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#### LOVE/SEX WARNING/DISCLAIMER:

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it and consider moving so someplace less backwards. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

#### CAVEATS:

This story is one bard's attempt to make sense of the crappy ending to a show she loved, and one American's attempt to make sense of the crappy turn her country has taken of late. In terms of continuity – I didn't go back and re-watch the later seasons, in part because 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. I may have gotten some details wrong here and there, but my heart is in the right place. 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***

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#### **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. And another. Sitting up, she stretched her shoulders and tilted her head from side to side, working the muscles of her neck, consciously willing them to relax. She sighed, breathing in the sea air and smiling sadly to herself. There was something about sleeping outside under the stars that made her dream of her life long ago – a life she was determined to revisit. The world had changed around her, and though she had changed with it, the essential truth of who she was, and the love she carried with her kept her moving forward. The rain intensified, rousing the dog lying next to the deck lounge where she'd drifted off. The gray and white Pitbull stood up, shook 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 towards the stairs that spiraled down to her bedroom suite below deck. The dog eagerly trotted a few steps ahead of her, pausing to wait at the top of the stairs. Before heading downstairs, Gabrielle glanced upwards off the port bow to gaze at the clouds that were just barely backlit by the moon. It had begun raining in earnest; the ghostly white moon glow shined off the still water of the ocean around her, but she could hear the rainfall hit the water rather than see it. After all the years, the centuries stacked upon each other like cordwood, it was still little things like this that made Gabrielle think of home, and Xena.

She was drawn from her reverie by Argo’s whining, possibly out of concern for the shift in Gabrielle’s thoughts, but more likely because of the increasing rain. This had been an unusually wet year in Southern California, and Argo disliked rain because of the thunder that sometimes accompanied it. Smiling at her canine companion, the woman once known as Gabrielle of Potidaea padded down the stairs to the master suite of *The Hippolyta*, the yacht and floating fortress she called home. She had insisted on registering the ship in Greece, and it seemed only fitting to christen it in honor of the famed queen of the Amazons.

To most people, Gabrielle Evans seemed like your average eccentric billionaire, and *The Hippolyta* your average opulent mega-yacht. However, and much to Gabrielle’s relief, most people didn’t pick up on all the little things that told a much more interesting story. Gabrielle had commissioned its construction, working very closely with the ship’s architects to create a vessel that would fit her needs and keep her secrets, 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. At nearly 200 feet, 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 gave Gabrielle the ability to connect to the world at large when needed, ~~but~~ and enabled her to escape just as easily. She maintained a crew of 15, rotating personnel out of a specialized division of her business, Bardic & Company. If she’d left the ship in its original configuration, it would have slept 12 guests in six cabins, not counting the master suite. Gabrielle had retained one suite as a guest stateroom, and if necessary could easily make additional spots for guests in the library or other places onboard where couches converted to beds. The remaining staterooms 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 the entire ship was wired with surveillance equipment.

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

She reached the bottom of the stairs and followed Argo through several rooms to her bedroom, which was spacious enough to fit a king-sized bed without seeming cramped. It was on the interior of the main deck, with rich wood paneling and several paintings covering the walls in lieu of windows. The carpeting was thick and luxurious, and the bed coverings and piles of pillows had splashes of deep reds and rich grays that contrasted nicely with the wood. The lighting was warm and inviting, and the deep color of the wood and warmth of the light reminded her of being on tall-masted sailing ships

centuries ago. A nightstand flanked each side of the bed and included charging port for a variety of electronic devices. A small neat bookcase was home to various volumes on a variety of subjects from science to politics, as well as a few good mysteries. 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. The outfit was sharp and stylish. Thinking she probably wouldn't need a jacket, she put one aside just in case, then made one last check to ensure 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 woman's voice said by way of greeting. Save for meetings, Gabrielle was perfectly comfortable 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 and 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 their 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 startup called *Bliss*, and their only product 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 headquartered?” 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, as 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 disconnecting the call 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 the clay 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 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.

Picking up the leather-bound book sitting on her nightstand, she followed the ribbon bookmark to the next blank page and began her daily ritual of writing down her thoughts, telling Xena about her day and her discoveries. She had been searching for anyone from Olympus for so painfully long, Aphrodite especially. She remembered back to that fateful day Poseidon had told her Aphrodite was the key to Xena’s resurrection, and at long last, she may have found her. This new development had her feeling almost giddy, hysterical even. She wrote for nearly an hour, saying everything she felt she needed to say for the day, 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 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, okay,” she mumbled, getting out of bed. Argo got up and headed up the stairs, to the deck and one of several patches of artificial grass set up for her use 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 meetings ahead.

Gabrielle Evans, President and CEO of Bardic & Company, was the latest manifestation of the bard's public persona. The company was based in Ireland, and to the casual observer, 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 interests through charitable organizations and foundations. On paper, Gabrielle Evans was a very reclusive billionaire who did not grant interviews, attend galas or other public events, and there was a great deal of speculation as to who Gabrielle Evans was, given that few photographs of her existed in the public domain, and those attributed to her were obviously way too young to actually be the company owner herself. In reality, Gabrielle met often with outsiders as Susan Vincent, the spokesperson for Gabrielle Evans. Those closest to her personal orbit knew her as Gabrielle, such as the crew of *The Hippolyta*, as they essentially lived with her, and her executive vice presidents. But she was an enigma to the world outside of that selective bubble.

The executive vice presidents met with her monthly in person to report on their divisions. Wherever in the world Gabrielle might be at the time, she had them brought to her location. The meetings could last anywhere from a few hours 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 she 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 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 a while, someone would make a strong enough case about any given decision, and 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 ferried the executive team from shore to *The Hippolyta* at 8:30 am. The various division heads cleared the routine security checks and ambled into the area adjacent to the conference room, where a luxurious breakfast buffet had been set up. The security checks included handprint and retina analysis, and depositing personal cell phones into a secure box just outside the meeting area. Small, discreet orange lights were illuminated. Located at routine intervals throughout the ship, these lights indicated to her inner circle that civilians were onboard, so the identity of Gabrielle Evans needed to be protected.

Gabrielle didn't worry about offending anyone; they were all very familiar with these sorts of measures as they were utilized throughout Bardic & Company. But being careful did not require her to be distant or aloof, so as she made her way to the buffet, she greeted everyone warmly, taking time to ask about their latest vacations, birthdays or anything that might have happened in their lives since the last meeting.

She made 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 hello when she traveled to the offices for meetings as Susan Vincent. He was tall, muscled, and wore his blond hair in a military-style haircut. She walked Brian out to the deck where he could sit and eat his breakfast while being discretely monitored by security. Returning to the buffet area, she helped herself to eggs Florentine and a glass of blended vegetable and fruit juices after everyone else had filled their plates and were seated at the table in the conference room. 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, but 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, following them into the conference room and making herself at home. Everyone was used to the boss' dog accompanying the boss everywhere.

