibility either. "Sarah, Elaine, and Ed the three of you will join us." Get suited up.

"Ingrid, I want you to review every extreme protocol about this ship. Every trap, every strength, every weakness; I want every one of Ares' people to regret ever setting foot onboard her."

"Yes, boss," came the immediate reply from the engineer.

"Bo- I'd like you and your sniper rifle on the top deck watching over us, but that will leave you potentially exposed."

The tall man nodded and gave Gabrielle a boyish smirk, "I guarantee I'm a better shot than they are. I got your back."

Steve Hagstrom, the bosun raised his finger to ask a question. "What's the plan? Besides trying to get Ares to show himself in daylight." When Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak then seemed to reconsider, he added "I'm prepared for it to sound completely insane."

The chuckles that followed put everyone at ease and the bard glanced to the companions sitting on her right and left before opening the briefcase and continuing. "At some point, we need Ares on the beach, hopefully a beach void of civilians. We need to rescue the hostage, get Argo back and catch him in a shockwave that we expect to be generated by Hephaestus' hammer hitting Xena's chakram." As she mentioned the two items, she withdrew them from the padded metal briefcase and also extracted Ares' sheathed dagger.

"I thought those weren't on the ship?" Michelle asked in surprise.

"We were outside when the subject came up and I was worried about drones listening in, not about you Captain." Gabrielle said reassuringly. She pointed to a small initial on one side of the chakram, "here is the stamp of Hephaestus," she said.

"And the dagger?" Ingrid Kamaka asked as she looked warily at the dagger. "It has his power, yeah? Shouldn't we try to destroy it?" The suggestion by the ship's mechanic was met by several nods of agreement around the table.

Xena shook her head. "No way will he release the hostage without it. He doesn't care about Jennifer one way or the other, but I think he will release her when he gets the knife, as a sign of good faith for something he wants more. He'll probably try to keep Argo for…" she was about to say 'Ambrosia' and stopped herself. "…leverage," she said instead.

"So, the crew going ashore…" Prisha Washburn began to ask.

"Elaine will be with Aphrodite, Ed with Xena and Sarah with me. The three of us," she indicated herself, Xena and the goddess, "will need to be separated. We need to get Jennifer out and to safety- Aphrodite that's your mission. Between Xena and I- one of us will throw the chakram, the other will throw the hammer…"

"Argo might be able to provide some helpful distraction at that moment," the goddess offered helpfully.

"When the hammer hits the chakram the blast should hurt Ares, and anyone else close to him which is why we want to keep him isolated. We have to do this from a distance – and we only get one shot at it." Gabrielle explained.

"Nope, this doesn't sound impossible at all." Bohemian added, wincing as Vox kicked him under the table.

"I admit it isn't perfect," the bard confessed. "But believe me when I say Xena and I have made things work with stranger planning than this. I want everyone to suit up. Get in those last-minute drills, check weapons, traps, surveillance everything."

As Gabrielle stood, Aphrodite put a gentle hand on her forearm, "We need to have a chat," she said when the bard glanced at Xena, added, "privately, if that's okay."

"Do you want to go to my study?' Gabrielle asked, concerned. "It's secure."

"How about a nice stroll on deck?" the goddess countered. "I enjoy the sunshine."

"Sure," Gabrielle agreed, having no idea what they were going to talk about. "Xena?"

The warrior grinned and nodded to the group of people making their way out of the conference room. "It's okay," she assured the bard. "I want to see what's in the armory and get a tour of the ship from a military point of view. You will…" she searched for the right phrase, "text me when you guys are done?"

Gabrielle nodded in the affirmative and kissed the warrior quickly before following the goddess from the conference room.

They strolled in silence for several minutes before Gabrielle nudged Aphrodite's shoulder. "Out with it," she finally said.

"I'm trying to put my thoughts in order," the goddess replied and Gabrielle chuckled.

"Honey, it's me. You don't have to be elegant. You are kind of freaking me out with your seriousness."

Aphrodite stopped walking and leaned against the railing on the main deck and looked out at the expanse of blue. She turned back to her companion and smiled looking down at the green eyes looking back up at her with such concern. "Gabrielle," she began and the bard was surprised to hear the sound of her name uttered by the goddess outside of the bedroom. Ever the fan of endearments, the woman speaking to her now was as serious as the bard from Potidaea had ever seen her. "Admitting vulnerability is not really my cup of tea. But this is important and we need to address it. Gabrielle stayed silent, letting the goddess take her time. "I can't directly attack Ares and he can't attack me- I know you know that part. He can't be hurt by anything on this ship except the chakram, the hammer, his dagger, you and Argo." Gabrielle looked at her in surprise but she continued. "That moment, in Mexico on the beach when you tasted my blood – it lets you penetrate a barrier of sorts. Not just into my feelings, but physically as well. For example, if we were still fucking and you scratched my back you'd actually leave a scratch now, or a hickey or whatever." She shrugged, having made her point. "If Argo were angry and bit me, I'd suffer a dog bite. I'd heal, mind you, but not quickly unless I had some Ambrosia."

"Argo?" Gabrielle asked wondering how the ability was bestowed on her dog.

"I wasn't planning on that." Aphrodite explained. "After…you know…you were in a thrall of sorts and fell over. Argo rushed over to see if you were okay and you know how dogs are about licking wounds. Well… I could communicate with her before of course, but it's much easier now. I also think she might live a bit longer than average for a dog her size."

Frozen, Gabrielle stood, mulling over the multitude of thoughts that cascaded through her mind. She had seen Aphrodite this exposed and vulnerable once before, during a night filled with sex that left her nearly comatose; gazing down as she'd

straddled the goddess, but this was for an entirely different reason. “Why?” she asked. “Did you know this would happen- with me I mean. I get that Argo was an accident.”

The Goddess of Love looked uncomfortable but took a deep breath and answered. Clearly this level of candor was distressing. “I wanted something to continue to connect us when the physicality of our relationship ended. I was in the thrall of power and memories at the time which is why I didn’t explain what was going to happen and give you the opportunity for informed consent.” She sighed and shrugged in defeat, “I also didn’t want to deal with the rejection if you said ‘no’. In hindsight, it was not fair of me to do that, I owe you an apology.”

There it was. Simultaneously, Gabrielle felt as if an unseen fog had been lifted between herself and the goddess yet at the same time an immense weight had settled upon her shoulders. Aphrodite loved her, truly loved her and that awareness represented a responsibility that the bard had not anticipated.

She didn’t say anything as she offered her arm to the goddess and continued to stroll up to the bow section of her ship. They walked, arm in arm before the bard spoke. “Aphrodite. I’m not sorry you did it. I am not sorry at all.” She left it there, saying anything more about her love for the goddess or how she was valued felt too much like leading her on. “Something tells me that if we weren’t about to battle Ares, you wouldn’t be mentioning this at all,” she added, matter-of-factly.

“Correct,” Aphrodite confirmed. “Some things can simply be felt without discussion. And this isn’t my favorite kind of chat.”

“But you want us to have every advantage where Ares is concerned? This is also why you weren’t worried about Argo. Because to some degree she can protect herself?”

The goddess nodded, “Ares can hurt her. She hasn’t had Ambrosia. But she can hurt him and he doesn’t know that. He knows his dagger can cut him, and he will suspect that he is vulnerable to the chakram which I’m sure he suspects you have. Xena has told him about the hammer. We don’t have a lot of surprises on our side. We will have to use them wisely. I have no idea if he will anticipate what will happen when the chakram and hammer collide.”

They were standing at the bow of the ship, just past the pad where the Bardic & Company helicopter was secured. Gabrielle looked up at the goddess as a strange thought came to her. “Xena and I aren’t the same, are we? This is about that as well, isn’t it?”

Aphrodite favored her with one of her radiant smiles. “Dear one, you and Xena have never been ‘the same.’”

“You know what I mean,” Gabrielle persisted.

“I do, and you’re right. Xena is starting her life over in many respects. She has the essence, if you will, of three Olympians. Sure, you’ve both had Ambrosia, but the fact that you ingested it post birth puts you on a more even footing with her given that you only have the essence of one Olympian in your system.” Aphrodite looked out at the ocean and opted not to make the joke about ‘fluid bonding’ that came to her. Instead she opted for more honesty. “You don’t have the same abilities as Xena, but you both have abilities beyond that of other mortals. Let’s face it, to some degree you are beyond Xena. You’ve put more training, studying, and living into your skill set than she ever had the chance to. You’ve made yourself Ares equal the hard way. The same work that Xena put in but without the godly DNA. He will underestimate you and that is another advantage. You don’t need the essence of gods to be beyond other people. The life you’ve lived has

done that. Keep eating Ambrosia, in small quantities – and you- and Xena- could end up like me."

Gabrielle was fairly certain that her heart didn't stop beating, it just felt that way. The Goddess of Love just offered her godhood. She searched for the possible words she could utter in response and finding none, simply took a step closer to the goddess and hugged her, trying to put all the love and affection she felt for her into that simple gesture. "Let's kick that can down the road for a few hundred years and revisit it later, okay?" she finally said. She felt the soft chuckle thrum through Aphrodite's body and smiled. It was a humbling feeling for Gabrielle- not to have one amazing love in her life, but two.

Pleased, but not surprised that the crew had waited for the two of them to return before serving breakfast, Gabrielle made a point to sit at the table with Rebekah Luna, the attorney traveling with the crew of *The Hippolyta*. Shen nudged her playfully and asked if he could eat with Vox, Bo, Ed, Nicolai and Wolfgang. She watched him go as Aphrodite and Xena joined her at the table with the attorney and Ingrid, the mechanic.

"We need to talk," Gabrielle said shifting her gaze from her godson to lawyer. "I hear you're feeling redundant."

Rebekah smiled at her, and quite in character with the shrewd lawyer, her smile gave away nothing. "In Michelle and Elaine's cabin there is a chart with pool going trying to identify all of the professions you've undoubtedly had. I put 'lawyer' on that list myself." There was no animosity in her voice, no judgement- if anything there was a sense of respect one would give a respected colleague.

"The fact that I've passed the bar gives me a greater appreciation for someone who has passion for it," the bard protested. "Look, seven of us have a captain's licenses but there is only ever one captain at a time on this ship. I own *The Hippolyta*, but if Michelle tells me to do something, I do it." Aphrodite chuckled and Gabrielle shot her an annoyed glance. "Besides," Gabrielle continued, "I need you to get in touch with someone from the President's office in Mexico. Explain what is going on- as much as appropriate," she added quickly. "Maria Sanchez is no fan of Turner and it is her people who will be in the line of fire if that beach isn't cleared."

The attorney nodded, deciding that the bard had made a good argument. "We might be able to get a video meeting with the president and Susan Vincent if she's speaking for Gabrielle Evans."

"Yeah, that would make sense. If you can get that setup I'll put on something appropriate and we can do the chat from my office." Gabrielle agreed.

"See if there is a way that the President can choke off Ares from the bulk of his force," Xena suggested. "Have Ares and a small force go through, then have some kind of road closure or other kind of emergency that would require a long detour. Ares will probably be in the first third of his army- not at the front of it but he's too anxious to be the last one to arrive." She glanced down the deck, azure blue eyes landing on the secured helicopter at the bow of the ship. "When we get closer, you might want to do a reconnaissance flight," she suggested. "Get a better sense of where exactly he may arrive from?"

"Has anyone contacted Poseidon?" Ingrid asked curiously as she finished her pancakes. "I mean you're going up against a god with a god, but you'd think you'd want as many gods as you can get your hands on, right?" The way she said it made it sound

like she was suggesting wearing a flowered shirt to a luau but the glances exchanged between Gabrielle, Xena and Aphrodite made it clear the statement was profound.

"Do you think he'd help?" Xena asked.

"Uncle Ariel? He couldn't have skittered off that beach fast enough when he heard Ares was in the mix," Aphrodite said with disgust.

"We should at least reach out," Gabrielle countered. "Give him the opportunity to help. He recently contacted us for a new identity, we have a way to get through to him which is more immediate than his usual spy-craft protocols."

"I can reach out," Rebekah suggested. "Write up a brief let him know where we're at and what's going to happen. But will he believe it's really from us? He seems paranoid."

"Tell him I mentioned Nerites." Aphrodite said. "And if he's being stubborn tell him to do it for Rhodos and Herophilos." Ingrid opened her mouth to speak and the goddess silenced her with a glance. "Nerites was my first love and I turned him into a shell fish because he broke my heart. It's not something I mention to a lot of people." She shot a small grin at Gabrielle before continuing "I handle rejection much better now. Anyway, Rhodos and Herophilos are the two daughters I had with Poseidon." Ingrid dropped her fork which clattered on her plate and fell to the deck. Several people at other tables looked over to see if there was a problem and Aphrodite frowned at the mechanic. "I know what you're thinking, and while I don't blame you for being horrified, I also don't owe you an explanation or apology," the goddess said quietly, but forcefully. "For sure, incest is bad, and wrong, horrific all the other awful adjectives. That's a big 'duh'. But for a second put yourself in my place. You are part of a handful of people who are immortal. There aren't a lot of options out there for people who are like you, or understand you, or can even deal with you on your level. My culture pre-existed yours and didn't have the same taboos so to judge me by them millennia later is rather unfair. And don't get me wrong, you have your taboos for very good reason I might add, keep those taboos right where they are. I wish all mortals were as horrified as you were just now.

"Anyway, I'd had an affair with Ares, yes that Ares, and Poseidon helped me out and…" she shrugged. With a fork, she reached across the table and speared the remaining pancake on the mechanic's plate, the one she knew stood no chance of being eaten at this point and transferred them to her plate before digging in. "Come on, we were all consenting adults here…"

"I think she's still getting over mythology being more history than myth," Rebekah observed.

"Whatever," Aphrodite, replied. "Tell Ariel that he owes me and he really should help us. The world that Ares wants, has always wanted isn't going to go any easier for him walking around on dry land."

"It's going to get a lot worse," Xena added. "I've no doubt Poseidon feels the devastation of climate change and what's happening in the oceans more profoundly than any of us. For that reason alone, he should be in favor of people that want a different world than the one Ares wants."

The lawyer nodded in agreement and stood. "I think I've got enough to draft a persuasive missive to Mr. Waters," she said. "Do you want to see it before I send it?"

Gabrielle smiled in appreciation. “Don’t wait for me,” she said. “Send the letter, you know what you’re doing. I’m going to meet with everyone on board, review every facet of what we’ve got for a plan thus far. If you need anything, you know how to reach me. When I’m done I’ll meet with you in my office to talk to President Sanchez.”

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Xena adjusted the night vision goggles and peered down at the ground below as Gabrielle smoothly brought the helicopter around. There was no sign of Ares but even so, they had opted not to use the search light and give away their presence. While the helicopter could be heard obviously, anyone on the ground would have to estimate where exactly it was or what it was doing. “Right there,” the warrior announced, “just a little to the right, you’re over it right now, that’s the road that leads to the beach, the quickest route at any rate. And there, it ends and you’ve got sand.” Xena spoke into the mic attached to her headset and Gabrielle heard her quite plainly over the noise of the vehicle. “Is there room for several jeeps to move side by side? Or will they have to go single file?”

The warrior frowned, considering. “Jeeps are the width of the cars we passed on our way over here?”

“More or less.”

“They could get three abreast, the sand to the sides of the road is fairly flat. I see some rocks though so they can’t move quickly. Can you take us over to the cliff where Aphrodite tossed my urn.” Xena realized as soon as she said it how strange it sounded; *her* urn, *her* ashes- she’d been dead. That was still a hard one to swallow. Upon further reflection, she decided that it couldn’t be any stranger than the things she’d experienced of late: Traveling from one side of a country to another in a matter of hours, flying like a graceful bird in a helicopter, traveling the ocean in a floating palace and seeing Gabrielle, her Gabrielle, in charge of an elite army. Absently, she wondered if Aphrodite was right- if she had come back different somehow. She didn’t feel different necessarily, but she did feel like she’d made a choice to learn from the things she’d done previously and that included taking the risk to be more open with Gabrielle. Was that due to Aphrodite’s influence or just maturity? Something caught her eye at the base of the narrow outcrop of rock and she refocused the binoculars, it was a number of stingrays feeding on squid close to the surface of the water. Unsarcastically she felt protective of them.

“One of us needs to get Ares up on that ledge and shove him off, the other will throw their weapon from below. Do you want to throw the hammer or the chakram?” Gabrielle asked moving down a bit for a closer look.

“Do you have a preference?” Xena asked noting how narrow the formation over the water was and how sharp the rocks looked below.

“I spent more than a decade throwing your chakram around in Egypt,” Gabrielle explained. “I’m more comfortable with that.”

Xena nodded “I’ll take the hammer. You know,” the warrior continued, “we’re going to be pretty exposed on the beach. There really isn’t any kind of cover. They’ve got the rocks, and your ship is going to have to be pretty far out for a mooring. They will have the same weapons that they used in DC? The guns?”

Gabrielle nodded, “You can count on that. But they’ll be using automatic weapons possibly- a lot more bullets. We’re going to need as much confusion and chaos
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as we can muster when the fighting starts. Have you seen enough?" she asked after making a quick scan of her control panel to check the fuel. The warrior nodded. "I'm going to fly low over a couple of other areas on our way back," Gabrielle explained. "If anyone is watching us I want there to be several places they think we're interested in, not just this part of the beach."

Xena nodded in agreement, putting the binoculars down and watching the bard's movements with wonder. "Do you want to take the stick?" Gabrielle asked with a smile as she guided the craft higher. She read the look of apprehension and excitement on the warrior's face as an affirmative. She guided Xena's hand to the control stick, covering it with her own showing her how the control resulted in movement of the craft. Words were not needed. Like its own language, Gabrielle could almost feel her thoughts transmitted to her lover via the tactile touch. While she knew it technically wasn't so, there was no denying the unique electricity that passed between them that she'd never encountered with anyone else. After a few moments, she removed her hand, and decided that the look of joy and wonder on Xena's face as she guided the craft was one of the most radiant sights she'd ever seen.

Together they spent nearly the next hour making an extensive and believable survey of any number of prominent places along the Cabo San Lucas coastline. She'd noted on her map several places that would make sense for *The Hippolyta* to anchor providing as safe a trajectory as possible from yacht to beach. She touched down smoothly on the helicopter pad as the ship continued on its way to the very end of the Baja peninsula. They were met by Ed and Steve who quickly and efficiently secured the vehicle to the ship. Michelle was also waiting for them at the landing pad.

"Any sign of company?" Gabrielle asked as she took off her headset and left it on the seat of the helicopter.

