

Chapter 6: Fun in the Sun

The long weekend on Catalina Island was exactly the break Gabrielle had been looking for. The change of both scenery and routine seemed to lift the spirits of everyone onboard *The Hippolyta*. Bard and goddess went through the closet and packed away a third of the contents therein. Aphrodite had her curiosity satisfied by discovering that the drawers were indeed as neat and tidy as the rest of the closet.

“I can’t take credit,” Gabrielle confessed, “the people assigned as stewards keep me in shape. This rotation it’s Blake Taylor and Samantha Ramirez. The only place that is off limits to the crew is the study, it’s therefore the messiest place on the ship. Occasionally they make me straighten it up, but not often enough.”

Gabrielle went through the wardrobe, impressed with how thorough Aphrodite was in anticipating what Xena might need. There were the usual undergarments, some less casual clothes, such as jeans and t-shirts, shoes, blouses, jackets, a couple of dresses, some technical outdoor clothing, a pair of motorcycle boots, a leather jacket, and various accessories.

She chuckled, holding up a telltale white bag from the Apple Store. “You don’t think an iPhone and Apple Watch are overkill? I mean, aren’t we are talking about a woman whose most advanced possession was a round flying knife?”

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

For her own attire, the goddess unpacked her duffle bag into the drawer that Gabrielle had emptied for her use. She hung up the things that she didn’t want to get wrinkled and added her new purchases as well. “Where did you put it?” she asked, trying to sound nonchalant as she held up a new jacket and studied her reflection in the full-length mirror.

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

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

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

With the sun warm on her skin and the smell of steaks coming from the well-tended barbecue, Gabrielle didn’t think the day could be any more perfect, aside from

having Xena there with her, of course. From her vantage point on a beach towel at the stern of the yacht, she had full view of her dog frolicking in the water with a few of the crew, as well as people enjoying other areas of the ship. She was absently listening to a political radio show podcast that several other members of her crew were enjoying, laughing at the jokes and debating the current political climate. While she felt distracted by Aphrodite's presence, she was grateful for the respite from the dismal realities of the world at large.

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

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

Wolfgang shrugged, "Every day is a new horror show..."

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

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

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

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

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

Gabrielle did a double take. Aphrodite was wearing her new swimsuit, a black and pale blue bikini. The bard wasn't sure if it was the suit, or that the goddess had just been in the water, which she was casually shaking from her short hair, but something about the goddess was different. The water seemed to shimmer as it ran in rivulets down her body, and the goddess seemed to be glowing. Suddenly the bard felt very thirsty.

Wolfgang looked like a deer caught in headlights, unable to pull his eyes from the goddess standing in front of him. "Um...ah...this is Vox Wandre," he said quickly, "our engineer. Um...hey... I think I need a swim." He handed Vox a tube of sunscreen and bolted for the water. He was quickly joined by Steve, who had been lounging nearby and listening to the podcast, leaving Blake alone to tend the laptop. It was not lost on Gabrielle that everyone in the vicinity was looking at Aphrodite, and that the two now splashing in the water had both been wearing speedos.

Vox extended her hand to Aphrodite. “Nice to meet you,” she said, her expression ambivalent.

As the goddess shook her hand, it was all she could do to not smile at the young woman sympathetically. While not outwardly hostile, it was clear from the strong grip and eye contact that the engineer was not a fan of the Goddess of Love.

“You and Wolfgang were saying something about the Stephanie Miller Show?” Gabrielle asked, attempting to diffuse the tension.

“What?” Vox asked. “Oh, yeah. Nah,” she shrugged carelessly. “Just the usual stuff. Playing clips from the Gideon Power Hour and making fun of him. Shit like that.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I’ll admit I’m behind,” she said a little color tinting her cheeks. “I’ve been, ah... busy.”

“So I’ve heard,” Vox said, casting a baleful glance at Aphrodite. Realizing she’d just overstepped, Vox quickly tried to backtrack. “I was below deck in the engine room the other day with Ingrid when you made the introductions on the bridge so I wanted to come by and say ‘Hi’. You know, introduce myself.”

“Ah,” Gabrielle said with a nod, forgiving the young woman’s gaff.

“And to bring you this,” she added. Extending her hand holding the tube of sunscreen. “Wolfie thought you might need it.”

“Thanks,” Aphrodite said, taking the sunscreen from the other woman, which only served to intensify her frown.

The bard’s expression grew stern, and she turned her head towards the men in the water. “Wolfgang Louise Fowler did you pull the tattoo bet again?”

“Your middle name is Louise?” Aphrodite asked with a chuckle.

The young man laughed and shook his head. “No, it’s from the radio show. When you’re in trouble everyone gets the middle name Louise. It’s a thing.” Treading water, he raised his hands helplessly. “It was too easy.”

“How much did you bet him?” the bard asked, turning her attention back to the lanky butch.

“Five hundred bucks,” Vox said quietly.

“Exposition, please?” Aphrodite looked at Wolfgang, who dove under the water to avoid answering. She waited until he came back up for air, then casually ran her fingers through her hair, pushing the short blond tresses away from her face. As she did so, she raised her arms, which in turn raised her chest and caused the muscles of her abdomen to flex. This had the desired effect; the young man was transfixed. The slicked back hair made the goddess look far more butch than Gabrielle was accustomed, and as much as Gabrielle wanted to stare, she allowed herself only a cursory glance.

“No one ever believes that Gabrielle has a giant dragon tattoo that covers her whole back,” Bohemian explained on behalf of the distracted navigator. “The new guy nearly always falls for it, and Vox is the newest member of the crew.”

Aphrodite chuckled and turned towards Vox. With her short hair smoothed back against her head, she had a more severe, commanding presence. “Why don’t you believe Gabrielle has a giant, gorgeous, stunning dragon covering her back?” Her tone was deceptively sweet. The young woman looked at Aphrodite with a newfound, albeit grudging respect.

Vox shrugged, which seemed to be her go-to maneuver. “She just doesn’t seem like the type, or whatever.”

Aphrodite nodded at Gabrielle. The bard rolled her eyes, stood up, and turned around, showing Vox the sinuous, winged, claw-footed dragon that wound its way from her tailbone to the nape of her neck and across both shoulders.

“Holy shit,” the young woman exclaimed. She impulsively reached out to touch it, pulling back as she realized she was about to touch her employer so intimately.

“It’s always the femmy ones you have to watch out for.” Aphrodite winked at Vox as the engineer mentally readjusted her opinions on her boss.

“Wolfgang isn’t taking your money,” Gabrielle said, frowning at Aphrodite. “This bet thing is too much like hazing and *it isn’t okay*.”

“Hey man, I wouldn’t do that to Vox!” Bohemian protested at being included in the blanket chastisement. “We went through training together in Transportation. She’d kick my ass.” He winked at his friend, who cracked a smile in spite of herself.

“No, it’s cool.” Vox demurred. “I’m one of the guys, and they’ve all been great – even Bo.” She glanced at the sunscreen that Aphrodite had set down on a low table nearby then back at the goddess. “I’m going to get back to the podcast. I’ll see you guys after dinner.”

“I’ll join you,” Bohemian said, getting up to follow the engineer, and wrapping a towel around his baggy swim trunks so he didn’t leave a trail of water behind him.

“Okay,” Gabrielle said with warmth and kindness. When they’d departed, she sat back down on her towel.

“You didn’t call me ‘Aphrodite Louise’. I guess I’m not in trouble?” The goddess moved closer to her lover. Gabrielle responded by giving her a sidewise look, picking up her beer and taking a long pull. With seriousness the goddess added, “That one is going to be trouble. She’s absolutely in love with you.”

“For now,” Gabrielle replied quietly, “She’s young and just figuring out who she is. I’d rather her be infatuated with me than Michelle or anyone else in the crew.”

“Not your first rodeo with a love-sick employee?”

“It happens from time to time. They always end up either getting a grip on themselves, transferring out of the department, or leaving the organization entirely. Sometimes, they become really exceptional additions to the team.”

“And you never indulge?” Aphrodite asked with a raised eyebrow.

Gabrielle shook her head. “Not for a very, *very* long time at work, and certainly never in the Transportation or Special Projects divisions. They’re too important. I indulge elsewhere.”

“You’re going to have to tell me all about your indulgences later,” Aphrodite said with a flirtatious wink. “Should I use the sunscreen? I know your skin won’t burn, but for appearances?”

Gabrielle put her sunglasses back down and looked around. Frequent glances were still coming the goddess’ way, and she was either unaware or chose not to acknowledge it. “Sure. Usually I wear a long-sleeved surf shirt to avoid the question about not burning or tanning, but the sun feels so nice.”

Aphrodite put her sunglasses on before applying the cream to the bard’s back. She glanced over at the table a short distance away where several people were talking politics over the podcast and sure enough, Vox was glowering jealously at her. She resisted the urge to take off her sunglasses and wink.

Argo ambled over and curled up next to her mistress to enjoy a nice scratch behind the ears. “There is something different about you,” Gabrielle said as the goddess unnecessarily applied sunscreen to her lover’s back.

“I love the ocean,” Aphrodite replied. “I was born from sea foam and it makes me feel young and reckless.”

Gabrielle nodded. “It shows. You know, we’re going to have a ten-year old on this ship any minute now,” she added quietly, for the goddess’ ears alone.

“I promise to behave,” Aphrodite assured her, adding, “I’m great with kids.”

Gabrielle chuckled and took another pull from her beer. She cast a sympathetic glance at the men in the water because they had chosen to wear speedos instead of baggy swimming trunks. “I’m just glad the affect you have on me doesn’t show,” she said quietly with a nod to the men off the back of the boat, still swimming.

Now it was Aphrodite’s turn to chuckle, “I think it’s adorable that you don’t think it shows.” Gabrielle was going to respond when the voice of a newcomer diverted her attention.

“I just got off duty. What’d I miss?” Michelle approached the barbecue and checking the doneness of the meats and vegetables. Sarah shoed her away.

“I’m not micromanaging your captaining. You leave my barbecue alone.” She teased.

“Look who’s being obvious,” the bard muttered to Aphrodite, who had just spotted the captain. Michelle was wearing a bikini, a gradation of the colors of a sunset that contrasted beautifully with her light brown skin. Her curly brown hair had been released from its professional bun and fell just past her shoulders. Well-muscled and confident, she looked like she had just stepped off the cover of a sports magazine swimsuit edition. As the bard had inwardly predicted, the goddess took notice of Michelle, much the same way Steve and Wolfgang had just been looking at her.

“Just so you know,” Gabrielle said quietly, “the crew is very much off-limits for you too, especially the captain.”

“That’s a stupid rule,” Aphrodite said feigning a pout.

“Um, no, it’s a law,” Gabrielle replied. “You kinda, sorta work for me now. I mean, you *are* on the expense accounts.”

“You’re just jealous,” the goddess countered.

“Perhaps...” Gabrielle coyly demurred, turning her head towards the sound of an approaching helicopter.

“Okay. Better now?” Aphrodite asked.

Gabrielle turned back to the goddess and did a double take. The shimmer and glow were gone, and Aphrodite now looked like any other gorgeous woman, as opposed to the walking aphrodisiac from a moment earlier. “Should we go greet them?” She watched Argo shake the water from her coat and bound up the stairs to the upper decks.

“Nope,” Gabrielle said, laying back and enjoying the warmth of the sun. “We’ve got a routine, you see. Argo will go greet them. Susan will want to get the two of them settled into the guest stateroom. Then, he’s going to have to decide if he wants to hunt for his chocolate candy bar now or go swimming first.”

“You hide a candy bar?”

“Susan is pretty strict about what he eats when he’s not at school, but she knows I do it and is fine with it. Somewhere on board is a dark chocolate peppermint candy bar

and he'll run around the ship to find it." She shrugged. "It's good exercise. I read it in the Godmother Handbook."

Aphrodite was amused. She looked forward to spending the weekend with a young person. It had been a long time. "What other kinds of things do you guys do together?" she asked.

"He will tell me about what's going on in school, complain about his history lessons, we'll watch movies. I'm not really into video games," she gave Aphrodite an 'it's not as interesting when you've already done it', expression over the top of her sunglasses. "But there are plenty of people on the crew, certainly with this particular crew, who will play with him. You know, normal ten-year-old stuff."

To Aphrodite's delight (and Gabrielle's regret), Michelle had taken a seat on the edge of the deck while Gabrielle had been speaking.

"You guys have to play music tonight," Michelle suggested. "Shen loves it when you guys play."

"I saw all the instruments," Aphrodite said.

"Not all of them," Bohemian corrected, returning to the group. He sat down next to Aphrodite and dangled his legs in the water as well. "Gabrielle has this amazing lute from the Renaissance. It's kept in the vault. Occasionally we can get her to play it for us."

"Well I think that's settled," Aphrodite said, looking forward to the future concert.

"I'm hardly the only musician onboard," Gabrielle with a nod to Bo. "We've stayed up many a night, butchering songs by any number of contemporary artists."

"Just don't ask her to sing, though," Michelle playfully cautioned. "Gabrielle is an amazing musician, but singer she is not."

The goddess laughed out loud. "All these years, and you still can't carry a tune in a bucket?"

"Yeah well," the bard said with a blush.

Gabrielle was saved from further embarrassment by the lanky ten-year-old as he bounded across the main deck and climbed down the stairs to the dive deck. "Squirrel!" he shouted enthusiastically.

"Moose!" Gabrielle said as he rushed over to give her a hug. That mission accomplished, he went to the other crew members nearby and gave them high fives or fist bumps. Returning to Gabrielle, he looked over at Aphrodite and was suddenly overcome with shyness. "Shen," Gabrielle said encouragingly, "I want you to meet my friend, Aphrodite."

"It's very nice to meet you Shen," Aphrodite said extending her hand. "Or should I call you Moose?"

The young boy shook it, then deciding that the goddess was okay, offered her a fist bump that she happily returned. "Gabrielle is the only one who calls me Moose," he explained. "We used to watch Rocky and Bullwinkle when I was a kid."

"How was the trip from school?" The boy shrugged noncommittally at Gabrielle's question, assuming the posture of a jaded youngster.

"Helicopters are noisy, but we did see a pod of whales on the way here, which was cool. What is my crew assignment?" he asked.

"Whales are pretty cool," Gabrielle agreed. "So, you've been assigned breakfast duty tomorrow," Gabrielle said apologetically, as if she were giving him the world's

worst homework. His face lit up. Clearly the kitchen was not the worst place in the world to be, in his estimation.

From the barbecue Elaine started to quietly chant “smorgasbord, smorgasbord...” a chant that was quickly picked up by the two men in the water and Michelle, who was sitting next to Aphrodite.

“Pancake Smorgasbord!” Shen announced to the cheers of the assembled crew.

“It’s fantastic,” Michelle explained to Aphrodite. “He gets to pick three assistants and we have the most amazing collection of pancakes from around the world.” Quietly she added, “It’s so adorable. He always picks different crew because he doesn’t want anyone to feel left out.” Aphrodite smiled, already able to see Gabrielle’s influence on the small boy. Several on-duty crew suddenly appeared along the railing, playfully shoving each other out of the way and shouting to get Shen’s attention.

“Pick me!” Nicolai shouted from the railing, waving his hand, his thick Russian accent booming over the crew below.

Michelle leaned over towards Shen. “He’s the sous chef this rotation,” she said conspiratorially.

“You already get to work in the kitchen,” Shen shouted back. “Besides, I picked you last time,” he said apologetically. “Last time it was you, Samantha, and Wolfgang.” Still treading water, Wolfgang slowly put down his hand. The boy looked around at the faces of the crew and tapped Aphrodite on the shoulder. “You’re new, I pick you.”

“Awesome!” she said with a huge radiant grin.

“And Bo,” Shen added, as Bohemian happily accepted Aphrodite’s high five.

“And Gabrielle.”

The selections made, the on-duty crew went back to work while Gabrielle shared high fives with Bo and Aphrodite. Susan joined them on deck as Sarah called everyone to dinner. People made their way to the barbecue area and filled their plates with cooked meats, vegetables, and a variety of salads and other side dishes. Like all of the meals the goddess had shared with the crew, she enjoyed the sense of camaraderie this close-knit group provided. There was no denying it felt more like a family than crew of co-workers. Gabrielle was exceptionally good at bringing the right mix of personalities and skills together, and Aphrodite basked in the heady chemistry.

After dinner, everyone helped out with clearing the plates, regardless of their assigned duties. Several of the off-duty crew retreated to the galley to wash dishes while others retrieved an array of musical instruments, including the drum kit and amplifiers from below deck. A concert area was set up on the sun deck at the stern of the ship. Chairs were arranged for spectators, with some of the on-duty crew joining them. Elaine, presently in command, had a tablet with her that she frequently scanned to check readouts from the command room. Hatsuo was doing the same thing on his own tablet. Bohemian emerged with a black hard-shell case containing the lute, brought forth from its home in the ship’s vault.

Aphrodite took in the crisp, clear night and brightly shining stars. Everyone had put on warmer clothes against the evening chill. The water could be heard lapping against the hull of the yacht. The vessel was much too large to fit any of the moorings at Two Harbors, so they were anchored further out in deeper waters than most vessels required. A number of curious boats had sailed or motored past to take in the sight of the large ship, and now several onlookers were about to get a surprise concert. It wouldn’t take

much imagining to put herself back in Greece watching a play or a concert, when the world made much more sense than it did now.

Gabrielle picked up the lute and checked the tuning. “Any requests?” she asked Shen, her tone implying that she knew full well what he was going to ask her.

“Eruption!” he yelled, to the delight of the rest of the crew.

Aphrodite couldn’t help but chuckle. Leave it to a 21st century ten-year-old to ask for a song that would have confused the hell out of whomever made the 16th century instrument Gabrielle was holding. The goddess acknowledged that even though the instrument lacked a tremolo bar, Gabrielle did a fantastic rendition of the Van Halen classic. More impressive was that as she finished, she added strains of the Scott Joplin tune *Maple Leaf Rag* and then the song from the cantina scene in *Star Wars*. Shen was delighted. When she finished, Aphrodite could hear cheering from several boats that had gathered nearby.

“Do you know anything from the actual Renaissance?” Aphrodite asked coyly. “Something that might have actually been played on that gorgeous instrument?”

“Are you offering to sing?” Gabrielle replied, a bit of challenge in her voice.

“You’re a history nerd as well?” Blake, the steward asked, hopefully.

Gabrielle laughed. “She’s more of a history nerd than I am.”

“Oh this, I’ve got to see,” Rebekah Luna said, the disbelief obvious in her voice.

“Okay,” Aphrodite said as she approached the bard. “Do you know *The Hunt Is Up* or *Flow My Tears*?”

Gabrielle nodded. “Let’s do *The Hunt Is Up*, it’s more upbeat.” To her audience she added, “From the time of Henry the Eighth, in case anyone was wondering.” Gabrielle played and Aphrodite sang in a clear crisp soprano. The crew was mesmerized. When they’d finished there was silence on the deck and in the boats near them. “Well this is awkward,” Gabrielle said quietly to her companion.

“Hush,” Aphrodite chided, “they’re having a moment.”

“How the hell do you follow that?” Bohemian groused, breaking the silence. As if on cue, the sounds of applause drifted up from the boats nearby and the crew joined in enthusiastically.

“Prisha, you’re up next,” Gabrielle said, trading the lute for an acoustic guitar as Bo secured the antique instrument in its case. Samantha Ramirez, the other steward Aphrodite had only met briefly while wandering the ship, took a seat behind the drum kit, and Ingrid Kamaka picked up the bass. “Aphrodite, I don’t think you’ve met Ingrid,” she said with a nod to her bass player. “As the mechanic this tour, we hardly ever see her outside the engine room.”

Ingrid grinned, checking the tuning on her instrument. “Gotta keep an eye on those dilithium crystals,” she said.

Aphrodite replied in perfect Klingon, “Lugh,” to which the red head responded with a playful wink.

The goddess resumed her seat with the rest of the audience and was delighted by the concert. The crew picked songs that various people sang well, or not, depending on ability, level of inebriation, or a combination thereof. Prisha sang a haunting song in Hindi. Bohemian sang an extra cheesy version of Sammy Hagar’s *One Sip* directly to Aphrodite that amused the goddess greatly. People switched instruments, taking turns sitting in the audience, getting up to sing, or playing something different. For nearly two

hours Gabrielle and the crew entertained not only themselves, but the nearby boats which had increased in number over the course of their jam session. When it got colder and the fog rolled in the call for 'last song' was made.

Sarah Gibson turned to the woman sitting behind her. "Vox hasn't sung anything."

Michelle leaned over to Aphrodite and asked, "Have you guys met?"

"Oh, Vox and I go way back," she said with a smile as the lanky woman passed her.

On her way to the stage area, the engineer stopped and knelt down to Shen's eye level. "Any requests?" she asked the boy. He whispered in her ear and she shook her head. "You know your grandmother vetoed that song because CeeLo swears too much."

"Sing something mellow," he said sleepily. "It is the last song. Sing something that makes you *feel*."

"From the mouths of babes," Michelle whispered to the goddess.

The engineer stepped up to the microphone and belted out a gut-wrenching version of Heart's *Alone* that would have left Ann Wilson in tears. The cheers from the boats below were heard through the dense fog that had started to move in over the water.

It was well after midnight when the crew set to work breaking down the drum kit and moving the instruments back below deck to protect them from the moisture and salt. Bohemian, with Shen's help, took care to wipe each instrument down and give them a thorough once-over before stowing them. Gabrielle conferred with the boy as to the proper timing of breakfast, then apologized to Susan for keeping him up so late.

"He loves it out here," Susan said as she walked with Gabrielle and Aphrodite to their staterooms. "Being around the crew is good for him, and I'd trust anyone in Transportation around him. He's convinced that Vox requested ship duty at his suggestion."

Gabrielle nodded. "We trust our lives to Transportation every day," she said, mostly out of habit, then winced when the other woman arched an eyebrow at her.

"Some of us do, anyway," the Chinese woman dryly replied.

Gabrielle nodded as the three women came to a halt outside the door of the guest stateroom suite. "We go back to the marina the day after tomorrow," she said. "I will tell the crew before we head back, and we will see what comes of it."

"Tell the crew what?" Aphrodite queried, not sure what they were talking about.

"About me," Gabrielle said.

Aphrodite looked puzzled. "Trust me, Vox is the only one who cares that you're gay, and that's because she wants to be gay all over you."

Susan chuckled. "There was a time when Michelle wanted to be gay all over Gabrielle as well, but she got over it. I had originally thought she didn't have a chance."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, "She didn't have a chance. No one has a chance. Come on, I'm standing right here."

Still smiling, Susan patted Gabrielle's arm, "This woman takes more good-natured teasing from the people who work for her than anyone I've ever met."

"Susan knows the truth about...us..." Gabrielle explained looking at Aphrodite who had a 'no duh' expression on her face. "No, not the sex truth – the age truth."

“Ohhhh,” Aphrodite said. She looked down at the Chinese woman who was not quite as tall as the bard. “Do you mind?” she asked as she raised a hand to the woman’s face.

“Not at all,” Susan said, not quite sure what was going to happen. Briefly the goddess touched the woman’s forehead with the tips of three fingers, and then gently cupped her cheek for a moment. Susan’s eyes grew wide in surprise.

“That’s amazing,” she said when the goddess finished. “I feel this... overwhelming sense of... love?”

Aphrodite shrugged, “Love is kind of my thing.” Turning to Gabrielle she added, “You can trust her. No duplicity. She’s a keeper.”

“That’s why I told her,” Gabrielle said.

“What I mean is, her counsel is sound. If Susan thinks you should tell the crew, while it might not be what I’d do, I can see why you would take her advice. She’s only ever given you the best advice she can, based on the information she has at the time.”

“Thank you, Aphrodite,” Susan said with a warm smile. She lowered her hand from the cheek where the goddess had touched her. “You are indeed an amazing creature.”

They said their ‘Good nights,’ and as Aphrodite and Gabrielle walked to the master suite, the goddess leaned into Gabrielle’s shoulder. “I’m betting I’ve got a chance. I’m just sayin.”



Later, Aphrodite was sitting up in bed against a soft pile of pillows as Gabrielle reclined against her. Gabrielle touched her arm gently and murmured contentedly, “Do you really think telling the crew is a bad idea?” The goddess thought for a moment and then squeezed the bard reassuringly.

“That’s not my call to make, love. You should stop obsessing about it,” she insisted. “If you trust them and think Susan is right, I guess you should tell them. I’m not in the business of advertising who I am so...” she chuckled near the bard’s ear. “If we’re going to take on Ares with your own private army, it would only be fair if they know what they’ve signed up for.”

Gabrielle shifted, twisting towards the goddess so she could rest her head on the other woman’s breast and absently trace invisible symbols on her abdomen with the tip of her finger. “Noticed that, did ya?”

“Your crew is too precise and efficient to be anything but a band of elite fighters. Even the lovesick one. But I have to ask, why is everyone always dressed like they’re on vacation?”

“For the same reason that *Transportation* has a friendlier ring to it than *Special Forces*. We aren’t advertising who is doing what or making it easy to identify who is crew and who might be on vacation. Depending on by whom we get boarded, and what the legal liaison determines at the time, sometimes we pose as rich families.”

“Makes sense,” the goddess agreed. “How big is your army?”

“There are about seventy people in the Transportation Division, and another forty-two in Special Projects. They cycle in and out of duty on board the ship, or providing security for other assignments, but they need to be in the division at least five years before they get ship duty. Each one of them is remarkably accomplished, even Vox.”

“As much as your young butch suitor dislikes me, I’m going to be a cakewalk compared to Xena, when she gets here. I’m afraid she may be trouble – nothing Xena can’t handle of course – but she’s kinda grown on me, and I don’t want to see her ripped limb from limb.”

“I don’t think she dislikes you.” Gabrielle protested.

“Honey, I am literally doing all of the things that she’s fantasizing about, and things it hasn’t even dawned on her to fantasize about yet. Of course, she hates me.”

“Like everyone on the ship, she is a professional regardless of what she thinks in the privacy of her own mind.” Gabrielle replied. “I trust her to do her job, and if – when – we bring Xena back, she will adjust, or she will leave, simple as that. But since you mentioned it,” she redirected with a seductive murmur, “can you really tell what people are fantasizing about?”

“I can,” Aphrodite said. “It’s remarkable how unimaginative most people are, present company excluded of course.” She ran her fingers through the bard’s hair, brushing it back from her face with a gesture that said more about comfort and caring than it did about arousal. “Which is something we can discuss in greater detail later. It is late sweetie and you should really get some sleep. We have to report to the galley at oh-seven thirty hours sharp, as per Chef Shen’s orders.”

“Are you going to sleep?” Gabrielle asked, groggily.

“Maybe,” Aphrodite replied. “I’m content to hold onto you for a while.” While she didn’t respond, the goddess could feel Gabrielle smile and then slip into a peaceful slumber, her breathing soft and measured against Aphrodite’s skin. As she held her, she thought about the bard’s upcoming meeting, and what she might possibly do to cement the crew’s loyalty to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle woke slowly, hours later, surprised to find her lover asleep. She spooned Aphrodite, softly breathing against the back of her neck. Happy to be the first one conscious for a change, she took full advantage.

The brush of soft lips against the back of her neck had the goddess of love instantly conscious. She lay there for several long moments luxuriating in the sensation of the sensual caress to her skin. She had just rolled over and begun to move things along when they were interrupted by the sound of a voice through the speaker in the bedroom.

“Gabrielle, it’s oh-seven-hundred.”

“Fucking A,” Aphrodite said, clearly frustrated and annoyed. “Just when this episode was getting good.”

“Sorry sweetie,” Gabrielle said, the disappointment evident in her voice as well.

The goddess rolled her eyes. “If Shen weren’t so damn adorable, we’d *so* be blowing this off.” She frowned at the bard’s abdomen as her stomach audibly rumbled. “I swear that thing is on a timer.”

Gabrielle blushed. “Breakfast has always been my favorite meal of the day.” Argo barked in agreement. “Hers, too.” the bard added.

The Pancake Smorgasbord did not disappoint. Aphrodite knew Gabrielle was relieved when the two of them arrived before Bo. She could tell that the bard was going to tease the security officer and stopped her. “He was intentionally late because he assumed we would be otherwise occupied.” She whispered in the bard’s ear. The collection of contradictions that was Bohemian Van Lyle had him quickly becoming Aphrodite’s favorite member of the crew. He certainly seemed the least intimidated by

her, or by Gabrielle. The genuine kindness he extended to everyone did not seem to mesh with a man who would enlist in a company's Special Forces division. He was clearly a lover, not a fighter.

"What kind of pancakes are we making today, bro?" he asked Shen as the youngster handed each of them an apron. Shen pointed to a chart he'd made on paper pinned to the bulletin board in the large galley. It had four columns, outlining each person's responsibilities and the day's menu.

"I wasn't sure if you could cook," Shen said very seriously to Aphrodite. "Your job is to help out Bo and Gabrielle and me."

"Every executive chef needs a decent sous chef," she smiled. "I'm happy to help out."

The menu listed American pancakes, Japanese pancakes, French crepes, Finnish pannukakku, and Danish aebleskiver, as well as an assortment of fruits, bacon, and smoked salmon. Shen wanted to tackle the fluffy Japanese pancakes and the American style buttermilk ones, so Gabrielle was assigned crepes; the two Scandinavian cakes were left to Bo. Aphrodite tackled the fruit and prepared several fillings for the crepes and the spherical aebleskiver.

"How long have you been a chef?" Aphrodite asked Shen as he moved a mountain of cooked bacon to a warmed plate in the oven.

"My grandmother wants me to be able to take care of myself, so I've learned how to cook and do laundry and stuff," he said. "Technically, I'm not a chef."

Aphrodite grinned, and the young boy couldn't help but smile back at her. "You kind of seem like a chef to me," she said. "Your pancakes look perfect."

He quickly glanced at Gabrielle, then took a step closer to the goddess so he could talk to her without being overheard. "I'm glad you're here," he said conspiratorially. "I don't think Gabrielle has enough friends."

"You don't?" Aphrodite asked, surprised. "Isn't your grandmother one of her friends?"

He looked a little sad as he answered. "My grandmother is a little afraid of Gabrielle," he said. "Most people are, but I'm not sure why. I'm friends with her, but I'm away at boarding school a lot, so I can't always hang out with her."

Aphrodite nodded. "You know, I'm actually here to help Gabrielle find another of her friends."

"Is she nice like you?" Shen asked.

"Unfortunately, no." Aphrodite answered honestly. "But if you give her a chance, she's really nice on the inside. She doesn't really show it on the outside the way I do."

"But it's cool if I like you better?" the boy asked, concern in his voice.

"I'd be honored if you did, but not upset if you didn't." Aphrodite sealed their pact with a fist bump.

Taking her leave of the boy, Aphrodite moved on to help the ship's security officer with his tasks. Clearly a master of multi-tasking, Bo was working on the Finnish and Danish pancakes simultaneously, incorporating the fruit fillings that Aphrodite had prepared for him. He smiled when she approached, grateful for the extra pair of hands.

"That's one seriously cool little dude," he said quietly.

"I do believe the feeling is mutual," the goddess replied. "It's like an entire ship full of siblings, aunts and uncles."

The tall man was thoughtful a moment, working on the Finnish pancakes with practiced ease. “That kind of describes the main core of Ms. Evans’ company. Not the subsidiaries mind you, those are like regular companies, I guess. But the folks who interface a lot – those of us in Transportation or SP, tech, politics and the rest – it is like family. You close with your family?”

Aphrodite chuckled. “My relationship with my family can best be described as complicated and unconventional.” He nodded, opened his mouth to respond, then thought the better of it and closed it.

“Out with it,” the goddess directed, passing him a bowl of macerated fruit filling.

“You seem really cool,” he began. “There is something about you that’s different from others she’s been involved with. There’s a lightness to Gabrielle that I can’t recall ever seeing before. Every one of us is pretty protective of her, and...”

The Goddess of Love smiled at the man, making him blush. “I get it. Don’t break her heart or you’ll break my legs, or something to that effect? Before we circle back to just how many ‘others’ there have been, I can promise that Gabrielle and I are solid. Things may evolve, but no one is getting their heart broken. In fact, I might be the one on the losing side here, but I’m a big girl and I can take it.”

“Well, if you find yourself on the rebound and wanting to make some bad decisions over a bottle of tequila, let me know?” He smiled playfully.

Aphrodite laughed, genuinely moved by the tall man’s brazenness. “I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied with a flirtatious wink.

By 8:30, a mountain of food had been prepared, and crew members were milling about the galley. Chafing dishes were set up on deck to keep the various courses warm, and early arrivals carried the prepared food, dishes, drinks, and flatware out to the deck. On schedule, nineteen people lined up for breakfast, each of them either high fiving or fist bumping Shen in congratulatory thanks.

“Shen is fantastic,” Aphrodite said to Gabrielle, joining the bard at a round table already occupied by several crew. Gabrielle was sitting with Michelle to her left, Elaine to her right. Vox was seated on the other side of Michelle, her features making it clear she was annoyed at the Captain for taking the seat she’d been hoping to occupy. Wolfgang was sitting next to Elaine, so Aphrodite took the seat in between him and Vox, across from Gabrielle.

“Everybody loves Shen,” Wolfgang agreed. “We wish he could spend more time onboard.”

“It’s a really good school though, and I can understand why Susan wants him to go there.” Elaine countered, her hair pulled back from her face today, making the scar on her cheek more noticeable.

“He’d be safer here,” Vox said quietly.

“Safer?” Aphrodite asked.

Vox smirked a little, obviously pleased that she knew something about the company that the other woman didn’t.

“Susan is very cautious,” Gabrielle explained. “In the past, there has been a kidnapping attempt or two; an attempt to grab someone to get leverage. Not Shen, mind you but other people. Different countries, different organizations work that way. We’ve pissed off our share of really terrible people. Susan is really...private when it comes to

Shen. Now that she's raising him on her own, she feels that the boarding school is both a better education and a safer environment than living with her full time."

"I can see why you guys would want him here," Aphrodite agreed, which seemed to surprise the woman sitting next to her.

"You added an all hands meeting for tomorrow morning in the conference room before we head out. Back to the Marina, I'm assuming?" Michelle asked Gabrielle. "Is there anything special you need for the meeting?"

Gabrielle took a sip of her guava juice before responding. "Actually, there is. And yes, we're going back to Marina Del Rey. In addition to the usual meeting snacks I want a bottle of whatever anyone on the crew drinks. Vodka, tequila, whiskey, bourbon, gin, whatever anyone's poison is, have it at the meeting. The meeting might be at ten, but it's five o'clock somewhere."

Michelle nodded, carrying on as if the request weren't unusual. Everyone else at the table looked puzzled, save for Aphrodite. "Seats for Shen and Susan?" she asked.

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, this meeting is for myself and the crew."

"I'm planning to attend," Aphrodite announced. All eyes at the table shifted to her.

"And Aphrodite," Gabrielle amended, without skipping a beat.

"But she's..." Vox began.

"And Aphrodite," Michelle confirmed with a stern look at Vox. "We'll have everything set up," she smiled.

Without saying anything else, Vox got up from the table with her plate, ostensibly to go get seconds. Michelle said to Gabrielle, "She needs to get her shit together."

"Yeah, but," Wolfgang protested, sticking up for Vox, "it's her first tour and --"

"-- she's still getting used to the routine," Elaine finished, shooting him a warning look.

"Oh, come on, kids," Aphrodite said with mild exasperation. "We all know what's going on here."

"No," Gabrielle countered gently. "They both have valid points. Yes, she's new, and yes, she should have her shit together."

Michelle nodded, "I...adjusted...I'm sure she will too. I'll have a talk with her." She stood and gathered her plate and glass. "I'm headed to the bridge. Is it just R&R today, or will you need anything?"