"Let's get started," she said, taking her seat following the final security check. Like her private staterooms, the conference room had no windows. Unlike her suite, the colors were lighter, and the lighting a brighter white. The table was a large oval built from 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, yet all eight division heads and their boss 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.

Mike Tiller, 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 yet. I will keep you posted." As an afterthought she added, "Do you think several months will significantly cost us if we need to delay the auctions?" She watched the faces at the table carefully; their eyes shifted and they all looked uncomfortable.

Finally, Susan Yin, seated at Gabrielle's right, spoke up. "President Turner is insane, figuratively *and* literally. 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, which put things in perspective [for her](#).

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 and we can 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, Jorge Hernandez 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 to support demand. We need an increase of at least twenty-five percent.”

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

“Finance is still paying off this!” Heather Martin gestured at the room around them for context.

“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 shot back, not backing down. “A quarter billion dollars here, a quarter billion 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 so much with the liquidating...” Gabrielle lifted her hand and the Vice President of Finance immediately fell silent. She then turned to Mike 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. And see if you can talk them into trimming their commissions.” She raised her eyebrows at her head of Finance, who nodded her agreement and was mollified for the moment.

To Gabrielle’s disappointment, that was only the first debate of the morning, and the meeting lasted nearly twice as long as she’d hoped. Victoria Chen, head of the Politics Division, gave her assessment of the present political climate, reviewing which races they thought would benefit most from campaign contributions. Different theories were presented for possible outcomes and contingencies on 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 game 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 made it clear that she was done discussing the topic, and she politely turned her attention to the African-American man sitting next to her.

Realizing it was his turn, DeShaun Johnson, head of the Philanthropic Division, launched into the case to fully fund Planned Parenthood by funneling money through smaller charities. This was followed by more discussion, as a list of seventeen worthy charities was narrowed down to twelve. The head of Human Resources, Fiona O’Brien, reported on current staffing levels, and requests for press interviews that were



immediately rejected. She finished with a brief discussion on individuals that would be promoted into closer working proximity to Gabrielle.

Technology and Research was the last of the eight to give their report. 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 wanted to see more data before entering purchase negotiations. Her expression soured further when Gabrielle casually mentioned that she might be purchasing the dating app *Bliss*.

By the time everyone had reported out, 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 required her input.

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. 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, gods know 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, with brown hair that reached just below her ears. She adjusted her glasses, pushing them up 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 the quarter billion dollars to buy this boat."

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

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 her alter ego, Susan Vincent invited the two of them to enter through a door off of the conference room, which 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, but also had a large window on the stern side where the deck and ocean 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 with 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 beyond the office was a less formal study where Gabrielle actually did her work. But 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, not hiding his disappointment. "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, since 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 the company." 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 waiting 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, and was the third generation of her family

to work for Gabrielle. In her early seventies, Susan had no-nonsense attitude that Gabrielle once described as “Helen Mirrin-esque,” much to the Chinese woman’s delight. She dressed simply, always wearing variations of the same slacks and blouse. She kept her long, gray-streaked black hair in a ponytail, and seldom wore makeup. Having been around Gabrielle for her entire life, there was no way she could not have noticed the other woman’s lack of aging, but she never said anything, 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 just need to find out whose, and what it is he’s after.”

“I think DeShaun was also suspicious. 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 at which she excelled. 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 decades of experience that Gabrielle did, she did recognize which 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’s ready to take over more of my portfolio, and I think he’s ready to start attending 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 had this conversation. She couldn’t help but think how much the woman looked like her mother and 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, seemingly a bit embarrassed by the suggestion of dragging an injured man to a routine meeting, but knew that Susan could be in traction and hooked up to life support and still manage to make it to the meeting. “How is Shen adjusting to boarding school?” she asked, changing the subject. 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, gratefully. “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 enjoy a father-daughter brunch 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 here. We need to plan an evening, head over to Catalina, go swimming, and have a barbecue. Argo loves swimming with him.”

“You spoil him, Gabrielle.” Susan protested.

“Godmothers 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 gesture or if she were teasing her.

Susan glanced at her watch, then back to Gabrielle, brows furrowed in concern. “Your appointment with Valerie DelRay is at four. It’s not far, but it’s already three.”

“Give me 15 minutes, and I’ll take the tender back with you. No sense in making two trips. Are the flowers in the car?” Gabrielle asked.

Susan nodded. “Yes, and the address is programmed into the navigation.” She handed her boss a small slip of paper. “And 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. Martin 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**

Following the directions displayed on the car’s dashboard screen, Gabrielle turned down Ocean Avenue. The Venice Canals, just south of Santa Monica, were man-made waterways lined by rows of houses overlooking them. They were a little bit of Europe tucked away in Southern California; beautiful, serene, and seemingly out of place from the chaos of the Venice boardwalk, a mere stone’s throw away. All of the homes were relatively modest in size, but sold for millions of dollars, regardless of their condition. There were no sprawling estates here, square footage was at a premium, but most lots had a boat dock with small skiffs with which to navigate the narrow waterways.

Gabrielle found it equal parts comical and ironic that the woman for which she’d been searching for two thousand years was presently living not a half hour from where her yacht was anchored. 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 one of the only people alive she could say that about. She wished now that she’d had more time between finding Aphrodite 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 go into this next phase with Aphrodite the same blind faith that she had 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, likely her only opportunity, pass.

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

While there wasn’t much of a lawn in front of the house, there were a multitude of urns and flower boxes of different shapes, sizes, and colors with brightly colored flowers and herbs of diverse varieties fighting for space. It was eclectic, almost chaotic, but inviting. Making her way up the front walkway, she saw several small Greek statues that confirmed 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 straightened her skirt and tie before the door opened, and Gabrielle looked up into the crisp blue eyes of Aphrodite herself. “Gabrielle Evans,” she said extending her hand.

Aphrodite did a visible double take at the sight of her guest, but automatically 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. It was also homey, warm, inviting, and smelled wonderfully of lavender.

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

She had but a moment to take in her immediate surroundings, but 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, an homage to Versailles perhaps, with draperies, gold-leaf gilded everything. 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 meant 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 into 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, with tasteful oranges and yellows mixed with accents of pale blues and greens. It made Gabrielle think of spring.

Sitting down, she took a moment to let her eyes take in the vision now sitting across from her. Not surprisingly, Aphrodite had not aged a day. The goddess was still stunningly beautiful, with calming blue eyes. Hair was now short – even shorter than Gabrielle’s. She was wearing a vintage inspired dark blue dress with pale green accents. It was professional, even as it clung to her curves and was sexy as hell. Gabrielle looked out the window to keep from staring.