The captain shook her head. "Nothing yet. Aphrodite said she's going to keep watch tonight. She's in the command center at the moment and has been making frequent rounds on deck; said she can tell if anyone approaches whether they are on a boat, under water, or in the air. She's our very best defense at the moment." Gabrielle noticed that any attraction that the captain felt for the goddess was completely absent from this conversation. She was discussing a valued member of the crew who had a unique skillset.

Gabrielle nodded, understanding. "Did she say anything else?"

Only now did Michelle Fender blush, "She said to get some rest…eventually. Tomorrow is going to be a big day. Don't overdo it." The captain shrugged apologetically.

"It's fine," Gabrielle assured her. "Let me know when we get there, I'll be on deck shortly thereafter unless something happens. If anything seems amiss, do not hesitate to wake me. What about Shen?"

"Nicolai and Ed are taking turns staying with him. He can get to the safe hold from his quarters in less than thirty seconds. Twenty-two seconds is his average to get in and seal the hold his best time is seventeen." With a nod and a thankful smile, Gabrielle dismissed the captain.

"There is nothing more you can do tonight," Xena suggested gently. "You should get some rest…eventually" she added with a seductive whisper as the bard followed her to their cabin, albeit at this point with a somewhat larger grin on her face.

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Gabrielle adjusted the brim of her baseball hat and sunglasses as the zodiac sped towards the beach. Her ship was moored as close to the rock outcrop as its huge size would allow. Bohemian Van Lyle, the member of her crew whose marksmanship was in the same league as Gabrielle's watching over them with a sniper rifle. Michelle Fender was the command center with Wolfgang Fowler, navigator and Vox Wandre, engineer manning the conn communicating with Gabrielle as well as other divisions in the company. Steve Hagstrom the bosun was in the engine room with Ingrid Kamaka ready to spring any number of traps when the ship was eventually boarded. Hatsuo Eko, the chief of security was watching the monitors in the control room, coordinating with the crew and the Transportation Forces in Mexico. Nicolai Burns; armed to the teeth sous chef, stood guard near the ships most secure safe hold. The rest of the crew on board; stewards Blake Taylor and Samantha Ramirez, navigator Prisha Washburn, and lawyer Rebekah Luna were making frequent sweeps of the ship, keeping an eye out for the invaders they knew were coming.

All of Gabrielle's crew members were dressed in battle gear, the crew staying on *The Hippolyta* as well as in the zodiac with her. Executive Officer Elaine Jackson, chef Sarah Gibson, and flight attendant Ed Schecter looked every inch the elite fighting force that they were. Dangerous visions in beige, the uniforms were the color of sand. The military grade tactical armor might protect her and her crew from Ares' men, but she didn't fool herself into thinking that the Kevlar or weapons she wore would do anything against the god except for the chakram contained in a reinforced pocket at her back. The sky was bleak, the air heavy with moisture and the sea spray cold. The idyllic day of Xena's resurrection seemed like a lifetime ago.

She signaled to Xena and Aphrodite using sign language although the mic and earpiece she wore could have transmitted her voice just as well. *"Should we get our hands on some actual Ambrosia?"* she asked.

"It's a gamble either way," Aphrodite signed back. *"If he gets his hands on it, he will eat it immediately. But it is the one solid bargaining chip you've got. It's not like I'd let it go to waste if we can keep if from him."* she added with a smile.

Xena nodded and signed back to the other two. *"I think I have a solution for that."* She said, moving her hands efficiently as if she'd been speaking ASL for years. *"I'll meet up with you guys on shore. You need to stall Ares until I get there. Try not to tell him I went after the Ambrosia; my gut says that Poseidon really doesn't want other Olympians to know what exactly Ambrosia is and where it comes from."*

Aphrodite looked genuinely stung by the words so Gabrielle added quickly, *"Clearly you aren't just anyone."*

"Thank you, dear," She replied out loud.

"Be careful, please." Gabrielle said before Xena winked then tipped herself backwards out of the boat and Ed, who was guiding the tiller of the motor looked at the bard in surprise.

"She's okay," Gabrielle reassured him, as well as Sarah and Elaine who looked back at the splash. "She will meet up with us on the beach." He shrugged and kept a steady hand, steering the inflatable through the choppy water.

"There, on shore," Elaine called out pointing as she peered through binoculars. "I see four jeeps."
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Gabrielle looked in the direction her executive officer was pointing to see the vehicles were making their way across the sand to intersect with their trajectory. “Can you count the passengers?” she asked then added, “Wolfie, what do you have for me?”

“Vox has the drone in the air and is on the line with Glass, he’s knocked the satellite offline, the wrong people were using the data,” he said. “You’ve got four jeeps which came off the road like Xena predicted. Ares has sent two guys up the cliff in back, snipers no doubt. Vox counts eighteen people on the beach, plus Ares, Argo, and the other hostage.” He was quiet a moment and she heard him say something in Spanish into another mic. “We’re getting word from the Mexican government that they’ve choked off the rest of the convoy,” the navigator responded. “Our people from Transportation arrived and are assisting the local authorities in keeping an additional ten jeeps from joining the first four. You’ve got nineteen hostiles, not an additional forty.”

“Ares is in the third vehicle,” Aphrodite added. “That will be the one with the hostages. I can feel that he’s got men in the water too, no doubt to board your ship as soon as we engage on shore. There are a lot of men in the water, I’d say about thirty.”

Gabrielle nodded. Not the best news but not unexpected. “You copy Wolfie?”

“Roger that, boss.”

“Any sign of Ariel?” she asked the goddess, grateful that even if Ares was listening they wouldn’t know who she was talking about. Sadly, Aphrodite shook her head.

As the zodiac rode a final wave into shore Elaine and Sarah jumped out to pull the boat onto the sand. One last time Gabrielle glanced down at the host of weapons stowed on the bottom of the inflatable. They were beyond exposed on the beach but that’s what they’d planned for. Her best option was to not look like a threat. Before leaving the zodiac, she made an obvious show of taking the gun from her shoulder holster, the one from her hip, and one from her ankle holster and leaving them in the boat as well. She still had two guns at her back, safetys off, but they were well concealed. Aphrodite was unarmed, dressed in the same sand colored tactical clothing, minus the gear. Ed, Elaine, and Sarah stayed with the boat, keeping their hands visible, but not disarming.

Bard and goddess walked the short distance onto the sand. They stopped midway between Ares’ jeeps and the zodiac and waited. There was a pop in her earpiece and some static. Then Wolfgang’s voice cut through briefly, “They’re trying to jam our signal boss. Red Dragon secure…”

“Launch now,” Gabrielle replied. “Copy?”

“Rog—“ and the signal went dead. Confident that the company-wide assault against the God of War was underway she could only hope that their efforts to jam signals between Ares and his forces were proving as successful as his assault against hers. A heartbeat of worry descended and she thought about her people in harm’s way but she purposefully put that to the side. Adequately warned and advised the only thing to do now was respect the decision made by her people. She glanced behind her, wishing Xena were there.

“Not one but two irritating blonds,” Ares said in greeting as he confidently crossed the distance from his jeep. “And don’t you two look butch. I’m pretty sure only one of you is supposed to be the man,” he added with a self-satisfied smirk. In one hand, he held Argo’s leash and in the other a gun pointed at the dog’s head. In the jeep three mercenaries held guns on the escort who looked terrified. “Where is Xena?” he

demanded when he stood next to the pair, towering over Gabrielle. “Or did you chase her off to keep this piece of ass all to yourself?” he asked his sister with a suggestive leer.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes, “And people wonder where lesbians come from,” she replied dismissively. Reaching into the pocket on her thigh, a number of Ares’ men raised their guns, she shot her brother an annoyed glare and he waved his hand to forestall his men. She extracted Ares sheathed dagger saying, “We are prepared to do some deal making if you think you can stop being a dick for five minutes, which I realize is a stretch.”

“It’s not too late to switch sides ya know,” he replied, ignoring the barb. “Your interests align better with mine than theirs ya know. Long lived perhaps, but they’re still mortal. And give me back my fucking knife.”

“Not until you release Jennifer,” Gabrielle said. The god’s attention was momentarily distracted by a single shot into the surf. The God of War held up a hand again to stop any additional shooting. The bard turned her head to see Xena striding confidently out of the surf towards them. She was soaked, but didn’t seem to mind at all.

“That’s far enough Xena,” Ares called before the warrior reached the other two. “Where is my Ambrosia?”

“Let the woman go and we’ll talk,” she replied smoothing her hair back from her face.

The God of War, like his men was dressed in black tactical military garb; he wore an assortment of weapons and his short-cropped hair and Oakley sunglasses completed the alt-right picture. He seemed to do a quick calculation in his head and signaled to his men, “Let the bitch go,” he shouted to them. “That one anyway,” he added with a smirk.

Aphrodite stepped forward to meet the woman, roughly shoved out of the vehicle. She walked back towards the inflatable, walking behind the frightened woman to block her from any potential attack from the beach. When they neared the zodiac she signaled Elaine who moved forward to intercept the escort.

“That’s far enough,” Ares shouted with a glare at Xena. “No one moves any farther until I get my knife, the Ambrosia, and the hammer.” For emphasis, he jerked on the dog’s leash.

Xena noted Jennifer’s position, shielded by Aphrodite near the executive officer. Sarah Gibson was focused on Xena and it was clear that Ed was focused on Gabrielle. They weren’t in much of a position to argue. Xena nodded to Aphrodite who tossed the sheathed dagger to The God of War. He caught it easily and put the dagger in the cargo pocket on his pants. “The Ambrosia is up on the cliff,” she said with a nod to the tall arch not that far down the beach. You climb the cliff, it’s under a rock at the edge over the arch. I’ll go with you. When you have the Ambrosia you signal your men to let the dog go, then I’ll give you the hammer.” She nodded to the ancient weapon that rested at her thigh, the leather strap clipped to a loop on her tactical pants.

He smiled, revealing a row of perfect teeth. “Not so fast Xena,” he said with a slight nod of his head. “Change of plans. Your brat stays here on the beach. I’m bringing the dog, my sister and you up the cliff, and you three.” He said nodding to three of the men who had ridden in the jeep with him. Any funny business from you and all your new friends get riddled with bullets.”

“Take me instead of Aphrodite,” Gabrielle suggested helpfully.

Ares chuckled, his expression stating that he found her suggestion indeed funny. “Um. Fuck, no,” he said. “You’re annoying,” then, stepping aside with a formal bow added, “after you, ladies.”

Gabrielle met Xena’s eyes briefly as she headed towards the cliff. The bard’s eyes pled for caution and the warrior’s eyes returned reassurance. Having already repeatedly restated their love for each other in a variety of positions the night before, this moment was about the mission. Through years of adventures it had developed into the signature strength between the warrior and bard. Not the necessity to keep their love affair separate from their often life-threatening mission of fighting for the greater good, but rather their love affair sustaining and strengthening their ability to do so. Xena and Gabrielle were not the battling force of nature in spite of being lovers, rather because of it. Still, the frustration she saw there was genuine. This is not how they had planned the event, but some improvisation would be expected.

Absently the bard wondered if Ares knew that she could hurt him, certainly he knew that Aphrodite couldn’t, but he couldn’t hurt her either, so that was something. Knowing that there wasn’t anything she could do about Ares for the time being, she focused on the imminent battle before her. She noted the positions of the remaining men in the jeeps and the two snipers on the cliff that she couldn’t really see but knew where they were thanks to Wolfgang. Calculating the angles in a heartbeat, she made her best guess as to where they’d be positioned. The briefest glance told her that Ares’ men had varying degrees of readiness and experience. Some had their hands on their weapons, some did not. There was no doubt that Ed, Sarah and Elaine were making the same assessments themselves. With her hands at her sides she casually tapped at a switch in her pocket. In her earpiece, it sounded like breaks in the static but all of her people knew Morse Code. For now, she would watch and wait choosing the moment to make her move.

Xena led the way to the cliff, followed by Aphrodite then Ares holding Argo’s leash, with Ares’ men bringing up the rear. She moved as quickly as she dared, wanting to keep the god close behind and knowing it was only a matter of time until the men on the beach started shooting.

“Nice of your bard to disarm before joining me on the beach,” he said conversationally, picking his way up the cliff. “Not that I give a shit, mortals are expendable – that’s why they’re mortals.”

“One of the many reasons why you suck and Gabrielle rocks,” Aphrodite muttered as she climbed.

“I don’t get it, sis,” Ares chuckled, “you and Xena with the brat? If I’d known you were into threesomes…”

“Watch your step,” Xena cautioned, changing the subject after kicking some rocks loose. She reached the top of the narrow ledge and turned, keeping a careful eye on Argo as she led the way with Ares following her. Aphrodite joined her next and Ares motioned the two of them to stand back before cresting the thin rock outcrop himself. “Here’s how this goes,” the warrior continued casually. “You signal your expendable thugs to let Gabrielle take Jennifer the rest of the way to safety. I tell you where the Ambrosia is and you release the dog. You’ve already got your knife as a sign of good will. When it’s all done, you get the hammer. Simple.”

Ares looked down the cliff towards his men on the beach then regarded the woman confronting him and did a quick mental calculation. He nodded once and whistled twice, sharply, and the man who'd previously released the escort nodded at Gabrielle. "Quickly," the bard urged the frightened woman to get back to the zodiac as she hastened back there herself.

"Where is it?" Ares demanded, wasting no time.

"At the end of the outcrop," the warrior replied, under a rock.

He motioned for his three men to stand in between himself and the women as he searched the rocks at the end of the narrow rocky cliff, the water fifty feet below them. The powerful crashing of the surf against the rock beat out a steady rhythm interrupted by a cheer of victory as he found something under a rock. He held it up victoriously making sure the Goddess of Love could see it. Uncertainly, Aphrodite looked at Xena who didn't seem concerned. He popped the morsel in his mouth and grinned broadly. "That's what I'm talking about," he said, talking around the mouthful of Ambrosia.

Just then two things happened simultaneously. There was a commotion further down the beach at the most distant jeep as several shots rang out drawing his attention to the scene below. Gabrielle and Elaine raced to shield Jennifer as she made the last few steps to the Zodiac, hiding behind a shield pulled from the inflatable where Ed indicated. The bard drew one of the guns at her back and returned fire, as did Ed, Elaine, and Sarah. As the bard turned to grab a rifle from the inflatable boat, sunlight glinted off the metal at her back; the chakram had cut its way out of the reinforced pocket on her tactical jacket.

"What the…" Ares roared in anger from the top of the outcrop seeing the metallic glint, "kill her!"

Now it was Aphrodite who whistled and Argo, who had been calmly standing next to the God of War on her leash, turned and bit him at the knee. Ares bellowed and Xena used the brief distraction to disarm the guard closest to her. The other guard shot Aphrodite who didn't even flinch as the bullet simply hit her and fell to the ground, flattened, confusing the hell out of the two guards. There was another roar of pain and anger as Argo bit the hand of the god reaching down to pry her vice-like bite from his leg. This was the dog's undoing however, as it gave the powerful god the opportunity to fling his arm with enough force to send her flying twenty feet down the cliff where she yelped and was still.

From Gabrielle's vantage point she could see that something was happening on the outcrop but couldn't tell exactly what. She saw something get tossed partway down the cliff and put her fear aside as to what or who, it might be. She also saw two bodies tumble down the cliff across from her, above the jeeps. The snipers. She let the chakram slip into her hand from the pocket at her back and waited.

Aphrodite's eyes blazed with fury as she saw the dog thrown down the cliff and she charged at her brother. Xena was about to rush at Ares, hoping against hope that she could shove him over the cliff and send the hammer after him when The Goddess of Love ran past her, screaming and hurling herself and the God of War to the water below. The warrior spared the briefest of glances for the bard on the beach and watched for the glint of metal from her chakram that she knew would be headed towards the falling pair. She was not disappointed. Responding like muscle memory, Xena's brain calculated the precise geometry necessary for the hammer to meet the chakram close to the falling gods. She let the heavy hammer fly with all her might, knowing that in the next heartbeat she

would be hit by bullets from the two guards she hadn't disarmed. There was a bright flash and loud a bang as the hammer hit its mark, smashing the chakram to fragments.

A second later, double shots rang out as the armed guards dropped lifeless to the ground, one close enough to the edge of the cliff so that his lifeless body rolled over the edge. Looking down at the beach below, the warrior could see Gabrielle lowering her rifle and switching to her hand gun as she'd changed her focus to the men in the jeeps. The bard had not been joking about being a deadly shot.

Gabrielle returned fire on the men shooting at the group by the zodiac, wincing painfully as the armor plate covering her chest was hit. From her peripheral vision she saw an additional form go over the cliff in an elegant dive. Instantly recognizing the silhouette as Xena's she was puzzled as to why she was diving into the water. Setting aside questions she was in no position to get answers to at the moment, she focused her energy instead to the battle in front of her. The static in her earpiece popped then clarity "Boss, do you read? Over," came Vox's voice came clearly in her ear.

"Copy," Gabrielle said automatically, dropping another guard shooting from behind the armored door of a jeep.

"Their jammers have been knocked out, Glass came through. We've been boarded; fighting on deck. SP attacks in progress. Do you want reinforcements?" The engineer's voice was calm but the urgency was clear.

"Negative, only when the ship is secure…" her words were cut off by a scream to her left. In an effort to get Jennifer to safety, Elaine had been hit.

Gabrielle took several steps back, firing all the while to get near the wounded woman. "Got you covered boss," Sarah yelled, returning fire at the jeeps, ducking behind what little cover the deflating boat could provide and pulling another riot shield from the boat. Gabrielle briefly assessed the situation, which allowed her to realize it's gravity. Elaine was mortally wounded, bleeding profusely from her leg and lower abdomen and there wasn't anything she would be able to do to save her. A moment later Sarah was also hit, in the arm and without hesitation switched the gun to her left hand and kept firing.

"Vox, send over the reinforcements, Elaine has been hit," she said into her comm unit. "Sarah too."

"Roger," the engineer replied, and the emotion in that voice told her something else had gone very wrong. "What is it?" she asked, dropping another of the armed men.

"I've heard Bo was hurt, they think he's dead," the engineer said, desperate not to get choked up. "Something is happening in the water off the boat, there is a lot of screaming, there is still some fighting on deck, Michelle won't let us help."

"Hold your post," Gabrielle replied even though she knew her engineer absolutely would. "Keep me updated." With deadly aim, Gabrielle vented her hurt and anger on the men trying to kill her.