"I do have some work I need to get to. I may contact you to patch me through for some secure connections. I'll keep you posted."

"If Gabrielle is going to be stuck with work," Elaine suggested looking at Aphrodite, "Bo, Wolfie, and I were going to go snorkeling out by the rocks; you're welcome to join us."

Aphrodite beamed. "That would be lovely." With a wink at Gabrielle she added, "Just save me a couple of hours before dinner, okay? Three should do it." Elaine chuckled. Wolfgang picked up his plate and scurried away from the table as quickly as he could.

Gabrielle laughed, "You should really stop doing that to him," she said.

"It's not my fault that he keeps picturing what he thinks is going on," Aphrodite protested. "It's his own damn fault that he's nearly on the money."

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Free from distractions, even those of the most pleasurable kind, Gabrielle was able to finish the work she'd set for herself. She checked off her action items from the meeting with her division heads, and even caught up on the latest political dumpster fire from the reckless government administration in free fall. She wrote an email to Victoria Chen, head of her political division, with names of additional candidates she wanted to support, as well as organizations to combat the minority disenfranchisement operations of the Turner administration. Finally, she finished her presentation for the next day, ready to tackle the latest stop on her coming out journey. In addition to carving out time for her lover, she also set aside several hours to hang out with Shen to chat about his many adventures at school.

When Aphrodite returned from her own excursion, she took time away from the bard to socialize with the crew. She was aware that she'd recently been monopolizing Gabrielle's attention, and while perfectly understandable, knew that the bard had a vast organization to oversee, as well as a very special ten-year old guest. She made the most of her time with Gabrielle in the hours preceding dinner, but demurred from watching a movie with Shen, Susan, Argo and Gabrielle, deciding instead to spend some time alone, looking out at the stars and the ocean.

The next morning, Gabrielle felt a nervousness that she hadn't in centuries. She stood in her closet, unsure of what to wear.

Aphrodite didn't say anything, but simply kissed her on the forehead and handed her a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. They dressed quietly, then walked with Argo up to the outer deck together. The goddess brought her purse, which Gabrielle found odd, but was too distracted by her own nervousness to inquire about it.

She drank some tea, then headed to the conference room. The rest of the crew had begun to assemble. As requested, the bottles and glasses had been gathered in the center of the conference table, with seventeen seats arranged around.

With the crew assembled and the room secure, Gabrielle got right to the point. "I've asked everyone to join me because I have some fairly significant things to cover. Everyone is off-duty for the rest of the day and I will be bringing the ship back to the marina this evening." The crew looked at each other with varying degrees of surprise on their faces. "Furthermore, after you have had some time to process what I'm about to tell you, you will have the opportunity to stay with Transportation, transfer to a different department, or retire from Bardic with full benefits and pension. The NDAs you signed when you joined the company absolutely cover what you're about to hear. Do *not* mention this to anyone, not that anyone will believe you. And finally," she added nodding at the various bottles of alcohol that rested on a tray in the center of the table surrounded by various glassware, "since all of you are off-duty, you're free to have a drink or three if that helps this information go down any easier. It's a lot to take in, and no one will think less of you for having a belt."

"Since you're offering," Bo said, reaching for a bottle of tequila and a glass. There were chuckles around the table, and Gabrielle, grateful the tension had been broken, reached for her own glass. He filled her shot glass, then his, and they toasted each other before downing their shots.

Gabrielle tapped her iPad, and a panel in the wall behind her slid down revealing a large monitor. In the center of the screen was a rectangular photograph of the bard taken onboard the ship the previous day. The date was indicated in small type under the

photo. “The company line is that I took over Bardic & Company in 2000 from my mother, Rebekah Evans.” She tapped her tablet again and a second photo joined the first. This was also a photo of Gabrielle, but the hairstyle was different. Again, the date of the photo appeared underneath. “She took over the company in 1965 from her mother, Abigail Evans.” A third photo appeared next to the others, and eyes around the table started to grow wide. “Ingrid Bard started the company in 1900. Before that, it was known as The Chakram Shipping and Holding Company, which was run by Adele Sparrow.” At this point Steve, Elaine, and Sarah all reached for various bottles and glasses, with looks of disbelief on their faces. It was one thing to say someone looked just like a family member or shared a resemblance, it was quite another to see side-by-side photographs of obviously the same person. The quality of the photographs changed from color to black and white to daguerreotype. With one more tap on her iPad, the entire screen filled with identically sized rectangles in neat rows with dates, the images of her from pre-1830s represented by drawings and paintings. There was an audible gasp around the table.

“Holy fuck,” Vox whispered.

“Oh moi boch,” Nicolai rumbled in Russian.

Gabrielle pushed ahead. “The short version is that something happened to me over two thousand years ago that rendered me, for all practical purposes, immortal.”

For several long moments the only sound in the room were the clink of glassware and the decanting of bottles as Rebekah and Wolfgang reached for bottles and glasses. Finally, Bohemian cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “I really feel like this should be a prank or something,” he said. “But you sound totally serious.”

“Not a prank,” Gabrielle confirmed.

“This is impossible,” Nicolai said after downing his second shot of Vodka. “But I have been with you a long time, and this makes sense of...well...everything.” It was clear that the large bear of a man was struggling to reconcile this new information juxtaposed on top of his own experiences.

“How did it happen?” Hatsuo asked, at a loss for anything else to say.

Gabrielle shifted a bit uncomfortably. Even though she had expected this question, she wanted to be careful how she answered to avoid creating expectations of a ‘fountain of youth’ that did not (to her knowledge, anyway) exist. “It was something I ate, and as far as I know, it no longer exists on earth.”

“I don’t see how this is physiologically possible,” Michelle said. “How can a body even survive that long? Your cell’s ability to heal themselves would be nothing short of miraculous. Have you been tested? Could research be done to...?”

Gabrielle raised her hand to stop her line of questioning. “Michelle, this is not the first time someone has sought scientific evidence to what I’m saying. In the past, whenever I’ve told someone, it has always ended with people trying to kill me, exercise demons from me, or institutionalize me. A number of tests have been conducted on me that have ranged from brutal to torturous. Bloodletting, electroshock therapies, lobotomies, painful experiments, you name it. Unfortunately, there isn’t anything about me that can help anyone else. As soon as my blood leaves my system, it’s regular O negative, nothing special about it.

“Who else knows?” Steve asked. “Or rather, I should ask, ‘does anyone else believe this?’”

“Among the living, the only other person is Susan Yin, who believes me. I told her just a few days ago. Aphrodite,” nodding to her left at the goddess, “also knows and believes me. Actually,” she continued, “it was Susan who urged me to tell all of you. Depending on how this goes, my intention is to talk to Jorge about who to tell in Transportation, and work with Susan to decide who to read in from Special Projects. I also plan to tell the rest of the division heads when I think the time is appropriate.”

“So other than the photos, there really isn’t any way you can prove any of this?” Elaine asked doubtfully. “I don’t mean to be rude, but it sounds completely out there.”

“Out there?” Vox exclaimed. “This is fucking nuts.”

“I’m not offended,” Gabrielle said.

Steve looked at Elaine and shook his head, “Doesn’t this make her obsession with history make sense?”

“Hey now!” Gabrielle protested, “I wouldn’t say I’m *obsessed* with history!”

Michelle chuckled. “Gabrielle, most of the time you sound like you’re either a candidate for Mensa or auditioning for Jeopardy. But Elaine is right, you can’t really prove anything.”

“Is it me, or is that painting on the sixth row a Rembrandt?” Blake asked. “And that other drawing looks like a Da Vinci.”

“Good eye,” Aphrodite agreed looking more closely at the screen. “I also see a Botticelli, a Caravaggio, and a Renoir”

Gabrielle shrugged. “Yes.” she said to Blake, then turned back to Michelle. “I was hoping you guys would just believe me.”

“It’s a big ask.” Michelle replied. “I mean it absolutely makes a lot of things about you fall into place, but you just said you sat for portraits by a who’s who of famous artists.”

“That’s just batshit crazy,” Vox muttered.

“Crazy would be sitting for lecherous pig like Picasso,” Aphrodite commented, reaching towards the floor to retrieve her purse. “Gabrielle can provide physical proof,” she asserted, pulling out a boning knife from the galley. She reached over, took Gabrielle’s hand, placed it on the wooden conference table, then stabbed the knife down through the bard’s hand and deep into the table top.

“Ow! FUCK!” Gabrielle howled. “Fucking BITCH, motherFUCKER.” Chairs flew back as every member of the crew leapt to their feet to defend their employer.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Gabrielle panted around the pain. “Please, sit back down everyone. Vox, Bo, Nicolai I mean it! SIT THE FUCK DOWN!” Gabrielle roared over the din.

“Shit, Aphrodite,” she turned towards the woman next to her who handed her another shot glass full of tequila. “I thought you were just going to cut my hand. You know I’ve been crucified, how could you do that? Fuck!”

Aphrodite looked at the faces glowering at her from around the table. As she hoped, they were all angry at her, and feeling a great deal loyalty to Gabrielle, thereby forgetting for the moment that she’d just rocked their world with incomprehensible information.

“Can we all agree that Gabrielle is impaled on the table?” she asked. Silent nods and furious looks from around the table affirmed her statement.

“What do you mean you’ve been crucified?” Rebekah asked. “Like Christ crucified?”

Gabrielle struggled to keep her voice neutral. Gasping around the pain, she explained, “Romans crucified a lot of people. Caesar was a dick.” Bo poured himself another drink, which Nicolai immediately took from him and downed.

Mission accomplished, Aphrodite grasped the bard’s wrist to hold it steady, her other hand on the knife handle. Locking eyes with Gabrielle, she said, “On three... one...” then dislodged the thin knife from the table and the bard’s hand with one strong yank.

“Ow!” Gabrielle screamed again, but with less anger this time. Gabrielle lifted her hand from the table, leaving a small pool of blood behind, a thin stream of blood trailing down her arm. Aphrodite extracted some gauze from her purse and handed it to her lover, who wiped away the blood running down her arm and from the wound, then held up her hand to the crew. Before their eyes they could see the ends of the open cut, about an inch in length, seal itself. In moments, the wound was no more than a thin red line, like a light scratch. “The red mark will be completely gone by morning,” Gabrielle said to the crew as she wiped up the blood on the table.

“It still hurts?” Elaine asked, clearly worried.

Gabrielle gingerly touched her palm, “It feels like a really deep bruise. Certainly, a sharp knife isn’t as painful as a giant nail.”

“Let me,” Aphrodite said and briefly massaged the bard’s hand, then held it up to show the group that all evidence of injury had disappeared.

“Wait a minute,” Vox said, looking at the goddess disbelievingly. “You’re like Gabrielle?”

“Not exactly,” Aphrodite said, pouring the woman a shot of vodka and sliding the glass over to her. “I’m *much* older. I just wear my age very, *very* well.”

“How did you know I drink vodka?” she asked suspiciously, not touching the glass.

Wolfgang took the glass for himself and drank it. “Come on Vox,” he said incredulously. “Aphrodite. AFF-RHO-DIE-TEE. Goddess of Love? Ancient Greece?”

“You can’t be serious?” Vox said to her crewmate, looking critically at the goddess.

“Trust me, she has an effect on people,” Wolfgang replied, reaching for the vodka bottle.

“I think we’re getting a bit off topic here,” Gabrielle offered.

“Are we?” Steve wondered aloud. “You’re saying you’re two thousand years old, she’s claiming to be older, you both seem to have unusual... abilities.”

“Okay,” Aphrodite said, “no more coddling. God, goddess, whatever – they’re very murky words in today’s climate, so I obviously don’t use them. I used to have more power than I presently do, but I still have some abilities. I can tell each of you when you lost your virginity. And, no –” to no one specifically, “it doesn’t count if you were ten years old, and it was against your will. And, there is nothing wrong losing it at age sixteen, eighteen, twenty-two, twenty-four... I could go on. Yes, for those of you that have indulged both ways, it counts both times when you lose your virginity to each sex – there are differences. And no, being bisexual doesn’t mean you’re confused, you are actually bisexual. Although, one of you tried to use that as an excuse before coming to

terms with yourself.” As she spoke the crew began to exchange nervous glances with each other, wondering what was being said about whom.

“I know your sexual fantasies. When it comes to love and romance, I know what you’re afraid of, what you crave, and there is really nothing wrong about admitting your own kinks about submission if that’s what you’re into. And for the three of you wondering if you have a shot with me, you’ve picked a killer time to entertain such ideas.” Bohemian winked at her, then chuckled to himself. Wolfgang shifted uncomfortably in his seat, refusing to make eye contact, and Michelle kept her gaze steady, refusing to be embarrassed.

She moved to stand behind Gabrielle and put her hands on the bard’s shoulders. “If everyone would look at me for a moment.” Her words had an obvious effect on the crew, and they’d all been looking anywhere but at each other, Gabrielle, or the goddess. “Okay rev those engines...” Aphrodite said when they glanced at her, “and... relax,” she said softly.

There was an audible gasp around the table.

Gabrielle turned to look at the goddess. An intense blue was fading from her eyes. “What did you just do?” She demanded, concerned.

Aphrodite shrugged, “I turned all of them on, then off again.”

“You guys, I am so sorry,” Gabrielle said in a rush. “That was completely inappropriate and it won’t happen again,” she said sternly to the goddess.

“What?” Aphrodite protested. “If they believe me, believing you will be a piece of cake.”

“It’s INAPPROPRIATE,” Gabrielle exclaimed. “That is totally sexual harassment.”

Samantha Ramirez spoke up, “I’ve gotta say, as one of the few straight women on board, that was really weird.”

“It was pretty weird for this gay dude as well,” Blake agreed.

“I apologize,” Aphrodite conceded. “Gabrielle is right, it was inappropriate, and I did overstep. But, you were all being stubborn, and we don’t have all fucking day.”

“Well, I certainly think you made your point,” Michelle acknowledged. “And believing what I just experienced, it does make what Gabrielle is saying a little easier to swallow. So, you don’t die, but you can be hurt, and you built this company because...?”

Gabrielle took a deep breath and retold the same basic story that she’d told Susan. She mentioned Xena and that she was missing, how she needed Aphrodite’s help to find her, and that the underlying mission of their employer’s company was to seek out immortal people to help in that quest.

“So, *all* the gods are real?” Wolfgang finally asked. “There is an Ares, a Hades, Poseidon, Zeus – all of them?”

“We don’t know who all... is around,” Gabrielle said. “Ares, obviously. I mean, look at the world. Poseidon is a ‘yes’. We’re not sure about the others...”

“And we’re all risking our lives so you can find your lost love,” Steve asked, cautiously.

“Well, that and to do all the same work that the company has been doing for over a hundred years,” Gabrielle replied, a little more defensively than she’d intended.

“What the fuck,” Vox said with a shrug, “I’m in.”

“Well of course you’re in.” Ingrid snapped. “You’re...” Gabrielle stood up and with a warning glare stopped Ingrid’s train of thought. “You are really dedicated to do so,” Ingrid amended sheepishly. “I’m in too.”

“No guys,” Gabrielle protested. “Take the afternoon and think things over. I know this is weird.”

“We kinda signed up for weird by joining a civilian para-military organization, didn’t we?” Michelle asked. “I’m in.”

Within moments, all of the crew had affirmed their commitment to Gabrielle’s quest, knowing what they knew. Gabrielle smiled at them thankfully. “I really appreciate this. I’m going to be in my study for the next couple of hours. If anyone would like to talk to me privately, I’m available. I’ll answer whatever questions for you I can.” She glanced at Aphrodite.

“I’m going to go watch a movie with Shen,” the goddess replied.

“Susan is okay with you hanging around Shen?” Nicolai asked defensively, “After what just happened to us?”

“Oh shit,” Gabrielle murmured.

“What exactly are you asking me, Nicolai?” Aphrodite asked with deceptive calm in her voice.

“I mean, he’s just a kid,” the gruff man protested in his thick Russian accent.

Once again Gabrielle could see Aphrodite’s eyes shift from placid clear blue to intense azure then back again. This time only the sous chef seemed to be affected. The color drained from his face and his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“Aphrodite, what did you do to him?” Gabrielle demanded, getting angry. “You have to stop doing shit to my crew.”

Nicolai waved her away. “No, Gabrielle,” he said wiping at his eyes. “No, it’s okay. She made me remember my auntie, and how I felt about her when I was ten. It’s a nice memory. I understand now.”

Gabrielle was taken aback. “I’m sorry,” she said to Aphrodite.

“Sweetie,” the goddess said with a smile, “do you think I’d do anything to hurt anyone that has your back? Trust me when I tell you that everyone in this room is an ally.” She picked up the hand she’d driven a knife into earlier and kissed the palm. “We can discuss how you can make it up to me later.”

“Miss Aphrodite,” Elaine said as the goddess stood up to leave.

“Honey, it’s just Aphrodite. Seriously,” she said kindly.

“The thing you did with Gabrielle’s hand, with the wound...”

Aphrodite walked around the table to where Elaine was standing. “While I don’t think you need it, if it makes you feel any better,” she put her hand on the petite woman’s cheek. When she removed her hand, the scar was still there, but tears rolled down Elaine’s face and she hugged her tightly.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said.

Wolfgang was confused, “The scar is still there?”

“Not the one on the inside,” Aphrodite said. “That’s the one that bothered her.”

“Hey, as long as you’re passing out hugs,” Bo said with a grin and open arms.

Gabrielle watched each member of her crew, Vox included, line up to hug Aphrodite before leaving the conference room. Aphrodite had hijacked her coming out

story, and she couldn't be happier for it. It made her own immortality seem run of the mill by comparison.

## Chapter 7: Homecomings

Watching the sunset from the bridge of *The Hippolyta*, Gabrielle listened to the soothing thrum of the engines as she piloted the ship back towards the mainland. It felt good to be in charge of the ship once again.

She took the time alone to reflect back on the events of the day. She was happy several members of the crew took the opportunity to meet with her one on one but was almost disappointed that Hatsuo and Michelle's biggest concern was what they could do to help Gabrielle in her quest, not what the bard could do to help them grapple with their new information.

"Hey," Aphrodite said, stepping into the command room. "Did you want to be alone?"

"Not at all, beautiful," Gabrielle replied with a grin. "You are welcome anywhere, anytime."

"Your level of game is getting almost annoying, bard," she said after kissing her softly.

"What is the crew up to?" Gabrielle asked, checking the readouts on the screens in front of her.

"Michelle and Bo are helping Vox get drunk on the sundeck and hash out her feelings. I think the upshot is that you are now way too old for Vox."

"Nice," Gabrielle said flatly.

The goddess chuckled. "Blake didn't know Steve was bisexual, so they're having a nice chat. Samantha, Ingrid, and Elaine, are hashing out the legal ramifications of everything and what would and wouldn't be believed in court. Bo, Nicolai, Sarah, and Wolfie are playing video games with Shen, Argo is sleeping on the couch with them, and Rebekah, Hatsuo, Susan, and Prisha are playing Texas Hold 'Em, most likely with your money."

"Look, check this out," Gabrielle said as she watched one of the screens. She turned a couple of dials on a small controller pad and the image on the screen changed.

"Is that from a drone?" Aphrodite asked looking at the view of the water from above on the monitor.

"Yeah, I think I found some whales." As she maneuvered the drone, several large blue whales and a couple of smaller ones came into view.

"Look at the calves!" Aphrodite said excitedly as the drone moved closer, providing a view never possible from a boat. Aphrodite was standing behind Gabrielle, watching the monitor over her shoulder, her arms wrapped around the shorter woman's waist. They watched the whales lazily break the surface and exhale through their blowholes before submerging again. Eventually, a small pod of dolphins joined them, looking tiny by comparison. After a while, the bard brought the drone back to the deck and landed it near the control room.

"What does this do?" the goddess asked pointing at several of the readouts and switches.

Gabrielle chuckled. "It's best to learn from a pro," she said, picking up a handset and turning a switch. "Ensign Shen Teal, please report to the Command Center. Ensign

Shen Teal, report to the Command Center, please.” The request could be heard on speakers throughout the ship. Aphrodite took a couple of steps away from Gabrielle, leaving an appropriate distance between the two of them. A moment later, Shen and Argo came bounding into the control room with Susan at their heels. The pit bull made a bee-line for a soft dog bed in the corner of the room, plopping herself down most ungracefully.

“I get to drive?” Shen asked Gabrielle hopefully.

“Well, technically you’re steering and controlling the autopilot. First though, you have to teach Aphrodite what the different gauges and read-outs mean.” Gabrielle said as she took a step away from the ship’s wheel.

Shen stepped forward with purpose and pointed to a map under the Plexiglas to the side of the navigation screens. “This is Catalina,” he explained. “This is where we’re going – Marina Del Rey. He indicated with his finger the path they’d be traveling. “That screen is radar and it’s showing the depth of the ocean below us so we don’t run aground. This one is the auto pilot, it has the route programmed in. You turn it off here,” he pushed a button and took hold of the wheel. “And this is the heading I need to stay on so we go to the right place.”

“What about that screen over there?” Aphrodite asked with a knowing smile.

“That’s one of the security monitors. The security crew on duty makes sure no one sneaks on the ship,” he looked a little embarrassed, “or steals cookies out of the galley.”

“And this one?” Gabrielle asked, pointing to the monitor next to security.

Shen scrunched his face, thinking. “I think that has to do with communication. The radio channels for the coast guard, and when you talk to other parts of the company. It has encryption, right?”

“Exactamundo,” Gabrielle said, beaming.

“You guys packed up?” the bard asked Susan, as Shen continued to patiently explain to Aphrodite exactly how he was running the ship. At one point, he even turned the wheel over to her and told her she was doing an excellent job.

“We are going to take a car from the Marina to the airport, then the helicopter back to school,” Susan replied. “This has been a very nice weekend,” she said warmly. “Thank you so much.”

“Thank you for making the trip.” Gabrielle smiled, adding, “And thank you for...you know.”

“I look forward to many illuminating chats about history. I saw the portraits from your presentation earlier today. Quite the who’s who of famous artists.”

“They weren’t all that famous at the time,” Gabrielle said with a chuckle.

“What are your plans for the week?” Susan asked. “The jet won’t land at LAX until Thursday.”

“I have some research I need to do, some maps I need to review to remind myself where I left something. I need to do some inventories, and make sure the ship is stocked since I’m giving the crew some extra shore leave when they’re off duty. When we come back from Greece, we have to go to Cabo, and I think taking the boat is the best way to get there. Honestly, I’d take it to Greece if we had more time to spare, but I’m kind of anxious to...move this project along.”

“That is quite understandable,” Susan agreed. Conversationally she added, “When your project is finished, I’m out. You’ll need to have ‘the talk’ with Sabin of course, but he’s ready to take over, and I’m ready to relax. I’d like our visits to just be social ones.”

“I look forward to that too,” Gabrielle said with a smile. “It will be great when you get to meet Xena. I think you guys will get along.” They were quiet for a moment, watching as a flock of pelican flew alongside the ship, skimming the water before rising again. “I will tell Sabin next, and after that Jorge, I think. He can help me decide who needs to know in Transportation. I’m also thinking of telling the other division heads.”

“I don’t think Transportation personnel need to know until they are assigned ship duty, and for that they need to be in for a few years. I mean it’s Jorge’s call...” Susan shrugged. “I would only tell the team leaders in Special Projects and see where you go from there. People like Brian Glass don’t need to know until they’ve been fully vetted. Most of the rest of the company doesn’t get involved in your...esoteric pursuits, so they don’t need to know.”

“Need to know what?” Shen asked, making it clear he’d been half listening to the adult’s conversation. He looked at his grandmother, then back at Gabrielle. “Is this about you being gay?”

Gabrielle blushed in spite of herself, trying to remember the last time there had been so much discussion over her sexual orientation. “Did someone tell you that?” she asked.

The ten-year-old shook his head. “No. You just seem gay to me. I mean, you seem like you like girls – not that I’ve seen you around any girls that didn’t work for you besides Aphrodite, but you have that vibe.”

Susan started to chuckle, so turned her head away, suddenly becoming very interested in Argo, who continued sleeping.

“Well, Shen,” Gabrielle said bending down to look at the boy eye to eye, “you are very perceptive. I am gay, for the most part, but I’ve had a few relationships with men. If I had to pick a label, I think that’s the one I would pick. Is that cool with you?”

He frowned, giving the question some serious thought. “I don’t really care. You’re my godmother, and the same either way. I just don’t want you to be lonely.”

“Well buddy,” Gabrielle said, giving the boy a hug, “I’m working on that.”

“You don’t seem gay.” he said to Aphrodite.

“That’s because I’m bisexual,” she replied simply.

He looked from one woman to the other. “Are the two of you...” his voice trailed off as he became unsure how to finish the question.

Aphrodite put a hand on his shoulder and smiled warmly. “Now kiddo, you’re venturing into ‘none of your business’ territory. Just think of me as your favorite auntie for the time being. Say, what does control do?” She pointed to one of the dials he had yet to explain.

Grateful for something more to talk about besides girls and their relationships, Shen happily launched into fresh explanations of the controls he missed and their functions.



Gabrielle was studying the computer screen in front of her so intently that she didn't notice Aphrodite enter the study. Argo raised her head from the couch where she had been dozing.

"Gabrielle," the goddess said softly, drawing the bard from the computer screen with a start. "Wha..."

"Honey, it's two am. You need to stop for tonight."

The bard glanced at her watch, disbelief clouding her features. She stood with a groan, stretched her back, and then rubbed her eyes. "I had no idea it had gotten so late. I thought we saw Shen and Susan off maybe two hours ago."

There was an old journal on the desk, some sea charts, and maps of Greece. Aphrodite looked at the screen on which the bard had been working. On the monitor were another map, and a flight plan with a landing at the airport at Zakynthos. "What am I looking at?" the goddess asked, pointing to the hand drawn map in the bard's journal.

Gabrielle picked up the old book and touched the page reverently. "A lot of the stories for Xena I had to tell over and over. I started by writing things down in scrolls, and then someone would steal the scrolls, or they'd be destroyed. Next, I kept bound journals. At some point I'd get run out of town or locked up, lose everything, have to start over and I'd start a new journal and retell the stories..."

She shook off the memory and pointed to a place on her map. "This is the Gulf of Corinth. Cirra is on the north side of the water, here in Boeotia," she traced her finger up, "almost directly south of Mt. Olympus. For reference while looking at my less than stellar drawing, here is Macedonia with Potidaea to the north and east of Cirra, and Amphipolis further north and east of Potidaea."

"Right," Aphrodite said looking at the map. "East of Thessaly, here."

"Exactly. We were in the Gulf of Corinth when we encountered the pirates. Poseidon took both crews to the island of Kephallenia, to Antisamos Beach, with the island of Ithaca just to the north. That's where Hephaestus had the anvil and hammer – in a cave at the time. When it was...ah...destroyed, I took the hammer and Xena's chakram, which I still had, and went south to the island of Zakynthos, where I stored them in a sea cave for safekeeping. This spot," she pointed to the computer screen, "is called Shipwreck Beach, and while touristy, it is probably the closest place to head out to the cave. Do you snorkel?"

Aphrodite rolled her eyes, "No, but being a god does let me hold my breath indefinitely, as I know you've noticed," she added with a wink.

"Um...yeah. That is a very good point. For appearances, do you mind looking like a diver?" the bard asked, knowing she was blushing.

"You need to breathe?" Aphrodite asked, puzzled.

Gabrielle nodded. "Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I've drowned a few times. It's awful. Once I start breathing the air again, I cough the water out of my lungs and regain consciousness, and my brain repairs itself, but it is not a pleasant experience. I'm sure it's similar to how I've bounced back from the two lobotomies I've been subjected to."

"Honey, I'm so sorry," the goddess said, kissing the top of the bard's head.

"Ancient history," Gabrielle said, forcing a smile. "Come on Argo," she called to her dog. "Let's go for a walk on deck."

As the pair strolled in the cool night air, Gabrielle listened to the distant sounds of the Marina at night. Noise from vehicles, waves lapping against the hull, and the distant sound of a helicopter could be heard. “What were you up to this evening?”

Aphrodite smiled mischievously. “They nearly invited me to their poker game until they remembered that I can read all of them pretty easily, so I was invited to just hang out and chat. It’s nice, though. You have a good family here. They asked me about Xena.”

Gabrielle looked at Aphrodite and arched an eyebrow. “I was honest, for the most part. I explained that she’s been kept...separate from the world and hasn’t had the same experiences that you had. I told them they’d better give her a chance and that it isn’t a ‘her or me’ situation.”

Argo made use of her fake grass area, and then led the way back to the master stateroom with goddess and bard following behind. “Aphrodite,” Gabrielle began, stopping halfway down the spiral staircase that led to her bedroom, “I don’t want you to think...”

“Shhh,” Aphrodite said with a shake of her head. “Not tonight. We are going back to your bedroom, you are going to lie down and have the most amazing massage you’ve ever had, and you’re going to sleep in well past breakfast. There will be no relationship processing until you have the hammer. We’ve already established that.”

They descended a few more stairs, and Gabrielle stopped her once more so she’d turn around. “Aphrodite?”

“Yes?”

“I do love you.”

“I love you too, sweetie. I really do.”

The bard chuckled. “But being the Goddess of Love you kind of have to, don’t you?”

The goddess paused at the bedroom door and gave it some thought. “I don’t have to love everyone equally. Some people, some very special people, I love more.”



The Goddess of Love strolled up to the main deck to join the off-duty crew for breakfast. She sat down with Blake and Wolfgang and across from Vox, joined by Michelle after she had helped herself to the morning’s frittata. “No politics at breakfast,” the captain announced. Wolfgang turned off the podcast playing from his phone.

“Everyone seems on the same page politically,” Aphrodite observed.

Michelle grinned, “We are for the most part, but who needs to hear that at breakfast?”

“And it’s one thing to hear the point of view of people who can talk in complete sentences, even if you disagree with them,” Blake added, “but when she plays clips from the Gideon Power show, it just makes me want to throw your phone in the ocean.”

“Who is Gideon Power?” Aphrodite asked honestly.

“You seriously don’t know?” Vox asked stunned.

“What are you guys chatting about?” Sarah asked as she joined the quintet at their table.

“Aphrodite has never heard of Gideon Power,” Vox said.

While the goddess was sure that the engineer had tried to keep the self-satisfied superiority out of her voice, she wasn't entirely successful at it.

"He's kind of a Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck, and Bill O'Reilly type," Sarah supplied helpfully, without a trace of smugness whatsoever.

"Without the charm," Wolfgang added.

"Ah," Aphrodite said, with understanding. "I will admit that I don't get most of my news from American outlets unless it's articles in print. I prefer the perspective of people who aren't trying to analyze and report things while being part of the machine at the same time."

Wolfgang chuckled. "Dude, you're never going to get the best of her," he said quietly to Vox. "You need to stop trying."

"I'd be interested in listening to the program with you guys," Aphrodite said, specifically to Vox, "after breakfast maybe? I do like to get different perspectives."

The young woman nodded, warming up to the goddess in spite of her best efforts not to. "Yeah, that's cool," she said into her frittata.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Sarah asked, looking shyly at the goddess.

Aphrodite put her fork down, then dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin. "That's kind of my bread and butter. Go ahead."

"What exactly do you do?" Sarah asked. "I mean, as The Goddess of Love? Do you go around the world and make people fall in love?"

"You mean like the gig Santa Claus has? Without the toys?" Aphrodite asked dryly.

Unfortunately for Vox, she'd just had a healthy sip of orange juice which came out her nose from laughing, right into Wolfgang's lap.

"Dude!" he exclaimed, annoyed. "Fuck. Come on, man!"

"Oh god, I'm so sorry," Vox gasped. "Santa Claus! That's hysterical."

The navigator brushed at his lap with his napkin, chuckling. "It *is* kind of funny."

Vox was still cracking herself up, "Yeah, you'd think toys would totally be a part of it."

"Okay, now *that's* funny," Aphrodite conceded. "To answer your question honestly, Sarah," she added to the chef, "think of it this way – when your body is healthy, and it has the vitamins and minerals it needs, it can better fight off infection, right? Well I'm like a massive dose of vitamins that helps people realize the love they're already carrying around with them. Sometimes it's love for a person, or an idea, or a family. Sometimes it's jealousy or unrequited love, hopeless love, or annoying infatuation."

"So, if you can make someone love somebody, you can make them not love somebody too?" Vox asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"I could, but I wouldn't," Aphrodite replied. "Being able to love, even when it's painful and really sucks, is profoundly human and profoundly awesome. To take it away would diminish..." she looked at the young woman sympathetically, "whomever, and I wouldn't do that. A lack of love, even the messy kind, is what gives you the kind of assholes that flock to people like Gideon Power." She turned her attention back to Sarah. "I travel around a lot, all over the world, acting almost like...well the way a magnifying glass intensifies sunlight. I channel and expand the love I feel all around me."

Sarah looked like she was about to ask another question and Aphrodite shook her head. "One thing all my many years of experience has taught me, is that like Santa, it's

best to just accept that I do what I do, and not worry too much about the mechanics of how I do it. It's rather is beyond your understanding. Or at least, beyond my ability to have it make sense in a way that fits your understanding."

"Any food left?" Gabrielle asked, joining the crew on deck. She was greeted by hearty welcomes from those off duty. As she passed Aphrodite on her way to the plates and chafing dishes, she squeezed the goddess' shoulder and placed a quick kiss on the top of her head. "Good morning, gorgeous," she murmured quietly.

Aphrodite smiled. She was well aware that this was the first time Gabrielle had ever attempted to be open, honest, and physical with someone in front of her crew with them knowing the truth, and while she clearly felt some level of self-consciousness about it, she was determined to do it anyway.

Sarah squeezed closer to Blake to give Gabrielle space to sit next to Aphrodite, and the bard enthusiastically tucked into breakfast.

"Wolfie," Aphrodite said when she'd noticed that the rest of them had finished eating, "If you want to put your podcast back on, go ahead."

Gabrielle quickly glanced over to Michelle to see if the captain would countermand that request. She knew about the prohibition regarding phones and dining. Michelle caught her glance and returned it with a wink. "I'm not about to tell The Goddess of Love what to do," she said with a grin to Gabrielle. "You gave her Class One clearance, you're on your own." Without another word, the captain smiled and excused herself, heading to the bridge.

Wolfgang shrugged and tapped his phone, playing the podcast from where he'd paused it earlier. The host, Stephanie Miller, was discussing the latest Twitter meltdown of President Turner with her guests, the comedy duo Frangela. They played a clip from Gideon Power's 'Power Hour' where he put a positive spin on the president's behavior and lied about the context of his outbursts.

Aphrodite frowned at the sound of the voice coming through the phone's speaker. "Can you please replay that?" she asked thoughtfully.

Wolfgang scrolled the recording backwards a bit and hit play.

"Well fucking A," the goddess said crossing her arms. "That asshole."

"What?" Gabrielle asked, looking confused.

"You wanted to find Ares, right?" Aphrodite asked. "Well we just did," she added with a nod at the phone.

"That doesn't sound like Ares," the bard disagreed with a frown.

"I think whoever it is, is disguising their voice with a modulator," Vox said, listening critically. "It sounds kind of metallic." She pulled out her phone and after a quick search showed the results to Gabrielle and Aphrodite.

"That's not Ares," Gabrielle said, looking at the photos.

Blake chuckled, "You showed us hundreds of pictures yesterday, all of them you, but none of them you." He cocked his head, something just occurring to him. "What's your real name, anyway?"

"It's Gabrielle," Gabrielle said. "I go back to it every few hundred years. I mean if you want to be formal, it's Gabrielle of Potidaea."

"I'm going to get my laptop," Vox announced. "I've got some software that might deconstruct this," she said, nodding at Wolfgang's phone.