“I hope traffic wasn’t too bad.” Aphrodite said, drawing the bard’s attention back to her distracting visage.

“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 of 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 that made 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 the goddess 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 from the software company she’d talked to earlier didn’t seem phased by the \$280 million 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 said looking around as they headed towards the front door.

“Thanks,” Aphrodite replied, bringing her thoughts back 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, which she held open for the bard.

Gabrielle stopped at the door, touching 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 still trying to synch the bard she knew with this woman. 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 visiting 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 negotiation about cuisine preferences, Aphrodite suggested Moonshadows, a restaurant off the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. Gabrielle was familiar with it, and 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, and very little can throw them. As the car wove its way through her neighborhood to PCH, Aphrodite allowed herself to admit she was thrown. Sure, she obviously knew all about ambrosia and the effect it could have on humans who 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?

She debated between needing an answer, and not wanting to startle the woman behind the wheel, and settled on the former.

“Look,” she said, “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, selecting Adele on 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. Adele's 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. 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 came to, and there is a crowd of worshippers standing around. I wanted to get the blink out of there and 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 blink somewhere instantly; I'm earth bound. No fireballs. I'm not mortal – I'm still a god, I still have my duty, you know, my job, and that power is still there, but things are different too."

"How so?" Gabrielle asked. They were driving into the setting sun, so she took a pair of Ray Ban 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 the realization they were both wearing sunglasses they'd actually purchased in the 1950s.

"I used to be able to infuse the entire planet with love." Aphrodite continued, "I could be standing in Greece, and love, jealousy, infatuation, passion, lust, desire, or hope – I could feel all of it, everywhere. I guess my range has contracted over the years. 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 in her voice, and Gabrielle was warmed by the sound of it.

The goddess shrugged. "I spend a lot of my time in war-torn places. In recent years, it's been places in Africa where people are starving; places where disasters have happened. I do a lot of volunteer work so I can be near people who need love and hope. Then I come back to places like this, where comparatively, people have everything, to make sure they feel empathy and caring, and influence them to take an interest in 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! 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,’ and now I can’t do anything but comfort the victims.” She knew the conversation was getting heavy, and that was not how she wanted to start her reunion with Gabrielle. “But enough about me, how did you keep from going crazy? At least tell me that.”

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 Moonshadows parking lot. 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 trying to escape my own head. I’ve tried getting high or drunk – not very successfully – and I’ve been institutionalized numerous times.” Now it was Gabrielle’s desire change the subject. “I hope we can get a table on the patio.”

Aphrodite smiled as they approached the host, who was telling couple ahead of them there was no outdoor seating available, so Gabrielle was surprised when the goddess asked for a table for two, and they were led outside to the corner table on the patio, closest to the water. The view was stunning. 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 French as she looked over the menu.

As Gabrielle opened the wine list, she replied in Italian, “Honestly I’ve lost count. Fifty at least, many of them dead now. I’ve moved around a lot, and try to learn the language of wherever I’m at. Many have gotten fairly rusty from lack of use.”

The waiter arrived and introduced himself. Gabrielle ordered a bottle of her favorite sake, Shimizu No Mai Junmai Daiginjo.

“From the beginning,” Aphrodite instructed, shifting to Portuguese.

The sake 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, so 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 obligated 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.”

She took another sip of sake, glancing around. 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 people from falling off the deck. The sun was now low on the horizon, and the sand of the beach glowed a warm ochre. The clouds from the night before had moved on, and the sky was clear. Stars would be making an appearance soon. The tide was starting to go out, the waves now crashing only a short distance away with the water rushing towards them below.

The rocks and the water reminded her so vividly of that shipwreck, and of trying to look after her crew because she felt responsible for them. She remembered Poseidon showing up and the events that followed, but she couldn’t bring herself to tell Aphrodite what she had done for the god of the Sea. Right now, with the sun setting, it was too scenic and beautiful to say something sure to 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 nodded. “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 rolled her eyes. “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* me, and that I needed to find something first. He doubted that one lifetime would be long enough, 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 were able to complete the task

and return to him, he would give Xena ambrosia as well so we could 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, so they 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 as 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 hole closes up the second you take the stud out?”

“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 in the eighties.”

They ordered dessert. The spectacular light show of the sunset had ended, the sky shifting 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 seem to mind them lingering over their meal, especially since Gabrielle ordered her third bottle sake. At \$180 a bottle, he knew 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 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, and 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, having ordered several delectable looking items from the menu. “It’s no secret that I don’t get along with my family, but I do miss my children. I had four sons and a daughter with Hephaestus, and I had no way of knowing if they were on Olympus when the blast hit, or if they are somewhere in the world. It’s hard not knowing.” 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 around instantly, 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 without any way of knowing.”

Gabrielle looked at her “I know exactly what you mean,” she said seriously.

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.”

“naQ mer,” Aphrodite said with a smile.

The waiter came back to the table and apologetically told them that it was 11:00pm, and that the restaurant had closed at 10:00. Gabrielle casually handed over a black American Express card.

“Holy shit, Gabrielle,” Aphrodite said, her eyes widening, first at the black AmEx card, then at the bill.

The bard rolled her eyes. “Let’s go take a walk on the beach,” she suggested after 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 chuckled 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, hoarding 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 1920’s, early ‘30’s. I was an archeologist when The Great Depression hit. 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, and 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, who 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 off some artifacts. 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 without emotion.

"What?" Gabrielle asked, stunned and horrified.

"Honey," the goddess said gently, "it was the only way I could move freely from camp to camp. They needed every bit of love and hope I could muster. I helped as many people escape as I could, 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 between Hiroshima and Nagasaki to help 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.

"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 of you as '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, and 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, and rested her other hand on a strong shoulder. Gabrielle felt a lurch, like her heart skipping a beat. She felt a connection to the touch, a warm loving connection. Then she noticed the kind of awkward butterfly sensation in her belly that accompanies 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 from the past to what she wanted to happen in the future. Specifically, 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, 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. 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 talk about herself and her experiences without being 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 forgetting 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 shared with my last husband. It’s paid for so I kept 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 aid group: Médecins Sans Frontières, the ASPCA, UNICEF. Sometimes I trek for months in the jungle, living 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. I just did some math, and there went my buzz.”

“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 without sounding 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, and the mist was starting to roll in. It was dark, but Aphrodite knew that desire-tinged green eyes were shining up at her. They stopped walking. She took a moment to ask herself if this was what she wanted, 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 her thrall, and who could see past the trappings of divinity.