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Without hesitation, Xena dove off the cliff into the surf below following the bodies of Ares and Aphrodite. As soon as she hit the water she once again felt the unusual sensation of being in her element, a feeling she usually only had on horseback or in the midst of battle. Easily, she swam through the choppy water, avoiding the jagged rocks at the base of the outcrop while she searched for signs of either Olympian.
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There were dolphins in the area, she had called to assist in retrieving the immature Ambrosia that had been deposited on the cliff top by a willing seagull. She'd warned any sea life in the area willing to listen away from the battle. The creatures that fled were starting to return; those that didn't were stunned or perished in the blast making them easy prey for the more sentient of the ocean denizens.

She spotted Ares first, clearly wounded and struggling to swim. She swam past him, easily avoiding his grasp. Some distance beyond she spotted Aphrodite, who wasn't moving much at all. Wrapping her arm around the goddess' chest, she swam back to shore, signaling anyone willing to keep Ares in the water as long as possible. She also sent out a silent request for mature Ambrosia, hoping that some could be found in time. When the surf was shallow enough, Xena shifted the nearly unconscious goddess into her arms and carried her, walking as quickly on the wet sand as she could. She stopped near Gabrielle, the gunfire having ceased. Three men were on their knees with their hands interlaced on their heads, facing away from the bard- the rest of the men in the black uniforms were dead.

With measured, but urgent movements, Gabrielle worked over the prone body of Elaine. In spite of her best efforts, the young woman was going to bleed out before she could returned to the ship. In the distance she could hear the sound of the jet skis but she was almost positive it wouldn't help.

"Boss, are the hostages okay?" the injured woman struggled to ask.

"Yeah, Elaine," Gabrielle said soothingly. "You saved Jennifer. She's with Ed. She's okay, Sarah is okay too, took one in the arm but is giving a thumbs up. Take it easy, it's all good." Applying direct pressure made the executive officer scream in pain so she held the woman's hand instead sparing a glance to her left to see Aphrodite even badly wounded as she was, opening her eyes and trying to move closer. Sarah was quickly at the goddess' side, helping her get closer to the woman whose blood was staining the sand around them red. While Sarah was bleeding too; the chef had been shot twice in the vest and once in the arm but seemed unconcerned about her injury.

Leaning up Aphrodite looked at the dying woman, smiled her radiant grin, and gently picked up Elaine's other hand. Rich mocha skin contrasted against pale as placid blue eyes met with dark brown. "I've got you, love," she said softly to the dying woman. "there is nothing to be afraid of."

"I don't want to be cremated," Elaine pronounced, her voice a clear whisper. "I just want to be left to the sea like the old days."

"Ever the seafarer," Aphrodite said gently. "You can have whatever you want honey." The goddess maintained eye contact and squeezed the woman's hand.

Elaine's eyes went wide with wonder, "It doesn't hurt," she said, her voice clear, but soft. Aphrodite continued to smile, bringing the hand to her lips and kissing it gently. "It stopped hurting. I feel good, Gabrielle," she continued, "really good. I'm okay, it's all okay. Thank you…thank you for the adventure of a lifetime…"

Tears from the bard's eyes splashed down on Elaine's face but she didn't feel it. Her expression calm and relaxed, she was already dead.

Xena looked on helplessly at the scene in front of her. Aphrodite caught her eye and mouthed the word Argo and Xena looked fearfully at the rock outcrop. "Leave me with Gabrielle," she said. "You go, Gabrielle has this. If you hurry she'll be okay."

The bard looked up at the sound of her name having just tied a strip of cloth around the chef's arm to staunch the bleeding. "Argo?" she said, concern threading her voice.

"She's going to be okay," Aphrodite assured her, wincing in pain as the warrior ran down the beach back to the cliff.

Blake and Prisha arrived on jet skis just as an additional jeep pulled up on the sand near the others. "It's ours," Ed announced indicating the jeep, still pointing a gun at the three men who had surrendered.

"Go deal with that, please." Gabrielle asked her flight attendant gesturing at the kneeling men.

"There is another one alive on the cliff, over the arch," Aphrodite added. The big man nodded in understanding before striding towards the jeep to confer with the people from Transportation.

"What can I do?" Gabrielle asked, looking intently at the goddess. Without asking permission, she concentrated on the goddess and could feel just how frightened Aphrodite was. The pain nearly unbearable and Gabrielle knew she was getting a diluted sense of it. In her very long life, The Goddess of Love had never been hurt this badly.

"Go help Ed," Aphrodite said to Sarah who was about to argue.

One look from the bard made it clear not to. "Please take Blake and Prisha with you, thank you." Gabrielle added politely but also very much an order.

When it was just the two of them, Aphrodite moved her hand from her abdomen where she'd been holding it. A fragment of Xena's chakram about four inches long had easily sliced through her clothing and impaled her like so much shrapnel. There was a second piece, smaller than the first, in her thigh and a third one in her chest. There was also a slice across her upper bicep, her shirt cleanly sliced and exposed wound underneath. Given that her clothing was wet and her blood wasn't red, it would have been easy to overlook how badly she'd been hurt if you didn't know what to look for.

Instinctively, Gabrielle turned towards the zodiac which was now deflated, but would have an intact first aid kit. Only the sound of the goddess' voice kept her from rushing over to retrieve it.

"Listen to me very carefully Gabrielle," the goddess gritted around the pain. When green eyes once again were held by blue, Aphrodite continued. "I am not going to die so put that fear away. I'm hurt, that is all. Yes, badly hurt – but I'm not going to die. I know you're *listening* to me, so feel that. You need to get me in the water before you take out the shrapnel. My clothing, anything with my blood on it needs to be burned. I don't want my blood coming into contact with anyone else. Is that clear?"

Whether it was their connection or the ferocity with which the goddess spoke, Gabrielle wasn't sure, but the meaning was clear. Aphrodite had chosen to let the bard past her defenses, to move one small step closer to godhood. That was not a gift that she was willing to risk falling into anyone else's hands. That also meant she was not to use sterile gloves which went against everything she'd learned through centuries of medical training.

"You are also going to take care of Argo first when you get back to the ship," Aphrodite continued, struggling to stand up. Gabrielle was at her side. "Get me into the water and you can pull out the chakram pieces, but beyond that, you do nothing until everyone else is tended to, is that clear." Mutely the bard nodded. There was no

playfulness to her voice, none of the kind lyrical quality that she associated with the Goddess of Love. In fact, in this moment the fierce determination sounded much more like Athena than the goddess she considered her closest friend.

Leaning on Gabrielle the pair walked into the surf, just past where the waves were breaking. Immediately Aphrodite seemed to relax, her feet just touching the sand on the bottom. Gabrielle was treading water, unsure what she should do next. “Can I help you shoulder this pain?” Gabrielle felt the uncertainty as she asked the goddess. Aphrodite had never been in this position before, they were both equally unsure of what to do. “Give me some of the pain,” the bard said, this time not as a question. “I’ve got this.”

“Start with the big one,” Aphrodite urged through gritted teeth as she brought her hands to the bard’s shoulders. It was clear that she intended to keep Gabrielle’s head above water while the bard used her hands to extract the chakram piece. “Throw it onto the sand when it’s out,” the goddess urged, “you may need it later.” With a silent nod Gabrielle reached for Aphrodite, looking below the surface of the water at her abdomen. The bard could feel an emotional weight settle on her like the worst, most intense migraine ever. Immediately it conjured up memories of lobotomies and electroshock treatments. Focusing past the pain she found the curved piece of chakram and with a thumb and forefinger pinched on the inside curve, pulled with firm and consistent tension. Aphrodite cried out, a chilling sound that scared Gabrielle to her core, but she did not relent. The pain in her own head worsened, staying conscious by force of will alone. The goddess released a second cry and then a gasp as the chunk of metal came free. Aphrodite panted, and the pain behind Gabrielle’s eyes lessened ever so slightly. To the bard’s surprise the fragment was much larger than she expected, three inches easily had impaled in the goddess’ body. She brought it to the surface to throw it overhand to the sand and noted that there was no blood on its surface. “My blood dissolves in seawater,” the goddess explained.

“I guess this is karma for impaling me to my conference table,” Gabrielle replied, happy that Aphrodite smiled in return.

“Asshole,” Aphrodite replied but the tone made it clear that she was grateful.

“You ready to go again tiger?” Gabrielle asked, smiling past her own pain to convey a reassurance she didn’t completely feel. She reached for the metal embedded in the goddess’ chest next. The bard could almost feel a high-pitched whine in her inner ear as she reached for the fragment. On instinct, she moved forward and kissed Aphrodite, distracting her for the instant it took to wrench the shrapnel from her skin.

“Sneaky,” the goddess said with a pant, grateful for the distraction.

After inspecting the second fragment, not as large as the first and again, showing no signs of honey colored blood, she tossed it overhand to join it’s sibling on the sand.

“Last one,” Gabrielle assured her before taking a deep breath and diving under the surface of the water to inspect the goddess’ thigh. She broke the surface of the water and smoothed her hair away from her face, regarding Aphrodite seriously. “I think you need to float on your back,” she suggested. “This won’t be as bad as the first, but it won’t be as easy as the one I just did.”

Aphrodite, nodded, letting Gabrielle support her as she easily floated on the surface of the water. All of the feelings were there, at the forefront of the bard’s mind; the fear, the pain, the uncertainty. Gabrielle knew there was nothing she could do to negate those feelings and distracting the goddess a second time was not going to work. Instead

she thought about the closeness she felt for Aphrodite. How she valued her friendship, how she loved her and how she had returned the other half of her soul. Every positive thing she could articulate in her own mind about her connection to the goddess she thought about in the kind of three-dimensional detail that made her a bard among bards. All of that love and positivity she sent to the goddess in a single blast as she pulled the last bit of chakram free.

Aphrodite cried out in pain, but it wasn't the agonized wail from before. She wrapped her arms and legs around Gabrielle and cried. The bard held her stroking her back, telling her it was okay. She could feel the pain lessen, the fear dissipate; these were tears of relief. Gabrielle moved toward the shallow water, picking up Aphrodite in her arms. She waited until the goddess had stopped sobbing, regaining some measure of composure before walking to the shore and laying her gently next to what remained of the zodiac.

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Xena raced to the rock outcrop, climbing it as quickly as she could, searching for the pit bull. She found the dog two thirds of the way up whimpering and conscious, with one of her hind legs at an odd angle, clearly broken. She was bleeding from some deep cuts and scratches, but the broken bone appeared to be the worst of her injuries. Gently, she picked up the animal, fully expecting to be bit out of pain or fear but she was not. Argo simply yelped and whined. Before beginning her descent, she glanced over to the two men left on the rocky ledge. One was dead, the other still unconscious. The unconscious fighter could wait, Gabrielle's dog was more important.

Cradling Argo, keeping the broken leg as immobile as she could, she made her way down the cliff. She'd begun her walk back up the beach when someone approached, coming out of the water with the hammer of Hephaestus dangling from his wrist by the leather strap. While she'd never seen him in this form, she knew instantly who it was and that he was very, very angry.

"Creatures of the sea are not yours to command," he said bluntly and without greeting.

"Who's commanding?" Xena drawled in reply not slowing down, having neither the time nor interest to argue with the God of the Sea. "I asked nicely. Besides," she added with a hint of surprise, "I thought I'd killed you?"

Poseidon shrugged, not at all embarrassed. "And Hercules thought he killed Zeus and on and on. When someone is trying to kill you, it's not a bad idea to let them think you dead. You'd be surprised at how many of us resurfaced in that window between your death and…" he trailed off, uncomfortable.

"Gabrielle and the Anvil of Hephaestus, yes I know," Xena supplied. "We can discuss a list of who's who later," she added with a nod to the wounded dog.

"My nephew is out there, hurt," he shot back pointing to the area blow the arch, "with dolphins keeping him from coming ashore."

"Aphrodite is over there," Xena replied, icily, "*also* hurt and unlike your nephew, she is going to get our help."

Grey eyes bore into blue and Xena maintained her pace, walking as quickly as she dared to keep the dog as comfortable as possible.
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As they neared the group by the jet skis, Poseidon put his hand on Xena's shoulder to stop her out of earshot. The warrior was surprised at the gentle touch, clearly being communicated as a request as opposed to a command. She stopped to look at the God of the Sea, the person responsible for her renewed life.

"Gabrielle's people are not the ones to deal with Ares," he said urgently. "You've more than made your point with him. He's hurt but he isn't dead. You can't kill us. You think you can, but you can't, you never could. Your bard is going to want to try and contain him; that is not her job and if it takes fifty years or a hundred and fifty years, that kind of folly will backfire and have a corrosive effect on anyone in that kind of proximity to him, the two of you included. Either you let his men take him wherever he can convince them to go, or I have to take him. Child, he is a god. You might not like him, but you still have to respect him."

"I'll think about it," Xena replied with a curt nod then continued towards the others. She knew in her gut that Poseidon was right. There was no way they'd be able to keep a muzzle on Ares indefinitely. He was injured, for the time being at any rate, he'd think twice about getting involved in their affairs. When she reached the others they were in a tight cluster around Elaine's body. Aphrodite was leaning heavily on Gabrielle but looked a little better than when she'd brought her out of the water. The three prisoners were being watched by the newcomers from Gabrielle's company and she could see three men heading to the rock arch to retrieve the two bodies and the unconscious soldier with Blake and Prisha assisting.

Xena knelt in the sand cradling Argo, Gabrielle was immediately at her side, kissing the face of the whimpering dog.

"Awww sweet pea, what happened to you?" she said, her voice soothing and warm. "Your leg is broken, girl." She looked the dog over as much as she could in Xena's arms. After a quick triage of the people on the beach, she came to a decision. "Ed, you're taking Sarah back on the jet ski. Sarah, report to sick bay and anyone onboard the ship who is injured, I don't care if it's just a scratch, anyone who is injured have them meet there too. Ed, come back with the stretcher. Xena, you will take Aphrodite to the ship on the other jet ski; Aphrodite will tell you how to operate it." She held the goddess' eyes a moment longer to see if there would be an argument but there was only exhaustion. "Ed, when you come back, bring the other zodiac. We can transport Elaine and Argo." He nodded once in the affirmative and helped Sarah to the jet ski, getting her situated first before climbing on in front of her and taking off. Only now did she acknowledge Poseidon's presence. "What are you doing here?" she asked acidly. "You know, we could have used your help."

"Child, you had my help," he shot back. "Were it not for me and the forces I command, your ship would have been overwhelmed. Ares knows a floating fortress when he sees it. He suspects you've got something valuable onboard, I'm sure. Without me and the sharks you'd have had twice as many of Ares men onboard."

Gabrielle looked like she'd been stung. She averted her eyes. "I didn't know. I'm sorry. Thank you for your help. I didn't know you'd gotten my message."

He shrugged. "You have a persuasive lawyer. How are you?" he asked, looking at his niece.

"Don't worry about me," the goddess deflected. "Argo is in pain, Xena hand her to me, let me hold her until Ed gets back." Xena glanced at Gabrielle who nodded.

Carefully she transferred the large dog to the goddess' arms. The dog cried out in pain a couple of times then seemed to settle down comfortably. "Besides," the goddess continued, "I'm in better shape than he is. And I don't understand that, he just had Ambrosia." She looked down the beach at the silhouette of Ares crawling on his hands and knees out of the surf.

"Immature Ambrosia," Xena corrected her. "The stuff on the cliff wasn't mature. It was still mostly translucent, didn't have the same kick. I'm tracking down some of the real thing for you," she added. "You need to hold tight until it gets here."

Poseidon turned to look at Xena with an expression that was equal parts rage, respect, and confusion. "You are not the keeper of Ambrosia, Xena. I am."

The warrior shrugged indifferently, "I think we can argue that *you* made me your partner in that."

"We can fight this out later," Gabrielle cut in. "I need my people to go get Ares." She was about to signal the troops guarding the prisoners when Xena stopped her.

"We can't take Ares," she said.

"What do you mean we can't?" Gabrielle asked. "Look at him, he can't even stand up." Clear of the water, the form on the beach had collapsed on the sand and was still.

"What I mean is we have to let his men go, they can collect him and take him off somewhere where he can lick his wounds and get better," Xena knew that what she was saying was the right course of action, but she didn't feel much better about it than Gabrielle did.

"It's going to take him a long time to recover," Aphrodite added. "Sweetheart, you know Xena is right. You can't keep any of us captive. It just wouldn't work."

"Then what was the point?" Gabrielle demanded, exasperated and frustrated. Elaine's body was still warm, she feared for the worst back on *The Hippolyta*. She'd lost Susan, Shen might still be in danger.

Poseidon looked down at the bard with an expression one might consider fatherly. His grey blue eyes were empathetic, his expression sad but firm. "You know you can't eliminate war from the world Gabrielle," he said gently. "Anymore, then you can eliminate love. The best you can do is tip the scales in one direction or the other. It cost you, I don't deny it cost you- but you did tip the scales in the direction of love. Ares will recover, but it will take him time, which gives Aphrodite and the rest of you a head start. And I think he's learned to leave you and yours alone. Work against him how you see fit, make a better case for people to follow, keep fighting your war; but this piece has to stay on the game board. You can't take it off."

"Hey," Aphrodite said softly, gesturing for Gabrielle to come closer. It was clear that the effort to talk was taking its toll. "Love, you know he's right," she said quietly after swallowing with effort. "But that doesn't mean you can't scare the crap outta him."

The bard pet Argo's head considering her options, then nodded and stood, noting the hammer that Poseidon was still carrying. "I'm going to need that back," she said. While polite, it was clear that it was not a request that would tolerate refusal. He glanced at Xena who took a step to Gabrielle's side and stood, her back straight, at her full height; she was looking the god eye to eye. "Very well," he said, passing the hammer to the bard.

Xena and Gabrielle walked down the beach to where Ares lay. He had crawled onto the sand and pushed himself over so he was lying on his back. A large fragment of chakram extending from just below his collar bone. There was another piece sticking out of his abdomen. His blood was the color of burgundy wine, one might almost think it looked nearly human; it was a realization that sickened Gabrielle. “Nicely played ladies,” he said, the defeat in his voice evident.

Gabrielle stood over him, moving to block the sun so he could see her face clearly. She held the hammer by its leather strap directly over the metal protruding from his shoulder. There was no masking the fear on Ares’ face.

“If she lets go,” Xena said smoothly, “I bet there is still enough juice in that piece of chakram to end the three of us.

“You’d be killed too,” Ares sputtered.

“It’s been over two thousand years,” Gabrielle replied easily. “I’ve seen everything I want to see. Got Hamilton tickets and everything.”

“And me,” Xena added, “dead is no big deal. I was just there.”

“Don’t,” the God of War begged. “You guys are off limits, I swear.”