“Great.” The bard agreed, “I need a quick word with Michelle. Let’s reconvene in the den and have a listen.”

Aphrodite and Argo accompanied Gabrielle to the bridge where Michelle had relieved Elaine of command. The fit woman was sitting on a couch at the back of the command room reviewing some lists on an iPad and chatting with Steve. “It’s your call,” she was saying to the bosun, “but I think the varnishing could wait.” When she saw the bard at the doorway, she immediately stood up. “Gabrielle on deck.” Steve promptly stood as well.

“As you were.” Gabrielle said, waving her hand. Argo immediately jumped on the couch and snuggled next to the captain.

“Hey! I was going to sit there,” Aphrodite said playfully, earning a snicker from Steve and a frown from Gabrielle. Michelle was clearly flattered.

“What’s up, boss?” Michelle asked.

“Tomorrow, Aphrodite, Argo, and I are going to take the jet to Greece to pick up something. I don’t know how long we will need to be gone.” Michelle nodded, listening.

“I think I should take a couple of crew. Normally, I’d just grab a pair of bodies from Transportation...”

“But you trust us more because you’ve trusted us?” Michelle asked wryly.

Gabrielle nodded. “What can I say? When Susan is right, she’s right. I want you to decide who is going to go. I’m not sure what it will be like on the ground. I’m not expecting any issues, but you never know. This should be a simple retrieval mission for something I stored...a while ago.”

The captain nodded, “I will text you tonight and let you know who.”

“Look, if anyone is thinking of leaving...I don’t want anyone going who isn’t up for...” Gabrielle began.

“Everyone is just as committed to the company and you as they were last week.” Michelle said. “We have had a number of frank discussions amongst ourselves. No one is transferring out.”

“I’m sure there must be some kind of fallout...” Gabrielle protested.

“Oh, there’s fallout alright,” Steve interjected. “No one is pretending there isn’t fallout. It’s like finding out that the sun doesn’t orbit the earth. That’s a big deal and you have to rethink a lot of what you’ve taken for granted. But that isn’t your fault,” he concluded with a shy glance at Aphrodite.

“Annnndddd,” the goddess encouraged.

“Look, you can’t stand on deck and have a conversation with a goddess and not have your religious views somewhat shaken.” Steve put up his hands and shrugged.

“Depends on the religion, I’d expect,” Aphrodite mused.

“Did you ever meet Jesus Christ?” Steve asked, seriously.

Aphrodite looked uncomfortable. “I’ve known a lot of people named Jesus. Did any of them fit the description of the person described today? Gabrielle would be the first to tell you about how embellishments get added to stories with each telling over time. That’s what storytellers do. Does that make the central theme of the story, which is ‘don’t be a dick’ any less true? Absolutely not.”

“But if someone believes that, and believes in you, and believes in...whatever?” Steve protested.

“I know what I am, and I know what people call me. I’m not worshipped the way I used to be, which does kind of suck, but that doesn’t change what I do, for the most part,” she added with a glance at Gabrielle. “For all I know, there is an Osiris or Horus running around somewhere. Religion was created as an instrument to govern people, by offering solace and protection from the things that scare you. For those of us who’ve been the object of worship, it really has less to do with us than one might expect. Personally, I think if you just stick to the mantra of ‘don’t be a dick’ you’ll be fine.”

“Honestly,” Michelle said to Gabrielle with a smile, “It’s a moot point. No one is leaving their post because things are just too incredibly interesting now.”

Gabrielle shrugged. “Good enough for me.”

Leaving the bridge, Gabrielle, Argo, and Aphrodite descended to the main deck, and joined the crew assembled in the den. Vox, Sarah, and Wolfgang were huddled around the coffee table, staring intently at a laptop with an external speaker.

“Try it again, with half of that.” Wolfgang suggested as the engineer’s fingers flew over the keyboard. Wolfgang quickly vacated his seat on the couch for them.

“Argo,” Gabrielle warned the pit bull, who had ambled over to the couch, intent on taking Wolfgang up on his offer. Aphrodite took the seat instead, while Wolfgang and Gabrielle pulled up slipper chairs.

Vox made a final tap on the keyboard and restarted the playback. The bard’s eyes grew wide at voice coming over the speakers. “Holy fuck,” she said, amazed.

“I know,” Aphrodite agreed. “My damn brother.”

“So, by ‘brother’,” Sarah asked carefully, “you mean Ares, the Ancient Greek God of War.”

“He’s such a jerk, and you don’t really have to keep saying ‘ancient’. We’re old, we get it,” she fumed.

“But for ‘old’ you’re also incredibly hot,” Wolfgang added helpfully. “Both of you.” Aphrodite smiled and gave him a wink, which made the navigator blush.

“And he has an army of racist, misogynistic, homophobic, crazed yokels,” Gabrielle said, getting the conversation back on track. “Do you know where he hosts his radio show from?” she asked Wolfgang.

The lanky man shook his head. “He’s pretty secretive,” he explained, “says the government is always tracking him.”

Gabrielle took the phone out of her pocket and scrolled through her contacts. Tapping one, she put the phone to her ear. “Sabin, the ‘Olympus’ assignment, please open an investigation on Gideon Power, the radio guy. Full throttle. See if anything connects to the name Ares. This has the highest priority. Thank you.” She listened as he reiterated her instructions. “Yes, exactly,” she confirmed, and then ended the call.

She put the phone down and smiled, feeling that she had accomplished more in the last ten days than she had in the hundreds of years previously. “Really great work, guys,” she said. “Thanks. I want everyone really enjoying their off-duty shifts. Take time to get off the ship. You want to go out, see a show, fly somewhere? Whatever you want. You’re approved to expense it. Just be back on-time. I’ll have the plane so you’ll have to fly commercial, but go first class, I’ll let Jorge and Michelle know. I’m celebrating tonight, so I want the rest of you to celebrate as well.”

“Not a bad pay day for digging a silly political podcast,” Wolfgang grinned, sharing a hi-five with Vox.

“So, where are you sweeping me off my feet?” Aphrodite asked with excitement. Gabrielle thought a moment, Dwayne’s words of caution coming back to her. “I’m taking you hiking,” she said with a grin. “Let’s go get dressed.”



The late afternoon sun shone down on Yosemite Falls as Gabrielle packed up the remnants of their picnic. “The candied salmon was delicious,” Aphrodite said passing the water bottle back to the bard who stowed it in her backpack. “I must say,” she added with a smile, “you’re making progress on taking the ‘douche’ off the ‘billionaire with her own fleet of vehicles’ thing.”

They continued their hike, enjoying the sound of the waterfalls and nature. It was several hours later when they returned to the kitchen of the Majestic Yosemite Hotel in Yosemite Valley. A small table for two had been set up on the back porch and Gabrielle put on an apron.

“You’re making me dinner?”

“I’m taking Dwayne’s advice,” Gabrielle winked.

“He didn’t mention that I love to cook. Let’s make this a joint effort,” Aphrodite said, joining Gabrielle at the stove.

They were serenaded by the sounds of night as they ate their seabass en papillote with stuffed zucchini flowers. Several deer came into the clearing to have their last nibble on the tall grasses before retiring for the night. In the moonlight, an acrobatic bat made short work of the insects attracted by the lights of the historic hotel.

“What’s your plan for tomorrow?” Aphrodite asked, finishing her wine and chocolate almond tart.

“We go to LAX, take the jet to Zakynthos, and hopefully find the hammer quickly. If all goes well, we can be on our way to Cabo the next day.”

“So, this may be our last night together,” Aphrodite observed. Her voice contained no hint of regret, she simply stating the fact.

“I intend to make the most of it,” the bard said raising her glass.

“Me too, Gabrielle.”



The next morning, Nicolai and Vox met them on deck, each carrying a large duffle bag. Vox wore military boots with pants, t-shirt, and jacket. Nicolai however, was wearing a dark suit with dark sunglasses. To Aphrodite’s eyes, he looked every inch the most intimidating bodyguard she’d ever seen. She greeted the pair with a warm smile.

“I’ve always wondered what the Incredible Hulk would look like in a suit,” she said warmly in Russian. “Nicolai, you clean up nice!”

“Thank you,” he said in his thick accent with a small bow to the goddess. “It is bespoke. Transportation has a good tailor.”

At the tender, Michelle came up and handed Gabrielle and Aphrodite their passports, “I got the Susan Vincent and Anna Winter passports out of the safe,” she said. “I hope your trip is successful.”

“Thank you,” Gabrielle said accepting the documents. She raised an eyebrow when Michelle hugged Aphrodite as they boarded the small boat.

“What can I say,” the goddess said, shouldering her backpack. “Your crew likes to hug.”

A dark sedan waited for the quartet at the marina. It took them to the company’s private jet in a hangar at the Los Angeles International Airport. At the bottom of the plane’s stairs stood another well-muscled man, similarly attired to Nicolai.

“Aphrodite, this is Ed Schecter,” Gabrielle said, making introductions. Ed smiled, extending a hand in greeting. “I’ll be your flight attendant today,” he said. The goddess was at an uncharacteristic loss for words. He didn’t look like any flight attendant she’d ever seen before. While his suit was similar to Nicolai’s, he wore his with a crisp white shirt that contrasted sharply against his dark brown skin. He was obviously a body builder, the suit strained against the very muscles it was intended to cover. His head was shaved, and Aphrodite thought he looked like a younger, darker version of her neighbor Dwayne. While Nicolai seemed like a hairy, hulking, mountain of a man, Ed seemed to have sculpted his body with precision. Ed watched Aphrodite try to reconcile her assumptions of “flight attendant” with his appearance and chuckled. “Well, maybe a flight attendant who is good in a fight.” Gracefully gesturing towards the top of the stairs, he added “Please, this way.”

He led Gabrielle, Aphrodite, and Argo up the stairs, then returned to greet Nicolai and Vox with collegial familiarity. “How do you like ship duty?” he asked the young woman.

“Oh, it’s been quite the education,” she said, making the Russian rumble with laughter.

The conversation on the ground faded as Gabrielle and Aphrodite entered the plane, where a pair of hijab-clad women greeted them. “Our pilot and co-pilot, Isra and Kismet Suhr. I stole the Suhr sisters from the Royal Brunei Airlines,” Gabrielle explained, before Aphrodite could ask if they were related. The pair did not wear business suits like the men but were dressed in the closest thing to a military uniform that Aphrodite had seen on any of Gabrielle’s people.

“We should be cleared for takeoff momentarily,” Kismet said. “If you’d please take your seats.”

Gabrielle’s plane was a spacious one. There were no company markings or logos on the inside or out but could easily function as a traveling office or conference room, if necessary. There was a couch on one side, several recliner chairs with tables on the other, a small kitchen, and other amenities, including a sleeping and dressing area in the aft of the plane. Aphrodite sat down on the couch, followed by Gabrielle and Argo on either side of her. Nicolai and Vox deposited all the duffle bags in the back, and then relaxed into recliners.

In moments, the plane was moving. Ed took the recliner nearest the cockpit. “Let me know when you guys are hungry,” he said cheerfully. “It’s going to be a ten-hour flight, so please tell me if you need or want anything.”

They were soon airborne. As the plane climbed to cruising altitude, Nicolai stood, crossed to a cabinet, took two blankets and pillows, then handed a blanket and pillow to Vox with the instructions, “For later.” He then handed a blanket to Gabrielle and said “For now. You don’t look good; too tired. Use girlfriend for pillow.” He then sat back down, put the other pillow behind his head, and leaned back in the recliner. “I will wake you up three hours before landing to go over mission.”

Aphrodite chuckled, shifting to encourage the bard to stretch out. “You didn’t get any sleep last night,” she said quietly. “Don’t argue with a sharp dressed Russian.”

It was hard not to notice the look of envy that briefly crossed Vox’s face, but Gabrielle was too tired to care. She put her head down on Aphrodite’s lap and within seconds was sound asleep.



“Gabrielle! Wake up!” Aphrodite’s voice cut through her slumber with an urgency that had the bard instantly awake and alert.

“What’s going on?” she asked, noting the look of concern on the faces of her companions.

Ed put a laptop on the table across from Gabrielle. “Transportation just sent us a code red on Susan Yin, and this video call came in for you; you’ve got,” he checked his watch, “two minutes to make the connection.”

Gabrielle ran her hands through her hair and wiped her eyes. “Everyone over there,” she pointed in the direction of the cockpit, “out of the camera’s line of sight. She tapped the keyboard, and a video window opened up showing a standard interrogation room. Susan Yin was seated at a metal table handcuffed to a metal ring attached to the table. Seated next to her was a familiar face. At the sight of Ares, Gabrielle started to gesture with her hands, out of view of the camera, all the while keeping the expression on her face as passive as possible.

“The irritating blond. How the fuck are you still alive?” Ares asked with a big grin.

Gabrielle ignored him, focusing instead on the woman in handcuffs. “Susan, are you okay?” she asked.

“What is she doing?” Vox whispered to Aphrodite.

“It’s American Sign Language,” the goddess explained, her voice a soft whisper.

Nicolai nearly lifted Aphrodite off her feet when he grabbed her arm and brought her to the cockpit. Vox fell in behind them and closed the door. The cockpit of the small jet was now crowded with the pilot, co-pilot, huge Russian, engineer and goddess. “What did she say?” he quietly asked. Puzzled, Aphrodite conveyed the message. “She’s saying ‘Red Dragon, real time, now, confirm’. Does that mean anything to you?” In response, Kismet, the co-pilot got on the radio, and spoke urgently to the person on the other end. “Jorge, Red Dragon, from Gabrielle. You need to confirm. Red Dragon, now. Confirm please. This is *not* a drill.”

From her peripheral vision, Gabrielle saw Ed, standing just outside the cockpit door, nodding to her that the message was being relayed. Now, she just needed to stall.

Ares cut short any chance of her communicating with his captive. “You’re not talking to her, Gabrielle, you’re talking to me. Why don’t you start with how you survived?”

“My name is Susan Vincent,” Gabrielle said. “What do you want with Susan Yin?”

“Oh, get over yourself. I saw you making out with my sister.” Ares held up an 8x10 photograph of bard and goddess naked and entwined in the water at Catalina, when they thought they’d been alone. Gabrielle knew her people in the cockpit were watching the call from a small screen, and the feed was being recorded. Ares looked at the picture

and looked again at the bard. “I’ve heard of sex on the beach, but sex in the water?” he was clearly amused at his own joke. “Never saw you play tonsil hockey like that with Xena. Let’s dispense with the ‘Susan Vincent bullshit. I had you bugged immediately after you made contact with my sister. Your whole crew calls you Gabrielle.”

“You kidnapped Susan because you care who Aphrodite is kissing? Isn’t that taking the protective brother thing a bit too far?” Gabrielle asked in disbelief, fully aware the God of War was trying to goad her into anger and making a mistake.

Ares shook his head, his dark eyes flashing. “At least you’re admitting who you are, that’s progress,” Ares sneered. “And, no, I’ve got your minion because whatever it is you think you’re doing, you’re going to stop doing it right now. Right. Now. Today.” He emphasized each of the last three words with his fist against the tabletop.

The door to the cockpit opened. Aphrodite signed to Gabrielle that the message had been relayed, but they were still standing by for a response.

“What are you even talking about?” Gabrielle asked, not having to feign much confusion. “I ran into Aphrodite, we hit it off, we went to Catalina. Why would you even care?” As she spoke Argo woke, but didn’t bark. The dog sat with her head cocked to one side, staring at Aphrodite, whose eyes had flared an intense blue once again.

“What was that, the light? Who is with you?” Ares demanded hotly.

“My pilot, co-pilot, and flight attendant,” Gabrielle replied exasperated. “There was a glint of sunlight off the wing. I’m on my way to go buy a company. It’s what I do Ares. I make money, I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with you, and you need to let Susan go.”

“I know you’re trying to bring Xena back,” Ares said, his tone deadly. “Somehow my sister is involved – that’s why you’re chasing her. You’re going to abandon that quest right now.”

“Ares, it’s been two thousand years. What on earth makes you think I’d be able to accomplish this feat now if I haven’t done it already?” Gabrielle tried to appear flippant. “And don’t be ridiculous. Getting involved with Aphrodite to bring Xena back makes no sense. She’d pick up on that in a heartbeat. Does that sound like something she’d be into? You need to release Susan. She has nothing to do with any of this. Tell me where to meet you and we can talk.”

“She isn’t going anywhere. I know that you are looking for immortals. You’ve been looking for me, you found my sister, you may have found my uncle. Who knows who else you’ve found,” he said, his eyes cold.

“I found Aphrodite because I decided to buy her company. I buy companies, I make money, I take hot women to Catalina,” she said indifferently. “Seriously, that’s it. We fucked, had a great time, so what? Xena never even came up.”

“You might have thought you learned a thing or two from The Warrior Princess,” he shot back. “But you haven’t. Underestimating me is something Xena never did, and you don’t seem to have picked up on this fact. I’ve been watching you for a long time. I know how your current company started out as The Chakram Shipping and Holding Company, selling antiquities to raise capital.”

“A girl’s gotta eat,” she replied flatly. “That doesn’t explain why you would grab Susan of all people. She doesn’t know anything about any of this. This is between you and me – let her go. Just let her go.” Gabrielle continued to watch out of her peripheral

vision, reading the signs that told her that the co-pilot was still waiting on confirmation from Jorge in Transportation.

“That’s not how wars are fought Gabrielle” Ares continued. “This is going to stay a Xena-free world. My beef is with anyone who would consider helping you. I’ve come a really long way in my enhanced interrogation techniques. I recently had some practice in Iraq. Wanna watch?”

“Wait,” Gabrielle said hopefully, redirecting the conversation away from Susan. “Are you telling me you and Aphrodite have the power to bring Xena back? That’s something you can do? Because I haven’t found anyone in two thousand years that has said they can do it.”

“Stupid girl, this is not the part where I divulge intel to you.” Ares rolled his eyes.

Vox tapped Aphrodite’s shoulder and whispered in the goddess’ ear, her voice barely audible. “Confirmed from Jorge Hernandez, Red Dragon secure – en route to nest.” Aphrodite signed the message to Gabrielle, who forced herself to not sigh in relief.

“If you’re going to be obstinate, or stupid – admittedly with you it can be hard to tell the difference – I can always ask your associate.” He said turning to look at the handcuffed woman, then leered back at the camera. “She may be more cooperative.”

“Ares,” Gabrielle said, looking past the man to the woman behind him, hoping Susan could see her face. “From the time the *dragon* on my back glowed *red* and provided *protection* from creatures like you, I am *secure* in the knowledge that I will always gain the upper hand and triumph in the end.” As she said the words, she saw the micro expressions on Susan’s face change.

“Thank you, Gabrielle,” she said. Realizing he was being played, Ares’ expression shifted from menacing, to surprise, then rage. He turned back towards the Chinese woman as if to hit her, but she had already slumped over on the table, dead. A slight smile played on her lifeless lips as foam trickled from her mouth.

“Fuck you Ares,” Gabrielle said when he turned back to face her, and then cut the connection. Gabrielle slowly closed the laptop and sat for a couple of moments looking at absolutely nothing; the loss of her most trusted employee yet to sink in and make itself real. Tears fell freely from her eyes, but she didn’t cry; she was too angry to cry. It was one more loss, in a string of losses spanning two millennia.

Vox, Aphrodite, Nicolai, and Ed gathered around Gabrielle and stood quietly. Argo walked over and put her large head on the bard’s knee, pressing down reassuringly. Gabrielle rested her hand on dog’s head and steadied her breathing. “I don’t know how he captured her,” she started, her voice thick with emotion, “but long ago we established that if anything happened to her, I was to immediately secure Shen – he’s Red Dragon – and not worry about her. She was adamant, and I promised her that.”

“But...?” Aphrodite asked.

“She had a tooth with cyanide in it,” Gabrielle explained. “I didn’t think she was still wearing it because she wasn’t doing field work anymore. But she was signaling me from the second that Ares started talking that she was planning to kill herself before he could try to get information out of her. And she had no intention of enduring torture at her age.”

Gabrielle looked over to Kismet, “Update, please,” she said flatly.

The co-pilot tapped her headset and conversed briefly on the radio. “Jorge is on high alert. Shen is secured aboard *The Hippolyta*. Extra security has been sent to the

marina. Sabin has been alerted and has taken Special Projects to high alert as well. Everyone is waiting for your instructions. Do you want us to turn around?"

The bard shook her head. If Ares was willing to go to these lengths, there must be something he is truly afraid of. "I will tell Shen about his grandmother when I get back," she said. "Read in Michelle, then she can inform the rest of the crew. I want screen captures from that feed of Ares. I want SP to do facial recognition on every fucking database on earth. We are going to find him. For now, we proceed according to plan. Let's go over the mission."



"Any questions?" Gabrielle asked, an hour later, as she looked up from the map unrolled in front of her team. Somber expressions greeted her, but no one had any questions.

"We are starting our descent," Isra said over the cabin speaker. "Landing in ten minutes."

"Time to gear up," Vox announced, heading back to the duffle bags.

When the plane touched down, Gabrielle descended the stairs first, followed by Argo, then Aphrodite. She felt empty inside but was determined not to let her most recent loss derail what she'd been working so long to achieve. As arranged, a Land Rover was waiting for them.

"Ed, you stay with the plane," she said, putting an earpiece in her ear. "I don't know if Ares knows where we are, or if he knows what we're up to. We will be in constant communication. If anything looks the least bit out of place, you say something. I don't care if we have to buy this whole fucking airport; when we come back, this plane takes off."

"Yes, boss," he said with a nod. "Good hunting."

As bard and goddess walked towards the Land Rover, Aphrodite took Gabrielle's hand, and gave it a squeeze. "Welcome home, Gabrielle," she said softly.

## **Chapter 8: Hurt/Comfort**

They rode in silence as Nicolai drove the Land Rover to a small marina where a speedboat was waiting. Gabrielle sat in the back seat with Aphrodite, holding hands and looking out the window.

Her homeland had changed so much since the last time she was here, and her homecoming quickly overshadowed by the reality of her new responsibility. It descended upon her like a cloak. She was suddenly a mother again, a mother of a sweet, intelligent, kind ten-year-old who, in the span of less than two years, had gone through the abrupt loss of his parents and grandmother. As much as it was going to hurt, she was grateful that, at the very least, Shen wouldn't have to lose her too.

On a practical level, she knew she couldn't keep the him on the boat indefinitely. He would grow up, become an adult, go to college, fall in love, and raise a family. Would Ares still be hunting him then? Should he go back to his boarding school? Should she send an armed company of soldiers to protect him?

“Honey, you’re obsessing,” Aphrodite said gently, easily reading her thoughts. “Worry about what is in front of you. The rest will sort itself out later, I promise.” Empty, but comforted, Gabrielle nodded.

There were a few tourists getting in and out of boats at the docks; a larger number and variety of tourists could be seen on the beach. Vox put a small automatic weapon into her duffle bag and nodded to Nicolai to move out. As they walked to the boat, Vox led, with Nicolai bringing up the rear.

They loaded their gear into the waiting speedboat without incident. Once aboard, engineer and Russian swapped roles, with Vox piloting the boat, and Nicolai as lookout, a machine gun resting almost casually on his lap. As they headed out, Argo found a spot between duffle bags to curl up, nearly hidden under a seat. There was not a lot of room on the boat, and the ocean spray felt colder than she remembered.

“It will take a while to pass the tourists,” Nicolai said. While the engines were loud, they could hear each other quite well via their in-ear comms units. “Vox, I think you should sing.”

“What?” Vox queried, quite surprised at the request.

“For Susan,” he said in a tone that brokered no argument.

“What songs did she like?” Aphrodite asked.

“She loved music from the seventies,” he said with a rueful grin. “We were in the organization a long time together. Different departments, same mission, yes?”

Gabrielle smiled, fondly remembering when each of them had started. Susan’s tenure began just a few years before Nicolai, when Gabrielle was known as Rebekah Evans. “You guys were so young. Susan always loved the song Blue Bayou by Linda Ronstadt,” she mused, remembering how moved the Chinese woman was the first time she heard it.

The engineer began to sing. To her surprise and delight, Aphrodite joined her on the second verse, providing harmony. Gabrielle saw Nicolai wipe tears from his eyes more than once through the melodic, yet forlorn wail of the chorus. She looked out at the expanse of blue, at once longing and dreading when she would break down and have a long cry over Susan.

In time, they passed Shipwreck Beach to a more secluded area. Gabrielle critically scanned the contours of the island, comparing them to charts long committed to memory. She signaled for Vox to slow down, and studied the rocks for long moments, trying to remember the details from the last time she was here. They weren’t too close to rock’s edge, and at least a hundred feet from the cliff wall that rose nearly straight up in front of them. Anyone standing up there would have an unobstructed view of the boat, which meant that Gabrielle wanted to retrieve what she came for and leave as quickly as possible.

“The water line is different,” Gabrielle said, to no one in particular. “I think there has been some erosion. The cave will be under the water, maybe twenty-five to thirty feet down from here.” Vox and Nicolai switched positions, the large man taking over the driver’s seat in the boat while the lanky engineer donned a wet suit. Both Aphrodite and Gabrielle wore long-sleeved swim shirts. The bard hoisted the tank onto her back, while the goddess extracted a harpoon gun from the duffle bag.

“You don’t need any equipment at all?” Vox asked, uncertainly. “Not even a mask?”

“I’m at home in the water,” Aphrodite explained. “I was born here.” With that, the goddess dove into the water. Bard and engineer followed behind, tipping in backwards, tanks first.

Once under the surface, Gabrielle took the lead and swam down, critically eyeing the rocks. Dangling from her wrist was a small pick axe; an empty netted satchel attached to the weight belt at her waist. The clarity of the water was good, with visibility easily twenty feet or more. Before long, she’d spotted something familiar and made a bee line for a specific area of rock. Once there, she scanned an area covered with coral and ocean plants. She tapped a couple of times with her axe, disturbing as little of the coral as possible. A few minutes later, gave a thumbs-up sign to the two women. Vox helped her make quick work of clearing the cave entrance as Aphrodite scanned the area for any number of predators. Before long, the opening was large enough for the women to swim through single file. Gabrielle activated her headlamp and led the way. Roughly forty yards into the tunnel, it opened into a larger underwater chamber. Gabrielle moved to the rear left of the chamber and began digging with her pickaxe. Vox added light from her headlamp to where the bard was working. Moments later, the remains of a strong wooden box stood uncovered. The wood had long since rotted away, leaving only the iron bands that bound it. Reaching in with her gloved hand, she extracted a pair of sai, a chakram, and a large hammer. She put the hammer and sai into the bag at her waist, then checked the sharpness of the chakram against her gloved hand. The blade easily cut through the neoprene, so she carried it by the bar in the middle, not wanting to risk having it slice through the satchel.

The trio swam out of the cave and headed for the surface. It was only when they neared the boat that they realized bullets were flying and that they were under attack. Gabrielle broke the surface first and shouted at Nicolai, “Got it!”

“Very nice,” he shouted. “Maybe get back in the boat now?”

The big Russian was shooting at the cliff top with his automatic weapon, using his bullets sparingly in single shots. The attackers were less judicious with their weapons, creating a hail of bullets that pierced the water dangerously close to the boat. Small splashes were erupting everywhere as the bullets tore through the water.

Vox broke the surface next, screaming, “Fuck!” Aphrodite surfaced last and swam over to aid the injured woman. “Vox is hit,” Aphrodite explained to Gabrielle as the bard swam up to them. There was another small splash as a bullet hit the water and the engineer screamed again. “Twice,” she amended.

With Gabrielle’s help, they maneuvered the engineer to the far side of the boat, putting it between them and the gunfire, but not before the woman had been hit a third time, causing Vox to jerk her head back. Gabrielle tossed the chakram carefully into the boat, wrapped one arm around the engineer’s torso and held onto the boat cleat with her other hand. Aphrodite did the same so that the injured woman hung tightly in between them.

“Let’s go!” Gabrielle shouted to Nicolai. The large man did not ask questions, putting the boat in gear and quickly taking off, putting some distance between them and the gunfire. Nicolai tried to avoid flooring the engines, and it was all the bard and goddess could do to maintain their grip on the boat and the injured woman they were holding between them. “Is Argo okay?” Gabrielle screamed, hoping he could hear her without the ear piece.

“Yes,” he yelled back. “She warned me before they started shooting. She’s a good dog!”

The minutes dragged on. Eventually, the large man slowed the boat down long enough to lean over and lift the three women into the boat. Aphrodite seemed fine as far as Gabrielle could tell, but she could feel several places on her own body where the bullets had passed through her. Her skin was already healing, but it was still painful as hell.

Giving Vox the once over told an even more dismal story. She was bleeding profusely from her abdomen, her shoulder, and the side of her head. She could see the head wound was a superficial graze that would only require a few stitches, but it was impossible to gauge the damage from the other two injuries while on the boat. “Back to the dock,” Gabrielle said urgently. “Fast as you can. I’m not losing two people today. I’m fucking not.” Nicolai instantly put the boat in gear and they sped off. “Contact the plane. We need to take off the second we board. I don’t care who we have to bribe, how much it costs, whatever. Tell Ed to just make it happen.”

“Yes, boss,” Nicolai said and immediately began to relay the message.

“Hold here,” Gabrielle instructed Aphrodite, showing her where to put direct pressure on the woman’s abdomen. Vox groaned in pain.

“I know it hurts, Vox,” Gabrielle said, checking to see if there was any apparent injury to the woman’s neck or spine. “Hang in there. You’re going to be okay.”

“You’ve got this tiger,” Aphrodite said encouragingly.

“Report from Ed, boss,” Nicolai shouted, knowing that Gabrielle hadn’t worn an ear piece into the water. “Representatives from the Greek government are forbidding takeoff. They have some questions for you.”

“Looks like Ares tracked the plane,” she fumed. “We are not staying for questions,” she shouted to Nicolai, “Make sure the twins know we are going to be taking off without permission.”

The bard’s jaw clenched. The trip back to the dock seemed to take achingly longer than the trip to the cave, but they finally arrived. Before they reached the dock, Gabrielle explained her next instructions to the large Russian. “As soon as we stop, you pick up Vox. Her spine is ok, so it’s ok if you carry her. You are going to get in the back seat with her and Argo. I’ll drive.” A protest started to work its way across his face. Gabrielle held up her hand. “I can drive just fine,” she reassured him. “I’ve been driving since the invention of the automobile, remember?”

He nodded, “Yes, you drive.”

“Keep direct pressure here, and here,” she explained to him as the boat stopped and he reached to pick up the injured woman. “Argo, go!” Gabrielle shouted. The dog quickly launched herself out of the boat and up the dock. People quickly moved out of the way of the charging pit bull making a path for the rest of them. Gabrielle replaced her ear piece, grabbed her treasures, and followed, leaving the rest of the scuba equipment behind. Nicolai came next and Aphrodite brought up the rear, keeping an eye on the injured Vox and sous chef.

When they reached the car, it took only a moment for bard and goddess to situate the other two in the back seat, and take off, peeling out of the beach parking lot. “Ed, how we doing buddy?” she said over her ear piece, calm tension in her voice.

“I’m spending your cash, boss.” He said, his voice calm but urgent. “Local cops should be stopping traffic for you, but a government detail with military escort is on their way to the airport. They are determined to stop us and are offering medical assistance for Vox.”

“The fact that they know she’s injured says a lot,” Gabrielle replied, expertly winding the Land Rover through the narrow streets. “I know who’s behind this, and Vox doesn’t stand a chance if we wait for her to get transferred to a hospital. Stick with the local police, offer whatever it takes.”

As if on cue, they came to an intersection with a motorcycle police officer in the intersection, stopping traffic and waiving her through. As they passed, the officer jumped on his bike and followed behind the Land Rover. The same thing happened at the next intersection, with officers leap-frogging each other and clearing a path for her to speed through the winding streets to the airport. It took only a short time to reach the plane on the tarmac.

The stairs were lowered, and Ed stood at the bottom, waiting.

“Let’s go! Let’s go – get us in the air NOW!” Gabrielle shouted at the cockpit as she cleared the hatch behind Aphrodite, Argo, and Nicolai, who was carrying the injured Vox. They could see several cars in the distance speeding in their direction. Ed secured the door behind them. The plane engines roared to life as the two women in the cockpit began arranging with the tower for emergency takeoff.

“We’ve been denied clearance for takeoff,” Ed relayed from just outside the cockpit.

“Do it anyway.” Gabrielle ordered, her voice tense and urgent. “Put her here, on the floor,” Gabrielle gestured to Nicolai, who gently laid Vox supine on the floor where Gabrielle indicated, then backed out of the way, awaiting further instructions.

“Come here Argo.” Aphrodite, who had moved towards the back of the plane, called the visibly distraught dog over to her. Argo reluctantly moved behind the goddess but kept her injured friend in her line of sight.

The plane began to move as Ed retrieved a combat medic bag from a side compartment, set it down next to Gabrielle, and began breaking out supplies in a very fast, methodical fashion. He first handed the bard a pair of bandage shears, then began pulling out various supplies and equipment from the bag. IV bags, cannulas and tubing, gauze, monitoring cables, and a LifePak 20 portable monitor emerged from what, to Aphrodite, appeared to be a seemingly bottomless bag. This wasn’t far from the truth: combat medic bags are designed to provide a battlefield medic the ability to stabilize and transport a severely injured soldier, including the ability to perform emergency surgery. In other words, it was a small hospital packed into a backpack. You just needed to add someone who knows what they are doing.

Gabrielle knew what she was doing. The bard’s hands flew over the injured woman, using the shears to completely cut the neoprene wetsuit away from the engineer. Nicolai moved the neoprene pieces out of the way, then retrieved several blankets from a cabinet and covered Vox’s legs to keep her warm.

“I gotta say, Gabrielle,” Vox stammered, clearly in shock and in pain, “when I envisioned your hands all over me, this isn’t quite how I pictured it.” Her musing was cut short by a loud gasp of pain in response to the bard removing the pieces of her wetsuit sticky with blood.

Ed attached electrodes to Vox's chest, then grabbed her right arm and slapped a blood pressure cuff to her bicep and an oxygen sensor to her finger. He then gathered up all the ends of the wires and tubes, connected them to the LifePak, and powered it up. The monitor's beeps and chirps reflecting Vox's physiological vital signs were quickly followed by their appearance on the display. Both Ed and Gabrielle glanced at the numbers and visibly relaxed.

"Sorry, sorry," Gabrielle said apologetically. "I know this hurts like a bitch." Ed moved to Vox's other arm, cinched a tourniquet above her elbow then inserted a large bore IV cannula. Despite the pain from her injuries, Vox winced as Ed sent the needle home.

"Seriously, Ed? Fourteen gauge? I'm still conscious you know." Ed grunted in reply while he hooked up a bag of fluids.

"Don't knock it, Vox," Aphrodite said reassuringly. "You're in for some primo hurt/comfort."

"Your shoulder and head injury aren't too bad," Gabrielle reassured the engineer, in part to distract her. "The abdomen may be a little more interesting. Hang in there."

The plane made a turn en route to the runway for takeoff. Gabrielle checked the LifePak again then looked at Vox. "You're pretty stable right now, but I've got to figure out what's going on in there," she said, indicating the bullet's entry point in Vox's abdomen. "I'm not going to be able to put you out, so this is going to hurt a lot, and I'm sorry about that." She doused her hands with disinfectant, dried them briefly and put on surgical gloves with Ed's help.

"When does the comfort part start?" Vox asked Aphrodite with a swagger the injured woman clearly didn't feel.

"You've got this kiddo," Aphrodite replied with a radiant smile.

"Ed, hand Aphrodite the task lamp and shine it here," she said pointing to the engineer's abdomen.