Gabrielle was lonely, and while her devotion to Xena was absolutely authentic, it was clear the bard had learned that love for someone else did not lessen her love for Xena. Humans are not built to be solitary creatures, and she would only be fully successful in her goal of resurrecting Xena if she were able to keep herself healthy. 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. It was a kiss at once warm and caring, but confident and self-assured, and there was no mistaking its intent.

“I’m inviting you to spend the night on my yacht.” Gabrielle’s voice was confident, clear and soft.

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 joked 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. “You’ve got game, Gabrielle. I’ll grant you that.”

They turned on to PCH once more, driving for a bit when Aphrodite noticed they were not heading towards the marina.

“Sweetie, aren’t you going the wrong way?”

“Nope, we’re taking the scenic route.”

It didn’t take long for them to arrive at the Santa Monica airport. Gabrielle drove to the gate where someone was waiting for them. They were waved through, and drove onto the tarmac of the small airport to a helicopter ready for takeoff. She got out of the car and opened the door for Aphrodite. After Aphrodite exited the car, Gabrielle reached in for her flowers.

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, gesturing 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 aboard 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 exasperation.

"Perhaps," the goddess demurely answered.

They flew over Los Angeles, the lights shimmering like millions of stars below. The 101 Freeway sprawled below them, red and white lights snaking their way through the hills. The 5 Freeway could be seen off to the west, the 10 Freeway just below them. Gabrielle flew for about 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 in the marina. Sleek and majestic, it was too large to actually be docked; it was moored a short distance beyond the other ships and tended by smaller boats. Looking down from above, Aphrodite was impressed. Not just with the sheer size of the vessel, but also how beautifully designed it was. The helicopter pad was on the bow of the ship. As they landed, two people ran up; one who helped Aphrodite exit the aircraft, the other took the headset from Gabrielle, then climbed into the cockpit. 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, and 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 breathed, leading Aphrodite below deck.



Aphrodite woke slowly, enjoying the dual sensations of contentment and satisfaction that she hadn't felt in years. She'd fallen asleep between Gabrielle's legs, 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 that Gabrielle wore exquisitely. The goddess momentarily considered waking her companion for an encore performance, but after watching Gabrielle sleep, she couldn't bring herself to do it. They



had enjoyed each other for hours, and while nearly immortal as Gabrielle might be, she was still human, and undoubtedly exhausted. Happy and content for sure, but exhausted nonetheless.

Aphrodite thought that she might have dozed off for an hour or two, but not nearly long enough for a human to recharge their batteries, so slid out of bed, pulling the covers up around the sleeping woman as she rose. She nudged the sleeping dog in the 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, laid down at Gabrielle's side and resumed snoozing, her muscular head resting on the bard's thigh. She glanced at the watch Gabrielle had removed when they had undressed and a light touch caused the time – 04:42 – to display in a soft glow. Silently she crossed the room to the bathroom, closing the door behind her before turning on the light. She ran some water to wash her face and hands. Catching her reflection in the mirror, she grinned. Xena might have feelings about what she'd been up to, and intended to do more of, all of which would just have to be sorted out later, if and when the time came.

Turning and leaning against the elegant stone counter, she gazed around the exquisitely appointed room. The entire bathroom was large, with a massive Jacuzzi tub that could easily hold three people. The shower area was separate, and there was a dressing table off to the side. Everything was tasteful and elegant; the fixtures, well-crafted cabinets, and soft textures that were stately without being showy. There was no doubt Gabrielle enjoyed her creature comforts but wasn't looking to impress anyone with them.

There was a lot to take in, mentally and physically, even for a god. Just outside the door slept someone with a level of experience approaching her own. The myth writers had it wrong; gods didn't sleep with each other because they had some weird fondness for incest. They did it because they were part of a very small group uniquely capable of understanding their experiences in any meaningful way. Even gods needed to be understood to some degree.

She turned off the lights before opening the door to avoid waking her companion, then walked across the bedroom to a door she assumed led to the closet. As she suspected, it was. Closing the door behind her, she reached to where she expected to find a light switch, and soon the room glowed with a soft warm light. What she didn't expect to find was a large area with hangers and shelves neatly holding the bard's wardrobe. Everything was immaculate, nothing disorganized or out of place. Gabrielle didn't strike her as fastidious, and the heap of clothes they'd taken off of each other lay in a pile on the bedroom floor, but here was an order bordering on obsessive. There was a small section of formal wear, a larger array of business attire, sweaters neatly folded and stacked 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, running shoes, and hiking boots. She picked up an elegant stiletto to see if it was her size. Annoyed to find it was not, she put it back. Two thousand years ago, she'd have been able to make anything fit. She was tempted to open the drawers to see if they were as organized as the shelves, but didn't. Finding what she originally came for, she grabbed one of the luxurious bathrobes from a hook by the door, and put it on as she shut off the light and left the closet.

She left the bedroom and made her way down 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 1930's. 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, but she noticed there weren't many personal effects or knick-knacks on open surfaces. On second thought, she realized this might not be practical on a ship.

A doorway off the living room led to a conservatory of sorts. On one wall, a variety of guitars hung securely from wooden brackets. Being a bit of a musician (did groupie count?), she was impressed by the various styles and brands she recognized. 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 also a bass, a keyboard rack, and several amplifiers. In addition to her many skills, Gabrielle had clearly become a musician. 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.

Lining the opposing wall were bookshelves, filled with nearly identical leather-bound books. An intimate dining area lay just past the conservatory. It became clear to Aphrodite that these rooms were Gabrielle's inner sanctum, and she decided she preferred to be introduced to these spaces by the bard. Moving beyond the dining area, the space opened up, and she once again felt like she was on a large ship.

Out the windows to her left, the horizon was beginning to lighten with the glow of the coming dawn. She looked around for a way upstairs, out onto the deck and the morning air. It took a moment, but she found the stairway, then through a door to a beautiful and spacious deck. It was only now that she was outside she realized that the ship was moving, and they were well away from land.

She was curious, but unconcerned. There was no doubt Gabrielle would fill her in when she woke up. The air was crisp and cool, the robe warm and comfy. She settled herself on a deck lounge to watch the sun rise. With the smell of the ocean filling her senses, Aphrodite could almost imagine being back in Greece watching her brother Apollo in his daily ritual. 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, 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, no less. The exterior looked much more modern than the interior of the ship. The wood deck was a pale teak, the lounges white with blue pillows. The interior of the pool and hot tub were a pale blue. 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. 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. She was surprised not to see another soul. It was almost like being on a deserted cruise ship, and she felt like the only person in the world, in a contented, happy sort of way.

She felt, rather than heard Gabrielle approach. Strong arms reached around the lounge to hug her and she felt a gentle kiss on 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, made her way to the artificial grass 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 for emphasis.

“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 wasted no time bounding in the directions of the stairs.

“Smart dog,” Aphrodite observed.