“Not just us,” Xena clarified. “You leave me, Gabrielle, her extended family, which is anyone who works for her including the…” the warrior searched for the word.

“Subsidiaries,” Gabrielle added helpfully.

“Right, subsidiaries,” Xena added. “You also leave Aphrodite alone and Poseidon,” she added for good measure. “Basically, anyone who has ever had occasion to say hello to us, you leave them alone.”

“Fine, fine,” he agreed waving his hand in surrender. “Xena, there is a part of me in you,” he said, wincing with pain. “You can’t deny it. You can only go for so long and not crave a good fight.”

The warrior nodded in agreement. “Oh, I’m going to get plenty of fighting. Don’t worry about that. Fighting you, Ares. We are going to use every tool we have at our disposal. We are going to make war on your whole infernal machine. You’ve always wanted the war to end all wars, you’re going to get it.”

“Yeah,” Gabrielle added, “it’s just that the war is against your fucked-up world view and all that represents, you repugnant asshole.”

“Do we have a deal?” Xena asked.

He didn’t immediately answer so Gabrielle loosened her grip letting the hammer fall several inches before tightening her grip on the strap to stop it. “Yes,” he shouted, then winced in pain.

“I think he will keep his word,” Xena said turning to Gabrielle.

“If he doesn’t, we still have the hammer and the chakram fragments.” While spoken to Xena, the warning was clearly for Ares benefit. Gabrielle leaned down, about to pull the chakram fragment from his shoulder then stopped herself. She looked up to Xena taking a step back from the god. “I think you should do that,” she said.

At first Xena didn’t understand. “Is it because I’m related to the three of them?”

“What are you talking about?” Ares asked, his voice pained and tight.

“Surely you knew I was dead?” Xena asked with a wink.

Ares looked uncertain, dark eyes darting from warrior to bard. “She got better. Again,” Gabrielle supplied helpfully.

“But this time I came back with the help of Aphrodite and Poseidon,” the warrior explained. “I think the essence of three gods is better than one. Espeically if the one is you.”

Gabrielle nodded. “You should wash the blood off in the water before we get back to the boat. And um, if any of his blood gets in your mouth,” she added, “you will have insight into where he is, how he’s feeling, basically his thoughts. And you will have the ability to hurt him directly. It’s a weird trip though.”

There was no mistaking the look of supreme rage on Ares face, although he was in no position to refute what Gabrielle had just said. The comment drew the warrior’s attention from the God of War. Something fell into place for Xena about Gabrielle’s connection with Aphrodite. Far from making her jealous, it reassured Xena that there was a deeper reason for their mutual attachment.

Using the same force one would use to snap the bolt of an imbedded arrow, Xena roughly yanked the chakram fragment from Ares shoulder which elicited a pained howl. She repeated the motion with the segment on his thigh and he grunted again. “We’re going to let your men go,” she added. “They’ll come get you and I’m sure you can take it from there.”

Ares nodded. “Ya know, Xena, I will keep my word. Leave you and the brat and her collection of misfits alone. But give me time, I’ll bounce back. There are billions of people in the world Xena, millions of warriors. You used to be special, one of a kind-ahhhhh”

His words transitioned to a pained scream as Gabrielle kicked him in the groin as hard as she could. A new look of wariness and fear crossed his agony-stricken face. “Fucking right, I can hurt you,” the bard said icily. “I could make your face hamburger with my bare hands right now. That was for Susan, Elaine, and Bohemian. I swear, you fucking creep, if you hurt any of my people again I will unite the rest of the Olympians and we will rip you worthless limb from worthless limb.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the warrior replied to Ares with a proud smirk. “You’ve found a zillion other Xenas to work with and I just need the one. This one.” she nodded her head indicating the bard. With azure blue eyes boring down into those of Ares, Xena brought her hand holding the bloody fragments of chakram to her face. With seductive slowness, and an erotic yet dangerous grin, she inserted her thumb into her mouth, rolling her eyes back in pleasure as it came out clean.

“Fucking bitch,” Ares growled, helpless to stop her.

Xena staggered back a step and Gabrielle was instantly at her side, keeping her upright and steady. A rage unlike anything she’d ever known coursed through her veins, the world for a moment turning red and vulnerable. She could feel the fear, passion, anger and hate of everything around her and how the orchestration of those emotions led to power. Not since her most ruthless days as a warlord had she been this far removed from empathy and compassion. Just as she felt the need to scream, to release the merest fraction of anger, the wave receded and she felt her own sense of self come to the forefront once more. “Now the two of us can kick your ass,” she said, her threat void of any embellishment or bravado.

They turned to go, walking back to the bard’s people. “I don’t know,” Gabrielle said, putting her arm around Xena’s waist, in part to support her for the first few unsteady

steps and in part because she couldn't keep her hands off of her. The God of War no longer of urgent concern, she continued "I still think you're special and one of a kind."

Chapter 18: Happily Ever After

Gabrielle studied Argo's x-rays with a critical eye. The decision to care for the living before tending to the dead was an easy call to make, but the crew to an individual, had insisted on the dog being treated first. Working efficiently, Gabrielle set the dog's hind leg and began to apply the cast the animal would need to wear for the next several weeks. Argo had been remarkably calm since her return to the ship leaving little doubt in the bard's mind who was responsible for that.

There was a soft knock at the sick bay door and Xena entered, the concern for the dog evident on her features. "How is she doing?"

"She's doing really well," Gabrielle replied. "When her cast is finished, I'll give her a few stitches and then I'll be on to my next patient. How is Shen? How is everyone?"

Gabrielle had only the briefest of moments to hug her godson upon return to the boat to tell him herself about the death of his friends Elaine and Bo and to reassure him that his injured friends would be okay, including Argo. Nicolai, who took the post closest to the secured hold had fought off several attackers and even though bleeding from several stab wounds, would not leave the boy's side.

"I've put Aphrodite in your cabin," Xena began. "She requested that."

"*Our* cabin," Gabrielle corrected her automatically.

The warrior grinned and continued. "Our cabin. She's in a lot of pain and exhausted but has asked to speak to everyone on the boat privately. Your cabin has more room for someone to sit and chat with her. I told her to rest but you can imagine how well she'd listen to me. Maybe if you suggested it?"

Gabrielle looked up from her ministrations on the dog to see if there was any other meaning behind the statement. Reassured there was not, she went back to her work. "I don't think she'd listen to me either," she replied. "She's grown attached to the crew, she's missed having a family. She's been adopted into the company family and no doubt wants to comfort us all with our grieving. Any idea when some Ambrosia might come our way? I think that's the only thing that's going to fix her. She will heal, but I'd like her completely healthy long before Ares is."

Xena nodded in agreement. "I know it's on its way. I think I may have to have some sort of discussion with Poseidon about that. At the moment, he is with the uninjured crew watching over the bodies of Elaine and Bo, he genuinely seems moved. And he does seem pleased with the name Ariel, so that's what everyone is calling him. Blake and Samantha have begun the work of cleaning up the blood and mess at various places on deck. Ed is coordinating with your other people in Mexico to transfer the bodies of Ares' men from the ship and in the water back to the beach. Pos- Ariel wasn't kidding about the sharks. Nine men died in the water before ever boarding your ship. Your people fought off twenty trained assassins. I think there was a thirtieth man, in the water. But I don't think there is anything left of him to recover."

Gabrielle nodded, stripping off her gloves and donning a new pair before suturing the dog where necessary. "Who is up next?"

"I think Ingrid's burns are the most pressing, because of the pain, but if she's spoken to Aphrodite…" the warrior shrugged. "She'll probably be as relaxed as Argo is. Sarah has a bullet wound in her arm, the bullet thingie needs to come out. Nicolai has three stab wounds, stitches are needed but nothing more. Prisha got hit in the head with the butt end of a gun, I think she's got a concussion. Jennifer is unhurt, just scared. Shen is sitting with her talking about the paper he's working on about ancient Roman history. I think he's got your gift of conversation."

Stepping back from her work Gabrielle gave Argo a final examination to check for any additional injuries and received a warm lick on her face for her effort. She kissed the dog's nose after administering a pain killer that would provide additional comfort for the next twelve hours. For now, her work was finished.

"How are *you*?" She asked looking up into the brilliant blue eyes that felt like home where ever she was.

Xena smiled down at her. Two months ago, she would have answered the question about her physical wellbeing whether or not she thought that's what the question was. "I'm good, Gabrielle. I feel for the loss of your friends, I'm worried about Aphrodite, but I'm also good. We gave War a nosebleed today. Not fatal, but anything that has Ares feeling insecure and unsure of himself can't be a bad thing for us."

"That's how he's feeling?" Gabrielle asked. "Insecure and unsure?"

Xena nodded after a moment's thought. "He's scared. That thing with the blood rattled him. Not what he was expecting. The obvious question is how you knew?"

Gabrielle knew she was blushing but also knew that Xena deserved to know. "Aphrodite," she said.

"I'd worked that much out for myself," Xena replied with a chuckle taking two steps towards the bard so she could wrap her arms around her. "I was hoping for a little more detail," she added with an affectionate squeeze.

Gabrielle wrapped her arms around Xena's waist resting her head against the warrior's breast listening for a familiar heartbeat. Again, she marveled at the long distant memories that resurfaced at the touch. If she closed her eyes she could almost hear the soft creak and distant scent of leather. "Before we got you back we were on the beach. Poseidon- I mean Ariel- needed to have Aphrodite cut her hand with the last remaining shard that she had of her seashell. She was attached to it in the same way Ares is to his dagger. Then she had to put several drops of her blood in your urn, and Ariel had to do the same. After Aphrodite cut herself, I wrapped her hand and…she um…offered me some of the blood."

"Did you know what would happen?" Xena murmured into the top of her head.

"I didn't," she answered. "I didn't even know the full extent of what…that… implied until Aphrodite told me shortly before the battle."

"What was it like?"

"It was amazing," Gabrielle replied. "But also, kind of scary. There was an intense feeling of love for everything, for everyone, but there was also this sense of responsibility. In the span of a second, I could see backwards and forwards in time, millions of years in each direction. For a brief moment I knew all there was to know about love and relating to people. Then everything faded. What about you?"

Xena shook her head slightly trying to keep the recent memory at arm's length. "It was rage, anger and hatred. Past conflict, future conflict the power that comes from

the manipulation of people's base instincts. There was this skewed belief that conflict brings out the best in people; that the best is always strength and ruthlessness. I think where you were was a much better place to be."

"So, it was your life before we met?" Gabrielle asked gently.

The warrior nodded against the soft crown of blond hair. "In essence, yeah." She released the bard and took a step back, gently stroking Gabrielle's cheek with the back of her knuckles. "You have more patients to see to," she said softly before leaning in for a kiss.

When they parted Gabrielle nodded and smiled. "It's almost like old times in that respect. Could you please take Argo to Aphrodite? The two of them can rest together. And send in Ingrid? When I finish with everyone here I will check on our goddess then call Bo's parents and tell them."

Xena nodded. "Anything else? Michelle was asking for orders."

Gabrielle considered her options before speaking. "Have Michelle contact the department heads. Have them fly to Mexico tomorrow, Ed can ferry them here in the helicopter or we can hire a boat, whichever. Bo and Elaine had some close friends in other departments, have Michelle include them. I guess that means we may need additional provisions from Cabo San Lucas. Sarah and Nicolai can decide how much extra food we will need and buy out a local flower shop I suppose. We want things nice onboard for the funeral.

"I need to know Bo's last wishes with respect to burial from Fiona as soon as possible. Elaine will be buried at sea here, in Mexico, but I'd like to know what Bo wanted before I speak to his mothers. We need to have an update from everyone tomorrow before I decide what to do next, but Shen's school can be contacted. He can go back next week. I think Ares isn't in any condition to come after him, wouldn't you agree?"

"I think Shen will be a grown man before Ares is remotely in any shape to come after him personally. I think he's going to still do what he's doing. Playing groups of people against each other to create conflict. But I don't think he'll be personally involved for awhile," Xena moved to pick up the large dog. She cradled the canine in her arms, Argo's square head contentedly resting against her shoulder, the animal was fast asleep. "I'll come check on you after I get Argo situated, unless Aphrodite decides I need to chat with her that is."

"I will start preparing the bodies for burial when I've seen to all the living." Xena nodded in agreement and understanding. The warrior was nearly out the door when Gabrielle stopped her. "Xena," she said. The warrior turned around. "Thank you,"

With a smile that reached her eyes Xena replied, "I love you too, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle blinked determined not to burst out crying in sick bay. Of course, she and Xena had expressed their love for each other over the years, frequently and in countless way. But Xena saying it first- that was a rarity. She had to admit, Aphrodite's contention of a 'new Xena' seemed to have merit.

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Gabrielle softly knocked at the door to her quarters. The injuries of her crew tended to, Aphrodite was the next patient on her rounds. Xena met her at the door and smiled warmly. "I'll leave you two alone," she said gently and departed.
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A chair had been pulled up next to the bed where the warrior had obviously been sitting, keeping the goddess company. Argo was curled next to Aphrodite's side sleeping soundly; large head on her uninjured thigh. There was a slim journal resting in the goddess' lap. "Hey beautiful," Aphrodite said weakly.

"Flirt," the bard replied with a chuckle. "What's that?" she asked with a nod to the book.

"I nicked it from dear brother. I'm fairly certain it's his notes about the other Olympians he's found," Aphrodite replied, her voice sounding exhausted. She passed the book to Gabrielle who looked at it curiously, flipping through a couple of pages.

"What language is this?" The bard asked.

Aphrodite shrugged, wincing at the effort. "I have no idea."

"But you know every language," Gabrielle began in protest.

"I know every language used to express love. This is my war-obsessed brother's own code. One that I hope your warrior can help me crack, but it will take some time." Weakly, Aphrodite smiled in response to the bard's confused expression. "Xena has insight now, moreso than even before. She can see enough into Ares' thoughts to crack this code, but not until I'm stronger and can support her in doing something like that. But we'll figure it out, hopefully before Ares realizes I have it." She leaned back, tired. It was obvious that the injuries she'd sustained and the exertion she'd expended after the battle had cost her.

Gabrielle put the book on the nightstand and reached out to push an errant strand of hair off of the goddess' forehead. "What can I do?" she asked gently.

"I want you to get me out of these wet clothes and tuck me in," Aphrodite asked with a small smile. "I'm not sure if all the blood got washed away or not."

"Ah huh," Gabrielle replied with a grin. "I know you just want me to take your clothes off."

Aphrodite chuckled and then winced, the levity proving painful. "Maybe," she allowed softly. Gabrielle gently moved her dog to the side before starting on the goddess' clothing. Before unbuttoning on the shirt, she bent down to tenderly kiss her forehead. She could feel the woman beneath her smile and relax. It occurred to Gabrielle that for someone who spent most of her time tending to the emotions and needs of others, it was indeed a special thing to be cared for in return. With tenderness Gabrielle undid the buttons on the shirt, easing Aphrodite's svelte body from the damp fabric. She removed her bra next before moving onto the trousers, then covered her for the time being with a quilt. To the bard's surprise while the wounds were open they were not actively bleeding. The area around each of the injuries was an angry red color with the skin taking on an unhealthy greayish hue. The goddess' honey colored blood filled the painful looking wounds adding to the inflamed and tender looking lacerations. Examination of the ripped clothing revealed no sign of the unusual 'blood' which clearly relieved the goddess.

"I'll burn the pants and shirt to be on the safe side. Do you think this is an allergic reaction?" Gabrielle asked, gently checking the temperature of the goddess' skin without touching the wound.

"I think so," Aphrodite agreed. "But honey, I'm not running a feaver- I can't. It just hurts like a fucking bitch and I'm worn out. This whole fucking day has me wrecked. I'm keeping my shit together for your family dear one, if I were on my own I'd be a

blubbering mess right now. That kind of sadness isn't going to help your crew grapple with their grief."

"You are an amazing creature," Gabrielle said honestly looking into Aphrodite's placid blue eyes noting that they were as pale and grey as she'd ever seen them. The goddess usual infectious sparkle was missing, and that emptiness was palpable. Gabrielle felt it like a weight. She smiled encouragingly before moving to the closet to get a sweatshirt and a pair of Xena's sweatpants.

"I want one of your t-shirts," Aphrodite called and Gabrielle put the sweatshirt back. "One of your really soft ones. And I don't intend to give it back."

"You're high maintenance when you don't feel well," the bard deadpanned, selecting a shirt she'd worn a couple of days ago, knowing that it was incredibly soft and still smelled of her which is what the goddess had requested without saying so.

"I'm worth it," Aphrodite replied assisting where she could to get into the dry clothing. Once dressed and situated under the covers, Gabrielle went to the bathroom and returned with a hot washcloth, towel and hairbrush. Gently she cleaned the goddess' face, hands and arms, wiping away the sand and salt, then brushed her hair.

"Hey! You almost look hot again," Gabrielle said playfully, admiring her work when she finished.

"Asshole," the goddess muttered, sinking back into the pillows propped against her back, the exertion from changing her clothes having taken a visible toll. "Has everyone been tended to?"

"I have to call Bo's moms next. He and Elaine are on ice for now. Elaine wants to be buried at sea. I need to get her ready. I can get Bo cleaned up and dressed, but need to know his wishes before going beyond that." Seeing an unasked question on the goddess' face she continued. "Their friends are watching over them. They aren't alone. I know that what's left is just an empty shell. But it's important for the crew to be there for them. I love them, but I'm tending to the living first."

"Your crew are guarding their memories of them," Aphrodite responded, patting a space in the bed next to her. Gabrielle climbed into bed next to the goddess who immediately snuggled in, resting her head against the bard's breast, holding her close. Gabrielle put her arms around Aphrodite remembering that it wasn't so long ago that the goddess had held her in a similar fashion when the weight of everything had just been too much. "Can you spare a couple of hours?" she asked softly, an unusual vulnerability in her voice.

It was obvious where the fear came from and it wasn't just the Aphrodite's injury. Gabrielle wasn't an Olympian with the most epic of boundary issues. Gabrielle had for the vast majority of her very long life conducted herself in a very ethical, conventional way. She was honest, loyal, loved fiercely and was for the most part monogamous. No, she and Aphrodite weren't lovers nor did she see that down the road any time soon. Xena was her heart- the other half of her soul, and Aphrodite of all people understood that, the kiss in the ocean not withstanding. But she realized that Xena would equally understand that she and the woman she held weren't ever going to be 'just friends' either. There was a murky, messy middle space with Aphrodite that felt surprisingly comfortable. She squeezed a little tighter, deciding that for another couple of hours Bo's mothers could believe that their son was still alive. She was treating the living first and Aphrodite needed this. "For you dear heart, anything."