"We need to take off now," Nicolai urged, watching out the window as a parade of six cars quickly sped towards them. The plane accelerated having made the turn and sped down the runway.

There was a lurch as the jet became airborne, causing Vox to scream. "Everything okay back there?" Kismet called from the cockpit.

"Just level us out as fast and low as you can. We can't go to cruising altitude until I figure out what's going on here because the change in cabin pressure will complicate things."

"Got it, boss."

Vox squirmed in discomfort and groaned as Ed, now prepped and wearing gloves himself, placed a pair of surgical eye loupes on Gabrielle's face. "Vox," Gabrielle said urgently, "I need you to be really, really still."

"I think I can help with that," Aphrodite said. Passing the light to Nicolai, she moved behind Ed to position herself cross-legged at Vox's head. She placed her hands on Vox's temples which had an immediately calming effect on the injured woman.

Working quickly and calmly Gabrielle checked the entry wound through the large tattoo on her abdomen, then she and Ed rolled the now unconscious Vox on her side to check her back for an exit wound. Finding the telltale wound that indicated the exit of an intact bullet, she was about to breathe a sigh of relief when the bubbling of blood from

the wound made her catch her breath. Quickly rolling Vox back into place, her fears were confirmed by the sound of the monitor's alarms over the jet's engines as Vox's blood pressure began dropping in response to the blood loss. Vox had been bleeding inside her abdominal cavity, and the delay in treating the injury was starting to take its toll.

"I need to get in there and stop the bleeding." Even as the words were coming out of her mouth, Ed was reaching into the medic bag for supplies. He handed her another set of sterile gloves, surgical mask, scalpels, hemostats of various size and purpose, and gauze and then laid out a sterile towel onto Vox's chest. Gabrielle opened the containers and shook the supplies onto the drape, donned her gloves, and put her instruments into her preferred order. Ed set up a suction machine and hung a fresh bag of fluids to Vox's IV.

Gabrielle rubbed the surgical betadine scrub on and around the bullet wound, feeling around the entry wound for any clues as to the situation below. Placing her index finger on Vox's stomach where she intended to cut, she grabbed a scalpel, looked up and met Ed's eyes.

"Ready?" she asked. He nodded.

Gabrielle looked at Aphrodite. You can keep her under?

"Oh, I'm pretty sure she's otherwise occupied." Aphrodite replied cryptically. Gabrielle nodded at Ed and he turned on the suction machine.

"Let's do this."

Gabrielle steadied her breathing and lowered scalpel to skin. The meticulously rendered tattoo of a large feather colored in a gentle gradation of rainbow hue that fractured into silhouettes of birds taking flight barely registered in the bard's consciousness as she cut. Her focus was beyond the surface of the engineer's skin.

The blood that instantly began escaping the incision was bright red, indicating the possibility that the source of the bleeding was arterial. Ed followed behind the scalpel with the suction wand, clearing out the fluid as fast as he could. Once she finished making the incision, she pulled back the skin to expose the cavity so Ed could thoroughly suction out the remaining blood. While Ed cleared out the area, Gabrielle was studying the cavity for the source of the bleeding. Her search was rewarded by the oozing of blood from a separation in the liver caused by the bullet as it passed through Vox's stomach.

"Okay Ed, I think I see the problem here. Looks like the bullet transected the liver and nicked the hepatic artery. Hold the wound open and let me get in there."

Ed took over holding open the incision from Gabrielle, and Gabrielle grabbed a hemostat and attached the needle end of self-dissolving suture material. She then reached in and gingerly moved Vox's liver around until she could visualize the bullet's path. She followed the path until she reached the source of the bleeding.

"Ed, I need suction."

"Um..." His response caused her to look up from her loupes. She had forgotten he was using both hands to hold upon the incision. Looking over to Aphrodite, she made some rapid mental calculations, then said, "Goddess, glove up. You're going in." Aphrodite's eye widened, but she calmly reached over to the medic bag, deliberately selected a package of surgical gloves, donned the gloves, grabbed the suction wand, and peered into the cavity.

“Where do you want me?” She asked with feigned innocence. Gabrielle mentally rolled her eyes at the goddess’ perpetual lack of seriousness but maintained her composure.

“Down here, by my thumb,” Gabrielle moved her thumb and Aphrodite proficiently suctioned the fluids out of the way, then continued to keep the area clear without getting into Gabrielle’s way. Gabrielle quickly identified the nick in the artery wall and moved to suture it closed. Ed observed as Aphrodite continued providing spot suctioning around the area as Gabrielle worked, the two of them working in concert, adept and familiar with the rhythm of each other’s movement as if they had been performing this exact dance together for years. He marveled at the dance, distracted to the point he scarcely noticed the fatigue in his arms from holding open the incision.

“Okay, I think I’m good here.” Gabrielle’s matter-of-fact observation snapped Ed from his reverie. Aphrodite finished her duties with some spot clean up then sat back on her knees, admiring her work.

“I’ve never been much into housekeeping, but that’s not a bad job, if I do say so myself.” This prompted another mental eye roll from the bard. She nodded at Aphrodite.

“Don’t take your gloves off just yet. I need you to take over for Ed before his arms fall off. I still need to irrigate Vox’s abdomen with an antibiotic solution so she doesn’t die from infection and waste all my hard work.”

“Sure thing, hon.” That she was being ordered around by a mortal, albeit an extraordinary one, was not lost on the goddess, but instead of being annoyed she found herself bemused. Nicolai, who had been quietly observing from his position above the surgery as light bearer, also noticed and chuckled quietly to himself.

While Ed massaged the circulation back into his arms, Gabrielle shed her gloves, prepared a bag of fluids with antibiotics, then slowly emptied it into the cavity. Donning another pair of surgical gloves, she carefully moved around various organs and tissue in Vox’s abdomen to ensure the solution covered as much surface area as possible and to check for any additional injury. Seeing nothing, she suctioned the fluids out of Vox’s body.

After closing and dressing the stomach wound she pulled the blankets up to cover the engineer’s chest. Checking Vox’s vital sign readings on the monitor one more time, she moved to the next area of injury, the shoulder.

“This is a little more straightforward at least,” she said to no one in particular after a cursory exam of the wound. “Ed, let Isra and Kismet know we can head up to cruising altitude. Have them contact Jorge; I want a Transportation team on the tarmac when we land. We need a stretcher and equipped van to get us back to the marina and then onto the boat,” she ordered. “Any word from Greece? Are we being followed?”

Ed quickly moved to the cockpit to get an update and returned to, what had become for all intents and purposes, an operating room. “No one is following us and the Greek government isn’t lodging any formal charges. For the time being we seem to have made a clean break. We’re clear to get back to the ship. Isra said she’d update us before landing to make sure it’s still safe.”

“She’s not going to a hospital?” Aphrodite asked, surprised.

“She will be safer on the yacht,” Nicolai said.

“The facilities onboard are more than adequate to take care of this,” Gabrielle said confidently. “In a week she’ll be good as new.”

After a brief moment of stretching her neck from side to side, the bard donned a fresh pair of surgical gloves, showed Nicolai where to point the light, and began to remove the bullet lodged in the young woman's shoulder. The bright orange koi tattoo had been spared.

They must have reached cruising altitude because when her own ears popped, Vox woke up with a start, and let out a started howl of pain. She looked at Gabrielle clearly confused, with an almost panicked expression on her face.

"Can I take a moment?" Aphrodite asked.

Gabrielle checked the wound. The bleeding was minimal, all things considered, so she backed away a bit to give the goddess the space to move into the woman's line of sight.

"How you doing, tiger?" she asked warmly, a comforting lull to her voice.

"I was just...but how did I...?" Vox stammered, wincing in pain.

"I can send you back there, to relive it all over again. Or you can stay awake with us. It's up to you sweetie." There was no judgment in the goddess' voice, only caring and understanding.

Vox smiled, almost bashfully, "Send me back, please." After a brief touch to the woman's forehead, she was out again, her heart rate and vital signs stable and strong.

Gabrielle resumed her work, and in short order, removed a bullet from Vox's shoulder. After cleaning, stitching, and dressing the wound she then moved onto the graze wound on the side of her head, quickly closing it with a few stitches.

Finally, she took the surgical gloves off collapsing backwards as the stress and fatigue finally started catching up with her.

"Excellent work everyone," she said with another glance at the LifePak. "Vox should be fine. You all performed magnificently."

"Looks like all that med school really came in handy." The relief was evident in Aphrodite's voice.

Gabrielle smiled. She was pleased at how soundly the young woman was sleeping, but still curious. She glanced at the cockpit where Ed was talking to the twins. "What, exactly, did you do to her?" she asked quietly.

"I...um..." Aphrodite was not one to blush, but something told Gabrielle that if she were able, she would be bright red right now.

"What?" Gabrielle asked, sitting up on her elbow.

Aphrodite shrugged, "I gave her a first-time story."

"A *what*, now?" Gabrielle asked, completely confused.

"Memories," the goddess said, exasperated. "I couldn't think of a scenario to distract her with, so I gave her one of my own memories."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "First time memories? As in sex memories?"

"Yes." The goddess nodded, matter-of-fact. "I didn't have a lot of time to come up with something."

"With anyone I know?" Gabrielle asked, narrowing her eyes in annoyance. Aphrodite shrugged and smiled.

"So, my *employee* is going to remember having sex with *me*, as *you*?"

"That's about the gist of it." The goddess agreed.

The bard was going to say something else, but was distracted by a low, growling laugh that sounded like Jabba the Hutt. Gabrielle turned to Nicolai. He caught her gaze and laughed harder.

“Lesbians have such interesting troubles,” he said. “Vox is alive. So, what if she’s seen you naked?” He continued chuckling, clearly very pleased with himself.

“Well, there’s a bit more to it than that,” Gabrielle stammered, her indignation quickly losing steam.

“Not if he was speaking metaphorically,” Aphrodite added helpfully.

The flight to Los Angeles felt like it took days, not hours. At one point, Nicolai got up and rummaged through the kitchen, returning with a plate of cheeses, hard salami, fruit, and a glass of water. He sat the plate down in front of Gabrielle who was sitting on the floor, her back resting against the couch, frequently checking on the injured engineer who was hovering somewhere between consciousness and slumber.

“Eat,” he said simply.

Gabrielle nodded absently and he spoke more forcefully.

“Eat. Your day is a long way from over. When we get back to the ship you will take care of Vox, then you will take care of Shen. Right now, *I’m* taking care of *you*, so eat.”

“Thank you, Nicolai,” Gabrielle said, putting a few grapes into her mouth.

He glanced uncertainly over at Aphrodite then at Ed fast asleep in the recliner. “I do not know if gods eat. If they do, you eat too.” His eyes darted from Aphrodite to his employer, making his meaning quite clear. While he might be taking care of Gabrielle in the moment, it would be up to Aphrodite to do so, despite being completely spent from taking care of everyone else.

“I’ll eat,” Aphrodite said, “if you let Gabrielle make sure you’re okay.” He tried to look indignant but she persisted. “You’re the one who said I’m a god, hon. I know you got shot four times in your vest.”

Gabrielle was instantly on her feet, looking up at the big man with a very stern expression. “Take your jacket and shirt off now,” she barked. The flight attendant woke with a start and without being asked, produced an XXL hooded sweatshirt from a cupboard for the large, hulking man.

Grumbling, Nicolai took off his bespoke jacket, revealing his dress shirt with four bullet holes in the front. He removed both the shirt and his Kevlar vest. Four deep bruises were already formed on his chest. Gabrielle touched his skin gingerly, then donned a stethoscope to listen to his heartbeat and breathing. She prodded at him briefly, producing a series of annoyed grunts, then took a step back so she didn’t have to crane her neck to make eye contact. “Two broken ribs. Your lungs lucked out. The other two are just bruises.”

“When did you become a doctor?” he asked, donning the sweatshirt.

“Let’s just say that the first time I went to med school, I had to pretend to be a man, and leeches were an actual thing we used.” She replied with a smile. “If I had a couple of leeches, I could take care of those bruises, no problem.”

“I’ll keep the bruises,” he replied.

She turned her attention to Aphrodite. “As long as I’m checking everyone, are you okay?”

“Not so much as a scratch,” she said. “Bullets just kind of avoided me. But, I saw that you got hit a couple of times...”

Gabrielle shook her head dismissively, glancing subtly at Ed, who was headed to the cockpit to get an update from the pilot and co-pilot. “I lucked out too,” she said, giving Argo a belly rub, “not a scratch.”

A team was waiting for them when they landed at LAX, as she had requested. A man and woman with a stretcher carefully picked Vox up, and carried her out of the plane. The rest of them deplaned, and Gabrielle talked to Ed for a moment before joining Aphrodite and Nicolai at the van. Argo was already inside, sitting protectively next to Vox. They road back to the marina in silence. The team unloaded Vox, who remained unconscious.

“Is she going to keep those memories?” Gabrielle asked as they took a second tender boat to *The Hippolyta*.

“I can take them away if you want me to,” Aphrodite said.

“No,” Gabrielle replied. “I mean, if she wants you to take them away, fine. Don’t do it for me.”

Aphrodite put her arm around the bard and gave an affectionate squeeze. “You think she’s earned them, do you?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “I guess.”

It wasn’t long thereafter that Gabrielle had the opportunity to find out for herself. Vox Wandre woke to find her boss sitting in a chair next to her bed, watching the monitors carefully.

“This is awkward,” she said wincing, trying to force a grin.

“That is a true statement,” Gabrielle replied with a smile. “You know, I don’t think you can sue me for sexual harassment when it only happens in your mind.”

While it was the last thing in the world she expected, Vox blushed. “I would never sue you for that, Gabrielle,” she said.

Gabrielle sighed and glanced over at Argo, who had hopped onto the injured woman’s bed and was resting her large muscled head on the engineer’s legs. She made it quite clear that she intended to spend the night there. “Vox, is this going to be a thing? Because it can’t really be a thing.”

“No,” the engineer replied, with just a hint of sadness in her voice. “I know the memory isn’t mine, and I expect that Aphrodite will be here any minute to take it away.”

“It’s up to you,” Gabrielle said. “I told her I was fine if you kept it, as long as you’re okay with that and it...” she shrugged. “It could make things better or worse. Sometimes the fantasy of a person is more amazing than the, um, reality ...”

“No,” Vox interrupted, “this was pretty amazing.”

“You’re not helping,” Gabrielle muttered with a frown.

“It’s not going to be weird,” Vox assured her. “Obviously if it gets weird, you fire me. I respect and appreciate that it is a memory you’d trust me to keep.”

“Yeah, well...” Gabrielle said, checking the woman’s pulse one more time. “I’m sorry I made such a mess of the feather tattoo, I didn’t have a lot of options.”

“Now that I might sue you for,” Vox said, eliciting a laugh from the bard.

“How ‘bout I spring for your touch up work when you’re healed up. Any tattoo artist you want, anywhere in the world. You can make a vacation out of it.” Vox gave her a thumb’s up but was clearly in pain. Gabrielle knew she needed sleep. “You take it easy

for the next few days,” she continued getting up to take her leave. “Everyone is going to keep an eye on you. She paused, then leaned over and kissed the woman’s forehead tenderly. “You did well today Vox,” she said softly. “I’m not going to forget it.”

As she left the medical room, both Michelle and Elaine were waiting for her. Without speaking, she nodded, then followed them to the bridge. “Where is Shen?” Gabrielle asked, her heart heavy with sadness and exhaustion.

“We need to talk to you about that before you see him.” Michelle said.

“I’m listening.”

“When Jorge contacted me, I assembled the crew and we made a decision while Shen was en route. We want him to live here with you – with us – when he isn’t at school.”

Gabrielle nodded. So far, this conversation was tracking with her own thoughts. Michelle forged ahead. “But he isn’t going in the guest room. The crew voted, and we think he would be safer, and more comfortable on the lower deck with us. The captain and executive officer are never off duty together, so we decided to share the captain’s quarters. That frees up the Ex-Oh cabin for Shen. It will be more comfortable for him, sort of like living in a dorm at school. We’re in close proximity to keep an eye on him, and he’s always got someone to talk to.”

“So, Elaine is bunking with you?” Gabrielle asked Michelle.

“There is a couch in the captain’s quarters if we both need to sleep there at the same time,” the captain replied. “There is enough room. We think it’s what’s best for Shen.”

Gabrielle shrugged. It may have been the exhaustion; she was tired even before leaving for Greece, or it may have been the stress, sadness, or any number of things, but she saw no flaw in their plan. “No one has told him yet, have they?” she asked, wishing deep down, someone else had.

Michelle shook her head, “We thought it best...”

Gabrielle nodded. “I know.”

“He knows something is up. He was scooped up from school by an elite military team, the kid isn’t stupid. He’s in his quarters now. He’s had dinner, we told him to try and get some sleep,” Elaine offered.

Gabrielle told the women to set up a rotation so someone could be with Vox at all times, and to notify her if anything seemed amiss. She also gave instructions to depart for Cabo San Lucas immediately. She left the bridge and descended to the lower deck and the crew cabins. Upon reaching the door to the cabin formerly known as ‘executive officer’s, she took a deep breath to steady herself, then knocked.

“Come in,” an uncertain voice replied.

“Hey kiddo,” Gabrielle said as she opened the door. Her voice was warm, but she was unable to force a smile.

Shen jumped out of bed and ran to the door to hug the bard. He began crying, already assuming the worst.

“Grandma has been in an accident, hasn’t she?” he asked.

Gabrielle held onto the boy tightly as sobs shook his thin frame. “Yes, honey,” she said soothingly. “She was hurt and she died.”

“And I’m in danger?” he asked, pulling away to look at her.

Gabrielle moved the two of them to his bed so they could both sit down and she could look directly at him. “We don’t have all the answers yet, Shen,” she explained. “I am going to try to get those answers. I don’t know if you are in danger, but I promised your grandmother that I would never take chances with your safety. That’s why you’re here right now. I hope you will be able to go back to school soon, but until I’m sure it’s safe, are you okay staying here?”

He nodded and looked around the cabin in awe. “Do you see what they did for me?” he asked.

Gabrielle looked around the cabin and was surprised she hadn’t noticed the difference when she’d first stepped inside. On one wall was a poster of Gillian Anderson posing with The Creature from the Black Lagoon that she knew belonged to Michelle. An Xbox she knew to be Bohemian’s sat by the small television. There was a small statue of the Buddha belonging to Hatsuo. There were a couple of die cast metal action figures that belonged to Wolfgang. Everyone in the crew had put something in this space to transform it from an officer’s cabin to the bedroom of a ten-year-old boy. A much loved ten-year-old boy.

“They said Vox had been hurt,” he said cautiously.

“She was, but she is going to be okay,” Gabrielle reassured him. “You know what the responsibility is for someone in sick bay, right?” she asked the boy.

Shen nodded. “They get to pick the music that gets played throughout the ship.”

“Do you know why I have that rule?” Gabrielle asked. The boy shook his head. “Why do you think?”

He considered a moment. “It gives them something to do with the time they’re in bed?” he suggested. Gabrielle nodded. “And so the rest of the crew doesn’t forget about them as they do their regular jobs.”

“I think Vox would be really happy for you to help her pick songs, and if you want to pick songs that your grandmother liked...or didn’t like...you’re absolutely allowed to do that.”

He nodded, not quite able to smile. “What about school,” he asked.

Gabrielle thought for a moment. “I’m going to talk to Hatsuo about that. For now, you can take some time off if you want, it’s okay to take time and be sad. But I think you will do your studies here, with our help, until we know it’s safe to go back. I promise we won’t let you get behind.” He nodded, the exhaustion and sleepiness as evident on his face as she felt. Realizing it was three AM, she helped him get back into bed and tucked him in. “There is one more thing I need to tell you. We are going to Cabo San Lucas right now. It will take us about three days to get there. When we are there I have an important thing I need to do.”

“Is this to get your friend?” he asked sleepily. “Aphrodite told me she was going to help you find one of your friends. I really like her.”

Gabrielle smiled. “That is exactly what I’m going to try and do. If I find her, she will join us here on the boat. When she is here, she is probably going to need a lot of help from all of us to adjust. I’m not sure where she’s been and what she will be used to. I’m saying this because I don’t want you to think that I won’t have time for you or that I’ve forgotten you. Sometimes people have a hard time balancing things that are important to them. You are always able to get ahold of me,” she pointed to the button on the panel of his cabin’s intercom unit. “You also know that the crew can always reach me, and they

know how important you are to me. Don't ever feel like you're bothering me Shen, because you're not. Okay? I love you, and I really want you to remember that." He nodded, clearly losing the battle with slumber in spite of his grief. Gabrielle kissed him on the forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow, Moose."

"I love you too Squirrel," he said.

Gabrielle returned to her quarters, and immediately sensed something was very, very wrong. For one, Aphrodite wasn't there. They hadn't spoken much upon returning to the ship because she'd followed Vox to the medical bay. She opened the door to her closet and saw that the goddess' clothes were missing. She opened the drawers she'd cleaned out for her, and instead of the t-shirts, blouses or sweatshirts she expected to see, there was a pair of sai, a hammer, and a chakram in the drawer.

Gabrielle paced around her room, uncertain of what to do. Their agreement had made sense. Of course their relationship would change, now that the agreed-upon milestone had been met. She had the hammer. She sat down on what she now thought of as 'Aphrodite's side of the bed,' and tried to collect her thoughts. The weight of the day's events descended upon her like a tomb. The adrenalin hangover after being shot at, then doing emergency surgery on a plane, coupled with the loss of her most trusted advisor and the responsibility of raising a child, all in the same day was nearly too much to bear. Out of the corner of her eye she saw something on the floor, nearly under the bed. She reached down to pick it up. It was the four-page sex scene she'd jotted down for her lover her second night on the boat. This final loss was one too many.

"Come in," Aphrodite said at the soft knock at the door. She wasn't surprised to see Gabrielle enter the guest suite. She was, however, surprised to see the absolute look of devastation on her face.

"You forgot this," the bard said, putting the journal pages on the dresser. She didn't say anything else for long moments, and then turned to go.

"Gabrielle," Aphrodite said gently, "What did you come here to say?"

The bard turned back, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I came here to say that it's too much. Too much loss for one night. Susan's death, Vox getting shot, Shen's world turned upside down. I'm a mess and I..." she sighed. "I just want to cry, and have you hold me until everything stops hurting, and that isn't very fair to you."

Without hesitation, Aphrodite walked over to Gabrielle and put her arms around the bard. The last pretense of holding her shit together melted away, and the Gabrielle cried like she hadn't cried in centuries. She sobbed openly, without reservation, letting years of pain kept in check by her self-imposed reserve wash over the woman holding her. Partly because she knew that Aphrodite could withstand this storm, but mostly because she didn't have anything left to stop it.

For a long time, Aphrodite didn't say anything. She simply held onto Gabrielle and let her cry. Finally, she murmured into the top of the bard's head "You're welcome to stand here and cry all night, but it's going be harder for you to cry yourself to sleep standing up."

"I shouldn't stay," Gabrielle sniffled, and made a weak attempt to move away.

Aphrodite moved so she could look Gabrielle in the eye. "This one is on me, sweetie," she said tenderly. "I'm not letting you leave."

## **Chapter 9: The Birth of Xena**

Gabrielle extracted the last of the acupuncture needles from Vox's abdomen before lightly running her hands over the young woman's arms, legs, and torso to make sure no needles were left behind. Moving to the foot of the bed she checked the pulses in her feet once again. The strains of 'These Things' by She Wants Revenge could be heard playing through the ship's sound system.

"You are healing really quickly," she said, happy and relieved. "How are you feeling?"

Vox sat up and pulled the tank top down over her abdomen, then adjusted the covers back over her legs. "I feel great," she replied. "I'm ready for duty." Argo growled then barked once, and she frowned at the dog.

"Your nurse disagrees," Gabrielle commented, as she typed some notes into the laptop sitting on the nearby table. She looked critically at the engineer. "I can get Aphrodite down here for a second opinion. But I'd rather not; I'm your doctor and you really should be honest with me. It could be important."

The butch woman attempted to shrug but winced in pain halfway through. "It still hurts," she said nodding to her shoulder, "and my digestion is still kind of wonky."

"That could be from the antibiotics," the bard reassured her. She scrolled back on the laptop, reviewing her notes. "We can add some probiotics to your diet, but everything seems okay, otherwise. I want you to stay up here for at least the rest of the week and then you can move back to your cabin. Same rules apply; if anything changes you tell who is ever checking on you and they will let me know. I want you off duty though for another week or two at least. Enjoy your downtime."

"I enjoy my work," Vox protested.

Gabrielle nodded, "That's one indicator of a fantastic boss," she said dryly. "Besides," the bard added with a gesture to the doors outside. "Sick bay is closer to Shen's room than your cabin, and I think helping you is helping him."

Vox looked at Gabrielle appreciatively, "I suspect you're giving the same speech to him to keep me here."

"Whatever works to take care of my people." Gabrielle replied standing up, not the least bit perturbed that her ruse had been discovered.

There was a knock at the sick bay door. Both women looked up as Michelle entered. "I wanted to let you know that we will be at the coordinates you gave us in a couple of hours," she said.

Gabrielle nodded. She went back to the laptop on the desk and quickly did a search, bringing up a map. She showed it to the captain. "The Arch of Cabo San Lucas is here," she pointed at a tiny area of land jutting away from the peninsula. Next, she pointed to a spot on the map. "I think we should anchor about here. There are going to be tourists and cruise ships, and we want a low profile, since I'm not sure if Ares is still following us. It's going to be tricky. Aphrodite, Argo, and I will take the Zodiac to here," she pointed to a specific rocky spot of coastline. "Where is Aphrodite right now?"

"On the sundeck," Michelle answered, not quite able to mask the sympathetic expression that briefly crossed her face.

There was no doubt that the crew knew Aphrodite had moved into the guest stateroom. She and Gabrielle had not spent the night together since the night they returned from Greece with the injured engineer. No one had said anything, and while there was no animosity between bard and goddess whatsoever, there was an undercurrent

among the crew that Gabrielle had been dumped, and the sympathy was palpable. To their credit, no one treated Aphrodite any differently, and while the crew was mistaken, she was glad that the misunderstanding did not extend to someone she now considered one of her very dearest friends.

“Let me know when we anchor, and please have Bo check out the Zodiac to make sure we’ve got gas and camping supplies. I’m not sure how long we will be on the beach, but I’ll be in touch when we get there, and keep you posted.”

“Will do,” Michelle said with an efficient nod. “Should I have Nicolai or any of the other crew members join you?”

The bard shook her head. “No, it will just be the three of us.” She paused, choosing her next words carefully. “If we are successful and we return with Xena, I will give you a heads up. We may need a few days before I introduce her to everyone.”

Michelle nodded. “Aphrodite said she may have amnesia or some other kind of memory impairment. We’ll give your section of the ship wide berth.

“How is the patient,” Michelle asked, smiling over at the engineer.

“I’m going to be dee-jaying the rest of the week at least,” Vox said with a slight smirk. “Doctor’s orders.”

“If you keep playing The Carpenter’s Greatest Hits, there may be a mutiny before the end of the week,” the captain warned.

“The Carpenters is the music of pain and suffering,” the engineer parried.

“Their version of California Dreamin’ is an abomination,” Gabrielle said agreeing with the captain.

“I could always go back to work early,” Vox suggested.

Michelle shook her head. “Not until all of your stitches are out. That’s the rule. And until your doctor okays it. If we could survive the onslaught of surf guitar instrumentals from Bo’s bout with pneumonia last year, we will survive this, but you need to put more stuff like you’re playing now into the mix.

“Captain, I will consider the request,” she said formally. Argo barked twice. Vox frowned at the dog but rubbed her belly anyway. “Would it kill you to have my back here?” she muttered to the pit bull.

“I’ll be joining you for lunch later today,” Michelle said to the young woman as she was leaving. “Sarah said to text her what you’d like to eat. I’ll see you later.” She nodded once to Gabrielle and then left.

The bard was about to follow her out the door but stopped at the last moment. Turning back to face the recovering woman, she said, “I know you’re covering for Shen, and that’s very kind of you. Susan was the seventies easy listening buff.”

Vox smiled enigmatically. “I keep your secrets, boss, you keep mine.”

Before heading up to the sun deck, Gabrielle stopped to check on her godson. The past three days had been a time for mourning Shen’s grandmother and continuing with his studies. She knew his grief was not going to abate any time soon, but even now she could see him pushing forward. He wasn’t allowing the grief to take hold, and was focusing on his school work, which he greatly enjoyed.

His evenings were spent with a couple of hours of distraction after dinner: a movie, television, a video game, or music. Most nights he ate with Gabrielle, Aphrodite, and the rest of the crew, occasionally he just ate with the bard and goddess. His days were spent helping various crewmembers with their duties, when he felt up to it. If he

didn't, he could often be found with Vox, helping her pick music, or just hanging out with someone else who wasn't feeling that great either. When he wanted to work on his studies, he found a vast array of tutors from which to choose and could always find someone also passionate about the topic to help him.

Gabrielle found the boy in the den with Prisha, going over the day's history lesson. "Did you guys finish math already?" she asked, joining them.

"Math is a lot easier than history," he replied as she sat down on the couch. "At least math is either right or wrong. With history, there is so much stuff to remember. And who even cares anyway?"

"What period are you guys talking about?" Gabrielle asked, genuinely interested.

A flash of amusement crossed Prisha's face. "Ancient Greece and Rome."

"Lovely," Gabrielle said equal parts amused and resigned. "You know what I think is so fascinating about history?" she asked her godson. "As much as things change, they also stay the same. What's one of your favorite things to eat around Christmas?" she asked.

Shen thought a moment. "Nutbread." he said. "Mom used to make it and she learned it from grandma." A wave of sadness crossed his features and Gabrielle smiled understandingly.

"Your mom learned the recipe from her mom, who learned it from hers, who learned it from your great grandmother Betty." Gabrielle stopped there, not feeling the need at this point to inform the boy the recipe had originally been passed down to her from her mother in Potidaea. "So many of the things we don't think about are the same the world over and have been the same for thousands of years. And then one little thing changes and while the essence of people stays the same, the lives they live become very different. For example, the Dark Ages – what changed in the lives of people living in Europe that didn't change for the people going about their business in North America, or Australia, or the Middle East at the same time?"

The boy was silent for a moment then said, "Rats on the trade ships from Africa brought diseases like the plague and a lot of people died. I guess because of the way they had advanced, with people living closer together, and not understanding about hygiene and stuff they were more at risk of getting sick."

"Exactly. But also, they weren't trading with people from, say North America, which is why the plague at that time left people in North America alone."

"So, what's the part that stays the same? Sure, some of the foods we eat are the same, but the foods are different too," He pressed.

"Parents loved their children in twelve hundred AD, same as they do today."

Gabrielle replied. "They may say things differently and have different hopes and dreams for them, but parents usually love their kids and want them to do well in life. There are always people who fight, but also always people who try to make peace. There are people who don't worry about the problems they make for others, and always there are some amazing individuals who show up from time to time who worry a great deal about problems that aren't necessarily theirs, they just want to make things better for someone else. That's the part of history that makes me hopeful, more so than the inventions and stuff. With every great positive invention someone seems to make an equally great negative one."

“Don’t they say that if you know history you won’t repeat it?” Shen asked, confused.

“They say that, but people always repeat it. Always. It’s human nature I guess. Luckily, it’s not just the terrible stuff that gets repeated, but the good stuff too. That is also human nature.”

“Will you help me when I have to learn the different Renaissance artists?” Shen asked hopefully.

“Of course,” Gabrielle replied. “Some of my favorite artists lived in the Renaissance.” She gave Prisha a subtle wink when Shen was looking back at his history book. “Say Moose,” she continued, “remember when we talked about me going to try and find my friend Xena?” The boy nodded. “We are almost at Cabo San Lucas, which is where I think someone is going to bring her to meet up with me. I need to go with Aphrodite and Argo to the beach and wait for her, so I may be gone for a day or so. But, you can reach me by phone if you need to or have anyone onboard get in touch with me. I’m sorry I won’t be here tonight to have dinner with you.”

“I think that the boys were planning a ‘boys’ night’ while you were going to be off the ship.” Prisha explained to Gabrielle. “They wanted to have a *Guardians of the Galaxy* marathon, stay up late, make s’mores in the fire pit, and have a drum circle.”

Shen’s face lit up. “Can I go?” he asked hopefully.

“I don’t see why not,” Gabrielle replied, amusement threading her voice. She found it adorable that the youngster didn’t realize it was for his benefit. The choice of movie was deliberate and the meaning was not lost on her: A movie about a young boy losing his mother is raised by space pirates, and later find his own family of misfits. She didn’t doubt that there were also some things he might express to Bohemian, Steve, Hatsuo, Wolfgang, Blake, or Nicolai that he might not feel as at home saying to one of the women onboard. No doubt this would become more a factor as he grew up. “I think that midnight or one am is a decent curfew if you’re still awake then. Just do me a favor and try to sleep in tomorrow. Your brain can’t work if doesn’t get enough rest, right?” He nodded and she gave him a hug, kissing the top of his head before leaving the den to look for Aphrodite.

Argo followed Gabrielle up the stairs to the sun deck. The Goddess of Love was reclining on a lounge enjoying the sun and watching the ocean as the yacht sped south.

“Hey,” Gabrielle said.

“How’s your patient?” Aphrodite asked, patting the lounge and inviting the bard to sit.

“She’s doing really well, all things considered,” she answered. As if on cue, strains of The Carpenter’s hit “Yesterday Once More” could be heard through the ship’s sound system.

“Not again,” Gabrielle groaned.

“She’s processing her loss,” Aphrodite countered.

“She’s processing how to get out of sick bay,” the bard protested. “I know this is also for Shen but it’s been all the expected stuff of the seventies, nothing surprising. How many times have we heard ‘The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia’?”

“Honey, to most of your crew, this is fascinating history. You’re going to have to cut them some slack, you know this is how they’re honoring Susan. How is Shen, anyway? I haven’t seen him since breakfast.”

“He’s okay. He’s the only one not looking at me like I’ve been dumped.”

Aphrodite leaned over and grasped the bard’s hand. “When you bring Xena back,” she said, “you won’t notice how they’ll be looking at you. The only eyes you’re going to be interested in are those piercing blue ones.” Gabrielle was about to protest when the goddess shook her head. “Gabrielle, I’m okay. Really, I am. Yes, I miss you, but you’re right here. I’m good.” Argo barked once and the goddess frowned. “Not cool, Argo. Look, I’m going to give you guys seventy-five or a hundred years and then we’ll talk threesome.” Gabrielle blushed in spite of herself. The goddess continued, “I am going to hang around until your warrior gets settled, and we see what we can do about Ares, but then I need to take off for a few months. I’m being pulled towards Europe. I need to spend some time there and travel around.”

Gabrielle nodded and decided not to argue with the goddess. They had both agreed to a certain amount of messiness when they began, and the present circumstances weren’t anything either one of them would want to change. Her feelings of responsibility were mitigated somewhat by the fact that she was dealing with a woman who knew a lot more about love and relationships than she could ever hope to. “We are going to be dropping anchor in about an hour. We should get ready to head over. I need to...get some things out of the safe.”

Aphrodite nodded. “First, let’s go to your cabin and pack some clothes for Xena. I don’t know how she’ll be dressed, but we should be prepared for everything, right?”

Gabrielle agreed, and led the way back downstairs to her stateroom. Opening the door to the closet, she picked up a duffle bag for the goddess to pack her selections. There was no denying the tension between them. The last time they had been in this room together they had shared a tension much more pleasurable in nature.

“It will get easier over time,” Aphrodite said conversationally, as she selected a pair of jeans, underclothes, t-shirt, boots, and jacket.