Gabrielle settled herself on the lounge 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. It’s going to make you angry. Then I am going to ask for your help.” Gabrielle studied Aphrodite’s face, noting that gods did not have micro expressions to indicate 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 fact.

Concern was beginning to show on the goddess’ face. “We Olympians stay out of each other’s way,” she said. “You’re usually 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 actual FUCK?” she screamed, furious. The glow of post-coital happy contentment was gone, replaced by red-hot rage.

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. While no longer capable of making fireballs, 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 by the harmless sparks. She lowered her hands, 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 her impotence in her ability to express her rage. Gabrielle walked up to the railing, still 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 barely do 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, trying not 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 that 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, daring Aphrodite to say she had nothing to do with how Gabrielle and Xena felt about each other.

Aphrodite sighed, 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. I know you have the power to do that. That’s why I sent the crew below deck.” She looked out to the ocean where the sun had now risen above the horizon. She took a deep breath, looking unguardedly into the goddess’s eyes to make sure she knew she was deadly serious. “Two thousand years has taught me that while I’d search forever for a way to bring Xena back, I can’t endure a ‘forever’ without her.”

Aphrodite looked away, away from the ocean and Gabrielle. Her eyes traveled around the floating palace, suddenly realizing that to Gabrielle, it 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 Tartarus, 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 hates 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 the world – it’s all going to be one big giant nightmare for her. When she was alive, *she* was the one *you* learned from. Just how well do you think she’ll adjust to this world? To you?”

Gabrielle looked down, unable to face the goddess, but her voice 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, and its first warmth of the new day. Gabrielle was serious. This fight was over. What was done, was done. 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, and 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 near the brink of repeating of some the uglier events. 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 war god.

“This much coincidence takes an awful lot of planning, Gabrielle.” Aphrodite said seriously, her arms crossed. “It is no mistake that the absolutely worst people this country has to offer are in charge of some very dangerous agencies, and the chief executive has zero interest in the job, by any conventional definition.”

Gabrielle reached out and put her hand on the goddess’s arm. “I promise you, if we can find any possible way to 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.” Rolling her eyes at Gabrielle’s obvious lack of comprehension, she added, “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, one of 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 pretty remarkable. But sweetie, this is my wheelhouse. I know you woke up this morning surprised by the realization of just 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 am the god of love, after all. But I will say it’s refreshing to be around someone with whom I can be myself. Someone who knows me from the old neighborhood. I’ll happily 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. “You in?” she finally asked.

Gabrielle broke the hug and took a step back. There was no denying the truth in everything Aphrodite had said. She also couldn’t remember the last time anyone had gotten the better of her; knew what thoughts she was hiding, 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, “The 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 insisting on comfortable clothes and refusing to let Aphrodite put on the dress from the previous night. 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 chilled in an iced carafe to the side of the table. On the table, the centerpiece was composed of the flowers she’d been given the previous night, as was a mouthwatering 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. The crepes should be up shortly.”

“So, do all your conquests get the royal treatment?” Aphrodite teased.

Gabrielle feigned offense. “I’ll have you know that last night was the first time I’ve ever said ‘oh god’ during sex, and actually had one answer. That deserves the good china.” She held up a flute. “Mimosa?”

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

Gabrielle nodded. "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... 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, or medic, or captain, or mechanic is killed, you're kind of 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 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, enjoying the view of 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, and she made no movement to withdraw her hand or 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, currently our bosun and head of maintenance, and Hatsuo Eko, who's in charge of security."

Both men nodded respectfully to Aphrodite while 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 to 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 sealed, shiny silver bag containing a small electronic device. "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."

She released Aphrodite's hand to accept the small bag from Steve. "How long until we get back to Marina Del Rey?" Gabrielle asked, studying the bag.

"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 except 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. “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 and making sure she got attention from everyone.

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 and turned to go as another woman walked up behind the two men carrying a tray loaded with delicious looking crepes. Gabrielle introduced Aphrodite to Sarah Gibson, as the chef this tour, who informed them the crepes were compliments of her and Michelle Fender, the tour captain. The chef appeared roughly the same age as the rest of the crew she’d seen thus far, with rich auburn hair that evoked more red than brown. While not a color found in nature, Sarah wore it well in a short swept-up haircut making it look as if her head were on fire. She wasn’t as physically fit as most of the crew but solidly muscled and looked like she 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 challenge 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, “All kidding aside, the entire point of my company, besides working towards the greater good, 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, 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.

“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 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 her radiant ‘Aphrodite smile,’ and Gabrielle was glad she was able to articulate her thoughts 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 trust 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 access to all of it."

Aphrodite studied the bard. She wondered if this was just a byproduct of a human living two thousand years, this level of self-awareness and having one's shit together. It was sexy as hell, and while she felt drawn to the woman sitting across from her more than she had any other human, she wouldn't be doing Gabrielle any favors by telling her that. Aphrodite knew how complicated love and relationships could be; she was the architect of most of it, after all. But love wasn't just romantic, there was intensity in platonic love that could coexist with a physical relationship, and it would be to Gabrielle's benefit to steer their relationship 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." She hurriedly added, "I don't mean that as a slight. 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 felt it was really necessary."

Her gaze into Gabrielle's green eyes sharpened, and the bard felt herself get slightly dizzy. "Now I want you to remember exactly what Poseidon said. Tell me exactly what he told you, word for word."

Gabrielle was hit with a wave of vertigo that made her grateful she was sitting. Behind the off-balance sensation however, she could see the memory clearly; standing on the sand, Poseidon standing next to her. In a slightly dazed state, she relived the 2,000 year old conversation.

"I want to be clear about what we discussed earlier." Gabrielle was almost defiant as she detailed her terms to Poseidon. "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, Yodoshi stays defeated, and Xena can be returned, ~~Yodoshi stays defeated.~~" Poseidon looked down at ~~me-her~~ 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?" she asked, looking around the beach. She saw the basalt cave by the rocks of the shallow reef. They were standing on the sand.

"Poseidon was standing on the sand?" Aphrodite's voice intruded upon her memory. "In the water?"

"No," Gabrielle said, refocusing on the memory. "The water is about twenty feet behind us."

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

Gabrielle returned to her memory. “I can’t bring her back by myself, Gabrielle,” Poseidon continued. “I told you I would help you get Xena back, and I will do just that; I will *help* you. But first, 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 out loud to herself.

“I’m sorry, it’s what he said,” Gabrielle replied, annoyed at the interruption.

“Please, continue.” the goddess urged.

“I will go to her temple and call her,” Gabrielle said, her modern self suddenly realizing how naive she had been; until this point, she hadn’t the faintest idea of what she had done.