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Xena made her way to the gym where the bodies of the two fallen crew members were temporarily resting. Cots had been brought in and the bodies laid out on ice. No one had brought in chairs, there wasn't room. People stood together in small groups comforting each other and watching over the deceased. Several were sharing fond remembrances, a couple of people were crying. At the warrior's entry, the attention turned to her with people asking for an update on Argo. Everyone had already visited with Aphrodite.

"Argo is resting comfortably with Aphrodite," she explained. "Gabrielle says she was able to set her leg without complication and she's got some stitches in a couple of places, but will be fine. Down the road she may be able to tell when it's going to rain." She surveyed the room looking for a familiar face. "Where is Shen?" she asked.

"Shen and Wolife are in the supply hold with Rebekah." Michelle replied. "The kid has been through so much. Wolfie told Shen that he needed a break from the sadness and wanted to teach him drums. Rebekah is singing."

"Shen and Bo were really tight," Steve added. "I mean Wolfie was really close to Bo too. He Bo and Vox were like the three musketeers. They did everything together."

Xena had no idea what a musketeer was but got the gist. "Everyone who is injured was ordered to get some sleep in their quarters- except for Prisha with the concussion. Steve is staying with her," Michelle continued.

"And Vox?"

Hatsuo shook his head sadly, "We're not sure. She's taking this really hard. Wants to be alone I think." Xena nodded, worried about the young woman. In a very short time she'd felt bound to the people that her bard drew near. This was Gabrielle's crew, but now it was also her crew. She felt protective of them, proud of them and a million other things. Her musings were cut short when she noticed Poseidon- Ariel standing behind Hatsuo and eyeing her intently. She nodded at the God of the Sea and he followed her out of the gym onto the expansive smooth deck.

"Are we going to have a problem?" he asked after following her to the railing, the expanse of the Pacific sparkling out before them as far as the eye could see.

"As long as you stay out of my way I see no problem," the warrior replied amiably.

"You were playing with fire. What if that Ambrosia hadn't been immature? What if the dolphin who got it for you had made a mistake? Can you even imagine what you'd have on your hands if Ares ate a large quantity of mature Ambrosia?" He sounded more fearful than angry, desperate to convey his concerns to the warrior.

"Imagine if Gabrielle had a Poseidon who stuck around to tell me this stuff instead of run off at the first mention of Ares," she replied as neutrally as she could. "I don't deny I have a lot to learn, but if you are going to abdicate your responsibility to teach me, then I'm not going to feel entirely responsible if on occasion I…" she searched for the right expression, "fuck it up."

He opened his mouth to speak then closed it, conceding the point. "I can't argue with that," he said. "So, you're willing to learn?"

Xena shrugged, "It appears I don't really have much choice in that. One more thing," she added. "Ares gets no Ambrosia, immature or otherwise. I now you worry
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about your nephew, I know you feel that you need to see him – to make sure he's okay. Don't. You know he will just manipulate you into getting ambrosia for him. We need him to heal as slowly as possible. You agree to that and I promise that there will only be one of us exerting dominion over the sea. I will learn from you, and will consult with you before acting in your domain."

The threat was subtle but there. Poseidon could maintain his place of superiority over the oceans with Xena as an ally, but it came with a price. His eyebrows raised thoughtfully. He was impressed. "Aphrodite might have been right about you returning a better version of yourself. You've made a strong case here."

"What can I say," the warrior deadpanned. "It seems I take after mother's side of the family." She was rewarded with a thoughtful chuckle and respectful nod as the god turned and headed back into the gym. Xena was about to follow him when something caught her eye by the railing on the main deck below. Short platinum blond locks stood out in contrast to the deep blue of the ocean behind her.

Xena cleared her throat as she descended the stairs not wanting to intrude on the young woman unawares. Her body language indicated she was crying and Xena knew her new friend well enough to know she'd want a moment for self-composure. The warrior approached the railing, resting her arms on the varnished wood and looked out at the expanse of blue. "I look out like this," she said, "and it's easy to pretend I'm back in my old life. The sea has changed the least of everything. Then I turn the other way and I hardly know which end is up."

Vox nodded, trying to casually wipe her eyes before speaking. "I bet you had to bury a lot of your friends back then."

"Well, we didn't bury them, but yes."

The engineer looked genuinely surprised. "What did you do?"

Xena shrugged, watching the delicate formation as a row of pelicans flew past listening to the rhythmic slap of the water against the ship's hull. "When I was a warlord I didn't do much of anything. People died in battle and I didn't really have friends. There were a few people I valued more than others, but in a battle you stay where you fall. When I moved on to the other part of my life, after I'd met Gabrielle, funerals would involve a pyre. You'd bathe your departed loved one, dress them, spend some time with them and then the body would be placed on a pyre that would be lit and you'd wait with them as they became ash."

"Elaine and Bo are going in the sea," Vox said quietly, her voice cracking.

"There was a period of time when I lived at sea, I had crew die on occasion. Usually they just got tossed overboard, but once in awhile, I would honor whomever died if they were valued. They'd be wrapped in a shroud, weighted down, returned to nature."

"Xena," Vox observed. "Whenever you talk about yourself as a warlord, you make yourself sound like a total dick."

The warrior nodded, a sad smile on her face. "I *was* a total dick," she replied. "You and Bo were, close?"

"His was the shoulder I cried on, literally cried on, when I realized that yeah, Gabrielle was gay but I still didn't have a chance," she looked at Xena sheepishly, embarrassed at her admission.

"Aphrodite isn't someone you can really compete with," the warrior replied sympathetically.

"Dude!" Vox corrected her emphatically. "I'm talking about you. Yeah, Aphrodite is gorgeous, kind, funny, she seems pretty smart- okay maybe I do hate her a little, but Gabrielle built this billion-dollar enterprise to keep your memory close and to find you. From that meeting in the conference room when she told us what was up with her. Like, who wouldn't sleep with the Goddess of Love, right? But you are the love she chased down thousands of years. If someone told me that kind of love existed, I'd have told them to fuck off." Her eyes began to well with tears as she looked at Xena. "You know what Bo said to me? He said that if that kind of love exists for Gabrielle, it probably exists for other people too and while I'm waiting for…how did she put it…the other half of my soul, I should hop into bed with as many goddesses as I can find." The memory was too much and she broke down crying, Xena instinctively reached out and wrapped her arms around the sobbing woman; the engineer holding onto her tightly. She didn't say anything and after several minutes Vox regained her composure and released the warrior. They stood close, Xena kept her arm wrapped around the young woman's shoulders as the engineer rolled up the sleeve of her shirt.

"See this tattoo?" she said indicating one of several tattoos on that arm. It was an ornate old fashioned anchor and quill on the inside of her forearm. "Wolfie, Bo and I all got these matching tattoos when I got clearance for ship duty. "Those guys were my *mates*, ya know? I want to do something for him, but I can't help bathe him or dress his dead body. I talked to Wolfie about it, we just can't…handle him like that."

Xena squeezed the engineers shoulders "Vox, you don't have to. That is how Gabrielle wants to care for them- everyone is different. There are a lot of ways to honor someone. I mean you still have some skin left, I don't know about Wolfgang, but a new tattoo seems in order. As for the funeral, Shen told me that you sing. You heard the song I sing a song to honor the dead. I could teach it to you."

Vox looked genuinely surprised. "You'd do that?"

Playfully, Xena gently pushed the younger woman away. "Of *course* I'd do that. We're mates, right?"

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As night descended Gabrielle looked thoughtfully at her computer screen before hitting the button to connect the call. She took a deep breath then clicked on the cursor. Her screen filled with the faces of Bohemian Van Lyle's mothers, Olivia and Tzu-Ching, the Canadian and Taiwanese women having adopted the boy as a baby. While she had met them on several occasions, most of Gabrielle's sense of them had come from their son who loved to tell stories about growing up while she and off duty crew would gather around the firepit after a barbecued meal. Gabrielle ached for the women. The worry was evident on their faces and Gabrielle did not prolong the inevitable.

"Miss Vincent," Oliva said, "Michelle said this was urgent, what's happened to Bo?"

"Olivia, Tzu-Ching I am so very sorry to deliver this news." Already Olivia, the older of the two was crying, Tzu-Ching ever stoic, held her, not breaking eye contact with Gabrielle. "Bo was killed today in Mexico. There was…a substantial fight. He was shot and killed." She did not elaborate further, waiting to gauge the
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response of the man's parents. Olivia sobbed openly into her wife's shoulder and tears streamed from Tzu-Ching's eyes but she did not cry. Bo had shared enough about his parent's history to know that the woman from Taiwan had witnessed a lot of violence as a child, including escaping from Viet Nam as a refugee after her parents had traveled there for work.

"I know much of what Bo did was secret, but you can't say more?" Tzu-Ching asked.

Out of the corner of her eye Gabrielle could see her own reflection, the small screen image in the corner of what Bo's parents saw. She looked exhausted and spent. In the background behind the two grieving women she saw the living room where they kept the computer that their only son had given them. The home was warm, cheery, eclectic and she knew it smelled of Moxa and incense; Bo's clothes always retaining the fragrance after he visited home. Olivia was a masseuse and Tzu-Ching and acupuncturist. They knew what their son did was at times dangerous, but they also were proud of the extensive humanitarian and charitable causes he worked towards. "We were fighting a private military force from America, white nationalists. Bo was on the ship, providing cover for myself and several others on land," the bard continued. "There were two snipers on a cliff, he shot one of them. He was shot in turn, and even though gravely wounded, managed to line up his next shot and get the other sniper before succumbing to his injury. It happened in less than a minute. He saved me and several others including Sarah."

Tzu-Ching nodded, clearly proud of her son, grateful that his sacrifice meant something. "Was anyone else hurt?" Olivia asked, blotting at her eyes with a tissue.

"Elaine was also shot and killed. She was on land with me. Several others were injured on the ship, but Bo and Elaine were the only fatalities. I have been in touch with Fiona. Bo did not specify any instructions in the event of…" Gabrielle blinked back tears, reaching for a tissue herself.

"Bo didn't think about death," Tzu-Ching said, her voice finally cracking. "It did not concern him. But I think he would like to join Elaine in whatever ritual…" the stoic woman finally broke down with a sob. Olivia straightened up, and holding Tzu-Ching she regarded Gabrielle.

"What are the funeral plans for Elaine?" she asked.

"I was with Elaine when she died," the bard replied. "She asked to be buried at sea as she is- no cremation. It isn't remotely legal but I'm not concerned about that, it was her request."

Against the larger woman's breast Gabrielle saw a crown of black hair nod. "That is fine with us," Olivia agreed. "I'm sorry we won't be able to make it…"

Gabrielle shook her head, rushing to reassure her, "Robyn Versoul will be there to pick you up with a car in the morning," Gabrielle explained. "I've instructed the flight crew to bring you to Mexico where the twins, I believe you've met Isra and Kismet will helicopter you to the ship. When you are onboard, we will then set sail out to sea for the funeral. You can either spend some time in Mexico, or return home that evening." Gabrielle smiled sadly heart breaking for the two women, "I would think that you will probably want to be at home."

Olivia and Tzu-Ching looked at each other, clearly surprised and overwhelmed by the offer. "That is very kind of you Miss..."

"It's just Susan, please," she said gently. They nodded and Gabrielle felt like she'd intruded enough on their grief. They needed to process this privately. "Again, please, let me say how very sorry I am for Bo's loss. He was a wonderful man and a valued member of Gabrielle Evan's team, and a dear friend of mine. Fiona will be in touch with you in the days to come to talk about his life-insurance and pension. You can let her know whenever you are ready to discuss it." They nodded, having no idea that they were going to inherit a small fortune, something that would make most lottery winners blush. Gabrielle knew it was no consolation for losing a loved one, but money being one of the few things she had in excess she felt it the least she could do. "I will see you tomorrow then," she concluded a after they acknowledged her statement bid farewell and ended the call.

With a heavy sigh, she pushed herself back from her desk and looked up to see Xena standing in the doorway. She had no idea how long the warrior had been watching her but didn't mind. "I never had to make that type of call as a warlord," she observed. "I'm sorry that you have to."

"I don't put my people in harm's way lightly for this very reason," she replied. "I've had to make a number of these calls over the years and vividly remember each and every one. They are all excruciating."

"We can end the day on a positive at least," Xena added. She entered the office which revealed Poseidon standing just behind the warrior. "We have Ambrosia," she said.

"That's fantastic!" the bard replied excitedly, standing up "let's go give it to her."

Poseidon shook his head "Not so fast, Gabrielle," he admonished gently. "We need to have a chat."

Confused, she nodded towards the couch in her study the bottle of scotch from her chat with Susan Yin remaining on the low table like a tombstone. Gabrielle considered it was a way to keep the memory of her god daughter close, when they'd had that one conversation that had changed so much for her. Xena and Poseidon took seats on the couch and Gabrielle settled herself in the wing backed chair next to them. The leather creaked slightly and she was reminded of her lover's armor from long ago. "What's up?" she asked, putting aside memory and nostalgia with effort.

"Pos- Ariel," Xena corrected herself when the God of the Sea shot her a glance, "needs to cover some things before we heal our ailing goddess."

From the pocket of his shirt Poseidon extracted a rather large, plump *leaf* and put it on the table between them. It was bright red in color with deep orange flecks. It was beautiful. To Gabrielle's estimation it was probably twice the size of what she'd consumed on the beach in Mexico. "There are going to be…ramifications from healing my niece and we need to address it and be prepared before we give this to her."

"What kind of ramifications?" Gabrielle asked. "She's in a great deal of pain, it seems to be getting worse and she's having an allergic reaction or something from the chakram."

"I know," Poseidon agreed. "Fortunately, she was stronger than Ares when she was injured or she'd be in worse shape now, completely unable to support you and your crew in their grief."

"Is Ares similarly wounded?" Xena asked thoughtfully.

"Yes and no," Poseidon replied. "Your chakram is a weapon of war. He isn't allergic to it. He is hurt, he isn't going to heal very fast, but if we didn't aid Aphrodite, he would heal faster than she would. Physical pain and battle injuries are more in his wheelhouse. Emotional pain and heartache are in Aphrodite's."

"Okay," Gabrielle replied apprehensively, "what is it we need to address. I think the sooner we get her to full strength, the better for everyone."

"The thing is Gabrielle," Poseidon said patiently, "she is going to be *more* than at full strength. She needs something this potent to combat the debris in her system. It is going to release a wave of her…primal energy I'd expect. I mean some of this is conjecture. To my knowledge, none of us have been injured this badly before. After my error in not thinking through the ramifications of destroying Hephaestus' Anvil, I am trying to consider things a bit more judiciously here." He looked at Gabrielle, no trace of humor in his features. "Unless you want to offload everyone on board, sail your ship miles out to sea for a couple of days then give her the Ambrosia or have an orgy on your ship if you give it to her now. I can shield Shen from her energy, I can't shield everyone on board." He looked at her sympathetically, "the beach."

He didn't need to say more, Gabrielle's cheeks flushed crimson as she was transported to that brief moment of being imbued with the goddess' power. "What can we do?" Xena asked, in part to provide Gabrielle a moment to compose herself.

Poseidon looked thoughtful for a moment, scratching the grey gotee on his chin distractedly. "My neice could select a few of your crew, two or three should suffice, maybe four. And if the two of you help then you should be able to bleed off enough of her initial…energy to let her get a grip on herself. Aphrodite is strong, she knows herself – two or three hours would suffice I would expect. Again, this is guesswork."

"Wait, wait, wait," Gabrielle protested. "I'm not going to send in *any* crew that don't have that type of relationship with Aphrodite to…"

"Are you volunteering?" he asked hopefully. "Because that would solve your problem. She can't hurt you." He glanced at Xena. "Either of you."

Gabrielle blushed again and there was no mistaking the unhappiness in Xena's expression. "No, I'm not volunteering," she replied hurriedly. "I just can't ask someone to…do that. I mean Michelle has a relationship with Aphrodite and I'm sure she'd…"

Poseidon rolled his eyes, clearly not enjoying the conversation anymore than Xena or Gabrielle were. "Are you asking me to do it?" he asked with a frown.

"No!" both bard and warrior replied in unison.

"Good, because I can't shield Shen and…"

"We get it," Gabrielle said uncomfortably.

Xena shook her head, inwardly shifting gears and trying to frame the proposition before them like a military campaign. "How can we help…dissipate whatever it is that needs dissipating?" she asked.

Poseidon looked from warrior to bard with the expression worn my many single fathers when they have to discuss the facts of life with their pre-teen daughters. He took a deep breath and spoke as patiently and dispassionately as he could. "My

niece is the goddess of love. She's going to be overcome with that kind of energy. You," he said looking at Xena, "have the essence of three gods coursing through your veins. It is muted, not as clear, precise or strong a connection as your bard has, but I think should be enough that Aphrodite can channel some of her…ardor…through the two of you so it doesn't blast whomever she is with at full force. You two are the only two people besides myself onboard that she can't hurt."

Xena chuckled and Gabrielle looked at her questioningly, failing to see the humor in their predicament. "He's asking us to fuck thereby bleeding off some of Aphrodite's energy while she's fucking Michelle so she won't hurt your captain."

Both Poseidon and Gabrielle stared at Xena. Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak but then closed it.

"And I thought you were the one with the gift for descriptive language," he commented to the bard.

"Yes, well…um…that does seem to be what you're suggesting," she replied.

"Indeed," he agreed. "You have a connection to Aphrodite, and you have a connection to your warrior. Send your crew below decks- separately to their quarters or whatever. Have your Russian keep guard over his fallen comrades. I will watch a movie in the den with Shen. That's close enough that I can shield Shen and Nicolai, everyone else might think they're having a weird fantasy or two. Nothing they would act on." He chuckled to himself, "what is your expression? You're taking one for the team?"

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Gabrielle knocked on her stateroom door, this time answered by Michelle. She stood casually holding the Ambrosia behind her back. It was an unspoken agreement between those on the ship who knew of Ambrosia and what it could do not to mention it to anyone who didn't already know. It was an obvious no-brainer. "I need a word with the goddess," Gabrielle said with a smile.

"Is everything okay?" the captain asked worried. "Ariel was just here and he took Argo. Said they were going to watch a movie with Shen."

"Everything is okay," Gabrielle assured the brunette. "We've got a handle on healing Aphrodite, and it may have some fallout – sexual fallout – and we don't want anyone affected by that inappropriately."

Michelle nodded uncertainly and joined Xena in the hallway. "Let's go into the library," Xena suggested. "You can probably go back in there in a minute or two."