“I know,” Gabrielle replied. On the far side of the closet, on a top shelf she grasped hold of the handle to a nearly square metal box. Almost like a steel briefcase, it was padded with foam inside and had a cutout in shape of an urn. Touching the panel by her bed, the wall slid away and the shelf with Xena’s ashes slid forward. She undid the bracket, removed the urn, carefully placed it in the case and closed the clasps.

With each of them carrying a piece of luggage, they left the stateroom. The bard led them below decks to a nondescript bit of corridor in the middle of the ship. She touched a panel, and another section of wall slid away revealing a large safe in a heavily insulated area. Gabrielle touched a pad with her hand, entered a code, and then opened the door. She withdrew a second steel briefcase in which she placed Aphrodite’s shell and Xena’s chakram. The hammer was too large to fit so she handed that to Aphrodite to carry in the small duffle bag.

They continued down the corridor, further into the bowels of the yacht towards the stern. The immaculate cleanliness of this part of the ship did not surprise Aphrodite; she’d grown to expect nothing less from Gabrielle’s state-of-the-art floating fortress. They emerged from a door to the beach deck area where the diving platform extended out at water level. Bohemian Van Lyle was waiting for them next to an inflated Zodiac boat. As he stowed their bag and cases, the opening bars of ‘That’s Not My Name’ by the Ting Tings came through the speakers.

“Whadda ya know, something from this century,” he observed, chuckling.

“Look who’s talking,” Gabrielle replied dryly. “I still hear ‘University Boulevard’ in my dreams from time to time.”

“You’ve got to admit Los Straightjackets are a classic band, and that song is fun to play. You do a great version of it,” he countered. The pair boarded the inflatable, and he added, “Happy hunting,” as Gabrielle started the engine on the Zodiac. “I hope your quest is successful. I’ll keep an eye on everything here until you get back.”

The inflatable boat was large, with a bench across the middle and two benches for seats at the bow. The gear was stowed towards the front, so Aphrodite took the middle bench. Argo sat next to Gabrielle, who drove from the stern by guiding the handle on the outboard motor.

They passed a number of tourist boats out for the day, and a couple of cruise ships, then made their way to a beach area next to the famous rock formation at the very tip of the peninsula. Several large rocks were completely surrounded by water, like tiny islands. The main formation with the arch was at the edge of the beach. At high tide, a small section of sand would be surrounded by rock outcrop on one side, water on the other. Argo hopped out of the inflatable and swam the last yards towards shore. The tide was low, so the main part of the beach could be reached. Had they tried to reach the spot by land in a vehicle, they’d have run out of road some distance away. As it was, the boat was the most efficient means of travel to Poseidon’s chosen destination. When they’d reached the shallow water, Aphrodite climbed out as Gabrielle cut the engine and moved the propeller out of the water. The bard jumped out, and the two women pulled the boat ashore. They unloaded some of their gear, beach towels and such, then sat down to wait.

“Why here?” Aphrodite asked, wondering how they were going to deal with the crowd of tourists on the beach.

Gabrielle shrugged. “I honestly have no idea. I asked Poseidon how to get in touch with him and he’s given me various contact protocols. We meet up every couple of hundred years and he tells me the next location. I get the feeling he travels a lot.”

“I’ll bet,” the goddess replied sounding annoyed. She caught Gabrielle’s wounded look and her expression softened. “I’m not angry at you love, I’m pissed at my uncle.”

Several hours passed, the time whiled away with friendly conversation punctuated by the repeated throwing of a tennis ball for an enthusiastic pit bull, who was only too happy to retrieve it. Most of the other beach goers didn’t give them much attention. A couple of curious people approached, asking to pet the dog, then wandered off. As the afternoon wore on, people picked up their towels and coolers and left, until it was just the two of them on the beach. The nearby boats also dispersed, leaving the pair quite alone.

“The day is still nice,” Gabrielle observed. “I wonder where everyone went.”

“I’m sure he has something to do with that,” Aphrodite replied nodding to a lone figure that was walking up the beach towards them. As he got closer Gabrielle recognized Poseidon. He appeared to be in his sixties with white hair and a white goatee and mustache. He was physically very fit, tan, and with longish hair. He strolled towards them in shorts, an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, and flip-flops. He looked like he’d probably spent the day surfing. When he was close enough to greet Aphrodite with a warm smile she launched herself at the man shouting “You fucking dick!” and struck him forcefully across the jaw with a solid right cross. He dropped to the sand hard but was quickly back on his feet bringing up his own fist to punch back. In a heartbeat Gabrielle

was between them, her green eyes narrowed dangerously. Aphrodite was shaking out her fist, clearly in pain.

“Not today,” she said a warning threading her voice as she protectively stood in front of the goddess.

“You can’t hurt me, child,” he growled to Gabrielle, the warning and anger evident in his voice.

“You fucked my powers because you were feeling like the Little Mermaid?” Aphrodite continued to shout in protest. “Seriously? Do we need to call you Ariel? You wanted to walk on land and you fucked all of our powers to do it? You fucker!”

“You can blame Zeus or Hades if you’re looking for someone to punch,” he shot back, rubbing his jaw.

“Well gee, if only I could get in touch with them, BUT I CAN’T.”

“Are you finished with your tantrum?” he asked, his voice still rumbling with danger.

“Fuck you,” Aphrodite hissed back, not intimidated in the least.

“I will admit, I don’t really want to get in the middle of this family drama,” Gabrielle said to Poseidon. “But you are not touching Aphrodite, period.” He raised his hands in acquiescence, and the bard stepped aside. “Aphrodite, please don’t hit him again, even if he deserves it. I think it would be counterproductive.”

“Whatever,” the goddess fumed.

“Hades and Zeus picked their realms and while they had the power to travel everywhere, I was confined to the oceans, made of water. Destroying the anvil broke the tether and broke their restrictions on me so I could change my form and move about on land and in the sea.” He explained to Gabrielle. “I didn’t know it would have the other...extreme effects on all the others until it happened.”

“The ocean is two thirds of the fucking planet!” Aphrodite exclaimed. “You did this because you weren’t happy with only having two thirds?!”

“No,” he countered, “I did it because I wanted to have more interaction with humans and give them more control over their own destiny.”

“Oh, nice job there,” Aphrodite said icily. “Only took a couple thousand years, and we’re on the brink of mankind destroying the only planet they can survive on. Nice job, Ariel.”

“Unlike you, it seems,” he replied angrily. “I think that man’s greatest creativity and ingenuity comes from moments of desperation. They will devise a solution to save themselves and the planet, and don’t need the bailing out, nor the game-playing of a bunch of spoiled Olympians.”

“I think you give us too much credit,” Gabrielle said. “But that isn’t my concern at the moment. Are you going to be able to bring Xena back?”

He nodded regaining his composure. “I believe I can.”

“Then maybe we can get started on that, and you guys can try to kill each other later?” the bard asked, looking between the two. “But you’re not to touch Aphrodite, I’m serious about that.”

Poseidon shrugged, his anger having lost steam. “I’m fine. My niece has the fiery temper but it’s probably hormones.”

Gabrielle quickly turned to catch the goddess, who had just lunged at him again. “Aphrodite, please,” she whispered urgently in the taller woman’s ear. “We’re on the cusp of getting Xena back. Please don’t let him bait you.”

The goddess stopped struggling and brushed her short hair off her forehead. “Whatever,” she said with feigned indifference, glaring at Poseidon.

“What do we need to do?” Gabrielle asked.

“Bring me the urn of ashes, the shell, and the hammer,” Poseidon said, not looking at his niece.

Gabrielle and Aphrodite went back to the inflatable boat and returned with the two metal cases and the hammer. Looking around the beach, the bard found it quite deserted. The sun was setting, and the tide was coming in. They would be isolated on this patch of sand. The only boats in sight were distant cruise ships, and *The Hippolyta*, her gleaming white form standing out against the afternoon colors. It was anchored a safe distance away from the outer outcrop of rock, where the depth was sufficient for the mega yacht’s hull.

“Why don’t you build a fire, Gabrielle,” Poseidon suggested. “This may take a while.” He opened the square case and extracted the urn with Xena’s ashes. He lifted it, trying to determine its weight. He nodded, satisfied, and scanned the beach for rocks. While he went off to collect a few, Aphrodite helped Gabrielle with the fire.

“Are you going to be okay?” the bard asked, clearly concerned.

“Yes,” the goddess replied. “But I’m still really angry at him. If this were anyone but Xena, I’d say ‘fuck it’ and kick his ass, although that punch hurt me more than it probably hurt him. And don’t try to hit him,” she warned. “I was only able to land a punch because I’m like him, and it still hurt me worse. If you were to try to hit him or any of us, you could be looking at a broken hand and angry god for your trouble.”

A healthy fire was crackling by the time Poseidon returned. He had made two piles of rocks. One set larger than the other. “Aphrodite, I’m going to need you to take one of the smaller rocks and stand over there.” He pointed to a spot on the beach. “I want you to toss the rock underhanded in that direction,” he pointed out to sea. “I’m going to have to hit your rock with my rock,” he pointed to the larger pile. “We are only going to get one shot at this which is why we’re going to take four practice attempts.”

“What is it you’re going to be doing?” Gabrielle asked, apprehension threading her voice.

“When I prepare the urn, my niece is going to climb to the top of that formation,” he pointed to the arch, now extended over the water with the high tide. “Walk to the edge with it and toss it out to the water. I’m going to have to hit the urn with the hammer. If I’m successful, Xena will be reborn in a similar fashion to Aphrodite, from the seafoam.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to just stand in the water and hit the urn with the hammer there?” Gabrielle asked. “You can’t miss.”

“If you don’t mind getting blown up, sure,” Poseidon replied. “Remember what happened with the anvil when the pirates struck it with their weapons? Hitting the urn with the hammer is going to release a lot of energy, destroying everything around it. I’m not sure how far out, which is why it needs to be midair when that happens. If the hammer connects too close to the water, it could hurt the creatures there and obviously I don’t want to do that.”

“And my shell is going in the urn?” Aphrodite asked, concern threading her voice. Poseidon nodded.

“And it’s going to be destroyed.” He said simply. She looked away, her expression unreadable. “And, you are going to have to be the one to put it in there,” he added.

Gabrielle took a deep breath. Things just got more complicated. “Why tonight?” the bard asked, desperate to get Aphrodite’s mind off the shell and having to part with it.

“New moon has the flattest tide. The larger the waves, the more can go wrong,” he explained, handing the goddess a rock.

“And you’re certain that this won’t undo what Xena accomplished in Japan? That the souls of the 40,000 who perished at Higuchi will stay in a state of grace, out of the reach of Yodoshi?”

Poseidon looked down at Gabrielle with the patience of one who is explaining, yet again, why Santa only arrives when you’re asleep. “What I said over 2000 years ago still stands, child. The gods of Japan have no dominion over me. You followed their rules.” He shrugged. “Besides, I’m sure you’ve considered by now that what you think you saw was simply a hallucination brought about by your grief.”

The bard nodded. “Yes, I’ve considered that. I’ve had two thousand years to consider that, and I regret what I didn’t do in Japan.”

“Well, we are trying to rectify that now. Aphrodite, if you’d toss the rock please.”

For the first throw, Poseidon narrowly missed Aphrodite’s rock. On the second try, he nailed it, the larger rock shattering the smaller, the pieces falling into the ocean. Nodding, satisfied, he walked over to the urn and carefully removed the stopper, sealed with wax which had been in place for over two millennia.

“Gabrielle, hand Aphrodite the shell, please,” he instructed.

“Why do you need her shell?” she asked, as she opened the second case and extracted the luminous, pearl white shell. She was careful not to touch the sharp edge, handing it to the goddess by the smooth side. Aphrodite’s hand trembled as she accepted the gift. As soon as the bard let go, a bright glow seemed to travel through the goddess, making her more beautiful (if that were even possible), and radiating a soft, pale white light. The goddess stood up straighter, looked more regal and self-assured than at any time in the bard’s memory. The shell fragment did indeed do something to her.

“You’re not going to like this next bit,” Poseidon said. “That shell is one of the few things that can cut a god’s skin, that’s why we need it. You need to cut yourself with the shell, spill some blood into the urn, and then cut me to do the same. The hammer hitting the urn with the shell inside it is going to release the energy we need to get Xena back.”

Aphrodite caressed the shell looking into the depths of its shimmering surface. “I don’t think I can,” she said. “I think I need to keep it. I’m sorry, Gabrielle,” she said, her voice sultry and warm.

Gabrielle was instantly distracted by the sound of her voice, momentarily forgetting about the beach, her task, her dog, everything but the rich sound of Aphrodite’s voice. It was like hearing the song of a siren; she felt turned on, wanting nothing more than to tell Poseidon to take a hike and tune out the rest of the world, and tune out everything but she and Aphrodite. The memories of a few days ago came flooding back –

what it was like to kiss the goddess, how her arms felt wrapped around that warm, lithe body, her hands and mouth everywhere. She didn't realize how much she'd missed that.

Argo barked once. Then again. Gabrielle returned to her senses, forcing the erotic thoughts from her mind and focusing on the task at hand.

Taking a deep breath, she walked over to Aphrodite and put a hand on the woman's cheek, drawing her face up to make eye contact with her, tearing her eyes away from the shell. "Aphrodite," she said urgently, "if you can't do this, I will try to understand, I really will. I won't hold it against you."

"Thank you, Gabrielle," the goddess purred, causing the bard to bite her tongue to keep focused.

"But you will need to destroy me," she said. "I mean this. If you can't help me get Xena back, you have to let me go and kill me instead."

"No, I don't," she demurred. "We can forget Xena. We can enjoy our time together, like last week. We felt so amazing together. I want more of that." She smiled, a radiant, gorgeous, distracting smile. The bard wanted to get lost. Argo barked again.

The bard shook her head. "Sweetie, you know it's just a matter of time before you tire of me and will look for greener pastures. You said yourself, I have thousands of years left. There is no way I'm going to be able to entertain you for thousands of years."

"I'm afraid, Gabrielle," Aphrodite said. "I'm afraid of losing something that reminds me of who and what I am."

"I'm right here. I will remind you. I'm not going anywhere," the bard assured her. "You don't need something external to be what you are. Besides, I can't think of a more loving gift you could give to me or Xena. Please, Aphrodite."

Placid blue eyes kept contact with green as the Goddess of Love quickly drew the sharp edge of the shell across the palm of her hand. She cried out in pain as thick amber liquid, looking very much like acacia honey, pooled in her palm. She held her hand over the open urn and a dozen or more thick, viscous drops fell inside.

Gabrielle quickly ran over to the Zodiac and extracted a first aid kit. She withdrew several gauze pads and bandages and expertly wrapped Aphrodite's hand when the honey-like blood had stopped flowing. The goddess helped her by holding down a gauze pad, but several drops of the golden blood got onto the index finger of her other hand. Gabrielle was going to wipe it off with another gauze pad when the goddess pulled her hand away. Aphrodite glanced at Poseidon who frowned, then shrugged and purposefully turned his back on the two and took a sudden interest in the fire. Maintaining eye contact, Aphrodite brought her finger up to the bard's mouth offering it to her.

Unsure what to do, Gabrielle had a moment of panic. If this were another person offering her a bloody finger she'd politely decline, although she knew enough about various customs the world over, religious and otherwise, to make this not that unusual an offering. Her mind flashed back to what she told herself the very moment she'd known she'd found the goddess. That she would say yes, to everything. That there would be no request she'd refuse. Keeping the tranquil blue eyes in focus, she opened her mouth and accepted the gift. Instantly she felt as though she could see through time and space, look into anyone's innermost desires and fears. She felt supremely powerful and responsible; connected to everyone the world over. She felt so much love that it was almost overpowering, like hearing millions of voices at once, but instead of voices, they were

feelings. Falling to her knees, she had to put out her arms to keep from falling face first into the sand. Moments later, in what seemed like the distance, she heard Argo bark excitedly, almost howling. In a rush, in the space between heartbeats, she relived the most intimate moments she'd spent with Xena, then everyone who came after. She understood every nuance of love, clear and concise. But, before she could grasp those threads of understanding, they slipped from her grasp. She panted for several moments as the feeling of godhood coursed through her veins, then dissipated. While it only lasted a minute or two at most, she felt like she had journeyed through millions of years. She had no doubt that had the experience lasted much longer, she'd have gone insane. When she returned to herself, Argo was next to her, wagging her tail excitedly.

She shakily stood up. Hearing her brush the sand from her jeans, Poseidon turned around and rejoined them. Without another glance at the bard, he held out his hand to his niece. Aphrodite cut his palm so forcefully he winced. An aqua colored liquid seeped from the wound. He held his hand over the urn, letting three drops fall before drawing his hand back.

"Being a little stingy, uncle?" Aphrodite asked haughtily.

He held out his hand for Gabrielle to wrap, but instead she handed him the first-aid kit. "You're on your own, buddy," she said, having no desire to be at one with him or risk contaminating the memory of what she'd just experienced. He frowned but accepted the kit and began wrapping his own hand.

"Not at all," he said. "Xena already had the...essence... of one god coursing through her veins. I do not want to throw off the balance of who she is by adding too much. There is a chance she may come back...different... than she was before, and I am trying to minimize the risk of that."

"Then why do we need your blood at all?" Aphrodite asked.

"Because Xena is to be born of the sea, which is my domain. If we were standing at the mouth of an active volcano to birth Xena by fire, then you'd need the help of your ex-husband, Hephaestus, but he's not here. I am, as is the ocean. We're what you've got."

"What do you mean 'come back different'?" Gabrielle asked, worried.

"Like, straight different?" Aphrodite wondered. "A pacifist? Pleasant?"

Poseidon shrugged, "I have no way to know. The Xena you knew had the essence of Ares. Now she will have the essence of Ares, Aphrodite, and myself. But if you want her back, this is the only way to do it at this point in time, with what we have available to us. Aphrodite, if you please, the shell." He held the urn and waited patiently. The goddess was clearly having second thoughts again, but Gabrielle took her injured hand tenderly and she deposited the shell into the urn. He sat the urn down and reached into his pocket withdrawing a small cigarette case. He opened it and inside was a piece of a flat, slightly reddish, transparent bit of material that looked like a half-melted clump of gummy bears.

"Ambrosia," Aphrodite whispered, looking at the substance hungrily. Briefly the blue of her eyes intensified.

"Gabrielle," he said waving the bard over to him. She released the goddess' hand and stood next to Poseidon. He put his hand briefly over her heart and closed his eyes. She didn't feel any of the sensations that she'd experienced when Aphrodite had done it weeks earlier. She looked at the goddess questioningly. Aphrodite just smiled and winked. Satisfied with whatever it was he was listening for, Poseidon pinched off roughly a third of the ambrosia and put it in the urn as well. He closed the case with the unused

portion. "I suppose I owe you this, at least," he said handing it to Aphrodite who accepted it without hesitation.

"Thank you," she replied. She opened the case and hurriedly consumed the rest of the contents. "I'd forgotten how amazing this is," she said contentedly. As before, when she touched the shell, a shimmer seemed to transverse her body immediately after eating the ambrosia. She radiated a power that Gabrielle, standing several feet away, could feel.

Poseidon put the lid back on the urn, tapping it down carefully with his fingers and then put the urn back into the travel case. "Gabrielle, go with Aphrodite up to the top of the arch. You take the urn; she may still change her mind and try to get her shell back. Aphrodite, you take the two rocks, they weigh about the same as the urn. When you get to the top, signal me and we are going to try two more throws." Both women nodded and proceeded up the steep incline. The going was slow and difficult, each woman having an unwieldy burden to manage. When they'd reached the top, the goddess signaled Poseidon and threw the next rock. He missed it with his rock by a fair margin. She threw the next one, doing everything she could to keep the arc and distance consistent. He missed again, but just barely.

"What do you think?" she asked Gabrielle. "Do you want me to try again with the urn?"

Gabrielle looked down at where Poseidon was standing. He was waiting, holding the hammer. She couldn't hear him or even tell if he was shouting to her. If he missed, Xena's ashes would be lost, but the shell would be recoverable. If he was successful, the shell would be gone and Xena would return. She was about to tell the goddess to stand down, retrieve her shell and end her instead, but as she looked up, she saw that Aphrodite had already thrown the clay pot. She watched it moving in an upwards arc, out above the water. From below, Poseidon threw the hammer. It traveled end over end in its own arc. About ten feet above the water the arcs intersected; the blunt end of the hammer connecting solidly with the clay pot. There was a brilliant flash of bright light followed by pottery shards and ashes raining down over the water.

"I was going to tell you to wait," Gabrielle said, barely believing what she'd just seen. Knowing there was no way now to change course or her mind.

"I know dear one, that's why I threw it."

They made their way back down the rock formation to where Poseidon stood, watching the waves.

"What happens now?" Gabrielle asked.

"We wait," he said. "It took nine months for your mother to make you. This will happen more quickly, but it's still a big deal."

"I'd feel more comfortable waiting if I didn't know Ares was after us," Aphrodite muttered.

Poseidon looked at her, alarmed. "What about Ares?" he asked, worry evident in his voice.

"He knows who I am, he knows I'm trying to bring Xena back, he knows I found Aphrodite," Gabrielle explained. "He sent forces after us in Greece when we retrieved the hammer."

Poseidon looked from bard to goddess then back again. "I'm really sorry, but there is nothing more I can do for you. I gotta go."

Aphrodite was indignant. "You're that afraid of Ares?" she challenged.

“Look, I didn’t just eat a whole mouthful of ambrosia. Damn right, I’m that afraid of Ares,” he had already begun to back away from the pair. “Gabrielle, just wait here. When you see the water recede more than normal, Xena should arrive on the next set of waves. I will be in touch with you soon to see how she’s doing. And I’d like your help with a new identity if you don’t mind?”

Gabrielle nodded; she was saddened at his departure but didn’t fault him for looking out for himself. He’d kept his end of the bargain; there wasn’t much more she could ask of him.

“I really think you should consider the name Ariel,” Aphrodite shouted after him as he turned and walked purposefully and quickly down the beach, away from them. When he reached the place where the rock met the water, he quickly dove in and was gone.

Gabrielle searched the waves, looking for a sign but couldn’t see him. It was getting dark, so she returned to the fire and sat down in the sand, listening to the waves, learning the pattern. “So, Greece,” she said. “Bullets just bounced off you, did they?”

“Pretty much,” Aphrodite said, taking the seat next to her. “When I saw that Vox had been hit, I moved in between her and the gunfire. I think I deflected a few shots.”

“She owes you her life,” Gabrielle said gratefully.

“And you!” the goddess said. “Amazeballs surgery, for the win.”

They were silent for a few moments, watching the ocean. “So that other thing,” Gabrielle offered. “Are we going to talk about it?”

“We can if you want to,” Aphrodite said.

“Why did you...um...” Gabrielle was momentarily at a loss for words, which was not a customary feeling.

Aphrodite chuckled as she unwrapped the bandaged hand. She held her hand in the light of the fire, showing Gabrielle that the deep gash had been replaced by the faintest of thin white scars. There was also no trace of her light honey colored blood on any of the bandages or gauze. “Ambrosia,” she said simply “but something that can hurt a god, can *hurt* a god.” She watched the fire a bit longer. “Maybe I was having an Angelina Jolie moment with the blood?” she asked teasingly. Gabrielle nudged her with her shoulder. “Okay, okay. I know you intimately, and no, not just that,” she said at the bard’s blushing, evident even in the firelight. “Because I am a god, I know you intimately. I wanted to share some of that level of intimacy with you. You know, to be connected.” She was thoughtful for a moment, then said, “Concentrate. How am I feeling right now?”

Gabrielle thought about it, not expecting any kind of enlightenment since the feeling of godly power had passed. Yet even as she thought the task beyond her, she could indeed sense how Aphrodite felt. “You’re worried for me,” the bard said. “You’re afraid Xena won’t be what I remember, or that she won’t adjust, or that something will be off...and you’re disappointed with yourself for hoping that’s the case.”

Aphrodite smiled sadly at Gabrielle, “I am now as open a book to you, as you are to me. But like me, that kind of awareness only happens when you consciously look for it, and I have to trust that you won’t do it very often, as I don’t with you.”

“Until just now,” Gabrielle said, “I didn’t think there was anything more precious you could give me than your shell.”

Aphrodite smiled affectionately at the bard, and both women returned to watching the surf and waiting. As Gabrielle watched the small waves crash in succession, she was lulled by the rhythmic sounds and thought about all the things in her life that led her to this moment. She could feel her heart pound, and the sound of her own pulse in her ears overtook the sound of the ocean. So many small steps had led her here; thousands and thousands of small steps, the culmination of over two thousand years of struggles, hardships, successes and failures. Everything she had done since the moment Xena died, everything she had become, simply everything was directed at this moment.



Not unlike the two previous times she died, there was a moment of clarity; no pain, no distraction – just quiet understanding. She remembered the sound of her own heartbeat in her ears, steady and strong, then slowing, then stopping. She saw Gabrielle’s eyes, her beautiful face, her pain, her tears, and more love shining down than Xena ever thought she deserved in a hundred lifetimes. She felt the bard’s warmth, her strength and resolve, and knew Gabrielle would be alright. In the space between heartbeats she closed her eyes and saw their whole relationship play out, from the first time she saw those mischievous green eyes, to the first time she saw them filled with love, then with the fire of desire, and finally with the anguish of goodbye. Then, there was nothingness.

Suddenly, she was swirling in a cold, wet turmoil, spinning and tumbling in the roiling darkness. She felt cold air as she broke the surface, coughing up water and sputtering as she tried to fill her lungs with something other than saltwater. Unable to determine what it was or how she knew, she sensed that something was very wrong, very different. She felt different, but before she could form another coherent thought, the waves picked her up, then slammed her down into the sand.



They waited together for hours, each lost in their own thoughts. After what seemed like yet another lifetime, the rhythm of the waves changed and the sea roiled. The water line receded further away than normal, like the waterline heading out before a tidal wave. As if on cue, a much larger wave – easily three or four times larger than the waves they’d seen – crashed onto the sand, pushing forward and leaving what appeared in the darkness to be a large and formless mass behind in its wake.

Gabrielle rushed forward as the next wave hit and was nearly knocked off her feet by the force of the water. She struggled to reach the barely conscious woman, who was kneeling in the surf and beginning to sputter and cough. As the water receded again, she was able to grab the warrior around the waist and help her to stand. Xena was naked, except for Hephaestus’ hammer dangling from the leather strap around her wrist.

“Xena, Xena!” she shouted, breathless and hardly able to believe that the body she was touching was solid and real, and not a figment of her desperate imagination.

It was almost as if the bard’s voice came from a great distance. She was vaguely aware of being urged out of the surf. Trying to piece together her most recent recollections, she recalled the battle, her mortal injuries, then seeing Gabrielle’s face as she felt her body weaken.

“Gabrielle?” Xena gasped, dazed and uncertain. As the bard helped her stand she felt strong arms wrap around her body and warm lips cover her own. She returned the kiss as another wave came, knocking her down and forcing them apart. She looked down to find herself naked and then over to Gabrielle, who was strangely dressed. “Yodoshi?” she muttered, the cold salt water only adding to her confusion. “I was battling Yodoshi to save the souls...”

“Yes,” Gabrielle assured her. “The souls who perished in Higuchi were saved from Yodoshi’s grasp.”

Gratefully, she accepted the bard’s help to shallower water where she could get better footing. She felt weak and disoriented. Nothing made sense, but she was alive, she was very much alive.

“Gabrielle,” she said, leaning on the bard for support. “I don’t understand what has happened. Is this Jappa?”

At the sound of her name, Gabrielle’s eyes went wide. It hit her like a bolt as she looked up into the piercing blue eyes that she knew so well. The piercing blue eyes of the woman she had loved for so long. And then, she realized that she didn’t love her. She felt nothing. The realization rocked Gabrielle to her core. She had to love Xena, surely she did love Xena, she just didn’t feel ‘in love’. She supposed that it might be the shock of seeing her after all these years, seeing a face she knew so well, yet almost didn’t recognize. The simultaneous distant and familiar; a voice that could make her heart race, yet at the utterance of her name from those lips, it did not.

“That was a long time ago Xena,” she replied uneasily, suddenly unsure of how to proceed. The warrior looked around at the dark silhouettes of cliffs she did not recognize. As her eyes traveled up to the night sky, she had an unsettling sense of vertigo. She stumbled again as Aphrodite reached her, looking nearly unrecognizable. “Gabrielle,” Xena asked, noting green eyes welling with tears, “how long has it been?”

Gabrielle began to cry in earnest, finding it easier to simply give in to her joy, pain, and relief of seeing her warrior in the flesh, rather than trying to resolve her own confusion. She hugged her tightly once again even as Aphrodite wrapped a blanket around Xena’s shoulders. “Xena,” she sobbed, “it’s been two thousand years.”

The initial shock Xena felt shifted to confusion, and she was not entirely certain in the truth of what she was hearing. It could be equally plausible that she had been permitted into the Elysian Fields and united with Gabrielle once more. Her heart rejoiced, and her mind, which was frantically trying to make sense of the details around her, was forced into the background. She returned the bard’s embrace, grateful for the strength in her arms, limited as it was, was still stronger now than she had been at her death. With each passing breath she could feel her body growing stronger. She was returning to herself.

On firm sand now, out of the water, she favored both Aphrodite and Gabrielle with a radiant smile. “I can’t believe I’m alive!” She leaned down and kiss her bard once more. Gabrielle returned the embrace although when they parted Xena noted a look of confusion on Gabrielle’s face.

The mounting panic within Gabrielle continued to build at the sound of the warrior’s voice and the sight of her radiant smile. It was like suddenly finding something missing when you’d always assumed it was there. Unbidden the analogy came to mind of amputees who feel ghost limbs. Instead of sensing the memory of something severed

however, she was painfully aware of the absence of something that was as much a part of her as her own heart.

In that place, in her heart and in her mind where she always kept a torch burning for Xena she felt no heat, no flame. Confusion and panic battled for dominance and she saw the warrior's radiant smile falter, noticing her expression of distress no doubt.

She forced a reassuring smile and urge her companion to sit on the cooler near the fire to dress. Aphrodite had pulled some clothes from the small duffle bag and handed them to the warrior. The goddess' eyes flashed from the bard to the warrior, the discord in their respective energies palpable. While she was not surprised by this fact, she still ached for the pair and tried to sense if it was Gabrielle's feelings for her that had caused the bard's panic. Confident that it was not, she handed Xena a bottle of water and urged her to drink.

"You need to hydrate love," she said reassuringly. "We have a lot to fill you in on and this is all going to be overwhelming."

Gabrielle and Aphrodite had been speaking to the warrior in her native Greek. Uncertain the bard switched to English to ask Aphrodite, "where do I start? How much do I tell her?"

"How much do you tell me about what?" Xena responded, also in English.

Gabrielle and Aphrodite exchanged stunned glances. Then, Aphrodite said something to the warrior that the bard did not understand and Xena answered her, in the same unusual language.

"What was that?" Gabrielle asked.

"Xena, do you know what language you were just speaking?" Aphrodite queried, her voice calm and neutral.

"Elvish," Xena answered, confused. "But I don't know what that is."

"Holy shit," Gabrielle gasped.

"I guess we know my contribution to the new Xena," Aphrodite said.

Gabrielle continued to smile at Xena but the warrior could tell that it was forced. She'd known the bard long enough to know when something was wrong with Gabrielle, and something was very, very wrong. After a deep breath and several sips of water she finished dressing. Panic was not something she did, even when it seemed warranted. She would get her bearings first then decide on a course of action. She was alive, Gabrielle was alive. That was reason enough for the moment to rejoice.

## **Chapter 10: Learning Curves**

The first light of dawn was stating to break over the ocean's horizon as the Warrior Princess gazed into the slowly dying fire. She hadn't said much for the last several hours, listening intently as Gabrielle retold her tale – first of her life after Xena's death, how she became immortal, then a brief version of the most recent events – finding Aphrodite, going to Greece to retrieve the hammer, and finally, her mission to bring Xena back. Xena felt her initial sense of joy at being resurrected slowly ebbing away. Unconsciously, the warrior played with the zipper on the hooded sweat jacket she was wearing as she tried to put the pieces together. There was no denying the truth of what she was being told. Gabrielle seemed different, delivering the information by memory as though she'd practiced it hundreds of times. There was something different about Aphrodite as well, beyond her short hair; she looked at Xena with a sadness and

sympathy that the warrior thought out of place with her recent resurrection. Intrigued by the clothes Aphrodite had brought and pleased that they fit perfectly, Xena let herself be distracted by the sound of the zipper and the soft feel of the fleece fabric. Gabrielle had stopped speaking, and after an overly long pause, the warrior realized she was expected to say something.

“That’s a lot to take in,” she finally said, quietly. “Being immortal,” she was about to say something else, but stopped. Something told her that now was not the time to question the people around her, to voice just how wrong things felt. She would need time to observe and understand what was happening. “I guess I’m just a little disoriented right now. A bit tired perhaps,” she said instead. Argo, who was laying down between Xena and Gabrielle, shifted to put her large muscular head on the warrior’s foot, then sighed, almost as if she understood the warrior. “Your dog is adorable,” she said with a smile, reaching down to give her a scratch behind the ears.

Gabrielle looked uncertainly at Xena, then to Aphrodite. “I guess we should go back to the ship then?”

“Before we do,” Aphrodite interjected, “I’d like to test one more thing.” She opened the case that had held her shell and withdrew Xena’s chakram; the two halves fitting perfectly together making a disk with a cross bar in the middle. “Why don’t you throw this over there,” she said pointing to some nearby rocks. “I’m curious to see if it bounces off and returns to you.”

“I don’t know why it wouldn’t.” Xena said as she stood and brushed the sand off her jeans. The disk was a blur as it traveled across the beach and embedded itself in the nearby rock. Crestfallen, the warrior looked at the goddess for explanation.

“I think the tether to Olympus also gave you some advantages with respect to the laws of physics,” she said then walked over to the chakram and withdrew it from the rock with a hearty yank. “There is a lot that is going to overwhelm you, Xena,” she said returning the weapon. “Just remember that time is on your side, whether you like it or not, and eventually all this will sort itself out.” Xena took back the chakram, disappointed that this too felt like a stranger to her now.

Gabrielle led the way back to the Zodiac. Argo leapt in ahead of the equipment, anticipating castoff. The warrior was clearly intrigued by the motor and its propellers, staring at the equipment as she helped the bard and goddess push the boat into the water. With practiced efficiency, Gabrielle started the engine and steered the inflatable in the direction of the yacht. “Are you hungry?” the bard asked, almost embarrassed, not knowing what else to say. Uncharacteristically, the bard was at a loss for words. For all that two millennia of living had taught her, Gabrielle of Potidaea was completely out of her depth.

“More tired than hungry, I guess,” Xena replied looking from Gabrielle to Aphrodite, then back. “Although having been dead so long you’d think I’d be well rested.”

The goddess shook her head. “You may not like this Xena, but you are essentially a newborn, and a mortal-ish one at that. You’re going to need extra sleep for a while, and probably want to eat more regularly. Your body has undergone quite the metamorphosis, and time may reveal different...abilities or senses you didn’t have before. Be patient with yourself. It’s only the beginning, but it will get better.”

“Well, I can already walk and talk, so that’s a plus,” she quipped, trying for a levity that she just didn’t feel.

As they got closer to *The Hippolyta*, the warrior was visibly awed. She looked at Gabrielle with surprise. “That’s your ship?”

“The Hippolyta. Yes, she’s mine, although my Director of Finance might disagree.” While Xena tried to make sense of what she’d said, the bard steered the inflatable to the back of the yacht, where a lone woman was waiting to greet them. “Xena,” Gabrielle said as she handed the tie ropes to the woman. “This is Michelle, my ship’s captain. Michelle, this is Xena.”