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, Mt. Olympus, and the world.” He saw the question forming on her face and shook his head. “While I appreciate your help, I do not owe a mortal like yourself, or anyone else, an apology or explanation.” He then held out a small, golden plate holding a piece of ambrosia no bigger than her thumbnail.

“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 though all of humanity to find my niece. It will be like seeking a specific grain of sand on the beach. If you are up to this task, take the ambrosia and give yourself the time to develop the maturity and wisdom you will need to complete your quest. When you return to me with the key, I will fulfill my promise and Xena will be resurrected.”

As the memory started to fade back into her subconscious, Gabrielle remembered the last thing the god said to her. “Your life will be long, Gabrielle. 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, then looked up 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 from 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, or if I need to generate documentation. Basically the super illegal stuff. It also acts like a private surveillance and intelligence gathering company, also not strictly legal. We have people who scour public records, cultivate assets, and gather information 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, and we leave that stuff well alone. Sometimes people are on the run, sometimes they 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. “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. “That way, I can introduce you to everyone on the bridge. After that, I’ll take you back to your place and from there 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 any more negativity.”

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 was 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 command center, or central navigation, was the technological nerve center of the ship. It was dimly lit; much of the ambient 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 of the main deck. There was a chair at the center of the console, and 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 nothing about her attire that indicated she was the captain. In fact, as Aphrodite’s eyes adjusted to the ambient light, she realized everyone was dressed in the same casual attire as the two men from 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 as they entered the room, Gabrielle following her with Argo trailing behind. All talk stopped as the captain called them to attention.

“Gabrielle on deck,” she said, loud enough for everyone to hear. Everyone stopped what they were doing and gave 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 assembled crew. “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. While everyone in the room appeared to be in their early thirties to late forties – the same age that she and Gabrielle appeared to be, the captain looked to Aphrodite too young to be commanding a ship. Michelle, she noted, was in her early forties, 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. But her demeanor made it clear that she was every inch in charge.

“I hope breakfast was okay?” she asked sincerely.

Still clasping the woman’s hand, Aphrodite looked directly into her eyes, smiled at her, and felt the woman’s pulse speed up in response. “The crepes were divine, and 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 empathy. This was a woman who had seen personal difficulty, yet triumphed over it.

“It’s nice to meet you,” the goddess said. She squeezed the woman’s hand, conveying respect. Elaine smiled in response.

“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; his arms 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, punctuated with a distinct stripe of gray was pulled back into bun. Her nose was pierced and her skin was a

stunning rich brown. She spoke with a slight, lilting accent that Aphrodite placed as New Delhi.

“Next to Steve and Hatsuo is Bohemian Van Lyle, but we call him Bo. He’s also in security.”

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.’ With his tanned skin, shoulder length light brown dreadlocks and green eyes that twinkled mischievously, 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 engulfed 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 the woman was suspicious of her. Her warm smile did not extend to 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 dramatically on the hassles.”

“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 the deck eating breakfast. The next shots 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, matter-of-factly.

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 patch of artificial grass 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 obviously wanted their tracks covered, 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 gestured 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 and 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 contact 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? Would we be ready if we needed to get underway in a hurry?”

Steve nodded. “We are expecting to take delivery of a couple of more spare parts later this afternoon. Food stores are all 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 outside of routine. Just be ready to leave at a moment’s notice. Is anyone rotating off the ship?”

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, adding, “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. To the bard’s surprise, Aphrodite pushed the front door open and walked in. “You don’t lock your front door?”

“Would you break into a god’s home?” she asked. “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 paused, making a mental note to herself. “I need to tell him I may be gone for a while.”

The goddess led her through the house, and this time Gabrielle felt more at liberty to stop and take in her surroundings. Argo was busily exploring as well, sniffing everywhere, 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 and art nouveau, all of which seemed at home with the early American and more modern accents.

“I want to grab a few things,” Aphrodite said, heading upstairs. Argo bounded after her, with Gabrielle bringing up the rear. Simple picture frames holding pictures of Aphrodite and an older, handsome man in a wheelchair lined the wall up the stairs. In some shots he was by himself, much younger and vital looking: standing on a mountainside in one, posing next to a kayak in another, then a mountain bike. In the photos with Aphrodite he was older, clearly sick and frail. “How long were you married?” the bard asked. “This last time,” she clarified.

Aphrodite smiled, entering her bedroom, “Five very nice years,” she said. “I had recently been dumped, if you can believe that. I was at a charity fundraiser, and I’d just run into my ex, so I was pretty steamed. I was standing 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; and 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’ve honestly never had someone’s family embrace me the way Max’s family has. Max passed away two years ago, but I still keep in touch with them.”

While Gabrielle knew the goddess understood mortality even better than she did, she still found herself saying, “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

Aphrodite had been going through her closet, deciding which clothes to pack in a small duffel bag. At Gabrielle’s words, she stopped what she was doing and looked at the bard. Gabrielle was standing on the other side of the bed, having just set the family photo back on the nightstand. Her expression was sincere, poignantly indicating 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 went to Gabrielle. 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 yet again impressed at what a remarkable creature you’ve become.”

Gabrielle smiled, not really knowing what to say. She needn’t have worried. A moment later the goddess leaned forward, covering her mouth with a passionate kiss while 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, barking twice in warning. A man’s voice called up 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 having 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, 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 and resumed 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, 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. Easily six and a half feet tall, wide and muscled, Gabrielle 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 knowingly at her. “You are family, right?”

“Dwayne!” Aphrodite scolded, less gently than Gabrielle had been with 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 in an interested, 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 a while, 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 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 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, then 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. The memory was clearly 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.”



“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, 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.

“I met Rick in the mid-nineties. 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 a while my presence can 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?”

“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.

“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?”

“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 a while 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. The last time I finished med school was in the sixties. I’ve gone through formal medical training 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 during the westward expansion, before the gold rush." Gabrielle explained. "I wanted to buy land, but 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 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 a while," 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, clearing 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, helping as many people as I could make their way to Canada. I even met Harriet Tubman. That woman was a serious badass."

Gabrielle nodded. "Amelia Earhart. Met her once, another badass."

"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 went to 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 supermodel. She guessed he was in his sixties, with 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."

"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," 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 between Rick and Aphrodite. She didn't hit him, but stopped the tip of the pool cue 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 just as quickly returned it to 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. 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. The piece looked almost like mother of pearl, 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 *take* 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 duffel 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,” she said, taking the goddess’ hand. “What’s going on?”

Aphrodite looked over at Gabrielle, her face flush with annoyance. “He’s such a douche,” 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.”

Gabrielle pressed on. “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 that 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, and 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. "Aphrodite, that you would give that up to get Xena back means more than I can say."

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.

"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.