"Hey gorgeous," Gabrielle said as she made her way to the bed, after closing the door behind her. She kept the ambrosia out of sight for the moment, concealed in her hand.

"Flirt," Aphrodite said weakly. "You smell nice," she added absently.

"About that, I have ambrosia, but you need to hear me out before you can have it," Gabrielle did her best to strike to tone between firm and caring as she opened her hand. Aphrodite's eyes lit with hunger, but it was clear that the goddess was too weak to take it from the bard.

"I'm listening," she said, her eyes fixated on the exotic seaweed.

"When you eat this, I am going to share your consciousness and Xena and I are going to…er…help you bleed off some of your energy if need be." The goddesses' eyes brightened and Gabrielle shook her head. "No, hon. Not a
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threesome." The pout she got in return was adorable so she added "give us a few decades to get reacquainted, then we'll talk, okay?"

"Fair enough," she agreed sullenly. "How does this work?"

"I don't know," Gabrielle admitted. "I think you just have the ambrosia, we get Michelle back in here and…er…ah…"

"Got it sweet pea," Aphrodite said extending her hand. Gabrielle handed it to her and the goddess consumed the plant with a zeal that was most undignified. There was almost an animalistic urgency that surprised the bard. Immediately a warm ivory glow radiated from the goddess' skin and Gabrielle was unprepared for the magnitude of the, for lack of a better word, blast of Aphrodisiac that hit her. Similar to the goddess' reaction to her shell but with more energy and intensity, Gabrielle was overcome by an ardor the strength of which stunned her. In a second, she was on Aphrodite, kissing her with a passionate abandon. The goddess returned the onslaught for a number of long glorious minutes reveling in the feeling returning to the apex of her power, rejuvenated and renewed. Tongues moving against each other, their fingers threaded through each other's short blond hair, it was as if time and space stopped to relive a moment from the not so distant past. As she gained control of the rush she regained her sense of self restraint and gently, reluctantly pushed Gabrielle away from her after one last lingering kiss.

Confused and panting it took a moment for the bard to regain her composure. She looked sheepishly at Aphrodite, clearly embarrassed. "I…"

"My bad," the goddess said reassuringly. She took a breath. A deep, sexy, alluring breath and Gabrielle leaned forward again. "I think you need to…"

"Yes," Gabrielle said with discipline. "Xena and I need to…"

Aphrodite winked playfully, "I love you sweet pea, and thank you." She lifted the t-shirt she was wearing revealing thin white scars where her gaping wounds had been moments earlier.

Gabrielle nodded approvingly, feeling her head start to swim with lust once again, the heady energy in the room palpable. "I love you too, Aphrodite. I'll send Michelle in," she said. "If you need… anything…"

"Right side, bottom drawer," she replied with a sensual smile. "I remember, love. And I'll have everything cleaned up before you come back. "Good thing we aren't the jealous type."

Gabrielle winked before taking her leave and returning to the library. It was almost comical, Xena stood on one side of the library and Michelle on the other neither woman looking at the other. Both women looked beyond relieved when Gabrielle entered to serve as chaperone. "The goddess will see you now," she said to the captain with a soft chuckle. "Don't say I didn't warn you." Michelle nodded to Xena and Gabrielle then hurried into the cabin, shutting the door behind her.

It took only a second for Michelle to realize she was in over her head the moment the door closed. The room was warm, softly lit and the air nearly crackled with electric tension. In a graceful, fluid motion Aphrodite rose from the bed and stripped the soft t-shirt over her head. Ivory skin shimmered with perfectly proportioned breasts swaying as she moved, nipples erect. In four steps she was at the door, softly glowing blue eyes holding brown. A moment later and Aphrodite had covered her lips and she was lost. Strong, confident hands threaded through her

brunette hair and she surrendered completely to the lips moving against her and the soft tongue demanding entry into her mouth. The kiss was electric and sent a charge through her nervous system. Shoved with some force against the closed door, she brought her hand to the back of the goddess' head, the other caressing the skin of her cheek she was startled at how otherworldly it felt. The blond tresses of Aphrodite's short hair felt more like warm water to Michelle's fingertips and her skin was impossibly warm and soft. She could feel the energy of arousal wafting over her, penetrating her cells and molecules and knew this experience would be unlike any other.

"I feel like I should ask for a safe-word," she said, when Aphrodite finally broke the kiss so she could breathe. She was smiling, a radiant grin that said she could not be happier to be standing next to this door, in this cabin with this goddess.

"Darling," Aphrodite purred softly, her lips brushing against Michelle's. "I am the only person on earth with whom you will never need a safe word."

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Gabrielle had barely taken a step past Xena in the library when she felt the connection between her and the goddess open. Like sinking into a warm tub, she felt the lust rise in her senses; ravenous with need she turned to Xena who looked positively delicious. There was no concern about trivial mortal morays like privacy. The mundane details had been tended to and she didn't need to concern herself with anything but satiating her own need. She pushed Xena against the door and kissed her ferociously her hands making quick work of the buttons on the warrior's shirt. While she couldn't see exactly what was happening on the other side of the door, Gabrielle could feel it. She could feel Aphrodite's confidence, mastery, and exaltation in her domain. This is where she exuded a facility like no other and for the moment, the bard from Potidaea would share that with her, siphoning off some of the intensity for the safety of the mortal woman pinned to the other side of the door. Her tongue move against Xena's as she reveled in the warm wetness of her mouth.

Xena felt the impact on the other side of the door at the same moment that Gabrielle pushed her. The awareness that Michelle was essentially pressed against her back, separated only by a couple inches of polished wood was inescapable. She enjoyed Gabrielle's onslaught, returning the kiss with enthusiasm and heard the gasp of pleasure from inside cabin. The juxtaposition of anonymity and lack thereof was a heady combination.

Tossing her shirt on the floor, Gabrielle had her bra undone in an instant and lunged back at the warrior with a series of kisses down Xena's throat and across her collarbones. Releasing a low groan in appreciation, Xena stretched out her arms, bracing herself against the door frame as her lover found a breast, skilled hands undoing the button and zipper of her pants.

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Michelle heard Xena's groan on the other side of the door and smiled. Moments earlier both captain and warrior had surprised themselves and each other by engaging in a passionate kiss, seemingly for no reason. Both tall, strong, muscular women they'd battled for dominance in the lust fueled moment before both

sheepishly coming to their senses being embarrassed and moving away to opposite sides of the library. It was clear to Michelle now that all of this had something to do with the goddess' recovery. While she had no idea how Gabrielle had healed the impossibly beautiful woman or even what the nature of her injuries were in the first place, the captain of *The Hippolyta* was certain she was about to be ruined for any other lover, and she was absolutely fine with that. There was something additionally erotic about being pressed against the door, nearly feeling the heat of the woman on the other side penetrating through. There was little doubt in the captain's mind that Aphrodite could read that added excitement and planned to use it to her full advantage.

"Don't tell me I'm going to have to compete for your attention?" she murmured, her tongue trailing down Michelle's throat as she leisurely undid the buttons of her shirt.

"Oh god no!," she protested, her hands drifting over the planes of the goddess' back. "You are amazing and…" she hesitated for the briefest of moments and Aphrodite stopped what she was doing. The goddess rested her hands on the plane of the door on either side of Michelle's face.

"Yes?" she asked sweetly, her face inches from the captain's. Her face relaxed and perfect, blue eyes shimmering with desire in this moment Aphrodite was every bit The Goddess of Love. Michelle leaned forward to kiss her, and was rewarded with an enthusiastic response, but the goddess didn't move her hands. Michelle tried touching her, exploring her back, moving her hands to the front, cupping a perfectly proportioned breast, feeling the nipple go taught in her fingers. Aphrodite smiled, clearly enjoying the attention but again didn't move. "The rules of this game are simple hon. You try and hide anything from me that is better said out loud…" she needn't continue. It was clear to the captain that her privacy would be respected but not where the only point in silence was fear or insecurity of saying something she wanted to say. She could trust that the woman churning up her insides in the best possible way would know the difference.

"I was going to say that you smell fantastic, but I can't describe it. It's beautiful but indescribable…" She was rewarded by the goddess easing the shirt off of her, the bra following a second later. As Aphrodite pressed forward her breasts resting against the captain's, both women naked from the waist up she whispered into the brunette's ear.

"Gabrielle says I smell like tropical moonlight, but she's a bard and words are her thing." She felt the other woman stiffen ever so slightly and she nipped at a grateful neck, sliding one hand behind Michelle's head and sliding the other one down the front of her pants. "No love," she murmured. "I'm not thinking about her, I'm thinking about you." Now it was the captain's turn to moan out loud as Aphrodite's fingers found where she was hot and wet. "I would assume if you can hear Xena," she said with a sultry chuckle, "Xena can hear you too." Michelle groaned and again, panting in frustrated and disappointment as the goddess withdrew her hand, tasting her fingers then smiling.

While Aphrodite had not been entirely honest with the captain she felt that in her position some discretion was warranted. She could feel Gabrielle in tandem with her taking some of the surge she was riding and funneling it towards Xena. So

clearly, the bard was in her thoughts, not that Aphrodite couldn't focus on a dozen lovers all at once. She well knew that everything she was doing to the captain the bard was doing to her warrior and their shared connection proved exciting in that respect as well. Aphrodite was grateful for the three women she felt very connected to. Unlike the other members of Gabrielle's crew, the women in question had all participated in various forms of group sex before. There was a maturity in them all knowing their own sexual identity and being able to express their needs. Aphrodite saw value in all levels of experience, in fact, found the most awkward of encounters incredibly endearing and sweet but that wasn't what she needed in this moment. She needed to gather in experienced energy and send it back out to psyches that would not be paralyzed with fear and insecurity at its intensity.

Taking a step back from the captain, Aphrodite pushed the sweatpants past her hips and stepped out of them gracefully. She grinned noting the brunette unconsciously licking her lips, the pupils of her warm brown eyes dilating noticeably. "I think you're overdressed," she said. Without hesitation, Michelle grasped the sides of her pants, only to be stopped by a patient shake of the goddess' head. "No love," she said. "I want to do that." With a hand at the front of the captain's pants and one at the back she smoothly pulled them down.

"You seem like you've done this before," Michelle commented as she stepped from the garment.

Aphrodite chuckled, genuinely amused. "Once or twice, over the years," she replied with a lyrical laugh now leaning her naked body against that of the captain, pressing her back against the door once more. "Hold on," she murmured before moving in for a kiss once more. To Michelle's estimation it must have been what dancing with Grace Kelly would be like, or acting in a scene with Meryl Streep or discussing the nature of the universe with Stephen Hawking; to engage with someone who so completely knows what they're doing that it leaves you spellbound and breathless. There was an intensity and clarity to her feelings that she'd never felt before. The rush was there, the butterflies in her stomach, the quickening of her pulse, the sighs of bliss. She could not recall a time when she'd felt so in tune with her own lust. Aphrodite kissed her with unhurried intensity fully aware that it was driving the woman against her mad with desire. She shifted a little, trailing light kisses down the brunette's throat, moving the captain's hands to either side of the door jam. She continued downward lightly touching one of the captain's breasts teasing the nipple erect with her hand, using her lips and teeth on the other.

"Yes," Michelle gasped as she felt a thud against the door, clearly made from the warrior throwing her head backwards. "Yes, keep going," she panted again as the goddess continued her progress downward.

"Gabrielle, please!" she heard the muffled groan from behind and was very much aware that what was happening to her was also happening mere inches away from her. She briefly worried that the sounds of lovemaking so close and if it might distract her but then Aphrodite reached her center and the whole world vanished. Almost as if the room dissolved around her and she were surrounded by sensual light and mist. She shifted her legs, giving the goddess better access and gazed down the length of tan her torso into blue eyes of the woman kneeling in front of her. Eyes that were watching her intently with desire and mischief. Without breaking eye contact

The Goddess of Love had covered her cleft with her mouth and licked in an unhurried fashion giving a wink when her pleasured gasps became audible groans. She threw her head back again without a second thought to the 'thud' that sounded.

Temperature rising, pulse quickening, Michelle felt as though her entire being were melting; turning to liquid fire, willingly dissolving to essence to be consumed by the goddess kneeling in front of her. She watched transfixed as Aphrodite moved against her, feasting as she steadied the captain with warm hands against the brunette's thighs. When Michelle began to rock her hips back and forth, finding a counterpoint to the goddess' rhythm, Aphrodite moved one hand, easily sliding a couple of fingers into the standing woman and with her other hand reached out to press her right palm against the door, to meet Gabrielle's hand on the other side.

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Gabrielle moved against Xena with practiced ease. While their time in the bathtub might have been about rediscovery the memories had come flooding back and she well remembered what her warrior liked and was happy to give it to her. With strong arms, Xena braced herself against the door jam, her back pressing against the unyielding wooden surface of the door in order to push her hips forward to keep the bard's mouth at the perfect angle. Gabrielle could feel the desire and passion flowing from her cabin which only served to compound the love she already felt for Xena. While she wanted nothing more than to give her warrior release, she knew that she needed to hold off as long as she dared, the act of lovemaking itself being what was bleeding off the goddess' energy not the climax. Easily she moved three slick fingers in and out of her lover as she concentrated the movements of her mouth at the top of the cleft. Reaching forward with her right hand she expected to brace it against the door, finding Aphrodite's soft, strong hand instead, her skin warm with power as her pulse hammered out a steady rhythm. They interlaced their fingers and she felt Aphrodite's chi flow into her carrying with it a knowledge and understanding far beyond the bard's two thousand years. She did not see the goddess, only felt her as she kept her attention focused on Xena, green eyes gazing up into blue watching as Xena's eyes became heavy lidded with pleasure, her moans and pants musical in their beauty.

In tandem Michelle and Xena reached a hand forward from the door to the head of their respected lovers, for both an encouraging and pleading gesture. The two women on their knees gently withdrew their fingers from their lover, using that free hand to grasp the back of a thigh and hold them close as they drove their partners to climax. Modesty had no place as the audible gasps became pants, and the panting gave way to moaning the moans to pleading.

"Gabrielle… please… don't stop," Xena begged as her hips bucked of their own accord.

"Oh my god, oh my god…" Michelle gasped repeatedly as she ground herself against the goddess' willing mouth and tongue.

The two brunettes climaxed together their cries of release ringing out simultaneously in the private quarters. Aphrodite stilled her movement, allowing the pleasurable contractions to rocket through the captain's body and released the bard's
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hand. With graceful movements she stood and kissed Michelle hard, her arousal slicked skin sliding against that of the other woman.

"Fucking amazing," Michelle husked when she was given a moment to breathe.

"Lover, we're just getting started," Aphrodite murmured before taking her hand and leading her to the bed.

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Gabrielle released Xena, absently wiping slickness from her chin and stood up giving the warrior a chance to see her face more clearly. One glance at the blazing green eyes and Xena knew that this was not entirely *her* Gabrielle. The warrior had to admit that she had been distracted; consumed by her own sense of pleasure, aroused by what her lover had been doing to her body and the sound of sex from just behind the door. Her mind had been far too occupied to fully appreciate the change in her bard's expression and demeanor. There was a hunger and worldliness there that was new and if she hadn't understood the source, she would have been thrown.

"You are amazing," the warrior husked, drawing the shorter woman in for a kiss, her passion ignited anew at tasting herself on the bard's lips. Gabrielle returned the kiss with vigor, stepping away from Xena only for a moment to pull the t-shirt she'd been wearing over her head, tossing it to the floor, her bra following an instant later. She kissed Xena and could feel another onslaught of passion building from the cabin behind.

"Xena, I think we have about two minutes to get to the guest cabin before I lose it again," she said letting her hands roam over the statuesque body in front of her. "Unless you want to keep listening…"

The warrior chuckled as she allowed Gabrielle to lead her down the short hallway to the guest quarters, "I won't lie, that was great but I'm all for some privacy."

Inside the guest room with the unmade bed and clothes strewn everywhere Gabrielle pushed Xena towards the bed. "Not until I get your pants off," the warrior playfully protested. Gabrielle brought her hands to her hips but was stopped by her lover. "Not so fast. Come here," Xena demanded and Gabrielle beamed. Her smile was sultry as she stepped forward. Standing between the warrior's legs as Xena sat on the edge of the bed. She touched the soft brown tresses and lightly stroked the warrior's face.

"Do you feel her too?" she asked, lightly tracing Xena's mouth with the gentle tip of her finger.

"A bit," the warrior replied with a small smile. "But I'd expect not to the degree that you do."

"Describe it," she asked as strong hands slid around her waist, undoing her pants and easing them over her hips she could step out of them.

"It's like everything is making me think of sex. Anything potentially erotic is magnified; the scent of the sea air, the sway of the ship, the way I taste on your lips, hearing Michelle pant and groan through the door. Arousal is everywhere, everything is an Aphrodisiac. Is Aphrodite there, in your head?"
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"Not exactly," Gabrielle replied throwing her head back blissfully as she moved one of Xena's hands between her legs. "I can feel this…power. I know what you want, I sure as fuck know what I want, I know exactly what to do, how to do it and it's like even though Aphrodite and I are having this nearly identical experience together, it isn't with each other. *Obviously*," she groaned when Xena pushed two fingers inside.

"But you're watching her?" Xena pressed as she slowly, stroked with her hand. She enjoyed watching Gabrielle writhe and move against her, delighting in keeping her rhythm just out of synch.

Gabrielle didn't mind. In fact, the last thing she wanted was for the ride to be over too soon. No, the slow build keeping the fire warm but not explosive was exactly what she was hoping for in this moment. "Xena, right now, at the forefront of my memory is every orgasm we've ever shared. Every position, every setting, from my clumsy first attempts to the torrid trysts in hot springs, and waterfalls to the angry make up sex to the comical getting off while not jostling sprained limbs or broken ribs. Keeping quiet among the Amazons, not waking Joxer, all of those barns and inns and of course every fantastic perfect moment of our ability to express our love for each other. Aphrodite is here, at the periphery of my consciousness, but she's far too occupied with what she's doing with Michelle, and I'm far too occupied with you. It's like we're sharing the occasional high-five behind our backs, but she's not exactly part of this."

"Mm hum," Xena replied with an arched eyebrow as the bard pushed her backwards, urging her to scoot up the bed. "And this isn't exactly what she and Michelle are doing right now?" she asked wryly.

"How can you tell?" Gabrielle asked curiously, as Xena positioned herself in the middle of the bed.

"Because your eyes are glowing," Xena replied with a chuckle. "It makes sense to be…in synch with her, but the eyes that's a solid giveaway."

Undulating her hips back and forth at the warrior's waist Gabrielle smiled down enjoying that Xena was turned on by what she was doing. She shrugged, "fortunately we both have similar likes."