Michelle helped Aphrodite out of the boat and then Xena followed. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Xena,” she said with her hand extended. Unsure of the custom, Xena firmly grasped the woman’s forearm and gave it a shake.

“Thank you,” she said.

Gabrielle got out of the boat last after making sure Argo had cleared the inflatable. “Please have someone stow the gear. We were able to find Xena more quickly than we expected so nothing was really unpacked.” Michelle nodded, waiting for further instructions. “How are Vox and Shen?”

“Vox is fine, and getting stronger by the minute,” the captain replied. “I think the stitches on her head and shoulder can come out, but we wanted to wait for you.” As if on cue, the strains of *For All We Know* by the Carpenters began to play from the ship’s sound system. Michelle took a deep breath, then continued. “Shen is fine, all things considered. He’s got a lot of company, and he’s been talking about loss with the guys. It’s kind of sweet, he seems to have decided that the women onboard are better companions for his schoolwork and educational pursuits, and when he wants to talk about his feelings, he finds one of the guys or Vox. He’s grown really attached to her, and the guys are adjusting to having sensitive chats.” Michelle quickly glanced at Xena. “I think Vox is going to want as much ship duty as she can get, more for him than you at this point.”

Gabrielle nodded, relieved that all was okay. “Any security issues?”

Michelle nodded. “A few, but nothing we couldn’t handle. We got word from Technology that someone was trying to hack into our onboard systems. They prevented it and are looking into where the attack originated. We’ve also noticed heavier than usual drone activity nearby. Some if it may have been curious tourists, but Wolfgang and Sarah have been using them for target practice, and Bo has been retrieving them from the water. Ingrid is taking a look and will report back. Someone tried to bribe some people in the Mexican army to go after you when you went ashore, but they contacted someone we already have a good relationship with, and they read us in so we didn’t have a replay of Greece.

“Good,” Gabrielle said, visibly relieved. “When everything is stowed, weigh anchor, and let’s head back to Marina del Rey. We can regroup there. I don’t want to take a chance that Ares will reach out to someone we don’t know and successfully sabotage us. I’m going to get Xena settled and try to get some sleep. I’ll check in with Shen and Vox in a few hours. Don’t hesitate to wake me if you need to.”

Xena watched the exchange with interest, seeing the bard in a new light. Here, Gabrielle was a leader, one who had done it long enough that it no longer required effort; it was as natural to her as breathing or storytelling. It only took this short interaction to

convince the warrior this was no longer the Gabrielle she had known. If there had been any remaining suspicion about the amount of time that had passed, this laid waste to any doubt. Gabrielle had grown tremendously in their years of travel together, as had she, but her own progress had been halted by her death, while Gabrielle had continued on for an unimaginable amount of time. Xena found her thoughts unsettling; they were leading to feelings uncertainty that threatened to overwhelm her, so she decided to simply focus on her surroundings, and leave the bigger, more esoteric questions for later. With this mindset in place, she followed the shorter woman as she made her way through the ship. But looking around her as they went, she couldn't help but be awed by everything she saw. Gabrielle sensed her wonder, and paused, mid-stride.

"I'll give you a better tour after some sleep," Gabrielle assured her.

"Gabrielle?" the warrior asked tentatively.

"Yes, Xena?"

"Who is singing? It's beautiful." Xena was looking around for the source of the music, clearly confused as to why she could hear, but not see the source.

Aphrodite chuckled. "Another Carpenters fan," she said teasingly.

"Her name is Karen Carpenter," Gabrielle said. "But the music isn't live, it's a recording." Not surprisingly, Xena looked even more confused at her response.

An idea suddenly occurred to the bard. Taking out her phone, she explained, "We will go into phones in more detail later, but for now," she opened an app and shot a few seconds of video footage of the three of them standing together. To make the point, she waved at the camera before she stopped filming. "You can record something and play it back later – repeatedly." She played back the video, and as Xena watched, she asked in wonder, "Is it magic?"

"Kind of. What you will find is that a lot of what used to be called 'magic' is now called 'science', but that makes it no less remarkable," Aphrodite explained. The song ended and the opening notes of Helen Reddy's *I Am Woman* filled the air. Aphrodite giggled. "Vox *really* wants out of sickbay, hon."

They reached the bottom of the stairs where the elegant stairway opened up into Gabrielle's sitting room. One hallway led towards the guest stateroom and the other towards the bard's master suite. Gabrielle glanced at Aphrodite uncertainly.

"You kids get some sleep," the goddess said cheerfully. "I'm going to have breakfast with Shen, and then spend some time reading in the library. Xena if you need me, you can find me there," She pointed to the room adjacent to where they were standing. She wrapped her arms around the warrior and gave her a warm hug. "I am happy you are back dear one," she said. "Once the shock wears off, I hope that you are as happy about it as Gabrielle and I are."

Xena nodded, "Thank you Aphrodite, I am happy to be back," she said, but without enthusiasm.

The goddess turned to Gabrielle and hugged her as well, lightly kissing the top of the bard's head. "You are in almost as much shock as she is right now," she said gently. "Give yourself some time."

Gabrielle squeezed her tightly, then released her. "Thank you, Aphrodite. For absolutely everything." The goddess winked at her, then headed down the corridor.

The bard opened the door to her bedroom, holding it open for Xena to enter. The warrior looked around the room, then back at Gabrielle. “So, you live in a floating palace?”

Gabrielle nodded, remembering when a barn was a luxurious place for them to stay. “I guess I do. It’s a palace, a fortress, but mostly it’s home.” The bard led the way to the bathroom and stepped inside. “Most modern conveniences will seem kind of strange until you get used to them.” Xena listened patiently while Gabrielle gave a tutorial on all of the room’s amenities. She was fascinated by the toilet and intrigued by the Jacuzzi tub and the shower. Next, she was shown the closet, where Gabrielle and Aphrodite had organized the warrior’s wardrobe.

“The clothes are comfortable, soft,” Xena said. “But they don’t seem to offer any protection, except the boots perhaps.”

“The weapons of aggression have changed somewhat,” Gabrielle explained. “Visible armor would cause more social scrutiny than it’s worth and unless you’re wearing a type of armor called Kevlar, and that’s going to be noticed. So is your chakram – you’re not going to want to carry that around.” She started to explain the legal ramifications that could result from Xena’s usual method of problem solving, but stopped herself. There would be time for all of that later. Instead, she just said, “The tools of warfare have become ill-defined, but more varied and destructive.”

Gabrielle fell silent, wincing inwardly at the knot gripping her stomach. Here was someone she knew so intimately yet felt like such a stranger. They both glanced around, and then both looked down at the bed simultaneously. Gabrielle sat down on the edge of the bed and urged Xena to do the same. Taking the warrior’s hands in her own, she told her, “I promise I will explain it to you. All of it.”

Xena nodded and smiled a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. There was something different about Gabrielle. This wasn’t the woman who could easily see into the very depths of her soul; this person was almost a stranger. Unsure of how to proceed, she tried changing the subject to something more familiar to her.

“So, you are the leader of your own army now. I’m not sure I would have ever expected that.”

Gabrielle’s first impulse was to self-deprecate, but she resisted it. Xena had always been honest about her abilities as well as her flaws, albeit to a lesser degree.

“I am,” she replied. “And, I will tell you this – everything I know about being a leader, a good one at least, I learned from you.” She smiled up at the warrior, trying to convey that she was very happy to have her back, regardless of her internal confusion.

It was Gabrielle’s turn to switch topics. “Can you tell me the last thing you remember? Did I pull you from the Elysian Fields, or someplace nice?”

The warrior shrugged. “Sure, I remember it – it just happened. I remember the battle. I remember the pain of being pierced by arrows. I remember you trying to save me. The last thing that I thought about before I died was you, your face, your eyes, your touch.” She brought her hand up and gently touched the side of Gabrielle’s face. The bard distractedly realized that, despite being newly reborn, Xena’s fingers were still calloused. “My regret was not getting to spend another sunrise or sunset with you. I was deeply disappointed in myself for taking you for granted – for not putting you ahead of absolutely everything else.” Xena took a deep breath and sighed, dropping her hands into her lap and. “You know what it’s like, right before you die, how you get clarity about

what is really important in life? I guess I'm dense, because I had to die three times to really see it." She lost herself in her thoughts for a moment, then inhaled deeply, bringing herself back to the present. "After that, I was tumbling in the surf, naked, with a hammer wrapped around my wrist, and you were there, picking me up and helping me out of the water."

Xena looked up at Gabrielle. The cabin's warm light illuminated her surroundings better than she was used to, and Xena suddenly realized her young bard looked demonstrably older than she remembered. According to her story, a decade or so had passed from the time she died to when Gabrielle became immortal, but that didn't fully account for what she was seeing. The youthfulness provided by ambrosia did not mask the maturity of her bearing, or the exhaustion evident in her features. "Let's get some sleep Gabrielle," she said. "You've promised me answers, and I will hold you to it, but for now we both need sleep."

Gabrielle nodded. "You are right. I just need to go check on some things first. I'll be back in a bit. I'm going to leave Argo with you." The pit bull hopped up on the bed and made herself comfortable. Xena nodded uncertainly and stood to strip out of her still damp clothing.

Pausing outside her bedroom door, Gabrielle pondered what to do. Briefly she considered walking down the hall to Aphrodite's cabin, but that wasn't what she wanted, and anyway, the goddess said she was going to breakfast. Instead, she walked through her office to the study beyond and plopped onto the couch. The Scotch she had shared with Susan Yin was still sitting on the table, so helped herself to a healthy swig from the bottle. Sadness and confusion fought for emotional dominance, followed by the undeniable sensation of being overjoyed that Xena was alive once again, that her lifelong mission had been a success. Hoping for more clarity when she woke, she stretched out on the couch, covering herself with a quilt she'd made decades earlier. In seconds, she was fast asleep.



Xena woke with a start. For an instant, she thought she'd been dreaming, but the moment was fleeting. She noted the softness of the sheets, the opulence of the room, and the fact that she was alone. Neither Gabrielle, nor her dog was with her in the large bed. This hadn't been a dream. She had died, over two thousand years had passed, she was alive again, and it was 2017.

After rolling out of bed and making her way to the closet, she noticed a t-shirt on the floor and picked it up. Her clothes from earlier were still damp, so she donned the t-shirt and a fresh pair of jeans, then made her way to the library. As she expected, Aphrodite was sitting in a cozy chair with her legs tucked underneath her, reading a leather-bound book. At the warrior's approach, she looked up and smiled.

"How did you sleep?" she asked.

"Well, I think," Xena replied. "How long was I out?"

"About four hours, maybe. Let's go up on the deck, and I'll fix you something to eat. Do you need to use the bathroom or anything?"

"I, ah, used the one in Gabrielle's cabin. Have you seen her?"

"No, I haven't." The goddess looked puzzled. "Let me get my phone, and I'll find her." Xena nodded as if she understood.

Aphrodite led the way down the hall to the guest suite; it was smaller in size than Gabrielle's room, but just as luxuriously appointed. The bed was against one wall, and on the other side were portholes with views of the ocean. Xena noticed this cabin did not have the tidiness of Gabrielle's room. Clothes were casually tossed on the chair and couch, and several books were stacked on the nightstand. The open closet door revealed a chaos of more clothing inside. That it looked lived in made her question her assumptions about the nature of the goddess and bard's relationship.

Aphrodite retrieved her phone from the nightstand, quickly firing off a couple of text messages while making her way the upper deck of the ship. Xena followed her as she made her way to the barbecue area with its comfortable couch and loungers. There was a bar by the outdoor kitchen, and Xena slid onto one of the bar stools so she could talk to the goddess, who took her place behind the grill.

Opening the small refrigerator, Aphrodite was grateful that Sarah had brought up her request so quickly. Taking two large tumblers, she filled them with ice and water, squeezed a wedge of lime into each, then finished them off by depositing a disk of cucumber in each. She handed one to Xena and took a sip from the other. Xena followed suit, nodding with approval after her first sip. Curiously, she poked at the ice cubes.

The goddess extracted a plate of chicken breasts from the fridge, turned on the grill, and then proceeded with seasoning the meat with salt and pepper.

"Normally I'd do a light marinade with honey, lime juice, and Sriracha," she explained, "but I think for the time being you may want your food to taste like what you're used to."

"That looks like chicken." Xena said as she watched her place the meat on the grill.

Aphrodite nodded. "I have some basic vegetables here as well. I'll grill those too. There is an amazing world of food that I've got no doubt Gabrielle looks forward introducing you to."

"So. You and Gabrielle." Xena said, matter-of-factly, taking another sip of water and watching the goddess carefully.

"What makes you say that?" Aphrodite asked casually. She was surprised certainly but took pains not to show it. She wondered if the warrior was guessing or if this was some other ability, possibly a godly one.

Xena shrugged, looking for an instant like an older, brunette, more self-assured Vox. "I saw how you were looking at her over the firelight," she said. "I've looked at her that way myself."

"It isn't what you think," she demurred, immensely grateful that Argo wasn't on deck.

"No?" Xena asked arching an eyebrow knowingly.

Aphrodite regarded the warrior. "When Gabrielle found me, a little over a month ago she had been searching for me for over two thousand years. She had every expectation that the next piece of the puzzle may take years, decades, or centuries to complete. She was really lonely and sad. Both of us treated it like the temporary fling it was, which was two very old friends catching up and enjoying ourselves. As soon as she knew that the possibility of getting you back could actually come to fruition, she – we – ended it."

“I see,” Xena said nodding. “I don’t see how you could spend a month with Gabrielle and not fall absolutely in love with her.”

“Well I am the Goddess of Love, so naturally, I love everybody.” Aphrodite said evasively, hoping that would end the conversation.

“Uh huh,” Xena replied, deciding to play along and drop the conversation, but making it clear that she didn’t entirely believe the goddess. She was thoughtful for long moments, sipping her water, then asked, “Aside from your relationship, how is she doing? I can tell something is wrong.”

Aphrodite turned the chicken over on the grill, checking its doneness and gently poking at the various vegetables she’d also placed on the hot surface. She considered a moment about how much of the bard’s story to divulge. “Xena, while I suppose it makes sense, I didn’t expect that she would be in more shock from your resurrection that you are. I will be blunt, it has been a day since you saw Gabrielle,” she paused to do a quick calculation, “for her it has been over seven hundred, thirty-thousand days. That is nearly three quarters of a million days.” She shook her head in frustration knowing that numbers alone would have little resonance for the warrior. “She has lived more than thirty lifetimes since you died. More than twenty centuries. Your memory has been enshrined in her heart; static, unchanging but a very deep and real passion that she has tended all these years.

“I know love stories. I’ve seen every permutation from the magnificent to the monstrous and in the pantheon of truly epic love stories, you guys absolutely have a place. But this has come at a price for Gabrielle. While I am amazed at how well she has adjusted to a life span she was not equipped to endure, she has sacrificed for you. Keeping your memory close has cut her off to a lot of relationships and I suppose she’s put you on a pedestal of sorts. I can tell you from personal experience that when someone worships your memory and you step off that pedestal to say ‘hi’ it’s going to freak them out.”

She smiled gently wishing she could soften the impact her words would undoubtedly have on the warrior. “Poseidon knew he was taking a risk by giving her ambrosia in the first place. I’ll grant that he was careful in the amount he gave her, and she didn’t suffer from the insanity that hit Valasca or Callisto after they had it. She’s smart, and she found purpose and focus in addition to her quest to revive you. I’m not going to tell her story, that’s for her to do. But I will say she’s one of the most remarkable human beings I’ve ever met.” Xena nodded in agreement. “That said, however, she hasn’t had nearly the quantity of relationships that you would expect, and loneliness has certainly been a reoccurring theme in her life. You both need time. Time for you to adjust to the reality of this new world and time for her to adjust to the reality of you. I know it’s going to hurt Xena – but it has been *lifetimes* since she’s seen you. She’s going to do her best to act like she’s okay but she isn’t. Just be mindful of that, okay? The devotion she feels for you is every bit as present in every molecule of her being as the DNA she’s made from.”

“I didn’t understand most of that last bit, but I think I get your meaning.” Xena replied with a frown. She turned her head and looked out to the ocean, grateful to see something that looked unchanged. She said as much to the goddess, who smiled sadly back at her.

“I wish that was so, Xena.” She said and left the grill to stand by the railing. She gestured for the warrior to join her.

“What are we looking at?” Xena asked curiously.

“Just wait a moment,” the goddess said. After a couple of minutes of silent observation, Xena saw something out in the distance she didn’t recognize. It came closer, it’s bright blue and white color scheme contrasting with the ocean around them.

“What is that?” Xena asked.

“A cooler, I think,” Aphrodite replied. “It’s something that keeps food and drink cold. It probably fell off the back of someone’s boat and they didn’t notice it. “I think Michelle spotted it though, we’re slowing down.” Sure enough, they could see two people on the deck below reach out with a large net and scoop up the trash. “You could be anywhere on the ocean and it’s just a matter of waiting to see something manmade float by.” She pushed away from the railing and walked back to the grill. “I think lunch is ready.”

Aphrodite put several pieces of chicken and some grilled vegetables on a plate and passed it to the warrior, making a second plate for herself. As if on cue, Argo appeared, padding her way across the deck followed by Gabrielle.

“Am I in time for lunch?” She asked, taking the seat next to Xena. She smiled at the warrior and touched her arm as she settled herself on the barstool. Xena smiled in return but the grin did not extend to her eyes. “Did you sleep well?” she asked as Aphrodite passed her a plate of food.

“Well enough,” the warrior replied not making eye contact.

All three women ate in near silence, punctuated by compliments about the food and idle chit chat about the yacht and the common foods people ate. Aphrodite looked at the pair in front of her with concern but knew better than give voice to the tension. This was not the reunion of Xena and Gabrielle that she expected, and no doubt the pair in front of her would agree.

“So, I was thinking,” Gabrielle suggested as she finished her lunch, “that I’d take you to meet Shen and some of the crew if you’re feeling up to it? The fact that you can speak and understand languages has put us miles ahead of where I thought we’d be. It’s going to take us a couple of days to get back to Marina del Rey, which is where I’ve had a home base for the last couple of years. Next would be acclimating you to the ship and the rest of life in 2017.”

“That sounds good,” Xena agreed. “You mentioned him earlier. Who is Shen?”

“You know, I’m going to take these dishes to the kitchen and let you guys have a chat,” Aphrodite offered, neatly stacking up the plates on a tray. “You know how to reach me if you need anything,” she added with a nod to Gabrielle.

“What was that about,” Xena asked, watching the goddess leave.

“I need to tell you about Shen and that involves discussing some of my somewhat recent history. It’s more of a private conversation, I suppose,” Gabrielle replied. She found herself wishing that Aphrodite had stayed, but to what end, she had no idea.

“Gabrielle,” Xena said with a frown, “I’m happy to hear it, but first I need to know what’s going on. With you – with us.” It was plain to the bard that Xena wasn’t angry, she was hurt and confused, and Gabrielle could not blame her for that. She’d feel the same way were their places switched.

Chewing the inside of her cheek to keep from getting emotional and tearing up, Gabrielle ordered her thoughts. This was never a conversation she expected to have, with Xena of all people. She looked at the warrior, her open unguarded expression looked as out of place on her as did the jeans and t-shirt. “Xena, I honestly don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she said. “I love you Xena, I truly do, but the connection I felt to you, that I could always feel so strongly...” her words trailed off, and she shrugged. “Something feels different,” she tried again. “I can’t really describe it. There is just something different. I’m sure it will right itself, but it’s just...”

The warrior’s jaw was set and annoyance quickly flashed over her features. She opened her mouth to speak but then closed it. She was quiet a moment more before she spoke. “Is this about Aphrodite?” she asked, her tone neutral. For her part, Xena was relieved that Gabrielle didn’t feign surprise or ignorance about the question. “I understand that more time has passed for you than for me.”

“No,” the bard said simply, “it isn’t.” Cocking her head, Xena signaled that some elaboration would be appreciated. “I’m not sure how much you want to know,” Gabrielle continued at the warrior’s urging. “Yes, we’re close. No, it’s not the kind of relationship you and I had – have.”

Xena downed the last of her cucumber water and briefly retreated into her thoughts. Gabrielle’s use of the past tense stung, especially after her declarations following her arrival on the ship. But at the same time, she was still haunted by the intense regret she felt when she died. How had she taken her love for granted, and made Gabrielle secondary to her own personal mission of redemption?

The warrior could see herself at a crossroads, not unlike the one that had led her to burying her weapons before meeting Gabrielle. She should put Gabrielle first, her resurrection was a second chance to fully live the life that had been cut short. That would mean giving Gabrielle space and time to sort out her feelings, with no guarantee that the story would have the ending she wanted. The other option was to indulge her impulse to withdraw and put her own feelings of hurt and rejection first. Never a fan of talking about her feelings, Xena of Amphipolis was even less of a fan of living in this strange new world without Gabrielle. Of this much, she was certain.

“Gabrielle,” she said, her voice measured. “You haven’t seen me for a very long time. Aphrodite said you may be in shock – both of us probably are. I don’t expect things to instantly go back to the way they were.” Argo barked once and looked at the warrior expectantly. “Is your dog okay?” she asked.

There was a sadness in Gabrielle’s eyes as she smiled at the woman who she still considered her soulmate. The woman who she had felt at one point in time understood her better than anyone could and had made her feel like the very best version of herself. She didn’t have the heart to tell Xena that she knew she wasn’t being truthful, and there was the possibility that Xena genuinely believed what she’d just said. “Argo’s fine,” she said instead. “You can give her the cucumber slice from your water if you’d like.”

“So, tell me about Shen,” Xena said trying to sound reassuring as she tossed the cucumber to the pit bull.

Gabrielle took a sip from her own water while trying to decide where to start. “I met this man from China – Chin, in nineteen-twelve, one hundred and five years ago. His name was Shen Chu, and he was new to America. He was part of the second wave of Chinese immigrants to the west coast of the United States of America, where we’re

headed now. We met in a city called San Francisco. He spoke very little English, but I spoke Mandarin and Cantonese, and I was able to help him learn. It was my second journey to this country. I'd arrived on the east coast a few months earlier after a pretty extreme disaster and had made my way west to start my life over once again. I'd been to San Francisco before and wanted some familiarity." Xena sipped her water and nodded, indicating that she was following the story.

"Anyway, Shen was a dear man. He was hardly more than a boy when I met him, and he became one of my most trusted employees, a confidant, and a very dear friend. He grew up, got married and had a daughter. When Shen Chu and I met, I was going by the name Ingrid Bard." Debating how best to explain how she'd survived, Gabrielle took a sip of water before continuing. "Xena," she said. "One of the ways I've survived all these years is to periodically change my identity. I learned early on that living longer than people think is possible will cause a lot of confusion, suspicion, which leads to personal difficulty for me. Not drawing attention to oneself has been essential. I might change my name, move to a different village or country, take up a different profession. Essentially, I create an entirely new life for myself after a certain number of years have passed. When I'd developed a business that I wanted to keep and grow, changing identities would require years of preparation. I would create children away at boarding school or distant relatives. I'd try to age myself, and finally go on some kind of extended trip or retire. My new persona would take my place and take over my business or whatever. I'd have to replace the top tier of people in my company that I worked closely with, then either find them better jobs or pay them to retire, I'd start over fresh with a new crew from within the company that hadn't worked directly with the 'old' me.

"When the time came with Shen, I could not bear to part company. I did what I could to age myself and when the time came, I turned the company over to Abigail Evans, my new identity. Shen played along, pretending that he hadn't seen me every day for the past 18 years. It certainly helped the illusion within the company. His daughter started working for me in the 1950s and for one blissful year in 1970 when her daughter, Susan, started at my company, I had three generations of this wonderful family at my side." Xena nodded again to assure Gabrielle that she was following along with the story, and that it was making sense.

"Susan married her husband Tom about a year after she started, shortly before Shen Chu died. They had a daughter named Beatrix."

"Did she work for you as well?" The warrior asked.

Chuckling, Gabrielle replied, "No. Trixie was an artist. She was a professional dancer for a time before she had her son, Shen. Trixie and her father Tom were killed last year in a car accident on Father's Day. Susan was watching Shen so Trixie could take Tom to dinner, and a drunk driver killed them. Shen had lost his own father when he was five years old. Dave, Trixie's husband had a very serious illness called leukemia. For the last year Susan has been raising her grandson on her own.

Gabrielle took a deep breath, hoping she could get through the last of the story before choking up. "There is a custom here where you can designate someone outside of your family to step in called a "god-parent" should something happen to the primary custodian – like what you did with Tyldus for Solon. Susan died a few days ago, when Ares captured her and she killed herself to avoid revealing anything about me or my

organization. Since I am Shen's god-mother, I am responsible for him. As of a little over three days ago, I became a parent again."

With profound sympathy etching her features, Xena looked at Gabrielle. She tried to take in all that the bard had said and fathom a life where generation after generation you watch everyone you care for grow old and die. "All of this and still you came to resurrect me?" she finally asked.

"Xena, of course," Gabrielle answered without hesitation. "I've never stopped looking for a way to get you back."

The warrior frowned, "And you've seen Ares?"

Shaking her head Gabrielle replied, "While we were on the way to Greece to retrieve the hammer. Ares contacted me with a video message, something similar to what I did with my phone when we first got to the ship. I could see Susan in the background. She was...signaling me as to what she was going to do and I knew she was just waiting to hear if I'd gotten Shen to safety first. I stalled Ares long enough for my team to get to Shen's boarding school and get him to safety. When I let her know he was safe..." she shrugged. "Well, that was it."

"So, the boy lives here now?" Xena asked. "On this ship?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I think he will. He's ten years old. There is still a lot to sort out. My captain and her executive officer, the second in command, have decided to share accommodations so he can have a room down with the crew, sort of like his boarding school. For the moment, we are homeschooling him and keeping in close touch with his school and teachers. When it is safe he will go back to the school, if he wants to, and live here when he gets time off. If he doesn't, I'll get a house or something and live on land for a while. I need to do some research into Susan's...last wishes, but I expect that I will be legally adopting him." She could tell by Xena's expression that she was beginning to confuse the warrior and was frustrated with her inability to explain it better. She also knew that if she often thought of Xena's son Solon when she saw Shen, there was no doubt that Xena would as well. And that was going to be painful.

"I suppose I should meet him then," Xena said, smiling warmly.

They located the boy in the conference room taking a test with Prisha waiting to review the results. Gabrielle was surprised to see the drum set in the corner of the room. "Are we interrupting?" she asked as she walked in, with Xena and Argo following behind her.

Shen looked up, his expression bright at the sight of his godmother. "I was just finishing a test," he said. "History," he added dejectedly. He put down his pencil and passed the paper over to Prisha who reviewed it with a frown. "I've already aced a math test, but you know...history."

"One of my favorite subjects," Gabrielle explained to Xena. "Shen, I want you to meet my friend Xena that I told you about."

Shen got up and walked over to the warrior. "It's nice to meet you," Xena said, extending her arm the same way that Michelle had previously. "I'm not so good with history myself."

"It's nice to meet you too," Shen said a bit formally, shaking her hand politely.

The smile on the warrior's face was genuine, warm but Gabrielle could clearly see the sadness briefly cloud her eyes. There was no doubt in the bard's mind that Xena was

thinking of Solon and wishing she could have watched him grow up. Gabrielle gave her a moment to compose herself before introducing Prisha Washburn.

The navigator shook Xena's hand warmly. "Aphrodite mentioned you're dealing with some memory loss," she said. "If there is anything anyone on the crew can do to help you out, you just need to ask."

"That is very kind of you, thank you," Xena said, feeling relieved.

"What kind of memory loss?" Shen asked curiously. Xena was about to answer when she felt Gabrielle's hand on her arm stopping her.

"Xena had something happen to her which has made her forget a lot of things. Things like history, current events, how things work," Gabrielle explained vaguely. "She will get her memory back, but it will probably take some time."

"It's like amnesia?" He asked brightly. "From an accident?"

"Yes, sort of like that," Gabrielle agreed. "Say, why is the drum set in the conference room?" she asked, changing the subject.

Shen's expression brightened, "Blake said he'd start teaching me if I do well on my tests. These were just pre-tests to see what I've messed up."

"Well I can't argue with that logic," Gabrielle replied, nodding.

Prisha passed the test paper back to the boy with certain questions circled. She also passed him a laptop computer and a large coffee table book. "These are the questions that need some work," she said. "Why don't you try looking up some answers and see what you find? You might also check them against the book you got yesterday, see how the websites compare." He nodded, glumly regarding his paper.

Gabrielle's watch chimed and she checked her phone. She replied with a text message and glanced over to Prisha. "Prisha, Michelle has got something for us on the bridge," she said. "I also need to check on Vox. Xena, would you mind hanging out with Shen until I get back? He can show you around the ship if you'd like."

Xena nodded. "After he checks his questions of course, sure – I'd like that."

Shen waited until Gabrielle and Prisha left before speaking to the warrior. "You know, we could probably just do the tour. I don't think I'd get in much trouble. Gabrielle hardly ever gets mad."

Xena chuckled, the bittersweet memory of Solon coming to the surface anew. "She gets mad once in a while and it's kind of a scary sight. Maybe you should do your school work, just in case." She glanced over at the book on the table. "That's an impressive book you've got there."

He drew the book towards them and opened it. "Michelle ordered it for me from Amazon," he explained. "To help with my history."

"It's nice to know that the Amazons are still around," Xena replied.

"Oh yeah," Shen agreed. "It's a big company, they have everything. She requested one day delivery which is why they got it to me while we were in Mexico."

Xena nodded. "I'm sure because she's captain of the ship is why the Amazons were very accommodating. They're very dependable. I knew them when they were just a small tribe."

Shen looked at the warrior, a confused expression on his face. "I think they do the delivery as long as you pay the shipping. The book is a history of the world," he opened it to the beginning chapters and showed the warrior illustrations about the formations of the planets and the dinosaurs. "Then we get to the ancient world," he turned some pages to

the sights that Xena found familiar. “This is the Middle Ages,” he said, a somewhat dejected tone to his voice. “That’s what my test was on, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. I was going to use the laptop to check my answers first, you can look at my book if you want.”

Xena nodded and watched him for a moment as he opened the laptop and his fingers flew over the keys. She turned her attention to the book, turning the pages carefully and skimming the information. She was amazed that she could read the text and understood it for the most part. The images helped, and she was equal parts amazed and disheartened with each turn of the page. The people, both celebrated and notorious, the advancements, the struggles, war, more war, still more war leapt off the pages at her. Gabrielle had severely understated how much warfare and its tools had changed. “All of these things actually happened?” She asked as she turned the pages of World War II.

Shen nodded. “You’re pretty safe trusting books, well non-fiction research type books like this one,” he said. “Websites have a lot of fake stuff, so you can’t always trust what they’re saying.”

“Websites is that thingie?” She asked looking at the screen.

He nodded, “It’s faster if you can type,” he explained. “Hey, I’ll tell you what I’ve found, see if you can find it in the book, you can check the index.” He showed Xena the back of the book and how the index words corresponded to the page numbers. She nodded and set to work learning about the Middle Ages.



Gabrielle followed Prisha onto the bridge. The lights were dim and the room was illuminated by the glow of the monitors and the sunshine coming through the tinted windows of the control room. She was a little surprised to see Aphrodite already there, chatting with Hatsuo. Michelle announced her presence and everyone gave her their undivided attention.

“There’s news?” she asked.

Michelle nodded, making a slight adjustment to the onboard autopilot. “Susan’s body was recovered in Montana and has been moved to Quantico,” she said. “The Feds are involved.”

“Any of our people?” Gabrielle asked hopefully.

“No. We’ve got people tangential to the investigation, but the investigators and the pathologist on the case aren’t ours. We tried, but...” she shrugged.

Knowing it was a long shot to have people directly on the investigating team the bard asked, “What do they know?”

Shaking her head, Michelle replied, “Not much at this point, I’m afraid. We’ve tried to get to the pathologist and have a look at the report. I don’t think they are going to release the body until their investigation is closed.”

“Why did the Feds get involved? Did we just get lucky?”

“We got lucky with a local investigator in Montana,” Hatsuo interjected. “There was the cyanide and it was clear that the body had been moved. When her identity was confirmed, Special Projects was able to raise the profile of the case and get the Feds involved. We’ve got more people in DC than we do in Montana.”

“I was telling Hatsuo that I can get us a meeting with the pathologist if you’d like a first-hand account,” Aphrodite offered.

“With investigators, we don’t know?” Gabrielle asked, surprised.

The goddess shook her head. “No. I mean, I can get you a meeting with them too, I suppose. But I can get us a meeting with the pathologist, getting us past security and such.” Gabrielle still looked confused. “Not unlike my ability to teach your dog new tricks,” Aphrodite tried explaining slowly.

“She means it’s a ‘god’ thing,” Michelle offered.

“Oh!” Gabrielle exclaimed, embarrassed for not catching on sooner. “Yes, absolutely. I’d like to get Susan back for burial as soon as we can. I’d also like to see what we can do about Ares. Do we have the Gideon Power intel from Special Projects?”

“Yes,” Michelle confirmed. “I have it right here. But there are also a couple of other things that need your attention,” Michelle added, cautiously.

“Of course,” Gabrielle said, indicating to the captain to continue.

“When Shen was picked up they took everything from his dorm room, his clothes and computer, things like that. But he probably needs more from the house.”

The bard nodded. “Okay,” she said at last. “First things first. When we get to the Marina, I’ll take Shen home to pick up some stuff.” She glanced at Aphrodite trying to gauge how much her next words were going to hurt. “I’ll take Xena with me.”

Aphrodite nodded, to Gabrielle’s relief. “You should also take Argo,” the goddess suggested. “Shen will appreciate that.” The bard smiled gratefully, well aware that while expected, taking a back seat to the warrior would be painful. “Do you mind if I borrow a car? I’ve got some errands of my own to run.”

“Absolutely- anything you want in inventory is yours,” Gabrielle assured her with a glance to Michelle who gave an affirming nod. “Is a day enough time?” Aphrodite agreed that it was. “Great, we’ll meet with department heads the next morning, we can head to DC the next day. When exactly do we arrive home?”

“Day after tomorrow, early morning,” Michelle said.

“Okay, I know it’s short notice but see if Jorge can get everyone together. Please arrange for a car for the airport. I’d like to have Ed and the twins on duty, if possible. While I’m thinking about it, why don’t I meet with Jorge, Sabin and Fiona before the rest of the department heads- to loop them in on the same stuff I told you guys.”

“Oh, the booze meeting,” Michelle affirmed, making a note.

“The booze meeting?” Gabrielle asked, frowning and glancing at Aphrodite who chuckled.

The captain shrugged. “Well, it’s our shorthand for it. I know what the three of them like to drink, should I have it sent to your study?” she asked innocently.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes but nodded. “Yeah, makes sense. Getting back to the matter at hand, let’s see what we’ve got so far on the pathologist, the investigators, and Gideon Power.” The captain handed over her tablet and Gabrielle took a seat on the couch, scrolling through the documents. Her brow creased as she focused, reading and scrolling, tapping the tablet to open one document after the next. “One last thing,” she said. “See if SP can get anywhere with the computers for the investigators. I’d like to know what they know, and please have Blake or Samantha bring up some snacks, this is going to take a bit.”

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Shen looked at his companion nervously. They'd long since finished reviewing the test and he'd explained as much as he understood of historical events from that point on. From time to time Gabrielle's friend would point at something in the book and he'd tell her what it was or look it up on the internet if he didn't know. With each passing chapter, the woman's mood grew darker. More than once he'd seen her wipe at her eyes. On the one hand, it was a somewhat of a comfort to meet someone who was hurting as much as he was, but he wasn't sure how to deal with the imposing woman either. After filling Xena in on as much as he knew of the current wars in the Middle East he closed the book and came to a decision.