"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. “With the recent 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 away; the possibility was almost too much. “*When* you get her back,” the goddess continued, “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 Galileo is, much less Mandela or any contemporary cultural references – she 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. “Don’t get me wrong,” she added hurriedly, “If anyone can do this, it’s Xena, because 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, but I stopped sometime before the middle ages because it was just 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 – and you will become a former lover, my dear – I will still hang out with you.”

Gabrielle looked a little stunned by the observation but smiled sadly. Of course that was what was going to happen. It wasn’t as if 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, 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 itself for its descent into the ocean horizon, the bard and goddess headed south on the 101 freeway, a song playlist about Southern California providing the 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, realizing that 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 different 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 and 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 into 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." The goddess did as she was instructed and handed the phone back. The bard called up a number on the car's display, Susan Yin's voice came over the car speakers.

"Yes, Gabrielle?"

In that moment, hearing the voice of her de facto right hand, Gabrielle made a split decision to read in the woman on the other end of the line regarding the truth. The centuries had taught the bard to trust her own instincts, and while what she was going to do was something that had landed her in a psychiatric hospital more than once, her gut told her this was the right move.

"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 to the ship for her tomorrow. Valerie has Class One clearance.”

“Is she assigned to SP?” Susan asked.

“Sort of, yes. 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 grinned.

“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 I are the only people who know all the aliases.”

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

“Last name?”

“Amphipoli. Let’s run the identity two ways with American and Greek citizenship, and 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,”

“And Susan, 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, this is 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 with you 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 tender 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, it spoke volumes.



Gabrielle slid into bed next to Aphrodite, who was watching her. Neither woman bothered with sleeping attire. Unlike the previous night, which had been very much about releasing pent up lust and seduction, tonight was a more settled intimacy between them, 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 said finally.

"I just watched you brush your teeth. I think I can handle unsexy."

"Would you mind if I wrote in my journal for a few minutes? "I usually do it before I go to bed, and I didn't last night and..."

Again, Gabrielle was rewarded a smile 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 complied, and retrieved her journal. 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 your 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 to hold two thousand years of memories.

"You're welcome to read them, if you're curious about what I've been up to," Gabrielle said, passing the book over to Aphrodite and inviting her to look at its pages. The goddess immediately saw why the bard wasn't worried about anyone reading her most intimate thoughts. The writing was 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 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... interactions," 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 knew it was just teasing, Gabrielle could sense something else lurking just below the surface. If Aphrodite had been human, she might suspect a wounded ego.

"Hold on." Turning to the back of the book, she carefully tore some pages from the back of volume and started writing, 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.

As Gabrielle's attention was clearly elsewhere, she turned her attention back to the iPad. Twenty minutes later, Gabrielle finished and slid 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, first 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 the app. She watched Gabrielle for a moment; the bard was lost in her own thoughts of what she was recording for Xena. Checking the time on the iPad, she realized 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 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 pornographic. “Holy shit, Gabrielle,” Aphrodite breathed as she continued to read. The vignette 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 even humor. Flipping to the backside of the second page the goddess couldn’t help but giggle. “Oh you wish,” she said out loud.

Aphrodite moved on to the third page as the bard finished with her journal. Gabrielle watched Aphrodite read her words, inwardly beaming with satisfaction as crisp blue eyes flared with hunger and desire. By the time the goddess flipped over the fourth page, Gabrielle could almost feel the heat radiating from the other woman.

Aphrodite finished the document, tossed the pages and iPad to the floor, and turned to look at Gabrielle. “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 when Aphrodite sat up in bed and wondered if she should feel guilty or not. She knew she was not listening to her own better angels by indulging her desires with the bard. If she were to be perfectly honest, she could not remember the last time she’d indulged herself this way with a human, let alone a human woman. Gabrielle’s immortality was of course the reason she felt safe in letting go, knowing that she wouldn’t hurt her. Perhaps it was selfish on her part, still she doubted there would be any complaints from her companion. She gazed down at the bard, 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 she really didn’t want to think about it.

The sound of crickets drew her from her thoughts. She looked towards the source and saw Gabrielle’s phone light up from the nightstand across from her. She nudged her companion. “Wake up honey, 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. Seeing it was Susan Yin calling, she answered.

“Gabrielle’s phone, this is Valerie.”

Susan paused before responding. “Um...is Gabrielle there?”

“She’s here alright,” Aphrodite said looking down, “I’m just having some trouble waking her up.” She grimaced as soon as words left her mouth. This was not Dwayne, a close confidant with whom Gabrielle might discuss her sexual escapades, on the other end of the line. She didn’t know how much the bard’s employees knew about her private life and regretted having 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, can you fill her in?"

"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, then added, "The new moon is in three weeks, on the twenty-third."

"Yeah, I think Gabrielle needs to hear this from you. Hold on and I'll try to wake her again." Setting the phone down on the bed, she pushed Gabrielle onto her back, placed one hand on the bard's heart, the other on her forehead, then closed her eyes and concentrated.

The bard's eye flew open and she bolted upright in the bed. "By the gods! Holy fuck that was amazing! I can't even..." Her voice trailed off when Aphrodite closed her eyes and shook her head vigorously. She looked at her quizzically, then saw the caller ID on her phone as Aphrodite handed it to her, the phone number for her Senior Vice President of Special Projects on its screen. Were she any younger than her two thousand years, Gabrielle Evans would probably have 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 repeated the message she'd given Aphrodite, then waited for the bard's response.

Gabrielle tapped her watch on the nightstand. The face lit up with the time, 03:30. "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?"

"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 in Cabo San Lucas until the new moon, and 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 the current assignment is completed. The crew should rotate out. If they don't want to, that's fine, but this could be dicey, and I need them to be sharp."

"Understood," Susan said before hanging up.

Gabrielle put the phone back on the nightstand, her near death embarrassment having been dampened by the 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 didn't give any indication she was still upset by this topic, despite having been positively furious about it 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 of course you’re Hephaestus, 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, there was a village that was being harassed by a giant. A few miles away to the east, my men found a sleeping Titan. I remembered the incantation that awakens Titans, so I woke him up, asked 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, destroying the anvil in the process?”

“Exactly.”

“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 after all – 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.”

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

“Absolutely. When I left Greece after my great grandchildren 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 and get everything planned, so it’s all good.”

“So you have nothing left to worry about for now?” Aphrodite whispered near the bard’s ear.

“Well maybe one thing.” Gabrielle replied with a mischievous grin.



Gabrielle woke with a start, relaxed and revitalized in a way that defied description. Flashbacks of the previous night’s activities replayed in her mind, and she

blushed at the memory, but as she rolled over, she realized she was alone. She checked her watch, and was shocked to see it was 11:21AM.