Xena reached forward with her hands, resting one at the bard's hip to steady her as she moved and with the other reached forward rubbing her thumb through the trimmed hair of Gabrielle's pubic area. "Is this part of that?" The bard shook her head looking down at Xena's similarly trimmed hair. Now it was the warrior's turn to shrug. "I saw you in the shower and saw the razor and didn't know if it was a cultural thing or what."

"I like to fit in with whatever idiosyncratic customs prevail where ever I'm living." Deliberately she moved, slowly easing her way up Xena's body.

"You looking for another orgasm to add to that collection?" Xena asked dryly.

With a deceptively sweet smile Gabrielle leaned close so her face was right next to Xena's, her lips brushing against those of her lover. "Xena, I want you to drive me crazy with that perfect mouth of yours. I want you to make me feel so good I lose my fucking mind and when you're sure I can't take another second of it, I want you to make me come so hard you nearly drown." Blue eyes flared with passion, a wicked grin spreading across her to soon to be covered face.

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"Hey!" Michelle protested as Aphrodite leaned away from her, rising from her face and reaching to the bedside table.

"Just a minute, honey," the goddess reassured her, reaching to the bottom drawer and rummaging inside, putting a few items on the bed. "I promise you get to go back to what you were doing, it was delightful."

Curious, Michelle rolled over, surprised to see a bottle of lube, several dildos and a vibrator on the bed. Blushing furiously, she rolled back, forcing her eyes shut and grimacing. "You know, until now I'd forgotten that this was my bosses' bedroom and those are my bosses'…things."

Aphrodite frowned slightly, not foreseeing this complication. "The boss thing, that's the sticking point for you, not that…"

"You've…er…enjoyed each other? No. I'm not the jealous type. But she's my…" her words were stopped by a gentle finger on her lips.

"If you want me to I can…fix that for you, make it not bother you, but as a rule I really try not to tweak the minds of people I genuinely want to get to know." Aphrodite voice was kind, patient, in stark contrast to her eyes which conveyed hunger and her body which was thrumming with readiness. She straddled the captain's hips and lightly traced her fingers over warm, receptive skin, thinking as she playfully teased the woman's breasts beneath her.

"I can deal, you don't need to mess with my head," the captain assured her. "By all means, keep messing with my body – but I'll handle the head stuff."

Aphrodite smiled. "I can promise you this," she said, "you aren't just an employee any longer. From today on you're going to be more family to Gabrielle than the rest of the crew which you know very well she considers family, albeit with some strong boundaries firmly in place." She took a deep breath and a shimmer rippled over her, from her head moving down her body. "No matter what, we're spending the next several hours together. I need it too badly not to. But after that, if you want to keep your old life you can have it, no hard feelings. If you decide you're up for an adventure, you need to think of Gabrielle, Xena and Myself – differently. You will need to believe yourself as one of us. And…" Aphrodite stopped herself, not wanting to ruin the surprise.

"Group sex?" Michelle asked dryly.

The goddess winked, "I always gravitate to the smart ones. Not for awhile love, they need to do their 'romance get reacquainted' thing first. You take your time and think about it, no hurry in letting me know. But there is something pressing you will need to hurry back to," she purred as she repositioned herself, straddling the captain.

"I don't know why you bothered with lube?" Michelle asked as she eased her hand's over Aphrodite's thighs, "you certainly don't need it."

A delighted laugh filled the cabin. "Like that's for me."

Settling herself once more over the captain she brushed several brown curls from Michelle's forehead and returned the brunette's smile. The captain opened her mouth and reaching forward recreated the cadence and patterns from before the interruption. She lapped skillfully with her tongue delighting in the taste of the
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woman moving against her. As before she felt the room melt away, riding the wave of Aphrodite's building passion. She was warm, electric, every inch of her humming with pleasure, as she watched the tableau above her, the bliss on the goddess' face, infectious. Casually leaning back, Aphrodite reached behind touching her lover in time with her own movements. Impressed at the captain's concentration she rewarded her by reaching forward, picking up a dildo and put it to good use. If the captain had been able to see, she'd have been fascinated at the goddess' flexibility and dexterity. As it was however she could not see past the lithe body undulating above her, her own pleasure demanding equal attention. Slippery friction created heat that cascaded and intensified between the pair as they each concentrated on fulfilling the desires of the other.

Out of habit Michelle signaled the goddess with a squeeze to her thigh that she was at the exact right place, realizing a heartbeat later that obviously Aphrodite already knew that. Since their first kiss the goddess had done nothing but what the brunette craved at any given moment. Aphrodite was all too happy to provide verbal encouragement however. "That is exactly right, love. Right there," she said as she moved back and forth, the muscles of her legs, waist and torso contracting and releasing with practiced ease, pressing herself more firmly still onto her lover's mouth. When she brought her free hand to her own breast, pinching the nipple playfully, Michelle was pushed over the edge, another powerful climax cascading through her body.

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Gabrielle panted almost regretting that the instructions she had given Xena were so specific. Working wonders with her mouth alone the bard felt her warrior everywhere. For long moments she was deep inside of her, making her legs tremble and turn to liquid, moments later would lightly tease the bundle of nerves at the top of her cleft. When she came too close to the edge she would back off stroking the outside edges before beginning the dance again with variations. They continued the game for long minutes until Xena could feel the tremors begin in the bard's thighs that indicated muscles were at the point of fatigue and that a cramp was immanent. She moved her strong hands across the top of the bard's thigh and brought them up the bard's body to her breasts, cupping them firmly with intent.

Gabrielle could feel Aphrodite with her as she moved closer to climax. With a feeling that was more collaborative than voyeuristic, she felt the presence in her mind of give and take. The Goddess of Love giving her a sense of mastery and control over her own body and taking the energy generated by the passion and arousal she shared with Xena. As Xena touched her, Gabrielle could feel Aphrodite touch herself and that image sent a powerful orgasm careening through her, making her cry out her release.

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Aphrodite beamed joining her, riding the wave of Michelle's orgasm as well as that of Gabrielle. With every surge, with every, pant, moan, and groan Aphrodite felt her control increase and her strength. While the carnal lust she was reveling in was only one facet of the enigma that made up love it was emblematic of her overall

renewed strength and vigor. Aphrodite was stronger that she had been in thousands of years and the world would in time be better for it. In the here and now however, the effects would be felt by the people closest proximity to her.

Still smiling, she climbed off of the captain, releasing the woman gently removing the dildo and tossing it aside. “You know, back in the day I’d just grow a dick or two to party like that,” she observed.

Michelle took a couple of deep breaths to gain control of her breathing, her eyes wide with surprise. “You’re kidding?!”

“My name isn’t in ‘hermaphrodite’ by accident,” she replied. “I mean I could grow a dick anywhere, on my hands for example – or I should say your perception would have been that I grew one on my hand for a scene like this. I had all kinds of cool powers.” She frowned, not wanting her mood to darken with negativity.

Aphrodite stretched out on the bed next to Michelle and began to play with her hair, enjoying the feel of the tight curls in her fingertips. “What happened?” The captain asked.

“That my love is a story for another time,” she said before kissing the captain to derail her from any further questions. “Catch your breath and hydrate, I’m not done with you yet.”

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Hours later Gabrielle rejoined her crew. She knew that the goddess and the captain were still at it, but had a very clear sense that it was purely for enjoyment purposes and had nothing to do with containing the surge of power caused by the Ambrosia. After a shower she relieved Nicolai from his post while Xena checked in with Poseidon before joining her. It was impossible not to note the renewed sense of hopefulness among the crew even when performing the sad duty of preparing bodies for burial. There was no doubt in Gabrielle’s mind that a renewed and fully healthy Aphrodite had resonated powerfully with everyone on board. The stewards Blake and Samantha had been tasked with retrieving clothes for burial from Elaine and Bohemian’s cabins, respectively. Xena and Gabrielle had just finished bathing the bodies when the large form of Nicolai returned, stopping the stream of sunlight from the open doorway, the chef Sarah just in front of him. Both warrior and bard looked up from their work, noting the pair of serious expressions on their faces.

“Everything okay Nicolai?” Gabrielle asked as she repositioned the soft blanket over Bohemian’s body. She was wringing excess water from his freshly washed dreadlocks while Xena was combing out Elaine’s hair.

“Very well Miss. Evans,” he began formally, his heavy accent always reminding Gabrielle of music.

“Please, the both of you- speak freely,” she protested gently. Clearly, this was official business and she gave them her undivided attention.

“Alright,” the sous chef continued solemnly “Gabrielle. Very soon you will need a new captain and executive officer. “Michelle is going to run off with your old girlfriend. The decision is yours of course, but I would like to be captain with Sarah as my executive officer. Red and I work well in the kitchen, no?” Gabrielle glanced over to Xena who was trying to hide her smirk by focusing on her work. “No offense
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to new girlfriend, of course." He added with a curt nod to Xena which did nothing to abate the warrior's grin.

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "There is a fair amount there to unpack," she began kindly but still unhappy that her personal life seemed to once again be the focus of the crew's deliberations. "Michelle hasn't said anything to me as of yet, but if and when she does I'm happy to have the two of you in charge. You've taken a vote?"

While the final decision was obviously hers alone, Gabrielle knew that things proceeded much more smoothly when the rest of her current team was onboard with such changes. It provided the opportunity for any apprehensions about shifting duties to be aired and discussed. Sometimes only a conversation was needed, other times people found that a transfer was a better solution depending on the conflict. "The crew has been unanimous," Sarah added. "And we have some suggestions for staff additions.

Gabrielle nodded, threading a needle and having removed the bullet that killed Bo began to sew shut the wound in his neck. She was grateful that when dressed in his suit, it would not be visible to his parents. Small mercies. "Go on," she urged. "I'm listening."

"Ship will need time in dock for refitting and repairs," Nicolai began. "Shen will need a proper room on crew level, maybe room for a tutor? You discuss raising child with new girlfriend." While stifled, there was no denying the chuckle that came from Xena. "Ed would be good addition to the team, already in the know, yes? Robyn Versoul is on list to transfer back to ship duty, you will need to tell her or whomever. I think Vox should go to school for captain's license as well as Wolfgang- they can be study buddies while they continue work."

Gabrielle's first instinct was to attempt an explanation that referring to Aphrodite as the 'old girlfriend' and Xena as the 'new girlfriend' was not only inaccurate but also unfair to them both. Seeing the twinkle in the Russian's eyes however she realized he was teasing her to be playful. The large man did have a knack for making people feel a bit lighter when things were difficult. Not unlike his fondness for wearing rainbow unicorn t-shirts around Shen. Sutures done, she looked up regarding the pair. "You guys seem to have thought of everything."

"Not exactly," Sarah protested. "Jennifer has seen enough…or um…felt enough to know that something unusual has happened and I don't know how you want to handle that.

"So, we may have a new employee for Transportation or Special Projects?" Gabrielle asked dubiously, doubtful as she said it that either department would be a good fit for the soon to be former escort.

"I'll bet Aphrodite could use a personal assistant," Xena remarked. "If her intention is to travel, with or without Michelle, I'm sure she'd appreciate someone to make hotel arrangements, that sort of thing."

Blake and Samantha arrived with the clothing that their colleagues would be buried in and were surprised by the low rumble of laughter coming from the huge Russian. "It is nice when girlfriends get along so well," he said with a wink to his boss. With a formal bow he and Sarah took their leave, leaving the four to finish their ministrations to their fallen companions.

“I’m really growing to like that guy,” Xena remarked with a smile as she accepted Samantha’s help to dress Elaine.

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The following morning Gabrielle awoke early roused by the whining of her dog. She carried the animal up the stairs onto the deck for her to do her business, happy to see that her appetite had returned to normal. Once on a flat surface, the dog could walk with a cast on her hind leg surprisingly well. Taking a walk to the command center after feeding her she was not surprised to see Nicolai and Sarah but was very surprised to see Michelle with them. The captain looked exhausted but happy, no doubt operating on zero sleep. The slight sheepishness to her glance the only indicator of the intimacy they shared weather they wanted to or not. Stubbornly the bard refused to give legitimacy to the small pang of jealousy she felt. Gratefully, she was distracted by Shen sleeping on the couch, his head in Ed’s lap wrapped in the blanket that Elaine had given the flight-attendant from her cabin.

“Good morning,” she whispered softly, helping herself to a cup of espresso from the carafe.

“Good morning,” Michelle replied quietly handing her a sealed envelope. “This is my letter of resignation,” she said.

“Okay,” Gabrielle replied, having decided the previous night how she would handle this if it came up. She tossed it in the trash can under the console. “Not accepted. How is everyone?”

“But,” Michelle protested.

Gabrielle held up her hand and the captain fell silent, looking a little wounded. “You aren’t resigning, Michelle you are transferring. I won’t say you’re working *for* Aphrodite because that would be an HR nightmare. The Goddess of Love is only tangentially assigned to SP, you will be Bardic & Company’s liaison for her…”

“Humanitarian work,” Nicolai supplied helpfully.

“Exactly,” Gabrielle agreed. “You still get your regular salary, benefits, pension but you kinda have to do what she says.” The large man chuckled and Sarah nudged him in the arm. “Also, you may have an executive assistant, Jennifer. I need to see if she wants the job.”

“I tell you, lesbians. Better than soap opera,” Nicolai chuckled to himself. “They should make tv show.”

“When will the directors be arriving?” Gabrielle asked, ignoring the Russian’s comments and changing the subject.

“In about an hour.” Michelle replied, clearly relieved and pleased. “We thought we’d have a breakfast for the crew, then feed the directors when they get here. We will have additional people from Transportation and Special Projects. Friends of Elaine and Bo. Olivia and Tzu-Ching should be arriving right after the directors. Oh, and I spoke to Rebekah Luna this morning. She’s going to stay on as legal. She agrees that maybe only having to acclimate a couple of new people at a time is the way to go.”

“Excellent,” Gabrielle agreed. “When everyone is onboard, take us out to sea. Far enough to…” Michelle nodded needing no further elaboration. “When the funeral is over and our guests are gone, I’ll meet with the directors and we can head home.
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Once we're back at the marina we can make arrangements for the transition of crew and getting Shen back to school."

"Huh?" the boy said groggily waking up when he heard his name. "Did you say I'm going back to school?"

Gabrielle nodded, "Yes, if you want to. We need to make some changes to the ship so we'll be living on land for awhile. You know I have that place in Malibu."

"And Xena is going to live with us?" He asked. "What about Aphrodite?"

"Aphrodite has her own house in Venice, and I'm sure we can visit as often as you'd like." Gabrielle smiled giving up any pretense at having privacy where her crew was concerned. "And, Xena is going to live with us. I mean if we're both going to adopt you we really should live together, don't you think?"

"Well, what you're going to need to do is get married. But we can work on your proposal for Xena later. I'll need to give it some thought," the boy replied happily enjoying the burst of laughter from Nicolai that was infectious.

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As the last notes of Xena's song finished, with Vox providing a stunning harmony, Nicolai, Michelle, Ed and Sarah tipped the two sets of boards releasing the shrouded bodies of Bohemian Van Lyle and Elaine Jackson into the water. Olivia and Tzu-Ching Van Lyle sobbed together, the older woman clutching the dreadlock she'd clipped from her son's head before the service. Elaine did not have family outside of the tribe she'd created for herself, and the people she loved and cared about most were already onboard. Everyone from serving crew to other company members greeted the Van Lyle's with a hug and a fond memory of their son. Some of the crew they clearly knew well and these members stayed close offering what support and comfort they could. Other groups of people consoled each other and told stories of adventures they'd had with Elaine.

Soft orange lights lit the ship and as Shen explained to Xena it was a signal among the crew to refer to Gabrielle as Susan. The orange lights meant civilians were onboard, and that the identity of Gabrielle Evans needed to be protected. Gabrielle held Xena's hand when her song concluded and led her to the sobbing pair to extend her sympathies. "Olivia, Tzu-Ching …" she'd begun before being warmly hugged by Olivia, the taller of the two. "I am so very sorry about Bo," she said, her voice a bit muffled by the taller woman.

"We knew the job he did with you all was dangerous," Tzu-Ching replied when Olivia released the bard. "While we're broken hearted at our loss you can't fault your child for following their own heart wherever that leads them."

"Some people can grow to be very old and not live half as much as Bo lived," Shen interjected from Gabrielle's side.

The women smiled, looking down at him, impressed and curious about the ten year old. They looked just past him for signs of a parent among the crew. "This is my son, Shen," Gabrielle explained deciding that a streamlined story was best for everyone involved. "And this is my partner, Natasha."

Olivia and Tzu-Ching exchanged knowing glances, clearly answering a question they had asked themselves previously. Gabrielle was resigned to the fact that this would be a normal occurrence for awhile and simply went with it. Xena extended
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a hand and shook each of theirs warmly, expressing her condolences as well. Aphrodite approached, looking positively radiant even though mournful, and added her sympathies, introducing herself in the process. Again, the two women exchanged knowing glances.

"You're the young woman Bo mentioned having a crush on," Olivia said, beaming. "It is nice to meet you. He said such wonderful things about you when we spoke last week."

The goddess was clearly touched. "I think you have it backwards," she replied. "I'm the one who had the outrageous crush on him," she added with one of her radiant smiles. She had been chatting with them for several more minutes, her presence clearly providing solace when Poseidon came up and tapped the warrior on the shoulder getting her attention.

After leading Xena out of earshot, his expression somber he said, "Our duty to these two isn't finished yet. We don't want their bodies surfacing, getting picked up by a fishing vessel, starting some sort of investigation. We need to ensure that they are surrendered properly to the deep. Consider this your first lesson." Xena nodded, grateful that she would not need to shoulder her new responsibility without guidance.

"I'll meet up with you in the meeting," she whispered to Gabrielle before following the God of the Sea down to the water level.

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Having bid her guests aidu, Gabrielle sat down with her company directors around the rough-hewn conference table. Nicolai occupied the newly reserved seat for the ship's captain with Gabrielle flanked on either side by Aphrodite and Xena. Jennifer Charvel was more than happy to accept Aphrodite's offer of a permanent job, the two deciding that they did indeed quite like each other. While the newcomer wasn't in the meeting it was Gabrielle's first order of business to let Fiona know of the staffing additions as well as the position changes.

"We've also assigned Dr. Kate Sprucehill to Special Projects. I know people don't start there, but her skillset is unique," Fiona explained, reviewing her notes for the meeting.

Gabrielle nodded turning to her director of Finance. "Ms. Martin, you're gonna love this, but we need another plane."