"Xena, I want to take you to meet a friend of mine," he said, his tone concerned.

"Gabrielle said to wait here." The warrior replied reaching for the cover of the book to open it once again.

"No," he said firmly, which made bright blue eyes widen in surprise. "You can't absorb everything you don't know in one afternoon, that's why school takes a bunch of years." He stood up and, in a tone that brooked no argument said, "Follow me."

Inwardly Xena winced. The young boy's defiance seemed so much like Solon. As traumatic as his previous years and days had been, he carried himself with more composure than would be expected. She decided to give him the win and complied with his insistent request. As they walked through the ship he pointed out the various rooms and features of the yacht. Xena asked where the various bathrooms were and he made sure to highlight them as they passed. They stopped briefly at the gym which seemed to puzzle the warrior. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's a room to exercise in?"

He nodded, not understanding why she was confused. "Yeah, so you can stay in shape. There are weights, weight machines, and some treadmills, over there is a stair climber and there is a rock wall that the crew can assemble. They have climbing races."

"You don't just stay in shape by lifting things or running and walking?" Xena asked, perplexed.

"Um. No." Shen said shaking his head. "I mean I can I guess because I play sports at school. But adults sit around most of the time, it isn't healthy."

"They sit around because..."

"Their jobs," he continued to explain. "Most jobs just use your brain and you sit and do brain stuff. I mean, I guess people's brains are in great shape, but the rest of them just kind of...sits." The warrior frowned but kept quiet.

They continued through the ship to the lower decks. Shen made sure to introduce Xena to all of the crew that they encountered. The warrior offered her hand to each which they shook warmly and welcomed her aboard. There was no doubt that they had been alerted to her presence, since no one was surprised to see her, and everyone offered to be of any assistance to her that they could. One man in particular, that Shen referred to as 'Bo' complimented her B-52's t-shirt. The warrior had no idea what he was talking about but thanked him anyway. Finally, they reached a door at the end of the hallway. Shen knocked and when invited inside looked up at Xena. "This is sick-bay," he said as he pushed the door open.

Vox was sitting up in bed watching something on her tablet. She smiled at the boy's entrance which immediately faded to a guarded expression at the sight of the tall, dark woman entering behind him. "Hey Vox," Shen said. "This is Gabrielle's friend Xena."

“It’s nice to meet you,” Xena said extending her hand.

“Likewise,” Vox said and Argo, who had been sleeping on her bed, woke up and barked once. “That Argo, needs to stop,” she said tightly.

“Xena and I were talking about history,” Shen continued enthusiastically. “But it made her really sad, and you’ve been really helpful with me when I’ve been really sad, so I thought I’d bring her down here so you can help her too.”

Simultaneously Vox and Xena both looked at the boy, then at each other, then back at the boy. “Ah, dude,” the engineer awkwardly started, “um...I’m helpful to you because you and I know each other and we’re friends. It’s kinda hard to get that kind of help from someone you’ve just met. Like, literally, just met.”

“But you guys already have a lot in common. You can absolutely be friends. You’re both gay and you’re both in love with Gabrielle,” he insisted, confused. Vox and Xena locked eyes once again. “I thought that might help, having something in common. Aphrodite isn’t gay,” he added as an afterthought “she’s bisexual.”

Vox took a deep breath and let it out slowly making a mental note to have a conversation with Gabrielle so she could then have a conversation with the boy. For the moment, this was her mess to address. “Dude!” she said firmly. “First thing is you don’t just make assumptions about someone’s sexual orientation and then talk about it with someone they’ve just met. It’s totally rude.” She glanced at the dog watching her with interest before continuing. “Secondly, you shouldn’t make assumptions about how someone feels about someone else and again discuss it with someone who you’ve just met and isn’t in that relationship either, it’s a dick thing to do. It’s like you’re talking about Gabrielle behind her back, savvy?”

Shen’s eyes went wide and the boy looked genuinely wounded. “I’m sorry Vox, Xena,” he muttered.

Xena gently put a hand on his shoulder and knelt down to look him in the eyes. “I appreciate you trying to help me make friends, but the way you introduced me to the rest of the crew is the perfect way to do it.” He nodded mutely. “Neither of us are upset with you, we’re just both kind of embarrassed at the situation,” she explained. “I know you’ve been through a lot lately, and I do appreciate you bringing me to someone that you think can help me. That is very kind of you.”

“Yeah, dude,” Vox agreed. “Your introductions just need work, that’s all.” He relaxed somewhat, but his expression was dejected. “Say,” the engineer added brightly, “Argo hasn’t been on deck in a while, want to go throw the ball for her? You’ve made the intro, now Xena and I can have a chat.”

“You know,” Xena added, “Work on becoming friends.”

He nodded and happily, oblivious to the warrior’s smirk, grabbed the tennis ball sitting on the desk. In a flash, the pit bull jumped off the bed and followed him out of the room.

“Well this is awkward.” Vox said dryly.

“So, you’re in love with Gabrielle?” Xena asked cheerfully, with a genuine smile. “I think there is a fair amount of that going around the ship.”

Vox chuckled, impressed that the woman standing across from her was willing to make the embarrassing downright insufferable. “Kids say the darnedest things,” she said dismissively. “I’m an engineer on the crew, that’s all I am to Gabrielle.” She didn’t make the proclamation with any trace of self-pity or sadness, simply a stating of fact.

Xena rolled her eyes. “The Gabrielle I know would no doubt see each and every one of you as family.” The blond woman shrugged in response. “I do have some questions for you – if you’re willing to answer them,” she added sincerely.

“As long as they’re not too personal, go ahead,” the engineer replied. Vox took the opportunity to really study the newcomer. Xena was tall, imposing, nicely filling out an old t-shirt and new pair of jeans. Her hair was down and somewhat tousled and messy. Her bright blue eyes were piercing, and she looked like a woman unafraid of anything or anyone yet still unsettled and out of place in her current surroundings. She could easily picture Gabrielle with this woman; the awareness and the ease of it only served to annoy the younger woman.

“What’s a B-52?” Xena asked, looking down at her shirt.

“Oh that,” the young woman said, taking note of the tour shirt. “It’s a band. That’s one of Aphrodite’s shirts, and I’ve got to say though, you wear it well.” Vox picked up her tablet and tapped it a couple of times. In moments, a song played through the ship’s sound system. “This is the B-52’s” she explained. Xena listened deciding that she found the music she heard earlier more enjoyable.

“What’s next?” Vox asked gamely.

Xena’s eyes widened in understanding, “You’re the person responsible for the music?” she said. “The beautiful singing.”

Vox nodded. “Well at least until they let me out of sick bay I am. I’m glad you’ve enjoyed it because the rest of the crew is ready to kill me. Blake has been in here twice offering to take my stitches out himself.”

“Well the ones in your head are ready, so I don’t see why not.” Xena remarked after a casual glance. She looked at the bandage on the woman’s shoulder exposed by the tank top she was wearing. “May I?” she asked.

“You a doctor?” Vox asked dubiously.

“I was a warlord,” Xena said without pride or enjoyment. “I wasn’t a healer specifically but I had an army to take care of.” The engineer nodded and Xena leaned forward to lift the bandage away from the wound. Vox was surprised that her hands were gentle.

“So how do you know Gabrielle exactly?” the blond woman asked conversationally.

Xena lowered the bandage and looked at the younger woman while considering her answer. There was something about the younger woman that she sensed she could trust. While she wasn’t certain if it was the other woman’s love for Gabrielle that simultaneously endeared and annoyed her, or if it was something else, she came to the conclusion that being honest would provide her the most useful information. “We met shortly after I stopped being a warlord. We traveled together and were lovers for a number of years before I died.” Xena replied simply. “By the way, the stitches in your shoulder are ready to come out too.”

The woman’s eyes grew wide, and she blinked a couple of times. “I’m sorry, did you say you died?”

Xena nodded. “They tell me I died over two thousand years ago. Gabrielle and Aphrodite met Poseidon on the beach in...” she thought for a moment, “Shen called it ‘Mexico’. They just brought me back.”

“You know Gabrielle from Ancient Greece. And you’ve been dead? You speak English perfectly.”

Xena shrugged. “I will admit it doesn’t feel ancient to me, but yes, we met in Greece. I’m not Greek though; I’m...” she thought for a moment for the correct terminology, “Bulgarian-Thracian, whatever. Apparently, I can speak all the languages that Aphrodite can. It seems to be some by product of the resurrection, from her blood. I don’t know if there are any side effects from Poseidon’s blood...”

“Wait, wait, wait...” Vox said, waving at the warrior to slow down. “*Poseidon? The Poseidon.*” As soon as she said it she felt foolish. She’d already seen *the* Aphrodite in a bikini, swimming in the ocean with a pit bull; the concept of a real Poseidon seemed obvious when she thought about it.” Xena gave her a dubious look. “Yes, I know. I’ve met Aphrodite,” Vox muttered calling out her own foolishness. “So, for you, yesterday was a day that you died in Ancient Greece.” Vox nodded at her appearance, “the same age as you are today?”

The warrior shook her head. “No, Gabrielle and I were in Jappa – ah... Japan, but yes, I died as I am, and it does feel like it happened yesterday.” Unconsciously she rubbed her shoulder where one of the arrows had pierced her, “I was shot with arrows. A lot of them.”

There was an innocence in the way that the imposing woman spoke that made the engineer inclined to believe her. She seemed guileless and as confused by the world she now found herself in as a person could possibly be. “Okay, here’s the deal. For the moment, I’m going to say I believe you, until I spend another five minutes thinking about it and decide you must be nuts.” Vox gestured to a nearby chair and encouraged the woman to sit. “I’m surprised that Gabrielle hasn’t mentioned this, but you can’t say the resurrection thing to anyone else.”

“Why not?” Xena asked. “It’s what happened.”

“Even so,” the engineer assured her, “it butts up against people’s religious beliefs and they will totally freak out. When people feel shaky about their religion, it’s easier to attack the person challenging it than to think what they’ve believed their whole life might not be so. And make no mistake, people *will* freak out.”

“What exactly did Gabrielle tell you about me?” Xena asked. It seemed odd to the warrior that if Gabrielle were depending on the highest ranks of her private army, as she assumed the crew was, that they would know nothing of the mission objective. While they might not know the specifics, or all the details, surely, they knew something.

Vox frowned. Something about the warrior’s tone implied that she didn’t agree with Gabrielle’s leadership, and that didn’t sit well with the engineer. “She told us what she felt we needed to know. I was with her in Greece, obviously,” she nodded at her shoulder. “I knew she was after this hammer which was somehow necessary to find you. We know that she’s immortal, we know Aphrodite isn’t like most people- but you only have to meet Aphrodite to realize that.”

At the mention of the woman’s shoulder Xena started looking around the sterile looking room for something to cut the stitches. “You want me to take those out?” she asked. “Like I said, I’ve done it many times.” The engineer acquiesced, happy to distract the woman from questioning anything about Gabrielle’s decision making. She pointed to a drawer with a pair of small scissors. Xena tried them out, impressed at their ease of use.

“Why don’t you tell me why Shen is so concerned about you,” Vox asked, genuinely interested. Xena shrugged as she began to remove stitches and asked about the events in Shen’s book.



Gabrielle knocked softly at the sick bay door, surprised by the sound of conversation inside. The voices weren’t heated but animated enough for Gabrielle to clearly make out the sound of a frustrated Xena trying to understand something. She knocked at the door a little louder and was invited inside. It took only an instant for the bard to notice the tray sitting near her patient’s bed with a pair of scissors and the remnants of the sutures that had been removed. In a heartbeat, she was at Vox’s bedside examining the wound in the woman’s head and shoulder. “You took out the stitches?” She asked Xena, pointedly keeping her voice calm.

“They were ready to come out,” Xena offered.

“You’re cool with anyone removing your stitches?” she asked her patient as she made sure none had been missed.

“Well she did say she was a warlord and had experience,” Vox replied innocently. Gabrielle looked pointedly at the woman’s abdomen and without being asked, she pulled up her tank top, perhaps a little higher than was strictly necessary, and gave Gabrielle access to the bandaged area.

“What have you guys been chatting about?” She asked, keeping her voice neutral. Twice Vox inhaled sharply as Gabrielle touched her; first when the bard’s examination lead to a sharp pain, and the second time when her touch was very much the opposite. Gabrielle apologized for the second and asked Vox to roll over on her side. After a quick examination of the exit wound, she let the younger woman settle herself in the bed once again.

“We’ve been talking about what’s happened in the world that I’ve missed.” Xena said, her tone flat and unyielding. “And I’m having some trouble understanding how this has all happened.”

“Your abdomen is healing nicely, but both front and back stitches need to stay in a while longer.” Gabrielle said to Vox, buying herself some time before addressing Xena. “Your shoulder and head are fine. You can move back into your room now, but you are not cleared for work. You’re still recuperating. I want you to let me know if the pain gets any greater, or if you feel any heat or swelling. Anything that’s different from how it feels now, unless it’s better you tell me, got it? I know you’re going to be moving around more. And keep taking the antibiotics until they are finished.”

“Yes, Doc.” Vox replied obediently. “I...ah... suggested to Xena that she may want to keep the resurrection thing to herself, by the way.”

The warrior shook her head, “With everything else that is happening, I don’t see why that would be the biggest...”

“Xena,” Gabrielle interrupted, not wanting to have the argument that she could feel coming in front of the engineer. “Why don’t you and I go on deck and talk about this.” She forced a smile to her face and nodded at Vox before leaving the sickbay.

Xena extended her hand to Vox before she left, “It was very nice meeting you,” she said. “I am grateful for...our talk.”

“Anytime,” the engineer said with a smile, wondering at the moment who she felt worse for.

The warrior nodded and followed Gabrielle through the lower deck to the stairs that led up through the main deck to the upper deck. They were at the stern of the boat and could faintly hear the commotion of Shen playing with Argo at the bow. Xena breathed deeply of the sea air, enjoying the balmy touch of breeze and spectacular view. Gabrielle cocked her head looking up at the warrior. She was amazed that after all this time how quickly some old patterns reasserted themselves. Then she had to remind herself that for Xena, no time had passed, these patterns weren't old to her. “I had hoped to fill you in on what's happened in the world myself,” she said somewhat sadly. “I'm sorry that you've found out like this.”

“This has to do with me, doesn't it?” Xena asked, her piercing blue eyes searching Gabrielle's face for an indication that she might be wrong. “Why the world is this way.”

“Yes and no,” the bard replied. “Yes, the tether to Olympus was broken when I sent a Titan after a giant with the anvil of Hephaestus. The anvil, Titan, giant, and tether all destroyed in one blow.”

“Oh Gabrielle,” Xena said, her voice saddened and somewhat shocked.

“No, I didn't know that was what was going to happen, and no, I didn't ask.” Gabrielle shrugged. “Instead of bringing you back, I got the ambrosia and relative immortality. And, like Aphrodite and whomever else from Olympus was trapped on earth, I watched as the world has changed and evolved over the centuries.” She could see the question forming on the warrior's face and answered it. “Aphrodite has already pointed out that had the tether not been broken, she and the other gods would have been in better position to fight off the encroaching mythologies.” She shrugged. “But who knows if that would have changed anything.”

“How could it not change everything?” Xena asked dumbfounded. “The crusades, the wars between religions...”

“Given what I know now, I have every confidence that people would have found something else to fight about,” Gabrielle replied. “If not religion, then resources, or territory, or gods know what else. The ‘World Wars’ weren't about religion. I think the industrial revolution would have still happened and that has led to a great deal of the mess we presently find ourselves in. Xena, I've had two thousand years to consider the ramifications of what I did and to ponder the possibilities if I had not. Ultimately, that point is moot.”

With eyes narrowed in anger, Xena looked down at her companion. “I'm sorry Gabrielle, I've had less than a day to digest all of this. I apologize if my questions are moot.”

Gabrielle closed her eyes, forcing herself to stay calm. “I'm sorry Xena. I don't mean to be short or dismissive about your concerns. But I can't pretend that I haven't already thought about the things I've spent a lot of time thinking about. I'd much rather focus on what I need to do in the here and now, and about the future. Until less than twenty-four hours ago, my primary concern has been working on the things I needed to do to get you back. Sure, I'm upset by the things that are happening and the things that are obviously attributable to Ares. But that concern has been secondary to resurrecting you. Now I can devote all of my energy into doing something about Ares.”

“Great,” the warrior said icily. “We have something in common after all. You’ve had two thousand years to combat the forces of Ares. It doesn’t look like you’ve made much progress. You need to be able to fight on more than one front. Maybe you didn’t learn from me as much as you think you did.” As soon as the words were out, Xena realized she’d gone too far. Gabrielle looked like she’d been slapped.

Shock quickly gave way to pain and anger, however, evident on her face before she could form her retort.

“Fuck you Xena.” She turned on her heel and walked away.

Xena fully intended to follow, to apologize, to rephrase, but her feet would not move in the direction of the bard’s exit. Instead she walked over to the railing, pacing back and forth and fuming at her circumstances. She wasn’t just angry at the state of the world, she was angry at everything in general. This wasn’t helping her situation; she knew it, but mentally ran through her list anyhow: She was angry that time had passed for only her, angry that the woman she loved didn’t look at her the same as she had just days before, angry that she wasn’t loved in return... Xena stopped herself, realizing this line of thinking wasn’t getting her anywhere. Looking out at the ocean and around at the yacht, she felt at once lost and trapped.

Xena knew that Gabrielle had managed quite well for two thousand years without her; she was surrounded by evidence of this fact. Yet, she knew there was something missing in the bard’s strategy for dealing with Ares all these years, in spite of not having lived those years herself.

In the past, a disagreement such as this might have led her to Amphipolis to sort out her thoughts away from Gabrielle. Here on the bard’s ship, she did not have that luxury. She also felt lost without her. Knowing that Gabrielle had turned her back and walked away, and not knowing where she was on the ship presented Xena with an anxiety that was at once unfamiliar and unsettling.

She was drawn from her thoughts by the soft sound of something climbing the stairs. She glanced in the direction of the noise to see Aphrodite and Argo crossing the deck towards her. The goddess moved silently, but the metal tag on the dog’s collar did not. Xena turned her back on the stairs, certain that a visit from this particular goddess was not what she wanted at the moment; the dog, however, was a welcome diversion.

Aphrodite approached and casually leaned against the railing looking at the warrior. “You wanna talk about it?” she asked.

“Not especially,” the warrior replied dryly. “I’m surprised you’re not having this kind of helpful chat with Gabrielle.”

“Any chat I’d have with Gabrielle right now would quite likely lead to something decidedly unhelpful,” she replied with a shrug. For her part, Argo silently studied the two women through amber colored eyes.

Xena turned angrily on the goddess, “Why don’t you just go to her then? Gabrielle has clearly moved on from me,” she said. “In more ways than one,” she added, her voice pained. The pit bull whined and butted her large head at the warrior’s shin in an effort to get the tall woman to stoop down and pet her.

The Goddess of Love watched the faint clouds in the midday sky for a moment before responding. “I’ll be honest with you Xena,” she started. “I am very much considering that. But I also know that if I indulge myself at this point in time, Gabrielle will never forgive me, or herself for that matter, and that I simply cannot bear.

“A part of me,” she continued, “is quite content to let the two of you make a mess of things for the next few decades until you both pull your heads out of your asses and come to your senses. But the world is barreling toward a very dark place, and I don’t know if a few decades is something it has to spare – maybe, maybe not. So instead of just staying out of it, I’m going to give you the cold hard facts and let you make up your own mind.”

“Oh goody,” Xena muttered sarcastically.

Aphrodite ignored the comment and pressed on. “First of all, I knew this was not going to go well the moment Gabrielle told me what she was planning. Second, up until yesterday, you’d always been the worldlier of the two of you and letting go of that isn’t in your wheelhouse. But the fact of the matter is, no matter how badly you screw things up now, there are very few creatures on this planet that are going to be around for the long term, so you and Gabrielle are kind of stuck with each other, like it or not. And I know you both genuinely love each other, so it would really do all of us a lot of good if you could get over yourself sooner, rather than later. Furthermore, you are essentially a newborn. There could be...side effects developing from your resurrection, and you need to be watched over, for the time being anyway. You’re not running away from this.”

“This is some pep talk.”

“Whatever,” Aphrodite replied, dismissively.

“I am not wrong to think that this whole Ares thing could have been handled differently,” Xena defensively insisted.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. Maybe, okay? You are a master at strategy, and it’s totally possible you’d have figured out earlier that Ares was on earth when the tether was broken. Hell, you’d probably have figured out sooner what the ramifications of destroying the anvil were. But I’m not sure you’d have made it the two thousand years with your sanity intact the way Gabrielle has. Intellectual curiosity and emotional awareness were never your strong suits.

“Oh, by all means, tell me what you think,” Xena drawled, losing none of her sarcasm. “What have you done to turn the tide of things the last two thousand years?”

Aphrodite stepped up to the warrior, her pale blue eyes icy with fury. “Xena, what I’ve been up to these past two thousand years would fucking break you. I bring love and hope to places that don’t have enough of it.” Her eyes narrowed and were uncharacteristically cold. “You wouldn’t last five minutes. Yes, I spend time intermittently among the financially and emotionally wealthy, but then it’s back into the trenches.” She paused for breath, her fury spent. “I’m sorry you died, I truly am. And I’m really sorry I didn’t know about it to comfort you at the very end. But don’t even for a minute think that you are in any place to second guess the decisions I or Gabrielle have made until you live a hundred years or so in this place to make them.”

Xena nodded, realizing the goddess was right. “I apologize Aphrodite,” she said. “I was out of line.” She was silent for a moment until the goddess nodded, accepting her apology. “What do you suggest I do?”

“We don’t get to Marina del Rey until the day after tomorrow, in the morning. Take that time to sort things out. Gabrielle has some meetings as soon as we land – you can get more insight than as to what we are all up against. I also suspect Shen showed you where people gather to eat, join them and get to know these people. Do what you need to do to get your head straight, that’s the best advice I can offer you at the moment.”

As an afterthought, she added, “Maybe take a shower.” Xena nodded, looking none too pleased. The goddess continued, “I’ll have Shen or Vox find you tomorrow and show you how to use your phone,” she held up hers as example. “It’s the device you’ll use to communicate with people as well as look up all the shit you don’t know.” She then turned and walked away, leaving the warrior to stare in the direction of her retreating form.

Xena glanced down at the dog, who was purposefully leaning against her leg to get her attention. “Argo,” she said. “Something tells me there is an awful lot of shit I don’t know.” Argo grinned up at her, happily wagging her tail. With a heavy sigh, she smiled in return then went back to gazing out at the ocean.

A short while later, she heard footfalls on deck approaching from the opposite direction from where the goddess had departed. Briefly, she hoped it might be Gabrielle returning to afford her the chance to apologize, but she already knew that the footfalls did not belong to her bard. She was already looking in the direction of the newcomer before Elaine turned a corner across the deck, saw the warrior and froze.

The petite woman was shorter than Gabrielle, with a gymnast’s build. There was a soft fullness to her compact form that belied her sharp reflexes. Momentarily startled, she smiled and nodded at Xena, then resumed walking the short distance to the railing where the warrior stood.

“I’m sorry,” she said in greeting. “I didn’t expect anyone to be up here. I hope I didn’t startle you. Elaine Jackson, executive officer of *The Hippolyta*.”

“Xena,” the warrior replied extending her hand, which the black woman shook warmly. “Executive officer?”

Elaine shrugged. “Ships don’t really have co-pilots. Once upon a time we were first mates.” She turned and looked out at the expanse of blue, then simply said, “You’re Gabrielle’s friend.”

Her conversation with Vox playing back in her mind, Xena nodded politely but was cautious about what she could share with the newcomer. She was also regretting having been abandoned by Aphrodite and this was not a feeling she enjoyed having.

Elaine smiled gently and Xena had the uneasy sensation of already having divulged too much about her present circumstance. “I’ve had friends,” the XO continued smoothly, as if they’d been chatting for some time, “where we lose touch for years, but you get back into synch – but it can be rough going those first few days.”

The warrior listened to the woman, studying her more closely. She seemed to be roughly the same age as Xena, perhaps a bit older than Gabrielle appeared. She was dressed in the same manner as everyone else the warrior had encountered, with no outward designation of her rank. She had a rough scar that ran down one side of her face, from her temple to jawline. It was clearly visible, given that her hair was pulled back in a professional bun, and told the warrior there was more to her story.

Xena had already been able to determine that the woman in front of her had been viscously attacked long ago by a much larger, stronger person. Her first words to Xena were deliberately, albeit subconsciously, placating; her intent being to diffuse any tension and assume responsibility for the warrior’s potential surprise. She’d also been able to instantly ascertain Xena’s present mood, and connect the warrior’s unease to the lack of connection with Gabrielle. This was a woman with heightened empathy; a talent for reading people honed from years of living with abusers. With practiced discipline, Xena pushed aside memories of her own warlord past, when her fits of pique and unpredictable

outbursts had instilled similar skill in the people around her. At least, the ones who survived for any decent length of time.

“Gabrielle and I have been out of touch for a long time,” Xena acknowledged, answering the woman’s unasked question. “I hardly recognize her.”

Elaine nodded. “I’ve worked for Miss. Evans for eight and a half years,” she said. “I was recruited out of the Navy, and been in the Transportation department the whole time, starting on the ship before this one. Gabrielle Evans is one of the smartest, kindest, yet most closed off people I’ve ever met. I feel like in eight and a half years, I know a lot *about* her, but I hardly *know* her.” Xena turned towards her and blinked in surprise. Elaine smiled. “I bet you’re going to tell me that you knew Gabrielle to be open and loving, and the most generous person you ever knew.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“She is those things, but while she will ask how you are, provide any help or assistance you need, when it comes to how *she* is, or what you can do for *her*...” The woman shrugged. “I respect her a great deal, and I like her as a person, but I wouldn’t say I know her.” She chuckled, clearly making a joke to herself. “And this is coming from someone onboard who isn’t smitten and battling a crush on her. Those poor fools know her even less than I do. I have no doubt you’ll reconnect. Friendships take effort, like any other amazing work of art.

“Well, I don’t want to keep you,” Elaine said, extending her hand once again. “I always take a stroll on deck when I get off duty. Make sure everything is ship-shape. I come from sea-faring stock, since my ancestors were hauled to this country in the holds of ships packed in like sardines. There isn’t anything like the sea air from on deck, with the freedom to move about as you please. Xena, it was a pleasure to meet you, and if you need anything at all, I would be more than happy to assist you.”

Xena grasped the offered hand warmly saying, “thank you, Elaine Jackson. You are very kind.” She would have to think about what the XO had said. The Gabrielle she described did not sound like the Gabrielle she knew, who was always searching so desperately for meaning, for spiritual fulfillment for life’s answers. She sounded like a Gabrielle who had possibly either found out the solutions to life’s great mysteries or had come to the conclusion that there were no great answers to be found. While still angry and confused, she felt a little less alien in this new world. And for that, the warrior from Amphipolis was very grateful.

Chapter 11: Co-Parenting

Xena decided to give Gabrielle space while they were, for all intents and purposes, trapped together on the ship. She joined bard, goddess and the rest of the crew for meals, managing to sit next to Gabrielle at the table and chat civilly, but otherwise choosing to stay away. There was no denying that the bard was not thrilled with the arrangement but was still either hurt or angry enough with the warrior to not voice that objection. The warrior spent her time with Vox, and no one was more surprised than Gabrielle at how inseparable the pair had become. The rest of the crew was just grateful that the playlist of the cheesiest songs of the 1970’s had finally given way to a more general musical retrospective. For her part, Gabrielle tried to table her current discord with Xena to focus on what she needed to do over the next few days, which meant constantly working.

Aphrodite leaned against the doorway to Gabrielle's study and for long moments watched the bard work. There was an intensity to her features that would have looked more scholarly if the goddess hadn't known that it came from a place of profound sadness and avoidance. Argo dozed contentedly on the couch against the wall, untroubled by the human concerns in her orbit, lulled to sleep by the occasional soft clicking of her human's fingers on the computer keyboard. Several minutes passed until the bard looked up. Realizing she was being watched, she returned the goddesses gaze for a moment, then, pushing herself away from her desk, she leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms.

"I'm trying to figure out if you're gloating or not, and I wouldn't blame you if you were."

Taking the seat across from the desk, Aphrodite smiled. "No, love," she said, "I am not gloating."

"What is Xena up to anyway?" the bard asked, feigning indifference and pretending to organize folders and documents on her messy desk.

"She has Vox walking around on deck, getting her strength back."

"What is it with those two?" Gabrielle asked imploringly. "I swear they're inseparable."

Aphrodite chuckled. "You're not jealous, are you?"

"No, of course not," Gabrielle replied rolling her eyes. "I'm just trying to understand it."

"Think about it. Xena is everything Vox wants to be when she grows up. A badass Top who has you moving heaven and earth to find her."

Gabrielle shrugged, continuing to feign disinterest. "And Xena?" she asked.

"In Vox, Xena has found someone who she ask all sorts of questions without feeling foolish. Xena understands how people work and she was a master manipulator long before you reached puberty, my dear." It was clear to the bard that Aphrodite wasn't passing any sort of judgment, just calling it as she saw it. "No doubt she sees your engineer as no threat whatsoever, and certainly has no malicious intent, but she's very aware how much she's being looked up to." Aphrodite noted Gabrielle's puzzled look, so rephrased her observation. "She's feeling insecure. Who doesn't want to be around someone who idolizes them when they're feeling insecure?"

Gabrielle stared at the wood grain on her desk, unable to meet the goddess's pale blue gaze. "I look up to Xena," she said quietly.

"Sweetie, you did," Aphrodite said gently, leaning forward. "That was two thousand years ago. And while Xena has changed zero percent since the day she died, which for her was like, two days ago, you've lived something like thirty lifetimes at least."

The Goddess of Love leaned back in her chair and crossed one leg over the other. She was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt from the Hard Rock Café in San Francisco with the colors of the gay flag in the logo. Gabrielle could tell that she was making a concerted effort to look less spectacular, in hopes of being less of a distraction. The bard didn't have the heart to tell her the effort was in vain. A tomboy looking Aphrodite was every bit as enticing and sexy as a dressed-to-the-nines Aphrodite, perhaps more so. The goddess simply couldn't help it; she was just drawn that way.

Aphrodite watched the bard studying her, feeling a trifle guilty at how much she'd missed the attention of late. She knew Gabrielle was digesting what she'd said and sensed a question was coming. A very small part of her wanted to make up the worst advice possible and she smiled to herself realizing Gabrielle would know it. Not just because she'd given her the ability to sense her feelings, but because she'd shared enough with her that Gabrielle *knew her*. There weren't many entities in the history of Earth that could say they really understood The Goddess of Love, but the Bard from Potidaea was one of them.

Gabrielle looked at Aphrodite almost shyly as she asked the question. "You could fix this, couldn't you? Make me feel how I'm supposed to feel?" She didn't have to wait for the answer to know how the goddess felt, torn between her own wants and what she knew was best for Gabrielle.

"Honey, if I did that, you'd forever question if the feelings you had for Xena were really yours or something I put there. Sweet pea, you're going to have to do this the hard way." Aphrodite smiled sympathetically.

With a helpless shrug, Gabrielle asked, "So what do I do?"

"Have you considered that it's okay if you're the one that Xena looks up to?" Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak and Aphrodite raised her hand to stop her. "I get that topping isn't really your thing," she said with a slight smirk. "But I know you can be all alpha when you want to be." The bard's cheeks flushed crimson but the goddess continued. "Shenanigans in the bedroom aside, you run your company, you tell people all day long what you want done and how you want it. The years have brought you into your own. Don't hide that from Xena. You be you. You are going to be the consummate tour guide for her in the twenty-first century. Yeah, Vox and Shen taught her how to use her iPhone and programmed everyone's number into it and I've seen her google some stuff, but that isn't going to be how she learns to live in this world. Once upon a time she taught you how to live in her world, when you were so determined and tenacious that you could not be kept away. Now you need to return the favor and teach her how to live in yours."

"Great," Gabrielle said without enthusiasm.

"Well, you're in for a bit of luck. It's supposed to rain tonight so it'd be stupid for Xena to sleep on deck again, even if she can't catch a cold. I'm not saying jump in the sack with her, unless you want to of course, but you're going to have to let her get to know you all over again. She thinks you're both the old you. You're not, she is. At the very least, you need to tell her she's going with you tomorrow to Shen's house. Start there." Gabrielle nodded, unconvinced, but hopeful.

As the goddess predicted, the night did indeed bring rain. Unlike the gentle drops that woke her on the sundeck of what now seemed eons ago, this rain was hard and it was steady. Argo was reluctant to do her business on the artificial grass in the onslaught, so Gabrielle held out an umbrella for her. Once finished, the pit bull hurried back down the stairway to the decks below. It didn't take the bard long to find the warrior. Xena was sitting on a bar stool at the outdoor kitchen, glumly regarding the rain and the ocean from beneath the protection of a sunshade. There was enough wind that the warrior was still fully soaked, but at least she wasn't sitting directly in the rainstorm.

"You're not spending the night on deck." Gabrielle said matter-of-factly as she approached. She folded the umbrella and took a barstool next to the warrior, not the least bit perturbed that she was getting wet as well.

“Your ship is fairly full at the moment,” Xena noted dryly.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and studied Xena. It occurred to her that her gift from Aphrodite – to know what the other was feeling if she concentrated – would be supremely handy with her soul mate. But even as she thought it, she chided herself. Knowing what Xena was thinking or feeling was indeed part of what made them soul mates. “Xena, there are a variety of places you can sleep on the ship that will keep you dry that aren’t in my quarters, if you don’t want to sleep there. You can bunk with Aphrodite, you can crash in the library, or the den. There are comfortable couches all over the ship.” She was quiet a moment before adding “Or you can just use my cabin.”

Silence descended for long moments with neither of them speaking. Green and blue eyes looked out at the rain that was coming down with even more gusto. “Do you remember that barn, not far from Thebes – the rain storm?” Xena asked as she studied the downpour.

Gabrielle searched her memory, trying to put aside the hundreds of rainstorms that had happened since her life in Ancient Greece. She looked at Xena, taking the time to study her face, her eyes. Those piercing blue eyes; it had been so long and the surrealism of their reunion was still uncomfortable. But there was something, something in the way that the warrior looked out at the rain, her glum expression, which triggered something in the bard. “Was that shortly after I left the Bard Academy?” she asked. “We were traveling from Athens to Delphi, we hadn’t quite made it to Thebes because the weather got so bad. And by the gods, that barn leaked like a sieve. But it wasn’t particularly cold because it was the end of summer.”

Xena nodded, happy that Gabrielle remembered, though not entirely surprised. She’d always had an exceptional memory. “Yeah,” she said looking back out at the rain. “At the time, I’d wished it was colder.”

“Really?” Gabrielle asked curiously.

“Then I would’ve had an excuse to try and keep you warm,” the warrior replied with a shrug.

Gabrielle smiled, and for the first time since her resurrection, Xena finally felt as if she were with the person she’d known for years. *This* was Gabrielle. A few years older than she remembered, perhaps, but the way her green eyes sparkled when she smiled, it *was* her. “Follow me,” the bard urged, “I want to show you something.”

Obediently, Xena followed Gabrielle down the stairs. They walked in silence and stopped in the library. Gabrielle walked over to one of the four large bookcases that dominated the room. The polished wooden cases held leather bound volumes of similar height and thickness. Climbing a nearby ottoman, Gabrielle checked the spine of one of the first few volumes on the top shelf of the first bookcase before carefully pulling it free. “These are journals,” she explained. “I rewrote much of what I had in my scrolls and kept going...obviously” she said with a nod to the other cases.