“Fuck.” She picked up her phone to find a number of missed phone calls and texts from Susan Yin, a few from the bridge checking for signs of life, and one from Aphrodite which read, ‘*Don’t worry about a thing, hon, I got this.*’ She sat up and hit the intercom button to contact the bridge.

“Yes Gabrielle?” Michelle’s voice greeted her, bemusement oozing out from under the thinnest veneer of professionalism. Realizing she was the reason, she felt like an idiot.

She ignored the jab. “Is Susan Yin onboard?”

“Why yes, she’s having brunch on the sundeck with Aphrodite. Argo is there too, angling for Second Breakfast.” Gabrielle inwardly groaned, and felt her cheeks flushing crimson. She closed her eyes, wishing she could manipulate time instead of just outlive it.

She surrendered to the inevitable, but decided there was no way she was going anywhere without a shower. She turned to get out of bed and winced in pain. Gingerly touching her neck, she was surprised at how much it hurt. One more thing to worry about.

“Please tell Susan I apologize and I’ll be on deck in about twenty minutes.”

“Will do. And Gabrielle?”

“Yes?”

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

“Thank you, Michelle.” This was a wrinkle she should have foreseen, but had missed completely. 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.

She decided that neither Xena, nor anyone else could actually take Aphrodite’s place. Their relationship might change, but the goddess was always going to hold a unique place in the bard’s life. How could she not? People don’t just forget what they know about you and what you’ve shared together. But none of that took anything away from her love for Xena.

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

The day was warm, so she dressed in shorts and a t-shirt after her shower. Not bothering with shoes, she headed up to the sun deck, relieved that only a few 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, touching her neck as if wiping away a smudge of dirt. The pain vanished, and as the bard nonchalantly glanced down at her arm and thigh, she noticed 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 from the table and dumping the contents onto the table. Anna Winter’s passport, driver’s license, credit cards, including a black American Express card identical to Gabrielle’s, social security card, insurance card for the company vehicles, in short, all the plastic and identification one would have in their wallet, as well as several bound stacks of US currency, slid out in a pile.

Ten thousand?” Gabrielle indicated the money.

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

Sarah Gibson approached their table with a tray. There was a very large shot of 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.

While Gabrielle tried to think up a classy retort, Aphrodite pulled a few bills from one of the stacks, gathered some of the documentation and credit cards, and returned the rest of the cash and documents to the envelope. “You kids have fun,” she said, “I’ve got shopping to do and the boat is waiting to take me ashore. Mind if I take Argo with me?” She stood up, 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 her 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 comprised mostly of 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 Susan had worked for her as ‘Gabrielle Evans,’ and the years before that as ‘Rebekah Evans,’ and realized 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 she had kept it from her business life. If it had been a hundred years earlier Gabrielle might have been concerned this would change how the other woman saw her, or if she had any questions that needed clarification. But, this was 2017, and no one gave a shit. In any case, 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, 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 while 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 provisional placement, including Brian. Sabin is going to work directly with him, 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 to the study another double espresso for me and another cup of coffee for Susan.” As an afterthought she added “And some scotch with 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.”

Being quite familiar with *The Hippolyta*, the other woman led the way. 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?”

Susan looked slightly bewildered. “I’m not sure. I mean, I mentioned him when 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. It’s been too long since Shen and I hung out. 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.”

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 homier.

To one side was a somewhat cluttered desk. There were several shelves with books and antique looking mementos. A number of personal photos adorned the walls and bookcase. Susan settled herself on the couch against the far wall. On the low table in front of the couch were waiting a coffee, double espresso, bottle of Scotch and two glasses. Gabrielle closed the door to the study and then crossed to her desk where she flipped a switch. A low hum was followed by white noise and a pale blue light in the corner illuminating, indicating that 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 quite in this fashion before. “You don’t seem to find that odd.”

“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. You were going by Ingrid Bard at the time.”

“I remember him then,” Gabrielle replied smiling fondly. “A young man of twenty. He was part of the second wave of immigrants from China, and we met in San Francisco. I’d landed in Halifax Nova Scotia 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 The Chakram Shipping & Holding Company then?”

“It was. It was a difficult time for me then and your grandfather was wise and kind beyond his years.” It occurred to Gabrielle 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-consuming, laborious process that took years. Inventing children or relatives people never saw me with, or adopting a relative’s child. Just before I made the 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 when she started in fifty-two, because Betty 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.” Gabrielle was surprised at how the conversation was going. “And you? 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 while 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 has 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 generously into both glasses.

“That’s the time of Caesar,” Susan finally said, 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 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. 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, and a lot of professions. I’ve known you my whole life, seventy-three years, and 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. Acquisitions makes so much more sense 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, the vehicles – you’re saving things knowing in several hundred years they will be priceless.” Susan looked relieved, almost giddy at the realization that so much of what she’d seen in her working life now made sense. “I thought you were an amazingly savvy businesswoman, but 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. 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 she might 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, but wished the alcohol could also give her inspiration as to how to handle this next round 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 aren’t 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 gods 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 and usually get exaggerated. In your own lifetime you’ve seen the invention of Scientology, which is a new religion completely created by a science fiction author. Already the myths about him grow among his believers.”

Susan nodded, considering the 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 more 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 love of my life is a different 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 floozy. I'm kind of being a floozy right now, which is fine with Aphrodite.

"When I was a kid, there was this story that people had two heads, four arms and 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, 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'll find that your attitudes about monogamy, sexual orientation, and any number of things get really murky." She took a deep breath, not feeling at all comfortable having this personal of a conversation with an employee, regardless of how remarkable the conversation was going. "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 positive force for things. 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 is Gabrielle. I don't return to it very often, but it was time; I'd missed it.

"Well I'm happy to know you by 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 of saying goodbye to him

will be yours to say long after I'm gone, and 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 much 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 side of the yacht, she watched the powerboat motor back to the dock in the marina. She considered options of how best to tell the truth to the 15 crewmembers aboard *The Hippolyta*. 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 to realize she'd been working all day. While she thought she'd created 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 and 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.

As she ended the call, there was a knock at the door to her study. “Come in,” she called.

Aphrodite swept in, 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 dryly, getting up from the desk with 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 to a handsome man standing 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 that was not quite as muscle-bound as some others on the crew. Wearing casual slacks, loafers and a collared shirt, his “vacation-wear” ensemble was more stylishly put together than the staff Aphrodite had met on the bridge that first night. To the goddess’s ears, his accent placed him as growing up in the English countryside, then moving to London as soon as he was able. His manner spoke volumes; this was a man who made order out of chaos. It then became very apparent to the goddess that he was the reason 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. “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 smiled. “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. She was also realizing that she was looking at the 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...”

Gabrielle waved her off. “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,” Aphrodite 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, 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, the inevitability of sadness 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.”