The brunette opened her mouth to protest but across the table Aphrodite leaned forward resting her chin on the palm of her hand. "It's for me," she said and added a wink for good measure.

Heather Martin closed her mouth and made a notation on her note pad. "We can budget for this alongside remodeling your yacht," she said grudgingly. Mr. Tiller and I will come up with a plan. "Are we going to need an additional megayacht too?" she asked sweetly.

"No," Gabrielle said at the same time that the goddess replied in the affirmative. Aphrodite shrugged, accepting defeat. "Let's see where we are with everything else, shall we?" the bard asked rhetorically. "Ms. Chen, where are we on the political front?"

Victoria Chen opened a folder, identical copies of which had been passed to all participants. "The coordinated assault against Mr. Easton and Fire Industries went
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well. On the political front, Gideon Power was exposed as the actor Henry Scruggs a number of papers running a variety of articles about the web of connection between Easton, Scruggs and the Russian oligarchs that Fire Industries launders money for. Scruggs is claiming to simply be an actor playing a role but will most likely be investigated by the SEC and the AGs in various states for his false product claims and testimony he gave under oath in a deposition as Gideon Power in a sexual harassment case. That's open and shut perjury. Easton seems to be off the radar with the White House claiming that they don't know the guy although Mexico is helpfully suppling evidence to the contrary and the photographic evidence we collected has been forwarded on to several news outlets."

"So, it seems that Easton will have a number of messes he can focus on cleaning up distracting him from fomenting division and political discord," the bard observed.

"With the people lining up to get a piece of him legally, I think he will need to disappear and come up with a new identity," Sabin Jha added. "Special Projects will be keeping an eye out. The resources of the *Olympus* project will be transitioning to this new focus and we will continue to liaison, on an informal basis with Brian Glass at the CIA. We also caused a fair amount of havoc with his hacking operations in Macedonia. They will just relocate of course, but that will take time and money. Our people are on it and will continue to badger them whenever we can."

Gabrielle nodded, pleased with the outcome of their efforts. She gestured to DeShawn Johnson, head of philanthropy to speak. "Philanthropy is working on a joint project with Technology to provide some next generation support for various voter initiatives. We've identified some new grass-roots organizations that can use our help and with the expertise we have can help these groups simply overwhelm Easton and his ilk at the poles. We are already seeing positive results in several key states and districts. I will admit, it's a new avenue for us, but looks like a promising one." There was a passion and enthusiasm in the way he spoke that seemed to energize everyone around the table.

"I think we have some talent in the organization," he continued. "I realize that you can't run for office. Your dual role as in this company would preclude that." Inwardly Gabrielle chuckled that a fake identity was the least of the reasons why she shouldn't run for office. Perhaps she didn't need to tell every one of her directors her age. "But you have people working for you that absolutely should. Or at least take a more active role in cultivating candidates and supporting them. That would plant the seeds to build a bulwark against Easton years down the road. That and the education initiatives of course."

"I think that is a plan worth pursuing. Planning with a ten to fifteen year projection is wise," Xena commented with an approving nod. "Make sure Argo is in the room any time you interview a candidate," she added under her breath.

"Please prepare a proposal for the first phase of your initiative for our next meeting," Gabrielle said with an approving nod. She took a deep breath and gazed across the table. "Ms. Martin, why don't we go over budget numbers for the rest of the year. Let's see how many islands we have to liquidate."

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The night was clear and crisp as *The Hippolyta* spend north towards home. A precocious ten year old tucked into bed by his parents, Xena and Gabrielle quietly made their way from the crew quarters to the upper decks. The sounds of life and family surrounded them. Nicolai and Sarah were reviewing upcoming maintenance and duty assignments in the command center with an off-duty Ed snoring quite contentedly on the couch. An obviously smitten Wolfgang and equally smitten Vox were giving Jennifer a tour of the ship. While they couldn't see who, strains of a heated argument could be overheard about the merits of the latest Star Wars movie.

"Who are they talking about?" Xena asked as she picked up Argo before ascending the main stern staircase. "I didn't think America had a monarchy."

Gabrielle smiled. "Firstly, Princess Leia is fictional, and secondly, she is from Alderaan, well it's her adoptive home anyway. There is a magnificent world of cinema I am going to enjoy introducing you to it."

Xena chuckled. "I hope I like it as much as Vodka," she replied.

Gabrielle grinned in response, "Oh, I think you will."

They were hardly surprised to find the large hot tub on the main sun deck already in use by Aphrodite and Michelle. The pair were naked, sipping champagne, enjoying the massage jets and salt water but engaged in nothing more salacious than star gazing and conversation. Aphrodite brightened at the sight of the pair and beckoned them over already pouring an additional two flutes of the sparkling wine while Michelle looked positively mortified, for some reason thinking that her boss and owner of the ship might not come upon them at any moment.

"You should join us," Aphrodite suggested happily.

"Holy fuck," Michelle muttered her embarrassment evident. "I ah…thought you guys had already turned in…" While she and Xena had exchanged pleasantries at the funeral, this was the first time she'd had to face the warrior in a more private setting since their intimate encounter. Xena smiled sympathetically trying to reassure the brunette.

"Don't be such a prude," the goddess playfully admonished. "You're going to have to get used to seeing them naked if we're going to successfully vacation together."

The warrior shrugged approvingly as she non chalently stripped out of her clothes. "The water looks great."

"Where is it you think we're going on vacation to?" Gabrielle asked apprehensively as Xena climbed into the spacious Jacuzzi. "Michelle, if you're uncomfortable I don't want this to be an HR thing."

"By the gods this is amazing," the warrior purred happily accepting the offered glass, either oblivious to or purposefully ignoring the captains' appreciative yet embarrassed glance.

"I can't think of a moment you've been anything less than professional," Michelle assured her boss. "I think we can agree to a separation of on the clock time and off the clock time. Besides, I do need to adjust to my new role as liaison, right?" she asked with Aphrodite clinking glasses with her in solidarity.

"I can't argue with that," Gabrielle agreed as she stripped out of her own clothes, well aware and pleased at the trio of appreciative gazes from the women in the water. "It's going to be kinda cold walking to bed," Gabrielle observed as she

handed Argo a bone from the outside kitchen area before climbing in to join the others.

"Oh, I'll text Blake and have him bring you guys robes. He brought ours up earlier," Aphrodite said amiably.

"No!" Gabrielle replied a bit exasperated. "No offense, but I can only handle one crewmember having to see me naked on a given day. Okay? That's the last thing Blake needs to deal with tonight."

"Too bad Vox is giving Jennifer a tour with Wolfgang, I'm sure she'd help you out," Xena teased.

"Wouldn't count," Gabrielle replied without thinking. "She's already seen me naked." In that moment, she wasn't sure what was more embarrassing, the arched eyebrow from Xena or the one from Michelle. "It's a long story," the bard protested. "Suffice it to say it was a memory put in her head by Aphrodite after she'd been shot which I realize isn't helping this story at all."

"You'll have to tell me the long version sometime," the warrior suggested good-naturedly which Gabrielle hoped could come sometime after she'd recited all of the stories in all of the books in the library.

The quartet conversed amiably together for several hours. Xena, Gabrielle and Aphrodite telling stories of their adventures in Ancient Greece and Michelle telling stories of her childhood which the warrior found just as exotic. Gabrielle decided that whatever the goddess and captain had discussed had indeed had a profound effect on the captain. She was confident and relaxed, her intention to spend a great deal of time with Aphrodite and with them by extension quite clear. It was apparent that a bond was forming between the two brunettes in the group as they chatted and when the thought entered Gabrielle's mind she saw Aphrodite look over at her and wink. She could do nothing but smile indulgently in return. In time Michelle excused herself returning a short time later with robes for warrior and bard.

"If you ladies will excuse me," she said "I'd like to…ah get some sleep… before…" she trailed off, with a wicked smile.

"We get it. Before Aphrodite turns in," Xena supplied as mildly as she could.

Out of politeness Gabrielle glanced away as the captain kissed the goddess before taking her leave and retiring to the guest quarters.

"It's good that you're having the ship remodeled," Aphrodite observed when her lover had departed. "No one is going to stay in Bo's quarters and Michelle doesn't want to stay in the quarters she shared with Elaine."

"I knew there was a reason she'd been willing to bunk with you," Xena said playfully.

"You might want to see to some added soundproofing for the main sleeping quarters," the goddess added with a defiant smirk at the warrior.

"Where are you headed to next?" Gabrielle asked desperate to get the subject away from sex as quickly as she could. It was only a matter of time she knew, but at some point, she knew both Xena and Aphrodite would become comfortable enough with each other that teasing her about having slept with the both of them would be fair game. She wasn't ready for today to be that day.

When we get back to the Marina we're going to stay at my place until my plane arrives. You guys will come over for dinner and you will have to introduce Xena to Dwayne and explain to him why you dumped me.

"When the plane is ready I need to go to Europe, travel a bit. I think Africa after that. I'll be back for solstice though. I don't want to miss Shen's first solstice with you guys. Listen to you tell him stories about Senticles. Make some nutbread, it'll be great."

"I think he was raised Christian," Gabrielle said cautiously, unsure of the goddess' reaction. "I was there at his christening."

"Not him again," Aphrodite complained rolling her eyes, "Christ."

"I'll check in with him," Gabrielle added diplomatically, "see what he wants to celebrate, explain to him what we grew up celebrating. I'm sure he will be overjoyed to see you whatever the occasion."

"Are you fully recovered?" Xena asked, genuine concern in her voice.

After giving the warrior one of her thousand watt smiles the goddess replied, "Nearly good as new." After lifting her arm out of the water she added, "I have scars now though." She might not have intended the vulnerability to come through her voice but Gabrielle felt it.

"You're still stunningly beautiful," Xena said reassuringly nodding to Gabrielle for conformation.

"For sure," the bard agreed without thinking, "I'd hit that."

Xena tried to look stern but laughed in spite of herself, enjoying the crimson flush to the bard's cheeks.

"I've gotta say, warrior," Aphrodite observed. "You really came back a ten this time."

Playfully she looked wounded, "I thought I was always kind of a ten?" she protested.

Aphrodite shook her head, "your personality was a three – a five on a good day." Xena rolled her eyes and the The Goddess of Love splashed her playfully. "Alright loves, I'll leave you to your evening," Aphrodite added standing up, chuckling as the bard bashfully looked away and the warrior pointedly did not. "You kids have a good night and I will see the two of you in the morning. We still have two days before we get home and Shen said I can cook breakfast with him. By the way, both our rooms have been cleaned and ordered; fresh linens, cleaned your toys and I put back the ones I'm not keeping. And before you ask, yes I did it myself, well Michelle and I, keeping that whole thing in the family as it were. So, I'm back in the guest room. Don't want you kids ending up where you shouldn't."

Gabrielle and Xena nodded appreciatively. "Thank you, Aphrodite," the bard said.

"Anyway, I'm off to…" the goddess tried to continue with a michesvious grin.

"Yeah," Gabrielle cut her off not needing the details. "We get it. Have a good night."

Aphrodite donned a robe so she wouldn't drip inside the ship and blew them kisses before departing. Gabrielle watched her go then reached for the champagne bottle to refill their glasses. Reconsidering, she just passed the bottle to Xena, not bothering with the crystal flutes.

“So, this is your life,” Xena observed taking a swig then passing the bottle to her lover. “You travel the world on a floating fortress, never far from a variety of hot tubs, besting Ares and leading a vast army of elite fighters who are as dedicated to the greater good as you are.” She was thoughtful for a moment and looked up at the stars. “And along the way you have a dog that can detect deceit, you got the Goddess of Love to fall for you and resurrected me from the dead.”

Gabrielle smiled, leaning into Xena’s side, touching the warrior’s muscular leg under the water. “Well when you say it like that it really sounds fairly amazing.”

“But not as amazing as the time I killed the Bacchae,” the warrior replied.

“Wait a minute,” Gabrielle protested, “I helped you kill the Bacchae.”

“Helped?” Xena replied in mock confusion, “you *were* one of the Bacchae! I had to defeat them AND save you. That’s at least as interesting as having a floating palace.”

Gabrielle laughed, it feeling so impossibly good to once again have her universe righted. “At least my Argo can help question adversaries,” she challenged.

“But my Argo you could ride, well, this one is almost big enough to ride,” the warrior allowed after glancing over at the dog watching them contentedly.

Green eyes gazed up into blue, the shimmer of the lighted Jacuzzi reflecting in their eyes. They kissed, the first of many to follow and together stood, deciding that a place with a bit more privacy might be a better location to continue their conversation. She picked up Argo, to carry her down the stairs, her warrior bringing an extra bottle of champagne.

There was so much possibility in front of her, and for the first time in forever she wondered if thousands of years would be enough. No longer did time feel like cord wood stacked as a bulwark against loneliness. Time was going to be an amazing resource to show Xena the world, all that she learned and had grown to love. Watching Shen grow, getting a second chance at so much that had escaped them the first time around. She had to catch her breath, make herself slow down, she needed to focus on each of the moments in front of her and not waste any of them. In this moment she wanted to show Xena yet again, how very much she was loved and mattered in Gabrielle’s life. “You know,” she said conversationally to her warrior as she closed the door to her stateroom, her eyes dancing with desire and anticipation, “Aphrodite may be onto something with the suggestion of enhanced soundproofing.”

The End

Author’s note: The Xenaverse has spoiled me beyond measure in gifting me with some of the most amazing friends I’ve ever had. There are people in my life to this day who make up a tribe I love fiercely, close friends that came from a shared love of a quirky tv show, or in one unusual case, from being on a quirky tv show. From my amazing wife who I see every day, to people in different cities, time zones or even far flung countries like Finland – I honestly can’t think of anyone more blessed than me with the people I’ve gathered close. I seriously don’t deserve it, but no you can’t have them back, they’re mine!

There is another one though who deserves a shout out, a shout out that I’ve never properly done until now. And with a final work of fan fiction, I figured it was probably

overdue. I wrote my first story in 1996 and put it on a mailing list. I was contacted by a woman who I didn't realize at the time was quite possibly certifiably insane. She offered to edit for me so people would think English is my first language (I mean, it is *but I realize by my writing how you might be confused.)*

In the early days she'd hand me back printed pages dripping with red ink, at least I think it was ink- she said it was the blood of the innocent who didn't pay attention to grammar lessons but I chose not to believe her. Anyway, Pyrate Ska has edited every story I've written since the very beginning. Patiently, or not so patiently, crafting my demented musings into something that kinda sorta makes sense. When people say they like my work I'm all too happy to take the credit because I have an outrageous ego, but deep down I know what they're saying is they like Pyrate Ska's crafting *of my work. She's the rock star in my bat cave, the writer behind the writer who makes me- well- me. It may have taken me over twenty years to get around to this, but this one is dedicated to Pyrate Ska, with love and appreciation – and maybe a drink the next time I see ya – that nasty rum you like. Thanks buddy!*

Bat – 1/14/18 11:37pm

Soundtrack

Like any temperamental artist I have a process to how I work. It's evolved over time but has gelled into something I find helpful so I'm sharing it here. I have a tendency to collect a group of songs I listen to over and over while I'm working on a story. Music has always been tied to my writing, either to get inside a character's head, or to get the feel of a scene, or to just think about something else while I let my subconscious work on a problem. What follows is the playlist that I put together as I worked on this story. I live in Los Angeles which provides for ample time spent in one's car, often in traffic, listening to music. Yes, you can tell from my musical tastes that I'm ridiculously old, but I'm not Gabrielle/Aphrodite old so that's something.

In no particular order – and if the song is linked to a character or scene I've indicated that as well. If nothing is specified, the song just ended up on the playlist that helped get my head where I needed it to be.

1. Wish You Were Here, Fleetwood Mac, Mirage (Gabrielle)
2. Water Under The Bridge, Adele, 25
3. When We Were Young, Adele, 25 (Gabrielle/Aphrodite)
4. Blue Bayou, Linda Rondstadt, Best Of (Susan Yin)
5. Alone, Heart, The Road Home (Vox Wandre)
6. One Sip, Sammy Hagar, Lite Roast, (Bohemian Van Lyle)
7. Fuck You, Cee Lo Green (Shen's favorite song – kid is 10, it's the swearing)
8. I Am Woman, Helen Reddy, Best Of (Vox wanting out of sick bay)
9. For All We Know, Carpenters, Gold (Xena's introduction to modern music)
10. Yesterday Once More, Aimee Mann, Vinyl Soundtrack (Vox sick bay)
11. Half Breed, Cher, Greatest Hits (Vox wanting out of sick bay)
12. Better Be Home Soon, Crowded House, Woodface
13. Weeping Willow, Scott Joplin (Ballroom scene)

14. Eyes Wide Open, B-52s, Funplex
15. I Will Take Care Of You, The Bangels, Doll Revolution (Aphrodite & Gabrielle)
16. Crystal, Stevie Nicks, Practical Magic Soundtrack (Xena & Gabrielle)
17. I Still Miss Someone, Stevie Nicks, Behind The Mirror (Gabrielle)
18. Steal Your Heart Away, Fleetwood Mac, Say You Will
19. I Won't Last A Day Without You, Carpenters, Gold (Vox Sickbay/Gabrielle)
20. True Romantic, Indigo Girls, Poseidon & The Bitter Bug (Xena)
21. University Blvd, Los Straight Jackets, Rock Don't Run Vol. 1 (Bohemian)
22. For What It's Worth, Berlin, 4 Play (political climate)
23. My City Was Gone, The Pretenders, Learning To Crawl (political climate)
24. Silver Springs, Fleetwood Mac, The Dance (early Xena & Gabrielle)
25. Can't Stop Lovin' You, Van Halen, Balance (Gabrielle)
26. Lost At Sea, The Bangles, Doll Revolution
27. Superstar, Madonna, MDNA
28. Sunset Strip, Courtney Love, America's Sweetheart
29. Love Is All There Is, Sheryl Crow, Detours
30. Venus, Shocking Blue, Greatest Hits, (Aphrodite)
31. Special, Garbage, Version 2.0
32. Planets Of The Universe, Stevie Nicks, Trouble in Shangri-La
33. Fragments, Blondie, Pollenator
34. The Story, Sara Ramirez, EP (Xena & Gabrielle)
35. Eve of Destruction, The Turtles, It Ain't Me Babe, (political climate)
36. If I Lost You, Garbage, Strange Little Birds
37. Der Kommissar, After the Fire, Atomic Blonde Soundtrack
38. Cities In Dust, Siouxie & The Banshees, Atomic Blonde Soundtrack
39. 99 Luftballons, Kaleida, Atomic Blonde Soundtrack
40. My Favorite Mistake, Sheryl Crow, The Globe Sessions