“You wrote all of these?” Xena asked, her eyes widening in amazement. There were dozens upon dozens of books all neatly presented in the cases.

“You are of course welcome to read anything here,” Gabrielle continued with an affirmative nod. “I wrote all this stuff down so I could share the things I’d been through with you in the hope that we’d reconnect someday.” She checked the dates listed on the spine of the volume she held, which was the first one on its shelf. After opening the book,

she quickly turned pages until she found the passage she was looking for. Her finger on the paragraph she wanted Xena to read, she passed the book over.

Nervously Xena accepted the book. Reading had never been her strong suit. While not illiterate, as many warriors were, she wasn't much of a reader either, unless it was a map or sea chart. But just like with Shen's book she was surprised and relieved that the combination of languages used to write the text made perfect sense to her and she read the paragraph with ease. She chuckled and closed the book, passing it back to the bard. "You were wishing it had been colder too, huh?"

Gabrielle nodded, not the least bit embarrassed. She smiled. "I remember having such intense feelings, and not really knowing what to do with them, or why I was having them. I mean obviously, I'd heard tales in Potidaea of the women of Lesbos and I had a vague idea, conceptually at least, that there were women who wanted to be with other women...like that. But growing up I never really thought I was one of them. And then Perdicus and our whole betrothal thing." She shook her head, as if she couldn't imagine ever being that young or naive. "Anyway, it wasn't too long after we met that I knew something was different and even when I'd figured out *what*, you know, the figuring out of *how* was the next hurdle."

Blue eyes scanned the rows of books, moving from one shelf to the next, trying to take it all in. "These first seven volumes comprise our adventures together and if you go to the eighth one, that's where my journey after you died begins."

The blatant perspective hit Xena hard. Seven volumes barely made a dent in the first shelf of the first bookcase. Each bookcase had eight shelves, each shelf housed roughly forty books, by the warrior's guess. She was looking at hundreds and hundreds of books, and their time together made up seven. The visual representation of how much she'd missed was almost too much to handle. "You've lived so much more of your life without me than with me..."

"No, Xena," Gabrielle said adamantly. "You can't think of it like that – I don't. You may have died, but there hasn't been a day since we met that hasn't been 'with you.' Every single story, in every one of these books, is informed and shaped by the impact you've had on my life." She pulled the third volume down and opened the book, handing it to Xena. "Think of Lao Ma," she said. "Would you argue that at any point she stopped having an impact on your life?"

Xena glanced at the story, seeing her own words, as she'd relayed them to Gabrielle, staring back at her. "I'm hardly Lao Ma," she muttered.

The bard shrugged. "Maybe you are to me." The watch on Gabrielle's wrist vibrated and she glanced at it. "Xena, tomorrow morning we're going to get back to Marina del Rey. I need to take Shen to his grandmother's house, so he can collect some things. I'd like you to join me. I'd also like you to sit in on a meeting the day after tomorrow that I will be having with my department heads."

The warrior nodded. "Of course, Gabrielle."

"It's late though, and I'd like to get some sleep," she glanced off in the direction of her quarters.

Xena nodded, taking in the spines of the various books once again. "Do you mind if I stay up and read for a while? I'd like to know a little about what I've missed and not have it come from a..." she searched her recent memory for the correct word, "reference book."

Gabrielle took a step towards the warrior and hugged her warmly. It felt good to be on the same wavelength again. “Absolutely. Goodnight Xena.” She leaned up and gave her a shy kiss. Still feeling awkward about the exchange, Xena watched her go then pulled the eighth volume from its shelf and opened it.



“Gabrielle, we’re going to be at the Marina soon,” Michelle’s disembodied voice said through the cabin speaker. Opening one eye, then the other, Gabrielle replied to her captain then rolled over and looked at her watch in its charging stand. Turning her head in the other direction she saw Argo stretched out next to her, the muscular dog using the other pillow, dreaming contentedly her legs twitching, but no Xena. She got up and still in her nightshirt, walked the short distance to her library. Xena was stretched out on one of the couches, an open journal flattened against her chest, a small pile of several other journals stacked on the floor nearby. She returned to her quarters to shower, dressing in a comfortable pair of jeans, a soft t-shirt, and mechanic’s over shirt. She also pulled out a business suit to wear to her meeting the following day. While she was at it, she selected some clothes for the warrior as well, knowing Xena would have no idea what kind of attire would be appropriate for their day’s activities. She selected jeans, a thin hooded t-shirt and sneakers, laying them on the bed for her. She also put aside a suit that Aphrodite had purchased for the warrior for the next day’s business meeting. A moment later a quick note was sent to Blake to see to the ironing.

Returning to the library, Gabrielle paused before touching Xena to wake her. With her eyes closed in sleep, Gabrielle was once again reminded of that fateful day in Japan when she’d tried in vain to save her warrior’s life. It was almost like looking at a memory, the memory of a passion she had felt that she desperately wanted to feel again. Gabrielle had a perspective now that she did not have in her original life as she’d come to think of it. She glanced at the seven volumes on the top shelf of the book case, the seven books that represented less than a decade together. She had had several relationships since then that had lasted more than twice that length. She thought of Mistos, William, and several of the women she had partnered with over the centuries. The transition of a relationship from white hot passion to something more companionable was not alien to her, in some cases, as with the men, it was almost a relief. That didn’t, however, adequately described how she now felt about Xena either. She was saved from further self-reflection by blue eyes that fluttered open. “Good morning,” she said smiling down at Xena.

“I must have fallen asleep reading,” Xena said, a little embarrassed.

Gabrielle’s smile grew broader. “I can honestly say Xena, that is a sentence I never thought I’d hear coming from you.” The warrior sat up and rubbed her eyes. “Where did you leave off?”

“You were still in Egypt,” she replied. “Gabrielle, I’m very sorry that you thought I was talking to you all those years. Honestly, if I was a spirit I have absolutely no memory of it.”

“I’ve come to the realization it was my own grief talking,” she said. “Although at the time, it was a comfort to have you around. Our time together was unfairly cut short.” Gabrielle could sense that the conversation was steering in a direction that neither of them were ready to address at the moment so she changed the subject. “I’ve put some

clothes out on the bed for you, for when we go to Susan's house. There is another outfit laid out for tomorrow's meeting, but those are going to get ironed – just wear the comfortable clothes. Culturally, bathing is a daily exercise here. In other parts of the world, not so much, but here, obsessive cleanliness is a thing." The warrior nodded paying attention. Gabrielle had no doubt that Xena intended to master the customs of this place and time, just as she had with every other unusual situation she'd found herself in. She'd been a pirate, warrior, warlord she'd helped countless people, often by slipping in somewhere undetected, always fitting in. "There is an unusual looking undergarment," Gabrielle went on to explain, "it's called a 'bra' and it fastens in the back, it goes on under the t-shirt. Everything else should make sense. You can either use the bathtub or the shower like I showed you yesterday. Remember, the shampoo is first, then the conditioner."

"Which is just your hair, and the body wash stuff goes all over, and the small brush is for the teeth, with the toothpaste," Xena replied carefully, wanting to make sure she had it correct. She knew these instructions were basic, and she was determined not to need it explained a second time. Gabrielle nodded, unsure if she should hang around and wait for Xena to get ready in case there were any questions. "Gabrielle, I'm sure I'll be fine." The warrior said with more reassurance than she actually felt. "I've bested countless armies, remember? I'm not going to be defeated by getting dressed in the morning. Go ahead, I'll meet you on deck when I'm ready."

Gabrielle whistled for Argo who was instantly at her side. She left the library, and Xena to her own devices. She fed Argo before making her rounds, first to Vox, now recuperating in her own cabin, and then to the bridge. She was somewhat surprised at not encountering Aphrodite there. She enjoyed a quick cup of coffee as she touched base with Elaine, who was just coming on duty. Satisfied that everything was in order, she made her way to Shen's cabin to collect the boy. The door was slightly ajar but she softly knocked anyway.

"Come in," Shen replied. Gabrielle pushed the door open, surprised to see Shen sitting on his bed and Nicolai sitting at the small desk. There was a tray sitting on the bed with some empty breakfast plates and a half-drunk glass of orange juice. Both Nicolai and Shen were sipping something hot and steaming from teacups. Immediately Gabrielle could tell that the boy had recently been crying. "Nicolai made me some syrniki for breakfast," he said, doing his best to sound cheerful. "And some porridge. I don't want to finish my orange juice; would you like it?"

Gabrielle accepted the glass that Shen handed her and took a sip. "Fresh squeezed," she said with a smile to the sous chef. "Very nice, thank you Nicolai."

The large man was wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt with a bright unicorn on the front, chosen – she had no doubt – to bring a smile and laugh to his companion. "We are drinking tea," he explained, raising his teacup to her, "like men do in Russia for breakfast."

"Ah, I see."

"I will take tray back now," he continued, to the boy adding "you remember what I told you. There is no embarrassment with family unless from too much Vodka. You come see me when you get back, I will need help in kitchen." He picked up the tray, pausing so Gabrielle could deposit her now empty glass, then left the cabin. She squeezed his arm in appreciation as he left. His sad smile spoke volumes.

“You know,” Gabrielle began gently, ‘you don’t have to go to your house if you don’t want to. I can take care of this stuff for you.”

Shen nodded but seemed resolute. “I know. Nicolai told me you’d say that. But you’re going to decide what to do with grandma’s stuff and my stuff right? What to put in storage or bring to the boat?” Gabrielle nodded knowing it wasn’t going to be easy for him. “I think I should be there, even if I’m not sure what to store or what to take.” She hugged the boy – a hug he returned very tightly. She noted that his hair was still a little damp from his recent shower. She had been around enough children to know that his valiant attempt to be brave and mature was not going to last. He was nearing his breaking point and a meltdown was imminent, she just didn’t know when or where it was going to happen.

She grabbed a jacket for Shen and followed the boy and Argo through the ship to the stern where the taxi boat would meet them. Xena and Aphrodite were already there, the warrior holding an extra jacket for her. Gabrielle was taken aback at the sight of the pair of them. Xena, freshly showered with her hair neatly combed dressed as unremarkably as anyone else in the marina in a t-shirt and jeans. Still, she stood out. It was her posture, her remarkably fit body, and her intense gaze that set her apart from everyone. Gabrielle was happy that the sight of her made her stop and take notice. It was almost like remembering the lyrics to a song you thought forgotten or the steps to a dance from childhood. Aphrodite, on the other hand, was dressed in a casual retro fifties dress with a cardigan sweater, with matching purse and heels. Part of the clothing line she’d purchased when fitting out Xena’s wardrobe, she looked like she might be going off somewhere for a fancy brunch or meeting. “You guys look great,” she said joining them. “Thank you for grabbing my jacket, Xena.”

Xena handed over the jacket, smiling at Gabrielle and returned Shen’s fist-bump. “Hey Shen,” she said. He nodded in reply, clearly not really trusting himself to talk.

“I know it’s a bit cooler today,” Aphrodite said conversationally, “but it might be sunny later on. Shen, I picked these up for you. If it’s sunny, I thought they might be useful. Xena I got you a pair as well.” With that she extracted two pairs of sunglasses from her purse and hand handed one to each of them. Xena took the case and watched Shen as he opened his, following suit.

“Oh cool!” he said, donning the pair of Wayfarers. “These are like the sunglasses you and Gabrielle wear.”

“Not quite as old, but yes,” Aphrodite said.

Gabrielle smiled at her knowing full well she’d given them to him so he could cry less self-consciously and was touched by the gesture. She noticed that Xena held onto the case, not trying the glasses on and was grateful for that as well. There was no disguising the look of wonderment and disbelief on Xena’s face as the huge vessel approached the spot where it was going to anchor. The marina spread out before them with its vast array of boats, neighborhoods and business districts beyond the water, with the ever-present assortment of cars. “This is unbelievable,” Xena muttered under her breath.

“Where are you headed today?” Gabrielle asked Aphrodite as the taxi-boat carried them the short distance to the marina.

“I’m going to check in with Dwayne and have lunch with Max’s eldest daughter Kara. I’m also going to pick up some things for our upcoming trip to D.C...”

Gabrielle was going to respond when Aphrodite's expression stopped her. She looked pointedly at Xena who was staring in disbelief in the direction they were headed. Aphrodite pointed out a flock of pelicans flying low over the surface of the water and nudged Shen over a little way to get a better view, trying to afford them some limited privacy. "Xena, what's the matter?" Gabrielle asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Is it the cars?"

"By the gods," Xena whispered back, "I saw them in Shen's book of course but I had no idea... This is... this is science?"

Gabrielle urged the warrior to take a couple more steps towards the back of the boat, further away from Aphrodite and Shen. "Xena, you told me that you learned to swim by Torus tossing you into a local lake, right?" When the warrior nodded, she continued. "Today is going to be like that. There is a lot that you're going to take in that will either seem impossible, or won't make sense, or will seem silly. This isn't going to be all that different from all those times when you left me at one tavern or another while you had to go fight some bandits. I had to trust that you'd come back for me, but I also had to trust that you weren't bringing me along because I really wasn't ready for that kind of combat. The twist here is, while you're not ready to come along to fight the bandits, I'm bringing you anyway and you are going to just have to trust that I will explain all of the things that seem strange later. Even for a person who has lost their memory, there are things that Shen is going to expect you to be familiar with, or at least not freaked out by."

Xena nodded, forcing a smile to her face that almost looked natural. "I hope you appreciate now the wisdom of me not taking you fight the bandits back then." Argo nudged her comfortingly, expecting to get her ears scratched.

"If it's any consolation, none of the things we encounter today will put you in harm's way. Cars are just as safe as horses. Besides, you're immortal now, more indestructible than ever." As they disembarked, the familiar face of Ed standing in-between two cars greeted them in the parking lot. One of the cars was the Tesla she'd been driving of late, the other was a vintage Mustang convertible in candy apple red, recently pulled from storage. Gabrielle looked at the goddess with a smirk. "Figures," she muttered.

"Hey!" Aphrodite protested, "*you* said anything from inventory. It's your car. I'm just helping you out by driving it some."

"Woman after my own heart," Ed said cheerfully as he handed her the keys.

"Be careful," Gabrielle cautioned, "that thing is a magnet for speeding tickets."

"You'll have to tell me which department to send the speeding tickets to for payment," Aphrodite replied with a chuckle. She gave each of them a hug, including Shen, who didn't seem to mind. "I'll text you when I head back to the ship."

"This is us," Gabrielle gesturing at the other car. She opened the gullwing door so Shen could get in the back with Argo, then opened the door for Xena. When she sat down she carefully fastened her seatbelt, watching as Xena followed her actions. Had the circumstances been more jovial, she might have taken delight at the warrior's expression as she started the car and followed Aphrodite in the Mustang out of the parking lot.

Xena was trying to look causal as she gripped the sides of her seat, and it was clear to Gabrielle her companion was as amazed by the automobile as she had been when she'd ridden in her very first Model T more than a century earlier. She felt sympathy for

both of her passengers, Shen for his pain and Xena for her confusion. Argo was the only one who seemed to be having a good time.

Aside from morning traffic, the drive to the Pacific Palisades was uneventful. Gabrielle checked the rearview mirror from time to time, not surprised that the boy was wearing his sunglasses even though it wasn't sunny yet. She was also thinking about where they were going. Susan had asked her opinion about the investment when Trixie was small and she and Tom needed a larger place. The room that had once been her daughters became her grandson's and it wasn't all that long ago she'd helped Susan redecorate it after its stint as a guest room. She parked in the driveway and waited for the others to join her before unlocking the door and stepping inside. It was hard to believe this might be her last visit here. She'd had countless 'last visits' to houses over the years, and they were generally like this – nostalgic, and sometimes painful.

Choking up a little, Gabrielle looked around, already making inventories in her head, instructions to SP personnel about what to put into storage for Shen and what to dispose of, most likely by donation to a worthwhile charity. One advantage of knowing a family for three generations, she had very clear knowledge of which items were of value, both sentimental and monetary.

Shen opened the door to his room and stepped inside followed by Gabrielle, Xena, and Argo. They all looked around at the contents. There were superhero posters, Avengers from Marvel and Wonder Woman from DC, action figures, meticulously crafted models and some glass sculptures sitting on a nearby shelf. "I guess I need my clothes," he said. He was quiet a moment then cleared his throat. Gabrielle could see his eyes misting over, and he'd left his sunglasses in the car. "Um...can I...can I have a few minutes to do this by myself?" he asked. The bard nodded and kissed the top of his head before holding the door open for Xena. Argo looked hesitant, not wanting to leave Shen but when Gabrielle called her, she grudgingly obeyed, looking over her shoulder at Shen as she left.

The two women walked into the living room, not far from the bedroom, now with a closed door. Gabrielle typed some notes in her phone as to what items from there to store. In moments the first crash was heard and Xena started back towards the bedroom, only to be stopped by Gabrielle. "Let him be," she said firmly.

"Gabrielle, something just fell over in there," she said, concern threading her voice. She started to move again and Gabrielle pushed back, forcefully.

"He's destroying his room Xena," she said. "He's venting. He's a mess right now and he needs some time to be a mess. I did the same thing the first time you died. I destroyed a staff and a palm tree." Her words were punctuated by the sound of another loud sound of something breaking.

Xena shook her head, the worry evident on her features. "Gabrielle, you can talk to him. He needs reassurance. This isn't how you handle grief. He could hurt himself."

"I'm sorry Xena," the bard said, adamant. "But he needs to get this out of his system." The sounds of breakage continued and the warrior looked more frantic.

"But he's destroying..."

"It's just stuff, Xena."

"Gabrielle, you need to listen to me." The warrior's voice had shifted from trying to persuade to something more commanding.

“Xena, I’ve raised five children and plenty of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I think I know what I’m doing here.” As soon as the words left her mouth Gabrielle regretted it. Xena looked like she’d been slapped, not unlike how she had the previous time. “I am sorry Xena, I…” Her apology was cut short by a howl of pain from the other room. In a heartbeat, the bard was through the door to Shen’s room to find the boy standing there, holding his hand to the side of his face, blood trailing down his cheek and oozing between his fingers.

“What happened?” Gabrielle asked calmly as she grabbed a pillowcase from a pillow on the bed and put it to his face to staunch the bleeding.

“I threw the Hulk over there and it hit a glass thing which flew back this way.” He said between snuffles.

“Xena, please make sure Argo stays out there,” Gabrielle said after a brief glance at the boy’s face. Noting that it was a superficial injury and that the glass shard had missed his eye, she relaxed and surveyed the room. “There is glass all over the floor and I don’t want her to cut her feet.”

The warrior had been about to enter the room and stopped short, keeping the pit bull on the other side of the door. Argo whined in protest.

Gabrielle held the pillowcase firmly in place then replaced her hand with Shen’s. “The Hulk. It figures. Hold this here,” she instructed. “Let’s go into the kitchen where the light is better and Argo can chill out.” She followed the boy out of the room, firmly closing the door behind her. Argo snuffled at Shen’s free hand until he petted her. Once in the kitchen, Shen climbed up on a stool at the bar while Gabrielle turned on the lights and did another quick inspection of the wound. The room was cheery and bright, contrasting mightily with the mood of its inhabitants. “I think there is a first aid kit in the bathroom, I’m going to go get it.”

Once Gabrielle left, Shen was about to lower his hand and Xena stopped him. “Here,” she said. “I’ll hold it.” She kept firm pressure on the wound and regarded the boy. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, matter-of-factly.

“No,” he said glumly.

“Okay.”

“Life isn’t fair,” he added.

“No, it is not,” Xena agreed.

“I was just starting to not be sad all the time,” he whispered. Xena touched his shoulder reassuringly realizing anything she might say would sound trite and empty. “I know you’re sad too,” he added. She nodded.

Gabrielle returned with the first aid kit and Xena gently lowered the pillowcase. The bard dabbed at the cut with some antiseptic, then placed a gauze pad on the wound. “The good news Moose, is that there are butterfly bandages in here we can use instead of giving you stitches, even if stitches might teach a more meaningful lesson.” Shen grunted non-committedly and let her work, flinching a bit at the cold antiseptic. Carefully holding the wound closed, skilled fingers applied several of the small bandages in a neat row. “I don’t think it will leave a scar, but if it does it will just make you look more roguish.” She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment before softly asking “is there anything left in your room to keep besides the clothes?” He nodded mutely in the affirmative, his lower lip starting to quiver.

Reaching down, Gabrielle hugged Shen tightly and picked him up. He burst out crying with the same level of desperation and ferocity that Gabrielle had days earlier when Susan had died. He wrapped his legs around her middle and his arms around her shoulders burying his face in her neck as he cried. Gabrielle wasn't tall and Shen wasn't short but, in this moment, he seemed like a much younger much smaller child, frightened and lost. Strong arms held him tightly and securely. Gabrielle walked the living room rocking him and reassuring him that in time, all would be okay. Xena watched transfixed. This was something she'd never been able to be with Solon, something Gabrielle was not able to be with Hope. It was obvious by her tone and movement that she'd done this more than once before. Xena ached, watching something she'd chosen not to have. She wasn't jealous; rather, she felt awed watching them. After several minutes, he slipped into sleep.

"Xena, could you pick up my phone?" Gabrielle asked softly, not wanting to wake the boy. The warrior nodded and did as she was asked, typing in the security code and opening the app with the bard's notes. The two of them walked through the house and the bard dictated notes about each room, which items to keep and which to donate.

"What will happen to this house?" Xena asked quietly, looking around in wonder at the beautifully appointed home.

"I need to see Susan's official will of course," Gabrielle replied. "But I suspect she owns it free and clear and it belongs to Shen now. I will have it cleaned out, maybe use it as a rental property for the time being while he's young. When the time comes, I'll turn it over to him with the proceeds from the rent." The warrior nodded, feeling like she understood the gist of what Gabrielle was saying.

"Does everyone live in places like this?"

"No," Gabrielle answered. "My company pays really well because I'm not in it for myself. Some people live better than this, of course, but most not as well."

Silence hung in the room like an uninvited guest. Xena looked around, recognizing some of the objects around her and mystified by others. Not knowing what else to say, she spoke her mind. "So, you had five children?"

"Xena, that's not how I wanted to tell you," Gabrielle replied softly.

"I know."

Gabrielle sighed and listened to the rhythmic breathing of the boy in her arms. Confident he was truly asleep, she continued quietly. "It was about a hundred years after you died. His name was Mistos. We had a decent life together and my children were wonderful. Two boys, Lyceus and Minos and three girls, Lila, Arianna, and Xena." Gabrielle looked over at her companion and could see her eyes misting up – she was touched by the gesture. "They all married and had children, but it was excruciating outliving them and my grandchildren. I began to pull away when the great-grandchildren came along and had fully distanced myself from them when they reached adulthood. I've had limited interaction with my descendants since then. I know there are still some in Salem, here in the United States, and some in Greece and a few other places but I'm not in contact with them." Gabrielle was quiet a moment before continuing. "In the interest of full disclosure, I've had several marriages to men, and a handful of long term relationships with women. Depending where you are, marriages to women weren't always legal. I've genuinely loved all of my partners, and it's all in the journals, I didn't hide anything."

“The last thing I would ever want for you Gabrielle, is for you to be alone.” Xena said, her voice soft and sincere. “I won’t lie though, it’s hard to take all of this in.” She felt the urge to hesitate but didn’t. “I know you don’t feel the same...as you did. I can’t expect you to feel like no time has passed when so much of it has.” She could see the bard’s eyes glisten with unshed tears as they made their way back to the boy’s room. “We need to focus on this Ares thing and then, we can focus on us. It’s not like I’m going anywhere.” Xena smiled as she spoke, putting a more positive spin on things than she actually felt. She didn’t think Gabrielle believed her but sensed her companion was grateful for the gesture and for the space and time that gesture implied. They entered Shen’s room once again and Xena shut the door to keep Argo away from the glass. “Should we clean this up?” she asked looking at the mess on the floor. All of the models were broken, the sculptures shattered. Some of the posters were ripped, only the Spiderman poster appeared to have survived. There were a couple of awards, both scholastic and athletic that still hung on the walls and some photos on a bulletin board as well as an autographed picture of Scarlett Johansson with Shen from ComicCon.

“I’ve got people for that,” Gabrielle said offhandedly. “I’ll have a team pack up the place. I think there are a couple of empty boxes in the garage. I want to take his clothes, some of the photos, awards, the Spiderman poster, and these stuffed animals with us. There are also a couple of things from Susan’s bedroom and the living room I want to take. The rest SP can handle. Let’s go back to the living room, and could you bring that bear with us?”

Xena followed Gabrielle with the stuffed bear and watched achingly as the bard managed to get the boy situated on the couch without waking him up. Indeed, there was a practiced ease to how she moved, lifting his arm and wrapping it around his bear, implying that she’d done this many, many times before. Solon came to mind again and a glance to Gabrielle’s face told the warrior the bard’s thoughts were travelling the same path. Even all of these years later, there was a haunted look of regret, and an inability to make eye contact telling Xena Gabrielle still felt remorse about what had happened, even after all this time.

“He’s lucky to have you,” Xena said, trying to break the tension.

Taking a measured breath, Gabrielle replied, “When I had children of my own, real, human, wonderful, amazing children, it brought back how ridiculously naive and foolish I’d been about Hope. I know we got past it, I know we forgave each other, but even now, I’m still disappointed in myself that...” she stopped and shook her head. “I just wish I’d done better by you Xena,” she finally finished. “That’s all.”

Knowing how difficult taking advice so easily given could be, Xena nodded. “I forgave you, Gabrielle. But you need to forgive yourself.” The bard smiled back at her, but the gesture didn’t quite extend to the rest of her face. “Why don’t we get back to your list?” Xena asked.

Visibly relieved, Gabrielle nodded and they spent much of the next hour moving from room to room, making the appropriate inventories for the Special Projects Division.



The drive back to *The Hippolyta* was a somber one. Shen rode silently in the back seat, glumly looking out the window through his sunglasses, Argo’s large head resting on his lap. Xena and Gabrielle were each lost to their own thoughts about the other.

Gabrielle was disappointed that nothing in over two thousand years of living had prepared her for her current circumstance. Sure, there had been numerous times in her life when someone had stronger feelings for her than she had for them. But this was Xena, and that made her current emotional state unacceptable. Still, she knew emotions couldn't be forced, not with any hope of longevity, so she hoped that with time, the universe could return back to its normal axis.

Xena, on the other hand, was reminiscing about first meeting the bard. She'd felt drawn to the younger woman almost instantly. Sure, the interest was purely physical at first. But, given Gabrielle's youth and innocence, Xena considered it part of her overall redemption to not indulge her appetites as she would have in the recent past. Knowing now, that on a rainy night, in a leaky barn near Thebes Gabrielle had felt the same way as she shifted her perspective. She now understood how the bard felt all those years ago, yearning for a connection she did not believe was reciprocated. Blue eyes gazed out the passenger window marveling at the vehicles whizzing past, at once fascinating and terrifying her.

"Are you hungry Shen?" Gabrielle's voice broke the silence as she glanced into her rearview mirror at the boy.

"No," he answered glumly, staring at his feet. Argo lifted her head from his lap and cocked it to the side, chuffing softly.

"Argo says you're not being completely honest," Gabrielle observed, as she smoothly changed lanes.

Shen frowned and looked at Gabrielle, then back at the dog. "That's impossible," he said. "You're teasing me."

"Try it out for yourself," the bard replied with a shrug.

Shen looked at the dog. "I can fly," he said. Argo looked back and reached her head up to lick his face. "See," he said to Gabrielle.

"Moose, you've ridden in the company jet and helicopter more times than I can count. Isn't that flying?"

At first uncertain, his expression changed to serious. Gabrielle watched the transformation in the mirror and realized she'd made a big mistake. "Grandma isn't...grandma isn't..." he started getting choked up as he spoke, making the bard furious with herself. What was meant to be a diversion clearly wasn't and she should have anticipated the possibility.

"I'm three hundred years old," Xena said quickly hoping to distract the boy.

The dog barked once and poked the warrior's shoulder with her nose.

"And I had chocolate cake for breakfast," Gabrielle added, relieved beyond measure as her dog barked once again, this time eliciting a chuckle from the ten-year-old.

"Cake for breakfast. I wish," he muttered, looking at Gabrielle. "There has to be some sort of trick," he continued seriously. "A dog doesn't know what three hundred years means or know if your breakfast was called 'chocolate cake' or not. I just can't see how you're signaling her."

"A magician never reveals her secrets," Gabrielle assured him, grateful for Xena jumping in and relieved that he'd decided this was a magic trick. "Even so, we're going to get off the freeway and have some lunch."

She stopped at a restaurant that she knew the boy liked. It was upscale enough that that the trio were on the receiving end of dismissive looks from some of the other

diners as they rolled in wearing jeans and t-shirts. Xena seemed particularly aware of the eyes following them. Assured that the attention was just from their wardrobe, Gabrielle allowed herself to relax, letting her lips crease into a smile as she followed Xena and Shen to their table. Like she'd done so many times in the past, the warrior took the seat with her back to the rich wood paneling so she could see the entrance. By taking this position, Shen was seated safely between the two of them.

"Xena, it's safe," Gabrielle said quietly as they took their seats. "I'm confident we weren't followed, none of his people are here."

"There are a number of people looking at us." Xena shot back.

Gabrielle opened her menu, wondering what the specials of the day might be. "It's only because we're underdressed," she assured her companion.

Shen was also surveying his menu, often looking out the window behind Gabrielle where he had an unobstructed view of Argo napping peacefully in the shade of a small tree. "People always get the wrong idea about Gabrielle – I mean Susan," the boy said after closing his menu. The warrior's brows furrowed in confusion as she looked at the bard. "When we're out in public like this, she usually goes by Susan Vincent because it matches her credit card." Shen explained in hushed tones to Xena. "It's so people don't freak out because she's a billionaire." His eyes grew misty and he sat back, straight in his seat "at least that's what Grandma said. If Mr. Pink is here, you'll see. He'll treat, ah, Susan like she's Lady Gaga."

"Lady who?" Xena asked, perplexed.

"Thank you, Shen," Gabrielle said gently. "I'll take it from here." She smiled a bit bashfully at the warrior. "He's right. I don't look like I belong in places like this unless I really have to and..." Her explanation was cut short as a short, bald man with a moustache hurried over to the table.

"Miss Vincent," he said with a slight bow as he took her hand and quickly kissed her knuckles. "So very good to see you again." Several of the other patrons noticed the lavish attention and the ambient noise level in the dining room dropped slightly. "I've sent Sven out to take some refreshment to dear Argo and would love to tell you the specials." He smiled and turned to Shen shaking the boy's hand "Mr. Teal, very good to see you sir." Gabrielle could see that he did a double take at Shen's injury and was happy that he was too polite to mention it. Instead, he turned to Xena. "Miss, I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"This is a very dear friend of mine..." Gabrielle began.

"Miss Romanoff," Shen supplied helpfully. Green eyes darted to the boy with a distinct frown.

"Miss Romanoff, you are radiant," the short man said, taking her hand as he had with Gabrielle.

"Natasha, this is Gordon Pink, he owns the restaurant," Gabrielle said smoothly, casting a cocky glance knowingly at Shen, who grinned ear to ear, his first genuine smile of the day.

"It's nice to meet you," Xena said, glancing suspiciously at her two companions.

With the specials of the day considered, Gabrielle ordered something that she thought Xena might like. As she expected, Xena simply requested the same as her companion. Shen politely requested something off the menu, with which Mr. Pink was more than happy to oblige.

“Everyone gets a fake name?” Xena quietly asked Shen when Mr. Pink had returned to the kitchen with their order.

“Just the adults I think,” the boy replied. “The ones that are high up in the company at any rate. Grandma had a few different passports with different names. Natasha Romanoff is one of the Avengers. She’s called Black Widow and she’s a superhero.”

“Well that sounds like a great name then.” Xena agreed. “I’d like to be a superhero. I think.”

When the food arrived, Gabrielle was grateful that Shen dug into his meal with enthusiasm. Sadness tended to eclipse her sense of hunger and she was grateful that the growing boy now in her care did not seem hindered by that affliction. After a few silent moments of eating, the boy looked over at Gabrielle, a genuinely curious expression on his face. “Does this mean you have to adopt me, Gabrielle?” he asked.

There was no hiding the expression of love and concern that he saw reflected back in the bard’s face. “Moose, it’s never a question of ‘have to’ honey. It would be a tremendous honor for me to adopt you, but it would be up to you. I think there will be some documents of your grandmother’s I will be reviewing tomorrow and she may have left specific instructions. Still, I think she would want me to keep an eye on you, which is why your mom asked me to be your godmother.”

He listened intently, his expression serious as he looked from one of his companions to the other before cautiously inquiring, “Would you both be adopting me?” Xena could tell that he was nervous, genuinely wanting to know, but afraid of overstepping, as he had when he introduced her to Vox in Sick Bay.

“That might be a bit premature of a conversation at this point, Shen.” Xena said gently. “I’m still getting back on my feet, and Gabrielle and I aren’t... married.” Xena glanced to Gabrielle to check if she’d framed it correctly; the bard’s gentle smile told her she had. Shen nodded sagely, taking it all in. “But adopted or not,” Xena continued, “you can always count on me to be your friend. Like Vox, Aphrodite and everyone on the ship – you have a lot of friends you can count on and as you grow up you’ll realize what an important thing that is to have.”

He pushed the last few gnocchi around on his plate deciding what to ask next. “How did you two meet – become friends? And how did you get lost?” Xena smiled at Shen then turned to Gabrielle.

“You’re better at telling this story than I am,” she said, her rich voice tinged with amusement as she picked up her wine glass, marveling at the wine and the meal she was enjoying. Food and refreshments had certainly improved in many respects in the twenty centuries she’d missed.

Gabrielle dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin before proceeding. “I was young,” she began, “maybe six or seven years older than you are now, Shen. The...city that I grew up in was having some trouble with some...bad people coming to town.”

“Like the angry thugs that march for the President?” Shen asked, genuinely concerned. “Or a drug cartel?”

“Sort of,” Gabrielle agreed. “More like the thugs than a drug cartel. Anyway, I decided to leave town and that’s when I met Xena. She had...left her previous job and was looking to start a new career doing something different. She wanted to use her skills

in a different line of work. So, we became sort of a team and I helped her. With her work.”

“What kind of work?” Shen asked, not unexpectedly.

“Crime fighting.” Xena supplied, talking around a forkful of fish she’d just put into her mouth.

“Really?” Shen asked, impressed. “Like Black Widow? So, you *are* a super hero!”

“I guess,” Xena agreed after thinking about it for a moment. “I mean, we didn’t have secret identities. But we did help people who were being bullied or solved a mystery here and there. Sometimes we came up against some pretty devious villains.”

Once again Shen looked critically from Gabrielle to Xena and back, clearly trying to determine if the warrior was telling the truth or not. For her part Gabrielle smiled shyly at Xena. The taciturn warrior was not known for her story telling ability but here she’d come up with a fairly accurate and twenty-first century plausible explanation of their years of adventure. Gabrielle admitted to herself she could not have come up with a better story.

“Is that why you run an organization that does the same kind of work now?” Shen asked curiously, helping himself to another piece of garlic bread.

“Did your grandmother tell you that?” Gabrielle asked, wondering how on earth he’d gotten that idea.

With a shrug, the boy finished his lunch, just as Mr. Pink came by with a tray of assorted desserts, leaving it at the table. “Well, once I asked grandma what you did with all your money,” he explained. “She said that you had different parts of your company set up to help people in different ways. And that the reason you made money was so you could help more people. She said it was for the greater good.”

“That sounds like Gabrielle,” Xena affirmed.

“And you learned how to help people from Xena?” He asked.

“I’d say we figured it out together,” the warrior gently corrected him.